This is a commentary on the unfinished work *Imitació del foc: An Ardent Translation*

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Abstract:

This is a project on the life and work of the Communist Catalan poet Bartomeu Rosselló-Pòrcel. It incorporates the translation into English of ten poems which serve as entry points into small essays on the Catalan language, translation, desire, queerness, rhythm and sound in poetry. The project includes an experimental biography. The piece is introduced by a 4,000 word meta-commentary on the failures of the main text, commenting on the failure of translation and biography. The project involved research of the poet's archive, which is held by the Ajuntament de Palma, Mallorca, via its facsimile catalogue *Bartomeu Rosselló-Pòrcel: A la llum*

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This is a commentary on an unfinished work. The manuscript is titled *Imitació del foc: An Ardent Translation* and its author is given as Gina Prat Lilly. It is dated 23rd March 2023. The project comprises the following documents:

The writer's endeavour to introduce this poet to an English-speaking audience is a welcome one. It appears that no translation of the poet's complete work into English has been attempted. Some select poems appeared translated in David Rosenthal's edition of *Modern Catalan Poetry: An Anthology* (New Rivers Press, 1979) and in an issue of the literary journal *Catalan Review* (1991). Both are publications that might only be selected and taken off a bookshelf by readers searching specifically for Catalan poetry, and both are at least 30 years old. Had this project been finished, perhaps it could have become the first comprehensive translation of the poet's book of poems *Imitació del foc*. I have identified several points which could have led to this project's failure and abandonment, some of which, though egregious, are beyond the scope of this commentary. The rest are as follows.

This is the project of someone in love with the idea of a project. This is the project of a writer who, seduced by what a project could become, looks straight past the materials they have right in front of them. This is a project that promises too much, so much that it stumbles and trips over its own ways of thinking. This is a project that goes careening and crashing through the undergrowth of language with nothing but the fallible tools of translation, and comes out torn, battered, and confused. *Imitació*

del foc: An Ardent Translation makes clear its conceptual and formal ambitions from the outset. It is to be a strange mixture of translation, memoir, the poet's biography, the 20th century history of Spain, and a meditation on languages and making meaning. The fragments pull the project in all these varied directions. And this, of course, is where the trouble begins.

In the middle of the project, an image stands out for its strangeness. It is a black-and white photograph of an open book, stark against a dark background. One hand clasps the book open, fingers straight and stiff to keep it from closing, baring recto and verso up to the camera. The other hand, silver-ringed, fingers the top of the right-hand page, slipping an index finger behind it and following its papery edge to the bottom. The hand peels the page away from the rest of the book, turning it. Or caught in the act of turning it. Some long exposure or photographic mishap slows and stretches the hand, its fingers elongated and twisting as they glance the page, finger the page, turn the page. The verso is blank but for a small circular ink-stamp, indistinct, perhaps indicating its provenance from a library or archive. The recto, the page the hand is turning, contains a face, the sketch of a face enclosed in a faint rectangular outline. Or, the outline would have been rectangular, were the page not, in this very moment, being taken and turned. As it is, the rectangle skews across the page. So too the figure, the face. Sketched in grey charcoal, it has dark eyes and a serene, somewhat downturned mouth. The figure's hair crests and roughly parts in the middle. Small round glasses are seated high on the bridge of their nose and there is a shadow on their throat cast by a weak, flat chin. On the bias, the figure's cheeks are thinned, the visage lead into a curve by a hand that with a flick could tip it into the central gutter of the book. Skewing, tilting, distorting, the fingers keep turning, turning, turning the page.

The image is given to introduce Fragment 4, the biographical portion of the project. While the writer neither describes the image nor addresses it in their prose, we might infer, from the caption, that the hands belong to the writer, that the book is the book of poetry they are translating, and that the face on the page belongs to the poet. So far, so good. Another inference one might make is that the biography that follows might be somehow askew or distorted. The succeeding passages corroborate this assumption. In revealing the hand that holds the book and turns the page, the writer reveals their own hand in the project, setting us up for a strange biographical experience. But the photograph has captured something else too.

The writer is ensnared by the photograph, caught in the act by the image. The writer is apprehended in the moment they turn the page on the poet. Their hand moves quickly, with impatience: flick the corner, slip the finger, turn the page. Why not linger here, if only for a brief moment? Why not sit face-to-face with this poet with his glasses high on the bridge of his nose, why not look at him head-on? Why turn the page so swiftly, carelessly even, that the camera struggles to capture the hand's gesture? Perhaps the writer is careless in having revealed their hand here, for they

have also unwittingly revealed another thing. Is there not a glimpse to be caught in this sinuous sweep of the hand, a glimpse of dismissal? Oblivious, the writer casts their eyes over the poet's face all while mirthlessly turning the page, already lost in their own reverie, already thinking how nice it sounds to say that a poet writes with his glasses "slipped to the tip of his nose". Succumbing (of course, for this pull is irresistible) to the desire of what something could become, the writer turns the page.

So how can we trust this writer, how can we trust their exposition of the poet's life? At the outset, the biography lays claim "most of all, not to right wrongs, but to sit with […] complications." A simple enough phrase, habitual in the queer and feminist critical tradition into which the writer inscribes this work (they have earlier quoted Anne Carson and Lisa Robertson). But again, the writer dupes us, for to write a biography will always entail making choices. For lack of space, one cannot include everything. For lack of interest, one might sort the chaff from the wheat. For poignancy, one might think to linger on a picturesque scene of a child licking honey from their fingers. For colour, one might include an entertaining tale of light-hearted profanity. Does biography not necessarily collate, tweak, and curate a life? This one surely does and the writer holds untold sway in the affair. Time and again they tell of the poet's Communist political commitments, the articles he wrote, his extraordinariness. Should we regard with disbelief this figure who contains no contradictions or complications at all, a figure whose moral fibre is made to appear so incredibly intact? Does the above quote not serve to defend the biography *a priori* from accusations of partiality, and does it not alert us, then, to the implausibility of *this* biography and to the impossibility of biography *as a whole*? For biography, in promising a portrait of a life, belies a life.

What is the writer's role in this? They are aware that they have a place in the project, yes. As they introduce the poet, they write "I can't help but think, simply, that the poem does not exist without him, simply does not exist without [the poet] perched somewhere, in comfort or discomfort […] Writing as I write." Yet the writer appears to be uncomfortable here. For all their promises of closeness, of a memoir that will intimately mingle the poet's biography and their own, the writer struggles, defers, is tense and restless. Will not give themself up. Their voice flits from one register into another, their presence waxing and waning, at times disappearing altogether. Various forms emerge. Deceptively straightforward, dry prose, filled with dates, names of publications, historical context, literary movements. An incantation, clearly lifted from Linda Stupart's *Virus* (London: Arcadia Missa Publications, 2016) and not referenced. An oneiric passage, written as the interior monologue of the poet and making reference to the Spanish Civil War. Whole sentences are left hanging, unfinished, as though approximation to their object of study is futile and might never be accomplished. For this, in short, is what the writer has done: they have objectified, in full, the poet, his life and his work. The writer notes the importance that the poet gave to the spelling and rhythm of his own name, but later reverts to the use of an initialism to refer to him. The poet becomes a mere symbol, abstracted, a figure

who bears no relation to reality other than the meaning the writer wants to give to him. Yes, an object. A vessel perhaps.

But of course, materials are not hollow. To the writer's palpable shock and horror, materials refuse to comport themselves in the way the writer had intended for them. Materials push back, retort, gagging the writer. In the translation of the poem *El Captiu*, the writer falls silent. Their annotations, supposedly given to provide insights on the poem, remain empty. Having insisted that the poet's life and his Communist leanings must permeate his writing, how are they to contend now with this Nietzschean Übermensch?

> *I am a hero of this truth*
>
> *And I stood up straight, uncreated, pure,*
>
> *To sing a new hymn*

They give no direct indication of their thoughts. But translation reads stiffly in English, standoffish,

> *And only I, sitting atop the summit,*
>
> *Intelligence of the eyes upon the things.*
>
> *The peril saturated itself of me*
>
> *And the night foreboded me.*

by which we can sense, perhaps, a certain reticence to translate the poem. Though they had purported to "subsume their identity", here they rear up again to limit the translation, perhaps to temper its import. Does this indicate the writer's disappointment in the poem? If so, what hope is there for accuracy, if a translation is subject to the whims of the translator like this?

Ah, accuracy. Another of translation's false promises. As the writer indicates, translation is always a "non-innocent endeavour." Had we unthinkingly placed too much confidence in it? Had we handed over our trust to the writer? We might recall them shimmying slyly into another persona, "the ardent translator", and donning this new identity "like a flushed cheek". The hegemonic interpretation of this poet, the writer tells us, is that his politics do not permeate his poems. What the writer argues is that they *do*. Having reported that secondary scholarship is skewed, and thus closed the door on it, what critical tools is the writer left with? "A new approach, an approach which diverges from hegemonic ways of approaching a text, can reveal this. And this *is* a new approach, since no English translation and compilation of BRP's complete oeuvre exists, not even a complete English translation *of Imitació de foc*… A new approach will perform this…" That desirous ellipsis, again pitching the

writer (now in the guise of the ardent translator) beyond the materials, prompting them to turn the page, as they look hopefully towards what something could become, if only this time they could employ the right approach… Is the writer not as foolish, as we are, to place their trust in the unstable, unpredictable processes of translation to "reveal" these politics?

In "M-bro and dear raned", the writer appears to wilfully deploy a facile translator's conceit to attempt, in their view, a "communistification" of the poem "Pluja brodada". The conceit has some results the writer may have considered pleasing. One line gives "And ran' sack the grands". But, ultimately, it ties the poem up into a repetitive monotone mess, creating the unpronounceable series

And safe and in a fandna

Esgarrandfada. Brandla,

Again the writer is caught, confused, between what the poem is and what it could become. Perhaps what translation could *make* it become, in scooping out the meat of the poem and giving something else in its place. No love. They abandon this attempt, leaving the poem bereft of its closing verses, the conceit not taken to its end, and the writer's faith in translation toppled.

The writer is courageous in turning their attention to the prosodic and oral aspects of the poems. It results in a combination of some gorgeous results and other, clunkier ones. In "Post-rain song," "a cochlea-whorl tends a feeler" is an accomplished and evocative line for the snail crawling up the mountain, if slightly hermetic. Giving primacy to the voice of the poem appears warranted. A quick search now reveals that many of these poems were set to music and sung by a famous Catalan vocalist during the 1970s. Was there something in the texture of the poems that begged their translation, yes, their translation, into music? Is that something that is picked up by the translation here? In "Post-rain song" it feels appropriate, since the poem is quite literally called a song. At times the focus on the Catalan soundscape hinders some of its intelligibility in English, and yet we are happy to go along with it for the ride, capering along with its rhythms,

A mickle of blue sky,

A mickle mickle.

Nimble nudge nimble

And slips what! slips.

There is something uncontrolled in the writer's hand as they translate, as though they cannot quite hold on to the reins of translation. It flits, reportedly, between "syntax, vocabulary, punctuation, localisms, image, rhythm, movement, surface." And

it might well do, but the effect is more strained than it is abundant, more jittery than it is multiplicitous. Translating holds ample room for anxiety, for undercutting oneself. The translation of a poem might suggest itself on one day, unmistakeable, nuanced, and handsomely formed. Return to it another day and that same translation will appear callow, crude, totally inappropriate or misleading. There is such vulnerability in the decision to hold up a translation and claim its merit, and for all their bravado in the introductory fragments, the writer often falters, fears judgement. Though they had earlier called into question the issues of value in translation,

> *What makes a good translation?*
>
> > *How is translation's value measured?*
>
> *Is intelligibility even a concern for translation, let alone a necessary condition for it?*
>
> > *Is there such a thing as untranslatability? And, for that matter, is there such a thing as translatability?*

simply naming these anxieties has not exempt the writer from them. They seem to sense this. The writer becomes obsessive, defensive, bogged down in the absolute minutiae of their task. They are at pains to over-explain, at pains not to leave any crack unguarded. Neurotic annotations flood the page, encroaching onto the spatial integrity of the poems, each superscript number intent on legitimising one choice after another. In "Sóller":

> *This might be rendered in English as* the leaves bring up freshness *or* the foliage heightens freshness*. However, the Catalan notion of* alcen *is repeated in* aixequen *of the next verse, both variants denoting a* lifting *or* stirring up*. The iteration of the opening vowel* a *is essential to the inspiriting of both words to* rouse *and* raise *into the air the sensuous enumeration that follows. The openness of* frescor's *last vowel is emulated in the vowels of* soar *and* fresco*.*

They zoom in, attending painstakingly to the role of sound and rhythm in making meaning. To wilfully appropriate translation's tool of annotation, as the writer acknowledges in Fragment 2, Note 2, does in fact facilitate quite perspicacious scrutiny of a poem's mechanisms of making meaning. The observations of "Nu"'s singular combination of sounds to create a sense of lightness in the opening verse is illuminating. But at times, these observations can become too precise, fastidious. The writer makes use of some baffling linguistic and phonetic jargon. Are they commenting ironically on the hermeticism in the study of making meaning?

Other times still, the use of footnotes becomes a hindrance to the project's supposed "extension of thought." Since a superscript number is fastened to a single word or verse, there is little leeway for critical flexibility, little scope for the wonderings and

wanderings of the mind. In fact, occasionally thought becomes fettered by these annotations, as they curtail its development. If earlier the writer had been enamoured with what was beyond the poet and the poems, now they are blinkered in a different way. Their observations overtake the poem, do not give it enough breathing space. Again, is this pointing out the limitations of the tools of translation? Were these annotations to be the starting points for essays?

Translation is powerful as it is vulnerable. The writer admonishes conventional interpretations for submitting to the opinions of the poet's friend, his first posthumous editor. And now, the writer finds themself in one such position of influence. It is they who are to hand the book over to the world, to the English-speaking world. Are they afraid of what they will do with this power? A position they stepped into gladly at the outset, almost heedless, as though with little thought for the responsibilities of the role. Now, they struggle to give themself permission to run amok with the poems. There is fear in the writer. One can feel it in their terse translation of "Història del soldat," in the annotation's timid suggestion of *vuvuzela* for *bota-selles,* which does not find a place in the body of the poem. The writer cannot quite yet grant themself permission to touch, permission to smash-and-grab, permission to, in their own words, "get dirty with language." They are unsure, vacillating, never quite giving themself over fully to the translation or to the poem itself. And is this not the double bind that translation finds itself in always? Who or what does translation give itself over to? Pity the writer, ensnared in the middle, between the text it that is and the text that it could be. For they do, in fact, have the capability to toe the line between "abstraction and figuration." One can glimpse it in their translation of "Sóller," in contrast to a translation by one such Nathaniel Smith.

As I reach the end of the project, witness its thought petering out and come joltingly to a halt, I am filled with the sensation that, all along, it was never *us* that the writer had been fooling but *themself*. See the fragments. They are all set-up, no culmination. All manifesto, no delivery. All metaphor, little matter. All declarations, aims, motives, intentions. Much attempting to make these reality, and much failure, frustration, disenchantment as a result. The project does its utmost to reclaim the past, searches for a salve or salvation there, hopes translation might be the critical tool that can deliver this, believing that translation can provide that "singularly material and esoteric space" of "intimacy and speculation."

But such closeness or artistry cannot be forced, and the project exists mainly in the future tense. An annotation of the poem "Sóller" is appended on the front end of the word, the superscript number preceding the title itself. "In this translation I will" it begins, and promptly trails off. Forecasting, ascribing. Sentences unfinished, thought tapering off. Again, had they placed too much trust in translation, and not enough in themself? Had the writer overstated their personal connection with the poet and the poems? Did they expect to develop such a connection by calling themselves to arms with the sheer amount of introductory and contextualising materials?

I sense too, in the writer's tone, a compulsion, albeit stifled, to shine the heart out towards the materials they have brought in to surround the poems. Perhaps it was never the *poet*, but the *teacher* in the preface, who obsesses the writer. Not the *poet*, but the poet's *friend*. Not the *poems*, but what the poems could *become*. Not *translation*, but what translating might *do*. Not the *Catalan language*, but what it could have come to *signify*. Not the materials, but the critical theory around them. Never the *object*, but the *hand* embroiled in its delivery. Meaning never quite arrived at, knowledge never quite attained, translation always in its most incipient state.

When translating, one has to allow the gaze to soften somewhat. To sense both what a poem is and what it can become. Our writer, a silly creature whose glasses have slipped to the tip of their nose, suffers from both short- and long-sightedness. Sometimes they look too close. Others, they look too far. Their project is brazen in its ambitions. Brazen also in limits, its failures, its dead-ends. And for this it leaves us wanting, questioning, dissatisfied. Its centre does not yet quite hold. But perhaps we can catch a glimmer, each time the writer puts pen to paper, of their hopefulness that day. Beginnings, re-beginnings. See the variously dated fragments, the changing approaches. The project is filled with as many unexpected joys as unfulfilled promises. Their translation "Nude" feels like one such joy. It is not for lack of trying that this project fails. It is simply that every time one writes, it is a stab in the dark.

This project introduces the poet and some of his work to the English-speaking world. If that was all they set out to do, then this project could be left as it is. Dear prospective editor, you may delete at will the writer's hopes, their misgivings, their life. But should the writer ever read this commentary, should the writer ever find the heart to continue their abandoned manuscript then, dear writer, I have some gentle recommendations:

- Climb out of yourself and into the poet.
- Hold your materials tenderly but absolutely in your gaze. You can only look at something obliquely once you know its borders.
- Surrender to the intimacy you promise, to the speculation you intimate.
- Translation is a mode, not an end. You know this. Do this.
- Do not try to anticipate knowledge. Write from a place of curiosity and unknowing.

Imitació del foc: an ardent translation

Prose is a house, poetry a man in flames running quite fast through it.

– Anne Carson[1]

[1] Anne Carson, "Anne Carson: 'I do not believe in Art as Therapy'," interview by Kate Kellaway, *The Guardian*, October 30, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/30/anne-carson-do-not-believe-art-therapy-interview-float.

Fragment 1: Abstract

This is a speculative translation of and commentary on the 1930s Catalan poet BRP's poetic oeuvre. Exploring themes of queerness, care, beauty and resistance through the metaphors of fire, this project will be a speculative translation of and commentary on the 1930s Catalan poet Bartomeu Rosselló-Porcel's poetic oeuvre. This project is *a writing and thinking with,* not *of*. It is part literary criticism, part poetic excursus. This translation is alive. Like fire, it is vivified by a Mediterranean breeze. Like fire, it makes leaps at the gap between languages. Like fire, it is unable to be stilled. This project is the fire at the end of a torch, which is to say it is a call to arms and an agent for rebellion. Like fire, it is ever changing and ungraspable, and provides new modes of thinking that attend to that which may slip through our fingers but singes them nonetheless. Like fire, this project provides warmth and care. It shines a light, bestows a mystical glow. Themes of transformation and change are rendered tangible in the fabric of the piece by way of the speculative tenor of the project, both in the translation and the biography of the poet.

5th July 2022

Fragment 2: Notes

Note 1: Translations from Catalan and Spanish are my own unless indicated. Translations from Catalan have been aided by *Diccionari de la llengua catalana de l'Institut d'Estudis Catalans* (DIEC2); and from Spanish by the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*. Where necessary I have consulted the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Note 2: It is customary for the fruits of translation's labour to be given centre page. Whether typographically indented or justified side to side, a text in translation is usually presented as static, a product packaged to be readily consumed. Where absolutely essential, a translation might make use of a clarifying footnote or two, to flag or clarify a particularly knotty usage of language, a misapprehension, a regionalism. It appears almost as though translation were predicated on the obfuscation of its internal processes, contingent on its erasure from the page. In this piece, I want to visibilise translation's attempts, reveal its fraying edges, unveil all of its motivations and misgivings. Most of the labour of translation does not occur centre page. No, translation takes place in the margins, those tentative and hopeful spaces where meaning knots and unravels, grasping, gasping. The thinking of translation happens here, with all of its noetic and poetic trials. In the tradition of queer and feminist thought, this translation reveals and reclaims the margins both as a space for a deep material encounter with a text, and a space of speculation, gesturing outside the text and showing what it is that translation can do.

Fragment 3: Preface

The ardent translator dyes their hair orange; wears red and brown crochet jumpers; plants dark, luminous fritillary bulbs, hopeful their hanging snake-head blooms will surprise them in spring; drinks ginger root tea with abandon; understands these things, too, are translations.

I first came across the poet in a class on Catalan literature and language. I was 17 and felt desperately young. My teacher was odd and brilliant, with the air of some kind of sleek, old rabbit. She was glamorous, on the cusp of retirement after teaching in my rural secondary school for over 30 years. There were rumours she slept with the students and, though I was unsure about the veracity of the claims, they cohered vaguely with her, with the unflinchingness of her, standing before us with overlined hooded eyes and patent leather silver trainers. I was awed by her lessons, in which she refused to shy away from the erotic where the erotic was to be found, which happened to be here – in the elasticity of the sentence, in the snapping back of the line-break, in the languor of the paragraph. Her remit was the materiality of language: its baroque surfaces, the discovery of recondite meanings in the intimacy of its wet armpits, the affects of body to text and body to body. She did not flinch from these things, saw them through with courage and ardour still, as if this, too, were her first encounter with each text she lay open before us. She spoke to us, widely, of inchoative verbs, of the stone-breaking beauty of saxifrage flowers, of synaloepha and diphthongs in television advertisements for chocolate powder, of the best time of day to slaughter and flay a pig. It seemed to me, whether or not she *did* sleep with her students, that the reason for the allegation to have affixed itself to her was,

simply, that she didn't give a fuck, and that the patriarchal slap on the wrist had come down in full force to condemn this brazenness. Her silver trainers shone.

La Seu d'Urgell is a quiet town in the middle of the Catalan Pyrenees on the border with France, where rivers of melted snow pooled between the rocky mountains, prime for swimming in. I was born there and lived there until I was eighteen, in this town of twitching curtains. I spent my time in translation, moving in and among the languages of my life. English with my mother, whose Geordie accent still tinges my voice, at times, now. Catalan with my father, at school, with my friends. Spanish with the police and the hash dealers. French a tiptoe away, on the other side of the border. These languages have spilled across my life, spreading their legs across more than two decades. I have felt their varied movements: tongue trilling against the palate, lips slackened to temper a plosive, a geminate consonant lolling in the back of the throat. I have been the one turned to for an answer to the always urgent query *What does that mean?* The answer (always totally apparent and thoroughly inexpressible) never fails to come sputtering out of me, like brackish water. I have been asked *What language do you think in? What language do you dream in?* and *What language do you love the most?,* to which I can only say *I have the pleasure of feeling discomfort in all of these languages.* Which is to say that, for me, thinking, dreaming, and loving are not relegated to one language, but rather are in the spaces between, in, and amongst languages.

My Catalan teacher gave to me, one day, pressing it hard into my hand, a book called *Imitació del foc*. This was how I came to know the Communist Catalan poet Bartomeu Rosselló-Pòrcel,

and with his small book came shards of light, and with *them* came the horizon, as though drawn into view by the light of a lit torch held aloft. I have, over the years, carried with me those phosphorescent sparks, glimpsing their lambent potential everywhere: "these matches are called Rosebud because they have red tips of fire..."[2] Though this teacher of mine does not feature particularly prominently from here on out, I wanted to mention her here, with the compassion and admiration she was seldom afforded then, to say that perhaps she too was a poet, if a poet is simply someone who gives you something that changes something.

[2] Bernadette Mayer, *A Bernadette Mayer Reader* (New York: New Directions, 1992), 68.

Fragment 4: On biography

Figure 1: Scan of verso and recto of Rosselló-Pòrcel's collected works, *Obra poetica,* (Palma de Mallorca: Ediciones R.O.D.A., 1949). Likeness of the poet by Ramon Nadal. Manually scanned and distorted by the author.

"Always historicise," said Frederic Jameson.[3] I am sure he did not mean biographically, and I should know, by now, not to read poetry through the body of the poet, yet I can't help but think, simply, that the poem does not exist without him, simply does not exist without

[3] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Social Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), 9.

Rosselló-Pòrcel perched somewhere, in comfort or discomfort, to write: pen in hand, pen to mouth, mouth slack or pursed, glasses slipped to the tip of the nose, room sticky in the Mediterranean heat, pen to paper. Writing as I write.

This fascination with a poet's life is common to other writers too. It seems particularly appealing to queer writers, femmes, and feminists – perhaps it is that identity appears to be such a constitutive part of our existence that we are more susceptible to its assemblages and interferences. Familiar with the feeling of our existence being continuously thrown into question and versed in answering those questions in as intemperate or dispassionate a tone as is required, we don identities like a flushed cheek: the involuntary surface flash of something in our bodies, neither more contrived or less valuable for having been rouged by blush and thus acquired by artifice. In Lisa Robertson's *The Baudelaire Fractal*, Hazel Brown wakes one morning, flushed, to find she is the author of the entirety of Charles Baudelaire's body of work. As the narrative moves from London, to Vancouver, to Paris, to the French countryside, its protagonist–the slippery fictioning of an autobiography–shares Baudelaire's interests: art, sex, the sartorial specificities of a good jacket, poverty, modernity. Fascinated by our literary figures, we want to get close to them: to have written their words, to have done their deeds, to have fucked their fucks. Olivia Laing, Kathy Acker.[4] Kathy Acker, Don Quijote (a character yes, but a writer too).[5] In doing so we try, most of all, not to right wrongs, but to sit with their complications. Anne Carson's *Men in the Off Hours* could be a series of literary portraits, verse micro-snapshots of lives and works: Artaud, who stayed close to the madness; the summer of

[4] Olivia Laing, *Crudo* (London: Picador, 2018).

[5] Kathy Acker, *Don Quixote* (New York: Grove Press, 1986).