

AN INTERLUDE ON POETICS AS DIRT

CACONRAD & BRENDA IIJIMA

CONRAD: OKAY BRENDA! My friend! DIRT! The real thing MEETS poetry, the other real thing! We're both Capricorns so it feels right to be discussing DIRT with POETRY, Capricorn being the last island before the zodiac is engulfed by total air and water. Whenever I've had boyfriends who are also Earth signs the union to dirt is a merry and serious occasion. One summer I asked my boyfriend Robin to locate with me five different varieties of dirt to explore and eat. Our enthusiastic search (land)ed some exquisite side effects. We were in southwestern New York State at a pagan festival, and our friend the Reverend Velveteen Sly from the Church of the Subgenius officiated our DIRT UNION. To be honest, it turned out to actually be that holy, this search-and-eat dirt expedition. The plots of dirt were chosen carefully for texture and color as we were trying to find the perfect combination corresponding to the four cardinal elements and the fifth, unseen element. (At the time we referred to this fifth element as Wyrð, after the blank rune, but this was before hearing Freya Asswyn lecture on Wyrð being an American neo-pagan invention, and without historic location in the Rhineland and other Nordic regions.) The dirt in the woods is what made Robin sick, I think, but he had also been drinking a lot the night before, this crap alcohol called Purple Jesus. The dirt from the woods was near a rotting tree, fresh with life, and without a doubt the most ALIVE of all the dirt selections, I mean you could FEEL your heart racing ten minutes after eating it, your blood rich with its complex nutrients. We ate each selection at each location, small mouthfuls, chewing a long time, especially the dry, red dirt, which was probably an old clay bed long since baked to dust in the sun. Smell, taste, texture, inculcated information in the most unexpected ways which revealed itself in my dreams that night. I was in a submarine, which was not marine at all, but in the ground, and the machine didn't make tunnels, it didn't burrow, it simply moved through the dirt and the dirt healed behind it much like water would do. And yes, the periscope, you have to have a periscope, and I could SEE the festival dancers, naked around the campfire with the drummers, dancing and drumming all night long, as they do every night of these festivals. It felt like an out of body experience, only, instead of floating out of the body into the air it was underground PUSHING PUSHING THROUGH DIRT THE FRONT WINDOW OF THE MACHINE REVEALING ROOTS OF EVERY KIND SOME LIKE RED CHICKEN CLAWS AND DIRT DIRT DIRT WORMS DIRT DIRT DIRT PEBBLES AND COCOONS! I will ALWAYS remember this dream, this INCREDIBLE dream! It was most likely just a dream though, not astral travel, but what a vivid, MAGNIFICENT dream it was! I woke violently and suddenly and wrote without thinking about it, this little poem, which is part of my forthcoming CHAX Press book, *THE BOOK OF FRANK*:

Frank remembers
shirts of buried generals
flying in formation
over schoolyards

blowing wasps from sleeves

Dirt informed this poem directly, the graves sending the shirts into the sky, *threatening!* I remember thinking while eating one of the five selections of dirt *THIS IS OUTSIDE COMMERCE, FUCK THE BANKS, FUCK THE GROCERY BUSINESS, FUCK ALL BUSINESS, THIS ONE IS OUTSIDE THEIR REACH, WE TWO FAGS AND THE EARTH!* The desire to be Outside the functions of our culture have always been strong in me, but never stronger as on that day, slowly eating our mouthfuls of dirt together. One of the selections actually tasted like flesh, but it wasn't a rotted animal, it was dust, but tasted like meat. Even though I was vegetarian, it made the continuum of dirt, plant, and animal blink epiphanies throughout the day. Outside of waking violently from my submarine dream, the experience of our DIRT UNION was total pleasure. Earth as pleasure, something to strive for in this time of Earth as utilitarian, mineral scavenging, damn building, bomb craters, graves graves graves graves *fucking war-filled graves!* One of the most beautiful moments Robin and I shared in the pleasure of dirt this day was when the Reverend Velveteen Sly officiated our DIRT UNION, and we dug a little hole in the field, made love at her command (the Reverend enjoys telling fags when to get going), and deposited our semen into the hole simultaneously, putting a little dirt over our deposit, then an acorn, then more dirt. Sex and dirt and poetry have an endless braid of possibilities! *Horticulture and poetry and sex!*

IJJIMA: That meaty flavor you tasted was most likely iron. Many stones in New England contain copious amounts of iron – it bleeds out of the rocks. Dirt – ground down stones, the continuum of terrestrial matter in heady sedimentary patterns – where the nouns return to, only to reverb. Geophagy! There is substantial evidence that humans have been consuming dirt for medicinal reasons for over forty thousand years (reports Cindy Engel in *Wild Health: Lessons in Natural Wellness from the Animal Kingdom*) – animals go to great lengths to lick at dirt and clay which helps them deal with toxicity in their diets, etc. I'm attracted to dirt for its moist microbial richness – dirt of subterranean (or interior) eco-systems where movement involves burrowing, tunneling, and digging. (Eating this top layer is a bit hazardous because that's where most of the bacteria live – though my sister and I would feast on the occasional "dirt brownie"). As a child I used to dig holes in various places and lay my face into the concave excavation – in order to pick up vibrations of the earth and also to smell and feel the contours. And I found, if I inhaled short quick successive breaths I could gain access to the changeable dirt/earth scents quite like a fox, nose to mossy floor. Easy transition from solid to liquid interest me too. Pour a little water on dirt and you get mud. These shape shifting unstable properties point to a changeability not often conceded to in the lived out world of civilization. Dirt is disarticulation and re-absorption – the break down of civilization into dirt. Now, with our biomedical bodies loading up on synthetic chemicals we need dirt evermore to purify our own excretions. Dirt is the local blend – all this returning local color under our soles. Love your androgynous mother(ing) dirt! An acre of soil might contain 130 pounds each of algae and protozoa, 890 lbs. of insects, nearly 900 pounds of earthworms and about 2,000 pounds each of bacteria and fungi as well as a larger weight of plant roots than the above-the-ground plant parts. Worm gardens are the opposite of captivity. Mega processes going on including electron exchange and chemical transformation – the soil is charged I say. Dirt is erroneously thought to be dirty when in fact it is actively cleansing – and yes, there is the rotting stage, as you mention – and then there's the fact of the autotrophs and their hunger for compounds. And the fact of the heterotrophs and their insatiable appetite for autotrophs . . . I am very greedy about earthworm shit. I feed and I feed them, feed and feed and feed them. They become thick, plump and agile and their castings keep the tilth subtle, thick, aggregate, dense. The sticky binding element of soil is a protein called glomalin and 30% of soil mass consists of this substance. Glomalin contains 1-9% iron, so you might have tasted its slightly bloody meat flavor. What glomalin does is store carbon – 30-40% would be released into the atmosphere without this homeopathic glue.

I feel I have to evoke the material rich nano reality of dirt before I can wiggle amongst the symbols. There is so much fear of the pre-technical, and it is thought of as inferior, lower life – the untamed, undomesticated, not given to husbandry. As far as poetry is concerned, there must be room for the ugly, unsculpted, corrupted, unstable utterance – or something unformed and less than pristine. I look to dirt for a modality of the raw. An instance of what I mean is encapsulated in *Snow Sensitive Skin*, a moody, sensitive collaboration between Rob Halpern and Taylor Brady that they worked on during the conflict between Lebanon and Israel, the horrible aggression that was meted out, turning life to rubble . . .

– my carbon credits *public smog*
our outposts on the commons
being waste expands there
no limit to what's left over-
time remains *say life itself*
where gulls wheel scout mark
mountains of what won't decay
no future reference a bird-
filled sky affirms

– what guarantees the working day

Here's Abraham Smith from his book *Whim Man Mannon* – sultry soil – mortal tactile tract – troubling the farm:

secret soil coital
he dover here
sounds blonde as
whipped oil
please appeal to
wimpling skies
journeying trees
there is but one fence
bone true and
one blockhead dog
inside
to rend
the smarts
of trees
at journey's end

And James Thomas Stevens' tangible matter with matter:

The vegetable earth on its mineral spine

CONRAD: Much of what you say makes your book *AROUND SEA* more complete! If that makes sense? Tell us how *AROUND SEA* is part of your total immersion into Earth.

IJJIMA: There seemed to be so much taxonomy to cut through to visualize the flow of the ecosystem. Things are parsed out for value and quality and how this relates to human concern. I wanted to understand beyond thingness, to understand systems and how they surge within networks – in and out of formation/form – dissipating outlines.

CA, I love your poetry for its passionate creation and lyrical insistence of a commons of culture and an ecology of inclusivity. "we are not between trees between hairs/split mine in two so you can get it going/keep it soaring."

CONRAD: Filth is another word for pollution, for garbage, for the bacteria-laden STINK we sweep out the door to become someone else's problem, some other environment's stinking problem. Garbage is on the streets all over Philadelphia and sometimes I see it and feel an affinity. It feels important to not only admit this affinity, but to examine how and why there would be. It's not surrendering to the total breakdown, but accepting and understanding that IT IS ME the breakdown, as much as it is all of us. The garbage on the street is who we are. I've thought about inventing a long, hollow, clear plastic dress connected to a vacuum, and I would go around the city sucking up garbage, which would slowly fill my dress. And a sign mounted on my wig would read: EVERYTHING FROM EXPLODING STARS! Or maybe: PLEASE LITTER SO I CAN BE PRETTY! Or maybe: WALTZ ME WITH LOVE'S RECYCLING IN YOUR EYES! Or maybe: CONURBATION OR BUST! Or maybe: BE A SANITATION BEAUTY QUEEN! Or maybe: OUR BAROQUE CESSPOOL AND IMPENDING OVERDRAFT OF RESOURCES APPROACHETH! Or maybe: DECAY IS AT HAND YOUNG AND OLD! Or maybe: SCRUPLES ARE FOR HEALTHY PLANETS! Or maybe: JESUS DIED FOR YOUR INORDINATE CONSUMPTION OF SHIT! Or maybe: PLEASE PETITION AL QUEDA TO HELP END POLLUTION! Or maybe: GARBAGE SOON FOR ALL PROXIMITY OF DEGENERATES LIKE US!

IJJIMA: CA, could you talk at greater length about your engagement in reinvigorating the cultural commons?

CONRAD: (Soma)tic Poetics, and thanks for asking this in this way. The Body, somatic, is FROM dirt, and is walking ON dirt. Spirit is Soma. This is a poetry conducted through the Soma and Somatic, literally, by manipulating our bodies and other anatomies of our physical world to connect our spiritual centers for a more holistic poetry. The brain has too much rule over our lives the more mechanized our world becomes, pushing us further and further into forgetting THE DIRT we come from, THE DIRT WE ARE. (Soma)tic Poetics relocates the intelligence of the physical and spiritual worlds and alerts and alters other aspects of our lives as a result, keeping us tuned into the frequencies of wood, toenail, blood, sleet, all the neighboring carbon, gentle AND NOT. Being in this world, this way, taking no THING for granted for our poetry to recognize, fully observe, and even alleviate the stress from Alice Notley's wise observation, "Poetry's so common hardly anyone can find it." (from "C-81," *Mysteries of Small Houses*). But it's also true to say that (Soma)tic Poetics is informed by the destruction of our planet, and the planet is our Body of bodies. Actually, I don't really believe it's being destroyed, but that it's being reinvented, but in such a way that we humans may not survive its transformation. But for now it's our planet and our problem. And our poetry. Our American invasion and occupation of Iraq led me, ultimately, to this idea of the body being a marker for what we are doing, what we can do. I stopped cutting my hair on the 3rd anniversary of our invasion in order to have some THING IN my life as a daily reminder that we are at war. It's getting longer, and needing more and more care, my hair. But so is the war, getting longer, and needing more care. Suffering is not disconnected here, or anywhere, no matter how much we strive to forget. My war hair helped me formulate roads into SEEING poetry in a new way with the body. Jack Kimball is publishing my first collection of (Soma)tic poems called *(Soma)tic Midge* on his FAUX Press. There is a very brief introductory note I wrote for that book that I would like to share here:

I cannot stress enough how much this mechanistic world, as it becomes more and more efficient, resulting in ever increasing brutality, has required me to FIND MY BODY to FIND MY PLANET in order to find my poetry. If I am an extension of this world then I am an extension of garbage, shit, pesticides, bombed and smoldering cities, microchips, cyber, astral and biological pollution, BUT ALSO the beauty of a patch of unspoiled sand, all that croaks from the mud, talons on the cliff that take rock and silt so seriously flying over the spectacle for a closer examination is nothing short

of necessary. The most idle looking pebble will suddenly match any hunger, any rage. Suddenly, and will be realized at no other speed than suddenly.

Recently I was at a poetry reading and one of the poets announced, "IT'S GREAT SPRING IS FINALLY HERE, I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF WINTER!" The audience ERUPTED with shouts and applause. It startled me. I sat there turning my head around to look at everyone for that brief revelry against winter. "What is this?" I asked myself. This winter has been one of the mildest winters I have ever experienced in Philadelphia, and I've been here more than half my life. So, it couldn't possibly BE that everyone was tired of snow and ice, since we hardly had any. What is this? Weather is the enemy, JUST LISTEN TO the weather reports on the news stations of the radio and TV, their adjectives are gathered around this idea of Weather being our enemy. But how could it be? Maybe I'm wrong, BUT I've been thinking that everyone is SO STRESSED OUT with the war, with the politics, with all the darkness, with all the denial surrounding the darkness, and in the end it cannot be denied enough. There's never enough noise to shout down a war, especially a war WE ALL KNOW should not have happened. Over a MILLION lives, REAL HUMAN LIVES have been taken for this war which FILLS THE POCKETS OF THE WEALTHIEST CITIZENS OF OUR NATION WITH AMERICA'S WEALTHIEST TOP FIVE PERCENT INCREASING THEIR WEALTH BY FORTY PERCENT IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS. The EXACT age of the war, let me point out. Remember these facts, and try to sleep. Remember these facts, and try to wait for spring each year. Winter is not the enemy, not when Philadelphia had such a mild winter even the tulips were confused. No-no, spring is more than welcome in these dark times. And I don't blame anyone for wanting it, HELL YES I WANT SPRING AS MUCH AS THE NEXT PERSON, but I also want to live with the truth at the same time, and I KNOW winter is not to blame for our silent pain of being citizens funding the misery and bloodshed the rich have been dreaming of since the last war. We pay the price for paying our taxes, and it's terrible to live with, truly terrible.

Brenda, a couple of years ago you were on stage at the St. Mark's Poetry Project for the big New Year's Day marathon reading, and there were literally hundreds of us sitting, watching. You did this marvelous THING where you said, "Never forget the body," then gave us a brief, beautiful dance. After that you read your poems. There was something magical about it, and we all gasped! For me, I think, what you did was TAKE the power of the Body, and all that IS the Body (all the bodies of the Body, mind/flesh/spirit/other) and DIRECT them into the microphone. It was a moment to always remember. It was so ENLIGHTENING! It made the poems really SING out of you! And MOST IMPORTANT is that when you did this it seemed to take ALL OF US, all the many Bodies in the room, and get us into a common FLESH for a moment. Maybe I'm taking this too far, this idea, but it FELT like this. I had a physical reaction to it, goose bumps, and we all gasped, I can still hear us and feel the cool air of the gasp entering my throat. It felt shared, and holy.

IJJIMA: It just seemed that the set up – the audience OUT THERE sitting passively and the reader IN FRONT, on stage, usually very non-gestural – at the podium – the hierarchic structural furniture needed intervention – this configuration doesn't get beyond the spectacle associated with religiosity, politics and education where convention dictates body positionings. I wanted to pay tribute to the fact that poetry is surely not only a cerebral process – that body brains are intersubjective. How to generate kinetic energy – note all the varying energies available . . . that's the question and motivation. We watch wars on TV where bodies are explicitly involved – yet this lived reality is repressed. To witness whole persons, bodies in motion, palpable, tangible, organic – changeable. Plus, there is body curiosity – don't you wish you could witness each person's individual way of engaging their body in dance? Maybe what we should be doing is reading in the nude once a year, to access our vulnerabilities, to share these delicate human states. How easy to change the context merely by introducing the body!

revv. you'll-ution, the manuscript I'm working on right now is guttural-visceral. Much of the language is vernacular, raw, vascular (if that can be applied to language) and grotesque (by this I mean there is a clash of supposedly incompatible elements). And somehow, it moves back in time to the present by considering homo sapien roots, cave people, burials, excavations, quaking underlayers, body sensing and incarceration, etc. by filtering through the concept of revolution with all its varied implications. Maybe it is a flailing, spasmodic, agitated dance.

Could you write more about the incredible activations in your (Soma)tic Poetics? Each poem contains energetic instructions . . . you are compelling us to experience!

CONRAD: (Soma)tic Poetics is insistence for the instance you make. Experience OUT OF what's normal for us, that's key to what (Soma)tic Poetics expects to HAPPEN to us. It's about bringing the Body into the conversation, much like you were saying about your marvelous dance before reading, how it's not just the brain, poetry. In fact, often the best poems (or maybe I mean my FAVORITE poems) seem to involve all sensory.

Chris Martin was just here in Philadelphia to read with Kevin Varrone and Paul Siegell, it was great, the three of them were really fantastic together! When Chris was up there though he talked about DISEQUILIBRIUM, and how it's this shift that NEEDS TO happen inside us sometimes to create a new kind of processing in order for us to be able to take on new information. With DISEQUILIBRIUM we get a new set of equations to work things out with, and new kinds of places to hold information, and from this major perception shifts can occur. It's truly revolutionary to make new room inside for THE NEW ROOM INSIDE!

This is EXACTLY what (Soma)tic Poetics is about, especially the exercises, which I update monthly (SomaticPoetryExercises.blogspot.com). These are a series of odd choices, odd meaning not normal. Since I have always felt odd, and feel comfortable (especially comfortable at this point in my odd life) feeling odd, it took me to realize that IT'S THE CHOICES I MAKE that make me access poems. So if I can get other humans to get odd they can find a doorway when they're needing to. Getting us OFF TRACK, to STOP the normal way we wander into our days, THIS is how we create new ideas. You can ENTER new ideas for the brain by creating new ideas for the body. Does that make sense? I mean to say the Body is ONE BIG WEB of muscle, memory, sensation, bone, eyelash, etc., working together, so you can enter into thought with a physical sensation as well as doing a math problem. In fact the real discovery of course is that it's always happening anyway, but this is a way to be consciously doing it. It's like lucid dreaming while awake, such awareness.

In one exercise I ask you to stand naked in a bucket of water while looking through the peep hole of your front door. The water is room temperature. And you may not be used to being at your front door except to open it for someone else to walk through, or for you to walk in or out of, and that's it. But to STAND there, just STAND there, naked, in a bucket of water, spending time there, and really taking it all in and TAKING IT ALL IN while naked, it really will open new portals for you, I promise! I ask that you keep paper and pen RIGHT THERE so you can get writing.

For ten years I was macrobiotic (I'm just vegetarian now). But macrobiotics is really being SPECIFIC about choices which get into THE BIG LIFE (which is what the word macrobiotic means). For me what it did most besides healing ailments I had, was to show me how the body is this MARVELOUS organism, that, if we get the brain to truly understand the Body, to allow the Body to feed on the best choices of grains and beans and vegetables, that the Body will work as best as it can. And the brain will also be properly fed and in turn work as best as it can. And you can SMELL deeper, BREATHE deeper, SEX IS MUCH MORE SUBSTANTIAL, and everything TASTES BRAND NEW!

Before macrobiotics I had a drug dealer boyfriend and THAT WAS A LOT OF FANTASTIC PARTIES is what that was, but after macrobiotics I could access the world on a very holy, deep water sensation, just like I could with drugs, only, without the side effects of feeling irritable and depressed. But, (Soma)tic Poetics is very much part of this because, like my choice to let my hair grow to FEEL AND SEE the ever lengthening American war in Iraq, macrobiotics came first for me in making me a totally aware animal. Before macrobiotics so many parts of me were asleep. (Soma)tic Poetics would have never been possible without this ten year study of the organism I live in and am. The body is far more resilient, pliable, CAPABLE than I would have ever realized otherwise. I feel very fortunate for these discoveries.

I'd like to request a preview of the manuscript you're working on, *revv. you'll-ution*. And maybe give us more details about this spasmodic dance?

IJJIMA: At the threshold of meaning are unaccountable gestures that might open up in understandings as variegated assertions – where difference and temporality bloom. Spasmodic because bodily gesture and response can be a site of uncontrollability and this feels like an alternative conception of freedom in being. Volatilization not necessarily violent – these are spontaneous gesticulations that may have resided dominantly in the body, been previously foreclosed.

I guess society is close to producing a factory model of the body – this is getting to be true for “livestock” – but yet, their bodies resist.

The issue that got me involved with *revv. you'll-ution* is this incredible erasure or cloaking of recognition regarding the Haitian Revolution in terms of how this revolution in particular participated and shaped concepts of modernism – historians, academic and otherwise have spent good energy ignoring this successful struggle for racial equality – this sent spasms through my body system. This was a way my body communicated with (in) me. And too as is known, the body is a host for numerous various life forms, so they spasm occasionally too, territorializing, recalibrating, harmonizing.