

Derailleur

a foreword by j. s. davis

“Whence, perhaps, a means of evaluating the works of our modernity: their value would proceed from their duplicity. By which it must be understood that they always have two edges. The subversive edge may seem privileged because it is the edge of violence; but it is not violence which affects pleasure, nor is it destruction which interests it; what pleasure wants is the site of a loss, the seam, the cut, the deflation, the dissolve which seizes the subject in the midst of bliss. Culture thus recurs as an edge: in no matter what form.”

— Roland Barthes

“Introducing translation, because our tongue is not so clean as we might like, and certain non-literal components need further interpretation.”

— Christine Wertheim

“In a true garden, a non-coercive garden, a garden where everyone is responsible but no one is steward, there is union, there is non-exclusivity, there is fluidity, there is communication, there is balance.”

— Amanda Ackerman

Let's hope that “this stuff” we call poetry is never lost—though, it is occasionally misplaced, filed away, kicked about, even ignored, leaving room for more pressing, “pragmatic” issues in view. None of us can deny that the world has presented us with little to be concerned about—few claim boredom, contentment or closure. Many previous methods of containment, fortification and protection—well, these walls aren't working (but can I say the same about the smoke and mirrors?). We co-reside in this hum of complex architectures, both authentic and flimsy

connections, and sometimes appropriately, sometimes tragically: total destruction, chipped fragmentation, seductions, erasures. When such a silver-tongued, capable president finally presents himself, setting new precedents in comparison to those before him, this is no time to be mute or shy away from expressing work or observations directly related to our social realities, personal affectations, consequences and obligations that we have as both citizen-as-artist and breathing organism.

The 1st *valeveil* duo is part of an ongoing series to connect evolving poets and writers residing in the United States with those who either live, work or study in Scandinavia—with an original emphasis on English « » Swedish translation, hoping to expand. It has been observed that this is a *massive* amount of territory to be comparing and contrasting. The United States is composed of 48 neighboring states, Alaska, Hawaii, plus territories such as Puerto Rico and Guam (abiding by their own set of socio-political dictations [i.e. Nevada, where prostitution is legal, though regulated, but gay marriage is not vs. Texas, where residents are allowed by law to own and carry handguns in their vehicles without a license vs. Oregon, harboring cities such as Portland which have advanced transportation and city planning benefits for pedestrians, and cyclists who bypass unnecessary petrol consumption vs. Arkansas, where a select few complete democratic services—like helping run our country—that require both shirts and shoes]), and Scandinavia (i.e. Denmark, the Faroe Islands, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) where their public transportation is superb yet expensive, where one must be placed on a wait list at birth to have access to better housing options (a little limiting for newly arriving foreigners), where graffiti art is widely rejected as freedom of expression, where diversity is embraced—at least in

theory. Both regions of the world harbor their own contradictions and paradoxes. Yet, there is untapped potential in uniting these areas—much like a cocoon, it is still too premature to predict what shall emerge.

I hesitate to say how I truly feel about either area of the world; my perspective morphs at a lightning pace. But I can say: I sometimes love, sometimes loathe America, for what it has shown me that we can both be *at times*. Despite what some have said, I have faith in the *New Dream*—call it my version, yours, or even ours on less selfish days. My country is a disturbance; I am unsure of how to move on. I am placed in unpredictable moments of *WTF* from America's flaws, swift judgments, and cheap arrogance. Yet, I'm distracted by the possibilities and resources that Scandinavia (specifically Sweden) has illustrated. It *should* be possible to enjoy lush parks in the city center on a svelte day, to have a child and be given ample time off from work to bond and nurture it, to find and utilize reasonable health care options, to educate myself without going into enormous debt—if I work hard enough, if I keep trying. Even though, I am indebted to this America that we share, for everything true and good that it makes, thinks and does, for how much it continues to love me (even when I am not always able to reciprocate), I am also thankful that I am—under most circumstances—free to educate myself and investigate what the rest of the world has to offer.

Fences, borders, and boundaries exist, but no one is required to resign to what is given, to accept what we inherit, to submit to mediocrity. We have choices; there are so many choices. And there will be always be rules that were here before us. Should we strive for what is only attainable, or are other more seemingly unreachable forces now within our reach? How do we

ensure that these rules remain fair and just? How to overcome powerlessness. There is always a beginning, and it waits to be made again. And remade again.

One of the 1st questions repeatedly asked regarding this American-Scandinavia melting pot was, “Why choose California and Sweden as representations of the United States and Scandinavia?” The question was heavy then, and my answer still remains complicated, a bit unfiltered. Jen Hofer—American poet, translator and activist—reminds me that all countries possess very specific problems desiring very specific answers ... that it is important to not idealize or exalt a particular region of the world or to ignore responsibilities as citizens of our own. I have tried my best to do neither, but forgive me if I do now or have in the past. Most of *valeveil*'s projects—such as this one—are process-based and evolutionary in design, as is my life and the conclusions that I formulate (or don't) along the way.

But back to the q: why California and Sweden? Admittedly, I began with two places that have consumed me, two areas that I have been returning to for the past decade. I have, in some ways, had confusing affairs with both of them—a topophilia's threesome, in a way. Also, I do not consider California and Sweden as representations of any other larger land mass or territory, such as America or Scandinavia. I consider these areas, like all other areas, to be regions in-and-onto themselves, though not self-sustaining or self-contained. All countries, states, counties, cities, towns, districts, neighborhoods, houses, bedrooms, beds—all possess borders, rules, regulations—even if some of us disagree or deny that such said parameters exist. California and Sweden are starting points, though it can be argued that they are not “the best” starting points, but until trial-

and-error prove that an alternate combination is more fruitful, they are like bees to honey—both terribly sweet, terrible and sweet. And I am not ashamed to buzz around, sticky, in the muck of it. I am so sticky that I expect to never dry.

All that aside: mistakes are being made. I notice most mistakes made from places that I frequent, and I tend to feel the repercussions of these mistakes when I am physically present in a space. And a slight disclaimer is required. America has a new president—one that contrasts his predecessor on almost every front, omit a well-groomed suit. To avoid the risk of sounding like the evening news with updates on Castro, Afghanistan, the housing crisis, expanding unemployment rates, freakish crimes—liars and cheaters and thugs, oh my!—immigration conundrums, over-population, the Swine flu, birth defects, environmental deterioration, ad nauseam, I'll just say: I no longer feel the same way about my country as I did two years ago. More sound generations are surfacing with more logical, less violent methods of solving problems, yet there is still room for improvement. Or as Barack Obama shared with us on his 100 Days-in-Office speech, "I'm confident of the future, but I'm not content with the present." And to you, Dear Authority: you've orchestrated quite a shit pile (wait: this is no neat pile; it splatters walls in sporadic clumps, coats your dad's favorite arm chair, dominates dreams, streets and brutish post-office lines ... but it's not in our savings accounts) to clean up, but we're collecting tools, polishing them, finding them among the rubble—now more than ever, and frankly: some oldies-but-not-so-goodies just can't keep up.

I encountered Andrea Lambert's *Lorazepam and the Valley of Skin* in the summer of 2008—in SoCal, waiting for a new passport, watching America change, watching America change

me. We have a history of depending upon Manifest Destiny to find the gold we crave. What strikes me as most poignant about Lambert's chapbook: not all poets and writers are forthcoming, but she prefers verité. Sure, there are conceptual tricks, sly rules and maneuvers that writers learn—on our own time and in pedagogical settings—which enable many to mask writerly intentions or skew their ability to share an experience with the reader. For those who live to read, who read to live, reading provides one with both a sense of communion and solitude. Lambert understands that our populace is not impressed by literary masks and foils, that they instead appreciate being able to relate and understand. Some current writers suffer from a level of self-consciousness—wavering between the contrived and genuine. Though Lambert's work is self-aware, *Lorazepam and the Valley of Skin* instead benefits from her reflections. These same reflections are a primary ingredient in *La Vida Loca*—overlapping loves, losses, fears, coping mechanisms, diversions, illusions, a shaky sense of *fingers-crossed* and living moment-to-moment. Lambert, in essence, is embedded as a West Coast writer, post-Punk subversive and feminist. Yet, Lambert's work is for anyone who has been strained or has mixed sentiments towards what tomorrow brings—despite contrasting geographies, backgrounds, nationalities. *Lorazepam and the Valley of Skin* convinces. You too could be sharing *Scoops* ice cream on a scorching LA afternoon or in the *NoHo Diner* confiding, making lists on how to overcome hang-ups:

You coulda got my failure
 Made of trying
 We're damned instead
 I coulda been serious
 Nobody is gorgeous anymore
 — "Refused"

But what hits home with most of us in these slippery times is a mutual:

Desire for straightening, for order.
— “Symptoms”

And even for those of us who aren't picking up pencils, documenting these unpredictable—yet still coherent, engaging, pleasurable—times in America and elsewhere, many can empathize with Lambert's justifiable *mélange* of dread, wisdom, wanderlust and even, at times, deliberately mundane recollections of the ineffable. *Lorazepam and the Valley of Skin* was selected, in part, because her words assist, along with a barrage of others openly and not yet circulating, in a collective goal to *not* keep our mouths shut, retreat, shut down in moments of despair or paralysis, disallow others to marginalize us, to keep going after taking a blow:

The next day he wakes up in the stairwell
with his clothes inside out.
— “II”

to not turn our heads from what we're seeing and are a part of—for better or worse. For,

There's a place for us.
— “Pro-Mia at the NoHo *Starbucks*”

And for some of us, it might not be in America. But like a bratty child that keeps misbehaving, we have an elusive duty to foster the monster that we helped create—but where do we draw the line? And who is this “we” anyhow? If the baby grows up to be a menace, do we still have to support it, to unconditionally revere it? Or: do we leave it to fate, and for once in our lives, start

thinking about ourselves? Or is that how this problem started? The America-As-Baby metaphor only goes so far—much like how much of this incredible mess we’re actually capable of cleaning up, for present generations and those pending.

In response to the 2nd portion of the duo, entitled *730910-2155*, it is both poetic narrative and documentary, investigating the growing concerns of one’s identity in relation to their home country and to other countries that one lives in along the way—in this case: America and Sweden. Yet, it is also an ongoing examination of the role of the museum vs. artist vs. individual, how to validate of one’s own art practice, the separation of art and life (if any separation should be made), and an inquiry into why many societies place emphasis on archiving and preservation, instead of construction and progress. A choice was made for this specific writer/artist to leave behind a life in America to pursue an alternative. Another choice was also made to not reveal the author of *730910-2155*; this choice was not mine but the author’s. But how are we to refer to this unknown author, when the author’s given name is not disclosed? Should we refer to this anonymous figure by the Swedish personal identity number *730910-2155*, as “Anonymous,” or do we relieve the author of the burden associated with an assigned name or label of any kind? The best answer was never determined, yet, a decision was made. The author of *730910-2155* comments,

What is personal about a number?
— “Straight Up”

In response: what is impersonal about a name or what is personal about the absence of a name or what is impersonal about a number or what is personal about a name or when does a name deserve to mean more than a number or when does a number beg

for meaning? The author of *730910-2155* appears to be most interested in the means rather than the end, in questions rather than answers, in a shared adventure towards discovery—not an absolutist endpoint or the pretense of played-out dogmatism.

How many words does it take? What do you want to hear?
 Which version do you prefer? Where should I start? I could start
 anywhere, but I would have to mention the beginning and the now.
 I could speculate in the future, if I wanted to. I could speculate in
 the meaning. I could try to figure out what is the most important
 part, but would you understand?

— “Straight Up”

We live in this era together, where very few of us know who to trust, where “the death of the author” isn’t exactly a proper literary topic when the death of another innocent joins the numbers, where someone else’s personal becomes your public, where most fight tooth and nail to maintain a sense of safe space. It’s refreshing to know that at least your imagination remains yours—not everything in the world has been made. It is the unmade that we depend upon, and it is in our best interest to welcome the new—especially if it proves to be more competent. But how do we verify that we are equipped to accept this torch? How do we know that we are ready? I’ll leave you at the beginning, for:

The path to understanding is not linear, and not easily navigated.
 The path is itself a journey.

— “Straight Up”

—Summer, 2009