

# Decals of Love, or, the One True Imposter

(a lyric lecture on/with Wendy Lotterman's poems)

Forms of Address

Dear Wendy,

I'm twirling like a leaf in the wind, feeling all the rich red and orange and burnt auburn; and even grey suddenly seems like an interesting colour. I'm soaking it all up.

Wish me luck that my emotional quandaries will somehow magically resolve themselves.



Love poem, a:

Definitions, just like descriptions, aim for greater and greater precision, encircling the object until it can be captured. They aim for clarity, for a demarcation of outlines or limits. In this attempt, they are roundabout ways of figuring out suitable forms of address.

In *ON: Contemporary Practice*, a print and digital magazine dedicated to discussions of "one's contemporaries," Thom Donovan and Michael Cross pitch their editorial model as "motivated by desire, friendship, sociopolitical commitment, and discourse among one's communities and peers."<sup>1</sup> It's a motivation that leads to a question about form: "can we observe a present while it is still occurring; that is, before it has ossified into events consigned to a representative past?"

I've written elsewhere about the "movable contemporaneity" of provisional avant-garde communities.<sup>2</sup> Some writing might originate, commence, in one time, but only gain traction in another. Sometimes poems speak directly to a contemporary sensibility, aesthetic form, or content (like, the Internet), but poems without these thematic markers aren't necessarily less contemporary. Poems can be firmly lodged in our contemporary frames of reference or run against them, transforming them along the way.

1. Michael Cross and Thom Donovan, "About," *ON: Contemporary Practice*, [undated], <<https://on-contemporarypractice.square-space.com/about/>> [accessed 7 March 2020].

2. See Sophie Seita, *Provisional Avant-Gardes: Little Magazine Communities from Dada to Digital* (Stanford University Press, 2019).

This lyric lecture deals with the indentations on the surface of our contemporary moment (my contemporary moment?) made by the poems of the American poet Wendy Lotterman.<sup>3</sup> Following the contours, I will read Lotterman's work closely but also lovingly. I love these poems. I am enamoured with them. This essay is my attempt to make sense of my infatuation with Lotterman's words.

For a while now, some literary critics have suggested that critique isn't the only form our writing about literary works could take. Critique as we have come to know it in close readings, for example, usually produces a response that follows the formula "on the surface X looks like this, but really, if you lift the lid, tweak open the closet, the true meaning will be revealed" or it produces a slipshod cataloguing of formal features pointing everywhere and nowhere. At its best, however, close reading can be a *thinking with*, an alongside, in delightful entanglement, thus staying true to the text's spirit, but also taking it as an occasion for going elsewhere.



Love poems in their simplest definition are poems inspired by—or in some obstinately stochastic way 'about'—love in all its multiple forms and addresses and conceptual caresses.

I put "about" in quote marks because I am interested in prepositions, the work they can do. Love poems exist *around* or *near* a loved object; they're approximating it impatiently or perhaps somewhat hesitantly.

But love poems aren't just inspired by love, they can inspire love in return.

I am going to be talking about both of these directions and relations—their allure, their transactions.

Performatives, like "I love you" are speech acts that often occur in transactional situations, easily tested by the addition of a "hereby." I hereby order you to do this. I hereby arrest you. I am arrested by these poems, which is a form of love. And love is a performance artist who can't get enough attention. Who demands a response. Like a decoy.

It is rather awkward to declare love and not receive a response. So Wendy Lotterman's poems have called out their love and I shall answer their calling. They weren't written for or about me, but I am, for the purposes of this lecture (and my life), claiming them for myself. And this is a key feature of the love poem, as much as for the love song.

We want to make it ours.

3. Lotterman is currently writing a dissertation on possessive individualism in American lyric poetry and liberalism, and teaches at New York University. Her poems have been published by *Prelude*, *Bomb*, the Poetry Foundation, *The Literateur*, and *SAND*; she's read at the Sussex Poetry Festival, Cambridge University, and at Segue in New York; her chapbook *Intense Holiday* came out with After Hours LTD in 2016.

I will now copy for you one of Lotterman's poems in its entirety, a poem which I have made my own, and will then proceed to use her words to present my case, my encomium, at Plato's notable banquet.

Decoy 1



T I E

*The game cannot end in a tie, you say, as two tears streak down each of your cheeks. A penalty kicks out the window killing one of two twins, leaving the other to receive her love in doubles. What comes next. Freebasing hypertension and soft pretzels as sudden death parts our hair in the middle and we find this absolutely spectacular, the way an answer comes forth from the woods. In the video, we disappear back into the iridescent leaflet of original suspense, reimbursing the worst of what's kept to the breast. But sex is not a mother unable to pick which kid she loves more. One twin always dies since the game cannot end in a tie. Two skies sitting in a tree, sequencing love and contract. Two trees rejecting the room, fucking beneath the sky. Skies indifferent to the difference between one and two and two times you tell me that one team has to win, halving your cake as evidence of pleasure in domestic measures and tan-lines scrawled across your frosted hips, split in two even scenes of beauty with bouncers announcing the border. The erotic trespass expires by the time it's safe to cross. In the yard, privates collide with wine and Scrabble as I contemplate the single, silicone dome they emptied on the belt at security. How to keep this in perspective, myself, inadmissible to that love or what happens on each side of the border. I find it absolutely intolerable not to be in your bed, relaxing diaphragms and freebasing our inseparable futures. I find it intolerable. Grieving the national imperative to win, make rank, and identify, or what TV calls victory and textbooks call healthy development. But I would enter you both until genealogy inverted if such love were an appropriate taste. Sex and cat toys punctuate the open-concept honesty of first nights at sea with the fluency of decoys that don't get homesick. I got lonely, cried in church, went to a concept hospital for only hair and nails. Zionskirch[e] falls in and out of relation, but only as long as you think it: that this can and can't go on forever, that you do and don't want this to go on forever, that you are safe on planes, in the bathroom, imprisoned, asleep, but that it is better to be outside, beyond the idea of your secret interior. Banks break. Wives break and begin again with a contract that assimilates the doubt. The right reasons rain down like documented angels with the safety of love and statistically good looks. Your little rose wakes up in Stella Luna's fleece with the epistemology of horse girls gone wild. Her fruit-leather face, their zero sibillance policy. The tribal-style corona locks lips with the dream of a child who knows what she wants before the dye sets. A freeze-out lucidity of basic instinct mixed with a minimum of fear. The nightly tinnitus finds its way into your life, into a locket between our breasts in the bedroom where a shag-rug declares the space between girlhood and universality. Nipples touch the*

arch of your foot before your weight creates a prepubescent girl. A key to that room is etched on a single grain of rice that floats insensibly inside a vile on your chest, bobbing with your body in the water. There is a limited amount of faces that you can remember, but the diaphragm still tries to expand. Sudden death parts life in two scenes of less an excess: why I love you specifically, and why I can't cry for Argentina. I squeezed my thighs tight so I wouldn't fall off. Like most protests, the bruise will drain and then return to stasis. Feeling redistributes on the left so that holidays on your hip are spent without gifts. It isn't too late; you are not behind because you choose what I chose a long time ago and shame is not a baby in our hand- me-down bassinet. Your dreams turn sweet and then uncomfortably sour as sudden death drafts two teams of unequal need. It's too soon to give up. A golf-ball sized polyp moves into view as I reason that it is too soon to give up. No to this and all other metaphoric volumes arresting the underdog's wire-coat momentum, like an internalized doorstep lodged in the joint-birthday of desire. Life is a bottom. Only I can take the wind out of my sockets and trade gummies for head in the underwater playroom. I find you there. In a bulls-eye of kindness between fir trees and mowed out rings of concentric tenderness. You are soft and resonant. Your twin leaves the party before you can do the same. Come out, bearing the shape of the house that you came from. Arrive the diner, rarified by light-years of desire. Metaphoric volumes of moss will roll out, red hot along the lava beside the road. There is a limited amount of faces you can remember. There is a secret you don't yet know how to confess. You close both eyes, redistributing ghosts to the perimeter of your sensory kingdom. Skies divide, the bed dissolves like dip 'n' dots. I find you there, in rings of concentric threat where the truth produced two wings of equal size. There is a limited amount of faces. I love you specifically. The game cannot end in a tie, but you are paralyzed by indivisible desire, and terrified by the loss of every side.<sup>4</sup>



A tie is a knot. Things get stuck.

## Girls and Gemstones

Is post-shag-rug adulthood equivalent to the universal and the homogenous?

Love poems, which depend on the universal for their appeal to the reader, simultaneously depend on the specificity of the lover.

Wendy Lotterman's poems are not universal. The Universal kicks around as a ghost and causes a fuss, or is it the Specific? The specificity of "you." You as in you babe.

4. Wendy Lotterman, "Tie," *Abutting Grove* (manuscript, 2016-2019). "Tie" has previously been published in *The Literatureur* (2016). Other poems from this manuscript have also been published in various journals: "Sandals" in *SAND: Berlin's English Literary Journal* (v. 18, 2019); "Horses" in *Virulentxs* (small-issue zine published by Lotta Theißen, Berlin 2018); "Delete to Receive" in *Prelude* (v. 3, 2017); "≈", "≈ ≈" and "≈ ≈ ≈" published in *Poor Claudia* (2016); "In the Flowers of Young Girls in Shadow" in *BOMB* (2017).

"I love you specifically" but perhaps you are also a "lesser proxy" of my mother in this "replicable nursery."

You sub in as an exit strategy. But people and situations aren't metaphors or instruments; they can be read both as symbolic and absolutely singular, which is the core of what constitutes an acute crisis in these poems. Full of ferocious frustration, something always remains unconsummated, unrealised.

*"The erotic trespass expires by the time it's safe to cross."*

*"[W]here lanyard grants access to the gardens' is also where '[p]ossibility lays flayed before our separate reservations as range-of-motion invites the body to corroborate."<sup>5</sup>*

And will it?

Passes expire. The lanyard might promise a garden of earthly delights but it needs to be used at the right time, otherwise: *"ingress deletes the actual arcade."<sup>6</sup>* Or, by entering you undo the very idea of entrance, and thus *"kill the mystery."<sup>7</sup>* Maybe you feel desire needs boundaries to flourish.

*"There's a password for the party: it's the crevice where histamine brings your body into knowledge."<sup>8</sup>* If you let it. The crevice is a hidden or unknown or unenterable space that tickles or threatens you with an allergic reaction; an automatic, impulsive, response.

Desire can endure delay only so long. Eventually you need to act: *"you swear by the rate of exchange and the temperature of two legs that must finally put the subject to bed."<sup>9</sup>* The subject matter or the lover? You can't decide so you return to the *"obsessive Vitruvian escape room,"<sup>10</sup>* hooked by mathematically perfect proportions, idealised and therefore also *"indecipherable."<sup>11</sup>*

*"I can't tell what the rivulets of impossibly soft access are saying, but I get it."<sup>12</sup>*

The speaker makes a decision and then questions it again, *"sequencing love and contract"*—depending on where we put the stress.

*"No, you cannot get back into the same bed you left. The real non-transferable ticket is you."<sup>13</sup>*

Lotterman's poems are full of dualisms. One poem describes the *"binary siren of your nostrils,"<sup>14</sup>* "Tie" talks about *"two tears," "two twins," "receiv[ing] love in doubles," "two trees," "two skies indifferent to the difference between one and two."*

5. Lotterman, "Winter Noodles," *Abutting Grove*.  
 6. Lotterman, "Winter Noodles," *Abutting Grove*.  
 7. Lotterman, "Winter Noodles," *Abutting Grove*.  
 8. Lotterman, "Winter Noodles," *Abutting Grove*.  
 9. Lotterman, "Third Season," *Abutting Grove*.  
 10. Lotterman, "Third Season," *Abutting Grove*.  
 11. Lotterman, "Third Season," *Abutting Grove*.  
 12. Lotterman, "Winter Noodles," *Abutting Grove*.  
 13. Lotterman, "Third Season," *Abutting Grove*.  
 14. Lotterman, "≈ ≈ ≈", *Abutting Grove*.

The skies may be indifferent but neither the poem's speaker nor her addressee are. The addressed "you" reminds her of the impossibility of evenness, that love will be divided, that you can't have your cake and eat it, too.

Barbara Browning, another connoisseur of sexy language, argues otherwise. Citing the cultural critic Lewis Hyde, she writes, "In the world of gift ... you not only can have your cake and eat it too, you can't have your cake *unless* you eat it. [...] For Hyde, that's the link between the redistribution of wealth and eros. To him, and to me, the beauty of the gift is that, like sex, it confounds our sense of what it means to give pleasure and receive it. The more you give, the more you have."<sup>15</sup>

In Lotterman's poem, the cake is halved.

*"Halving your cake as evidence of pleasure in domestic measures and tan-lines scrawled across your frosted hips, split in two even scenes of beauty with bouncers announcing the border."*<sup>16</sup>

For Lotterman, *"feeling redistributes on the left so that holidays on your hip are spent without gifts."*<sup>17</sup>

And:

*"You close both eyes, redistributing ghosts to the perimeter of your sensory kingdom."*<sup>18</sup>

Tan-lines also leave traces of liminality on the body, *"announcing the border"* that can or cannot be crossed. What pierces the back and forth between twos, between mirrors, is the *"single, silicone dome."*<sup>19</sup> The question is: *"How to keep this in perspective"*—where the deictic points to *"myself,"* the *"erotic trespass,"* or the remembered scene at the airport, and either I or whatever *this* is is *"inadmissible to that love or what happens on each side of the border."* But it's also intolerable to be admitted, or not to admit to it, *"the open-concept honesty of first nights," "of first nights at sea,"* which might make you sea-sick, or maybe they won't because you're fluent in the language of floating, of swimming along with *"the fluency of decoys that don't get homesick."* A decoy is a duck at sea.

You better hold onto the railing.

*"I squeezed my thighs tight so I wouldn't fall off."*

Holidays on hips are formally, acrobatically, effective in their strong declaration in the face of doubt or objection, but *"[I]ike most protests, the bruise will drain and then return to stasis."*

The mind doth protest too much against the intensity of feeling. And isn't the

15. Barbara Browning, *The Gift, or, Techniques of the Body* (Coffee House Press, 2017), pp. 6-7.

16. Lotterman, "Tie," *Abutting Grove*.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

hip holiday already a gift or does this nagging child also want memorabilia from a trip to the “*beaches on bergen [sic]*”?<sup>20</sup>

When “*feeling redistributes on the left*”<sup>21</sup> it achieves greater social, but not emotional, equality.

In “Waves,” Lotterman writes “*most days I imagine myself wrapped around my mother’s ankle, or one of several lesser proxies.*”

Body parts and juices move from  
hip to lip to camembert  
from parts to ‘*crushed particulars.*’<sup>22</sup>

Lotterman’s poems reinvent the blazon-like poetic cataloguing; repeatedly the lover is inventoried, with bellies, thighs, belly-buttons:

“*the limit case is inevitably your belly-button.*”<sup>23</sup>

In mathematics, the limit case surfaces when one or more components of an object are at the maximum extent of their possible variation.

In the philosophy of science, it refers to an earlier theory which becomes subsumed into a later, often broader theory. It’s a special case of the generic theory. We usually read the specific for the generic. To justify it. Or we posit the exception. I am not interested in drawing out the queer bits of Lotterman’s poems to suggest that we must always read a writer who occupies a marginalised position through this marginalised identity. I want to talk about these poems’ queerness because it gives me joy, and because my queer reading of these poems is conditioned by the queer contexts in which I encountered them.

I felt and feel cushioned by Lotterman’s words. How they hold me, have held me.

How not to psychoanalyse when you know the poet?

Once we enter the realm of professionalised education, we are taught not to read for pleasure but rather to subsume our pleasure into a sublimated critical distance, to historicise, to move away from straightforward value judgements. This becomes somewhat more complicated with contemporary work when we can actively shape not only the canon but also contemporary debates and feelings. What are we reading for? And what would it mean to read along *with* (the) pleasure.

Lotterman’s poems lend themselves to being read to a lover. As pleasurable prompts. For seduction. Which puts a different spin on the question of the avant-garde’s often proclaimed desire for (or lack of) efficacy. Wendy’s poems

20. Lotterman, “Equator,” *Abutting Grove*.

21. Lotterman, “Tie,” *Abutting Grove*.

22. Lotterman, “Tie,” *Abutting Grove*.

23. Lotterman, “ $\approx \approx \approx$ ,” *Abutting Grove*.

are very effective. Given they are queer and they've been put to the test in explicitly queer situations we could say that they are therefore also socially effective, not just romantically.

Are we allowed to read and use our friends in this way? It's a form of homage—that would be the conventional and academic framework, but I am also making Lotterman's words mine by uttering them in a specific situation, which we could call a romantic situation. It's situational appropriation. It's the best kind of impersonation, via poetic language.

In a recent talk, Jonathan Flatley claimed "prurience as 'a critical mood', a form of recognition, of knowledge, in queer readings,"<sup>24</sup> a form of recognition, of knowledge. Flatley has written about the prurient as an important affect in queer readings. We could also say that queer prurience is delightfully non-productive or non-reproductive. Writing about Maggie Nelson's *Argonauts*, Flatley comments "As a queer critical text, as a text about queer theory, the text is open to exciting its readers, it thinks its readers might want to be aroused in the midst of learning about queer theory, and that that arousal might itself be a point of queer theory, but, at some basic level it is also a way of caring about her readers by trying to help them shift their mood (in part by showing us how queer theory helped *her* to awaken in her own world a new mood, or mode of attunement, a new way of being-with). [...] Like Warhol, for Nelson this is a way of being – and helping us to be – 'ablaze with our care.'"

How do we write about fantasies in a poem? Is the critic supposed to translate and make explicit? Do I list suggestive words—"fist," "mucus," "on all fours"?

After all, the belly and the belly-button often have directional force. They pull the speaker in all the "*cardinal direction[s]*."<sup>25</sup> There's also a pull between mystery and revelation. Something unspeakable and something that cannot yet be named.

*"Now you kill the mystery between your belly and everything else"*<sup>26</sup>

But only so much. There's still an issue of legibility, of reading signs. Casting away doubt:

*"I can't tell what the rivulets of impossibly soft access are saying, but I get it."*<sup>27</sup>

There are ways of getting it that can't be articulated.

*"There is a secret you don't yet know how to confess."*<sup>28</sup>

*"Without fantasy, there would be no love."*<sup>29</sup>

24. Jonathan Flatley, "Prurience," Critical Moods Panel, MLA Annual Convention, January 2017. Available here: <https://supervalent-thought.com/mla-17-643-moods-of-criticism-theatrical-humorless-prurient-susceptible-alacritous/>

25. Lotterman, "Winter Noodles," *Abutting Grove*.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

28. Lotterman, "Tie," *Abutting Grove*.

29. (Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love* (Punctum Books, 2012), 69.



≈ ≈ ≈

Love makes waves. A cliché is a cliché because it's so true it is embarrassing, excessive, inappropriate. Cliché is a term from printing: it's a plate with which to make copies; a decal.

"Most of us, given a choice between chaos and naming, between catastrophe and cliché, would choose naming. Most of us see this as a zero sum game—as if there were no third place to be: something without a name is commonly thought not to exist. And here's where we can discern the benevolence of translation."<sup>30</sup>

The double tilde in mathematics is the sign for almost-equivalence. A mark of suspension. An approximation.

Decoy 2

≈ ≈

*Decals of love spit up the dial-tone like nylon prayer flags. You constitute at least one remaining stanza of attachment, putting the lyric on pause with the ethical bedrock of debt. It's nothing to be ashamed of. Her legs upset you, over and over again – a smooth olive tonic on the way to what you can't touch. I tried you back and got nothing but net-worth; your mattress filled with Camembert. I am perfectly turned on and shut down by the repulsive taste of cream. For instance: your thigh rips open the seminal juice box, splashing face-paint on the taboo of incest and sending my prize to the waiting room. Evening collects in the vending machines as the room somehow ricochets your mood. Hesitation escapes through a backdoor oasis in which nothing seems to matter as much as it does at home, or home seems to matter when you're gone. There is a line that can't be walked. From the streets to my desk, where I saved your iridescent headshots in a set. A menagerie of chopsticks tests the tenderness of stakes not drawn to scale. The miracle is mediocre and rare, specifically yours and everyone's. It's exactly what it looks like: most days I imagine myself wrapped around my mother's ankle, or one of several lesser proxies. Dreams down pay the balance of what can't be staged in life, where I imagine the force of synthesis to be stoppable by a single disposable contact lens, placed on the tip of a penis. Yours or mine. We keep switching places. How else to felonize the scoliosis of class, or have uncommon consequence in a zero-fault state? Very little happened in the time it took to pass from conditions of rain to snow. The sky opened up and watched us waste the day. A barely reflective stretch of cellophane takes your wavy portrait, but can't remember anything. It is exactly what it looks like. Our non-negotiables are fertilizer and an endlessly replicable nursery.<sup>31</sup>*



30. Anne Carson, "Variations on the Right to Remain Silent," *Nay Rather* (Paris: Paris: Center for Writers & Translators, American U of Paris, 2013). Also available online here: <http://artandcrap.com/ensayos/anne-carson-variations-on-the-right-to-remain-silent/>

31. Lotterman, "≈ ≈", *Abutting Grove*.

Sometimes we have to put the lyric on pause. You put romantic exclamation on pause because, perhaps, you face an ethical dilemma, fighting over forbidden fruit or in this case: cream.

I gender the cream, the Camembert, the juice box.

I pretend to re-read my Freud, my Melanie Klein, my Jacques Lacan—what would they have to say to your fertiliser, your replicable nursery, this taboo of incest?

*"Finally, I love my therapist more than any other man; as soon as this is true, it no longer needs to be."<sup>32</sup>*

Transference is the redirection of feelings from childhood to a substitute, usually one's therapist in "*stanzas of attachment*."<sup>33</sup> Or it's the transfer of one love object to another. Perhaps, also, here, it's the surface transfer initiated by the decals of love, tattooed into habit, the movement from surface to depth that the poem dramatises.

In your first draft of the poem, "fertilizer" was "tracing paper," a material for replication. For tracing lines. For copying, repeating. "*Her legs upset you, over and over again.*" I see the commentary on warped social stratification, "*the scoliosis of class*," the "*uncommon consequence in a zero fault state*"— which rightly argue that the same rules don't apply to everyone—but I zero in on what I can't touch, on her legs upsetting you.

Sometimes we have to put the lyric on pause. In order to read what's actually there.

And so I read this poem as if in "*erotic lockstep*" with the "Three Seasons," or as the underbelly of "Tie." And then I learn that the poems aren't about *that* at all. You ask if this throws things. I say no. This is perfect.

Having access to the poet's compositional motivations might throw you off. Or it might throw into relief the workings of a poem in a new light. (In cliché printing there's a difference in level, which allows for the transfer).

Either this makes me a bad reader or a good friend. Not to encroach on the poem. Or vice versa. A good reader but a bad friend not to have picked up on the biographical detail.

Do poems want to be fully understood?

I am not completely wrong; it just turns out that the love is of a different kind. A different register.

The poem's subtext is a sick parent. Suddenly I notice the mention of a catheter. The word "*recover*," "*the waiting room*"; the question "*why does it hurt you to move*?" You add more keys to the carabiner.

32. Lotterman, "Intense Holiday," *Abutting Grove*.

33. Lotterman, "≈ ≈", *Abutting Grove*.

You see, this is also a lecture about the situatedness of reading. Would I have read this poem differently in the library rather than in bed and with company? The order of reading matters, too. Knowing that the poems “Horses” and “Sandals” are about a particular lover, I chased the love train of the other poems, too. I let myself be led in a particular direction, or rather: I leapt. Into that direction.

I.A. Richards chides me: “And the feelings that rush out may take a course that is only partially directed by the poem.”<sup>34</sup>

We look for what we want to find.

Which is like love.

Maybe we want all poems to be love poems. Maybe we want a poem to be the key to a new relationship or affair. Reading aloud or sending a poem as a gift is an incentive *for* love, the instigator *of* love.

I revisited these poems for this lecture and they hit me with all the force they did the first time I read them but now couched in their specific romance, the specific inflection of their impact on my life.

Enter Jonathan Flatley, reassuring the reader: “it’s entirely possible for a text to seem to ‘have’ one mood, or ‘be about’ one mood, and yet *produce* a mood in its readers that is distinct.”<sup>35</sup>

Enter Wendy: “*No more clues.*”<sup>36</sup>

Enter Diana Hamilton, raising a toast:

It’s anti-intellectual to presume self-doubt means one hasn’t thought hard enough;

—everyone who’s ever been smart at all—just like anyone who has ever really had faith, in God or in Love—is completely plagued by doubt.

But still.

I’m not sure the men watching know this,  
and I like to watch women  
be fucking masters of discourse.

Unfortunately, or fortunately—I don’t know how to say this part—I have to return to the part of that phrase that troubled you, if you

34. I.A. Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgement* (Harcourt, Brace, 1929), p. 61

35. Flatley, “Prurience.”

36. Lotterman, “Waves” *Abutting Grove*.

read it carefully, and has troubled me the most since I was a child,  
in love with women, in hate with myself:

I like to watch women.

Whether they're mastering their discourse or not, honestly.

But mastery isn't an escape from the question of sexiness; it pairs  
really well, in fact, with tousled hair."<sup>37</sup>

Hamilton here gets at a conundrum of contemporary feminist and queer writing. There is both the desire to be accessible and boldly "test the sponginess of explicitness"<sup>38</sup> and foreground elements of identity and the body or, conversely, to embrace linguistic difficulty, obscurity, and abstraction, often associated with a male avant-garde tradition. This has been an ongoing debate for the feminist avant-garde since at least the 1980s.

Verity Spott illuminates both the pitfalls of binary thinking and of the desire to make one's identity legible in "Against Trans\* Manifestos": "the observable is tenuous."<sup>39</sup>

Description doesn't run along straight lines.

Caspar Heinemann agrees: "Maybe sometimes all you can do is be the messy incoherent first draft you want to see in the universe."<sup>40</sup>

As does Lotterman: "*Now and then, portraits of young girls present two alternative futures in which I accept either the meltdown of mountaintop removal, or the secondary embellishments of Jello.*"<sup>41</sup>

Lotterman here references the American coming-of-age buddy movie *Now and Then*: while the tomboy character flattens her chest with a bandage, her friend stuffs her bra with balloons filled with pudding.

The choice is one of two extremes: to exaggerate and emphasise, or to minimise and suppress—or less negatively, to offer a space of maintenance. But how to undo the artificial and natural divide?

Lotterman's poetry revels in such wobbliness.

This is also couched in the context of summer camp, which is referenced a few times throughout Lotterman's poems, a spatially and temporarily contained microcosm for sexual development and for social pressures to play themselves out. For Sara Ahmed, "[b]odies become straight by tending toward straight objects,

37. Diana Hamilton, "Essay on Bad Writing," in *God Was Right* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2018).

39. Sophie Seita, "Emilia Galotti's Colouring Book of Feelings," *My Little Enlightenment Plays* (Pamenar Press, 2020) [forthcoming]

39. Verity Spott, "Against Trans\* Manifestos", *Datableed*, 3 (2016), <<https://www.datebleedzine.com/verity-spott-against-trans-manifestos>> [accessed 7 March 2020]

40. Caspar Heinemann, "NOTHING ELSE BUT: Some Fragments Written with the Intention of Becoming Something More Coherent at a Later Date Despite Experience Exposing This as Unlikely", *Interjection Calendar*, 004.08 (Montez Press, 2018), [p. 10].

41. Lotterman, "in the flowers of young girls in shadow," *Abutting Grove*.

such that they acquire their ‘direction[.]’ [...] The ‘nearness’ of love objects is not casual: we do not just find objects there, like that. The very requirement that the child follow a parental line puts some objects and not others in reach.”<sup>42</sup>

*“Parental love is enormous and mistakenly cast as the foil to all future partners.”<sup>43</sup>*

The mountain-top removal perhaps also reveals something a little darker—i.e. ecological damage. At first glance it seems like the more radical intervention in “nature” is the mountain-top removal, but maybe the Jello just hides its terrible ethical footprint more sweetly and in an artificially coloured guise (gelatin etc).

Ahmed again: “Of course, when we inherit, we also inherit the proximity of certain objects, as that which is available to us, as given within the family home.”<sup>44</sup>

Objects and objectives. Materials and values.

*“Our non-negotiables are fertilizer and an endlessly replicable nursery.”*

The construction also appears in “≈ ≈ ≈”: *“Our non-negotiables are hardwood floors and strong family values.”*

*“we inherit ways of inhabiting and extending into space”<sup>45</sup>*

Which shapes what’s present.

### Calligrams of Absence

When Lotterman studied at Bard, she wrote a thesis titled “Calligrams of Absence.” What she says about Mallarme could equally apply to her own work:

“The most honest testimony begins where it cannot be given. [...] The poet’s failure to forge a link between language, the self, and the world results in work that bears witness to these ruptures. And yet, the confluence between the disruption of the poetic form and the poet’s own adversity ultimately manages to create another link, as the poetry participates in the same conflicts experienced by the poet. The language points to what it cannot articulate by revealing the instances of its own failure.”

Which we might call queer.

42. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Duke University Press, 2006), 86-87.

44. Lotterman, “In the Flowers of Young Girls in Shadow,” *Abutting Grove*.

44. Ahmed, 86.

45. *Ibid.*

To substitute an absence.

"Sub" as verb and prefix appears frequently in Lotterman's poems.

*"Tagged by speed and free-play in this famously unbeatable level. We sub out."*<sup>46</sup>

*"Animated by right to smaller worlds, your knees sub in for the breeze."*<sup>47</sup>

*"Learning love on dummies with dad is the ruse of all workable substitutions."*<sup>48</sup>

But also: *"In place of you, nothing."*<sup>49</sup>

Substitution isn't so easy, after all. The lover is irreplaceable.

*"There is a stage at which the world empties out every proper noun and you, specifically you, sub-in as the tailored fulfillment of what life would like to bat next."*<sup>50</sup>

To sub is also to submit:

*"It's been so long since I had sex the way I wanted, except that yesterday I did, only after identifying the unquestionable ripple, and then submitting to the fortress of a fluke. I end with a Gettier, in which stimulation is an accident of my low threshold for pleasure."*<sup>51</sup>

The Gettier problem tests our understanding of propositional knowledge. Justified beliefs based on sensory data might feel absolutely true, or are true by sheer luck, and thus trouble what we understand to constitute knowledge.

*"Somewhere in middle of all of this there is a timeline of fungible love in which I forgot to say that I couldn't come home on half-days to find the light of two perverted suns doing sex things on the bed since the golf-balls in my wallet cannot feel or be felt."*<sup>52</sup>

I think again of the "ingress" and how the sun makes an ingress into the cardinal signs at equinoxes and solstices...

*"Life is a bottom,"*<sup>53</sup> but sometimes we find *"bottom[s] subtending tops,"*<sup>54</sup> straight lines joined at a point, or a bract extending under a flower to support and enfold it.

Perhaps I am also reading you for a theory of love.

46. Lotterman, "Third Season," *Abutting Grove*.

47. Lotterman, "Winter Noodles," *Abutting Grove*.

48. Lotterman, "Third Season," *Abutting Grove*.

49. Lotterman, "Third Season," *Abutting Grove*.

50. Lotterman, "Intense Holiday," *Abutting Grove*.

51. Lotterman, "Powers of Ten," *Abutting Grove*.

52. Lotterman, "In the Flowers of Young Girls in Shadow," *Abutting Grove*.

53. Lotterman, "Tie," *Abutting Grove*.

54. Lotterman, "Sandals," *Abutting Grove*.

"I get on the couch with no intention to be legible."<sup>55</sup>

The One True Imposter

"We meet in a new scene of  
reading where dawns of disco reflect the one true imposter  
of equestrian sovereignty in the carotid body of water.  
That gallop is you."<sup>56</sup>

The lover is a contradiction in terms, "*the one true imposter*," but like the carotid arteries, are the main vessel that supplies the head with blood.

No Answer

Roland Barthes writes in *A Lover's Discourse*, in a chapter on silence titled "No Answer": "The amorous subject suffers anxiety because the loved object replies scantily or not at all," and then in parentheses:

(Like a bad concert hall, affective space contains dead spots where the sound fails to circulate. —The perfect interlocutor, the friend, is he not the one who constructs around you the greatest possible resonance? Cannot friendship be defined as a space with total sonority?)<sup>57</sup>

We desire and give each other total sonority / tonal sorority.  
We call each other honey to feel held.  
We affirm our desires and encourage each other to pursue them.  
We comment on the vertiginous vernality of the affair.  
Talk about metaphorical proposals. Taking the tiniest of risks to test the waters.

"Massaging balm into the desert's cracking theme, you get wet, restless, head by the belly. In the dim-lit violet fish-shack, we remain, for that moment, explicit."<sup>58</sup>

And we refuse the accurate adjectives. Who cares what restless could *actually* mean.

The prettier words get at the underside of things, a different form of truth. Or maybe their surface sheen is just camouflage, which, when pierced, reveals their utter correctness. Which you call overkill, I "poetry."

Does a love poem depend on the candid? Or on the candy? Another decoy.

55. Lotterman, "Family Triage," *Abutting Grove*.

56. Lotterman, "Horses," *Abutting Grove*.

57. Roland Barthes, trans. Richard Howard, "No Answer," *A Lover's Discourse* (Hill and Wang, 1979), p. 167.

58. Lotterman, "Sandals," *Abutting Grove*.

"Our snack municipality is sweet and plainly impossible."<sup>59</sup>

Perhaps our true task is to study "the supple science of a sweet indentured / future, where a gesture systemically melts you."<sup>60</sup>

But extended explicitness is foreclosed because that would force a decision, an action:

"True correlation becomes not really possible: bottom subtending tops, or the opposite, but not at once. Lips collapse into access without accent: siren of a superintended pleasure."<sup>61</sup>

Pleasure "lives forever in that cognate promise."<sup>62</sup>

Let's try not to accelerate things. Decisions make you tired. But so does not-acting. Feelings take up mental space, an amorphous and non-coherent mesh; you can't articulate them.

As Lisa Robertson sighs in her *Magenta Soul Whip*, "Utopia is so emotional[.]"<sup>63</sup>

I still see you, lounging on the floor at La MaMa, as Karl-Marx-as-lapdog in my play, asking me and the audience: "what's up?" Sometimes we write lines already hearing, imagining, others saying them, thus writing an address without knowing it.

In an interview with Natalie Eilbert for the *Atlas Review*, you say:

If I get any thrill from people reading me, it's probably secondary to an immediate blush. Or maybe it's thanks to it. As soon as I reveal something, there's an impulse to kick dirt back into the hole I just dug. But then there's also a competing excitement associated with the reveal, and even though I say "competing" I think shame and thrill escalate together.<sup>64</sup>

Which makes me think of projections and polarities, and Philip Sidney who knew about both. As he puts it in "Astrophil and Stella":

from whose rules who do swerve,  
Rebels to Nature, strive for their own smart.  
It is most true, what we call Cupid's dart,  
An image is, which for ourselves we carve.<sup>65</sup>

59. Lotterman, "Third Season," *Abutting Grove*.

60. Lotterman, "Horses," *Abutting Grove*.

61. Lotterman, "Sandals," *Abutting Grove*.

62. *Ibid.*

63. Lisa Robertson, *Magenta Soul Whip* (Coach House Books, 2005), 19.

64. Wendy Lotterman, "A Conversation with Wendy Lotterman," interview by Natalie Eilbert, *The Atlas Review*, March 31, 2014 (<https://theatlasreview.wordpress.com/2014/03/31/a-conversation-with-wendy-lotterman/>).

65. Philip Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella* (1554-1586).



"I think we all want others to usher us into the light, but I kind of admire people who are like: fuck it, I'm not only going to push the ouija piece (i.e. me), but allow others to see me push it without shame."<sup>66</sup>

Your love is also yours. You can own your desire. (But does "own" imply ownership? And isn't that too simple, too much like self-help?)

Indirectly and inadvertently these texts teach us, without necessarily realising that proposition themselves, that there's strength in expressing desire and asking for things.

And so in these poems, just as in real life, time passes.

"[N]ew guests confuse the tempo of the room. At this point / it's easier to just undress in the open-air jeep, / to reveal the dewy truth of music"<sup>67</sup>

"I can't keep the rhythm, baby."<sup>68</sup>

I can't make you representative, Wendy.

Of "contemporary queer love poetry." Of the contemporary, of queerness, of poetry, of love. And yet, I've chosen *you*, "you specifically," to be the paragon of our generation!

"We still don't know exactly how the roads work, but it's okay."<sup>69</sup>

## Tetris

Reading Wendy Lotterman's poetry is pure synecdochic pleasure.

Admonishing all lovers, Berlant writes: "But we have already seen that your desire does not take you to its predestined object, the thing that will repair the trauma (of maternal separation, of sexual difference) that set you on your voyage in the first place. Desire is practical: it takes what it can get. Desire has bad eyesight, as it were: remember, that the object is not a thing, but a cluster of fantasmic investments in a scene that represents itself as offering some traction, not a solution to the irreparable contradictions of desire."<sup>70</sup>

Or maybe: desire has great eyesight thanks to the proxy of the rosy tint, but has burnt its tongue from a scalding liquid, drunk too fast.

I still have a small but visible scar from a tray of burnt nuts on my left hand from that first night in Crown Heights with a rekindled romance of remainders

66. Lotterman, "Interview," *Atlas Review*.

67. Lotterman, "Equator," *Abutting Grove*.

68. Wendy Lotterman, "Powers of Ten," *Intense Holiday* (After Hours LTD, 2016), unpaginated.

69. Lotterman, "Winter Noodles," *Abutting Grove*.

70. Berlant, 76.

that didn't add up. I don't need to analyse this. It's so overdetermined.

*"The bellies in the stadium collectively spell  
what you already know: that our pre-symbolic crushing  
is extinct, and is the only thing worth saving."*<sup>71</sup>

In the interview mentioned earlier, Lotterman continues:

[O]ne more thing, while we're on the lyric—some of my favorite poets offer these sprawling, panoramic views of cultural forces in intricate collision. Their poetry draws back to reveal the big picture of our time and place, like some fabulous, glitchy erector-set, too big to comprehend from within. I mostly don't do that. I go in. It's like that Eames movie "Powers of Ten", that zooms away from a couple lazing on a patch of grass in Chicago by powers of ten until our view is super-galactic, and then zooms back into the man until our view is sub-cellular. When you zoom into an individual—or, in the case of the lyric, the self—the subject *becomes* the panoramic, its own index of bigger forces, a complicated repository of an overdetermined "I" whose concerns are the sound of these forces clamoring. So I don't think expansive poems are disengaged with subjectivity, and I don't think lyrical poems are unexpansive.<sup>72</sup>

You go in.

In love you have to go in.

Then follows the realisation that we have already said it all. In this or that poem. To this or that lover. It's a frustration that we cannot get over.

*"My attempts to enter  
are redirected into a growing portrait of increasing blurriness;  
the roof of the building becomes  
the Tetris of my wet desperation.  
Privacy is a real thing, I guess,  
too firm to be crushed by the waves of my soggy,  
ambient love. I have already written this poem."*<sup>73</sup>

There are some poets who essentially write one long poem no matter what they write. In other words, they continue the thinking begun in one poem; they wrestle with one question; they write in one vein; it's one tonal constellation. I think Wendy Lotterman is one of these writers. Each poem is still distinct in that it broaches (on the surface) different topics or is shot into focus by some experience, but is ultimately an extended thinking into verse, spread out across her poems.

71. Lotterman, "Lake Anza," *Abutting Grove*.

72. Lotterman, "Interview," *Atlas Review*.

73. Lotterman, "Powers of Ten," *Intense Holiday*.

"I have trouble getting into short, punch-liney poems. [...] that sort of deadpan, monochromatic sincerity doesn't bowl me over. And of course I want to be."<sup>74</sup>

What does it mean for a poem to bowl you over?

Work that creates "that kind of fabulous combustion of thought that leaves me both winded and grateful."<sup>75</sup>

In her feminist reading of Diotima's speech in Plato's *Symposium*, Luce Irigaray concludes her analysis like this:

Neither the good nor the true nor justice nor the government of the city would occur without beauty. And its strongest ally is love. Love therefore deserves to be venerated. And Diotima asks that her words be considered as a celebration and praise of Love. [...] what she proposes to contemplate, beauty itself, is understood as that which confuses the opposition between immanence and transcendence. An always already sensible horizon at the depths of which everything would appear. But it would be necessary to go back over the whole speech again to discover it in its enchantment.<sup>76</sup>

Dear Wendy,

Yes to feelings as guests that one can properly address! It's something that I think you are very good at in your poetry—each poem showcases its own 'victory of the particular'. I especially like the new one you sent. I keep thinking about the choice you set up between 'the meltdown of mountaintop removal, or the secondary embellishments of Jello'. Both feel momentous but also wobbly from trembling (especially because of the l- and m-sounds). I think there's something incredibly seductive in your style—the suggestion of intimacy that is also partially semantic, the revelation of some secret under various layers of associative textual density or a kind of argumentative logic that only really works in poems or in dreams. Your poems often read themselves, psychoanalyse themselves, and place symbolic footholds or hooks along the way, which do not connect to a consistent metaphoric architecture and that's nice. I love reading these poems as a way of thinking through something—it's seriously good poetic thinking, i.e. thinking that happens in poems because of their prosody, their structure, their metaphoricity, and intensity. Your poems are also instructive, but in an indirect way: neither their instructions nor their poetic arguments are reducible to one statement. They're also just fun. I will have to think on it some more. I'd love to write about it some time.

Love,  
Sophie

74. Lotterman, "A Conversation with Wendy Lotterman," interview by Natalie Eilbert.

75. Ibid

76. Luce Irigaray, "Sorcerer Love: A Reading of Plato's Symposium, Diotima's Speech" / "L'amour Sorcier: Lecture de Platon, Le Banquet, Discours de Diotime," *Hypatia*, 3.3, French Feminist Philosophy (Winter, 1989), pp. 32-44 (p. 44).