

# poet walking through =

**BRIAN BLANCHFIELD:** I want to begin, having just finished reading and relishing your new book, by asking about something you refer to at least twice in your novel. You describe a breakthrough in your early poetry as a realization that you could "go out and get the poem." You variously use other related tropes to describe it—gathering, and shopping, carrying, keeping what isn't dropped—but always with a sense that there are goods out there that you and the poem move through. I wonder first, if it still holds for you, whether you want to explain how literally you mean "going out to get the poem" as a method of composition and, second, if going out to get it is different in Manhattan than it is in San Diego than it is in Reykjavik than it is in Missoula?

**EILEEN MYLES:** When you say go out and getting it, it assumes, you know, that you are someplace or there's a place where you are that you're always departing from, and there's a way in which I'm not sure that's clear to me at this point. I feel like I'm going to say the least abstract thing of all, which is just that the poem actually occurs in the context of somebody's life, and that's sort of inescapable, and there is a way in which the poem is a certain kind of description of reality that you have to be willing to do. And since the poem sort of has to take place, that description might just be the entire process of wanting there to be a poem before there is a poem—right, that's what feels most familiar today—that there is a desire to write a poem and then to think all over again what that thing might be. And so it winds up being kind of an openness to the fact of the object. Because definitely part of my thinking today is the notion of an aesthetic being such a loose thing that it's hardly anything at all, and to what extent do you then pull something back from that edge of that meaningless and chaos and do something a little bit with that and—then to call all of that a poem.

**BM:** So then, instead of my original impression of "going out and getting the poem" as hustling for or hunting for or prowling for a poem, rather, you mean sort of salvaging and stringing together and finding what least thing the poem needs, like some plasmic biomatter that multiplies and attains life in the right conditions? With the determination first that there need be a poem, which starts the chain, which "shakes the leash," as you say in "The Irony of the Leash," the poem that marked this new way of writing.

**EM:** Well, it started out literal and it probably still is. I consciously thought for a long time that *that* poem was for me the invention of a category—one of the new long poems I wrote in a way that felt *seasonal*. And it changed my way of thinking about poetry. Meaning, that when something changed that felt like a season, but not necessarily a natural one, that there would have to be a poem that also did that. A poem that was *about* going out to declare what the new terrain was now and how it felt to move through that. The act of writing the poem was also like the act of making there be such a place. So it was hunting, but even a little bit more like being hungry for a new way that had already begun.

**BM:** "At 27, it was okay to live." That's how you begin the chapter about coming to write this new sort of poem, the poets whose leash you shake to begin and then follow where it wants to go, until it arrives again at the opening gambit, the note or title you set out with.

**EM:** When I teach poetry I have this funny little lecture that goes through what I think of as the parts of the poem—you know, words and syllables and the title and lines and stanzas—but when I talk about the title there are these various possibilities for how to understand it, and one of them is a leash. I haven't let go of that. But I think in a way the title seems to cinch the poem, either at the beginning or the end or at some point in your thinking about it. I mean if you want a title. Thinking about younger poets, newer poets, the title is becoming the most problematic

conversation with  
eileen myles and  
brian blanchfield

part of the poem; it seems like the least—I don't want to say postmodern—the least contemporary piece in the poem. And the title is often kind of the worst part of hearing poets read poems. Because it brings a stop to poetry, and they own it again. Beginning a poem means another one has ended. The self-consciousness with which we deliver a poem is heightened by this sort of barking thing that stands outside the poem.

**BM:** We've been speaking about it already, in a way, but I wanted to ask you about what, very late in my reading of *Inferno*, dawned on me as the central theme of the book work, the work of poetry. What does poetry do, and what does one who does it do, and how. Certainly work as it pertains to class and labor concerns the narrator Eileen, and the middle section of the book is fashioned curiously as the "career narrative" required of grant applicants, but the question of the work of a poet is more frequently, or more lastingly, an ontological one. The title of the book, obviously from Dante, also signifies the fulfillment of an assignment, which a teacher gives young Eileen and her fellow students: to go home and write your own *Inferno*. When Eileen hears her own *inferno* singled out and read aloud, she goes to sleep that night thinking, Is this what I can do, can this be my job? By which she doesn't mean anything about craft, necessarily. Eileen's query is philosophical, poignant, she is moved by her fitness for the job but worries over her specialness: as she asks herself, "Weren't all Catholics counting and measuring with their bodies, all day long in and out?" I wonder if you can talk about the job of poetry in the context of young Eileen's question: Is the thing I am also the thing I can do?

**EM:** I mean, yeah, the idea of being a poet gives you a certain permission to simply exist in reality and yet to give it a—I mean, it's right next to religious vocation, it's a secular vocation. I mean, part of the reason writers and poets in particular are scorned is that to a certain extent we do what everybody can or could do. I mean, everybody has access to language in this way. So, what would be so special about doing that; and I suspect to 'the world' there's this huge vanity about claiming that terrain as what you call your work. I mean, it's so beautifully ludicrous that it's kind of a conceptual act in itself to decide to be a poet, which is why I think—it might be a fleeting thing but—some piece of the art world is actively falling in love with the idea of the poem or the poet. Because it is kind of a degenerate outpost of conception—that is apparently unused, because poets haven't like figured out what to do with it. So the art world's going: "We'll take it."

I think that whatever this talking animal is that we are, I'd rather not so much professionalize it as acknowledge it. Because I think it's the essence of our presence, our freedom, our difficulty, so there's something quasi-spiritual about the idea of dedicating your life to poetry, to say, "I will do this." You know? That's what I'm out looking for. It's the poem, a lifelong poem, you know, and I'd like to be in that poem, I'd like to be in the act of that. I don't want to be out of that air too long, because I might forget it's mine, and then who will I be and what will I do?

When I was young I had a friend, Caryl Slaughter, who was a poet and also a mental patient, in and out of mental institutions, and part of our friendship was my visiting her in those places, and we also spent a lot of odd time hanging out in wherever else she would stay, in people's basements, with her latest boyfriend, and I remember she gave me this slender book of poems, and I can't remember now whether it was Li Po or Tu Fu, I think it was Tu Fu, but it was just a slim volume, a short version of the poems of this person's life, a selected but they didn't call it that. In fact what it was was a young man's poems and then a slightly less young man's poems, then the middle age poems. And the poems of an old man. And what struck me when I saw this book was the thought that poems could walk you through your life—I think every poet has a number of moments when they say something and said, I want that—and I definitely thought doing something like that Tu Fu book would be okay. I mean, as a goal, to be in it.

**BM:** Hearing you talk about poetry as being lifelong, and knowing that elsewhere you have suggested that a book of poems covers a time of your life, a year or two, and is evidence or index of that, makes me want to ask about something that may be related, at least in that it has to do with time and marking time. Can you explain your concept of score in poetic composition, of a poem scoring life?

**EM:** I had this John Cage book and saw scores for the first time. I had this friend in Pennsylvania and he had written the book and given it to me, so I came upon it pretty accidentally, and I couldn't get over that there was such a thing, and this is after living in New York for about a hundred years and being surrounded by 'the score' but missing it entirely. You know, it solved a lot of whole lot of things for me, at the time. I had been struggling with, you know, "I write poems," and "I write these novel-type things," and having different desires for each of them. A poet who was very influential for me when I was young was Ted Berrigan because he talked a lot about being a poet. And some of the poets slightly younger than him whom he had sort of lorded it over when he was in his late twenties, early thirties, found some of this talk of his sort of laughable because, look at this man's life, you know. The suggestion being that his excuse for having a messy life was all his talk of poetry as a vocation. And I think the rest of them felt that it was their responsibility not to talk glowingly about what it was that we were doing—that that was for kids. But Ted was up for that conversation. You know I think, in a way, he was doing a lot of the work of what people now go to MFA programs for. He was willing. He was such an incredible example of talking poetics, whether he was addressing a room full of people, or talking to two people, or driving one person crazy, or speaking really intimately, he seemed to be thinking about it all the time, and whether it was an excuse for a life or what he did with his was unimportant. He wanted to expand or contract around poetry as his whim dictated. But, Ted was also a bit of a working class parent who was going to disabuse you of whatever ideas you had about a life in poetry, which was both the funny part and it seemed to come out of something like disappointment, and so I felt there was always a challenge that surrounded him and all the energy—and I didn't want that ever taken away from me, and there was something pure about it that was really appealing. By the eighties people would

sort of laugh at poets because, of course, you of all people probably had a day job. If you dropped this searching idea about poetry then the practice of it would simply get elided with the pathetic and the abject. This is the point at which some people would turn to prose, some people would turn to theory and others would seek a political solution to the poet's problem. Which I think is just existence itself.

When I encountered the score it just finally took the weight off the poem, for the first time, in a new way, and perhaps poetry started to be like gender, in that it was a performance of something. And what you got down on the page as the poem really wasn't the thing. The thing was always escaping, the thing was always beyond you, in some way, but the attempt was always to get at least part of it down. For me the score proposed a new relationship between poetry and reality, one that did not make the poem take all the weight. You know, like, (lifting and waving a card with her words and doodles on it) how much is this worth? Did I have a good a day, well, yeah, I had a good day. And this is just a piece of it. You know?

It's sort of like the day still had to stand on its own and the poem wasn't having to be an emblem of anything at all, it was just a nod towards the fleetingness of this ambition, you know, that I still carried. And to take poetry out of economic consequence seems sort of crucial in a way.

EM: But to still keep it a job...

EM: Well the job is the performance. I mean I know this is not a stylish perspective at all, but I think I've been working on it for years. The idea that all the things you do outside of writing poems are part of the terrain of being a poet.

EM: In *Inferno*, you use the term with a delicious irony, "the poetry field" —

EM: And it's a joke. The first time I met this guy who was a scientist he shared his very definite idea of what field research meant, he said, "I work in a laboratory and, for me everything outside of the laboratory is in the field." It just made me smile. I thought, he means the world. That's what field study means.

In *Inferno*, in the chapter "The Poetry Field," this young woman came to me, and again it was a joke, she comes asking questions about the poetry field, which just made me laugh, the notion that there could be such a thing, because even as a dumb young kid I knew there was no such economic field as poetry. But what it meant of course in this case was that she was looking for a partner in prostitution, which is really funny and sort of perfect.

EM: Because she assumed that since you were self-identified as a poet, that not only could you gain her entry into a literary life in New York, but also that necessarily you were broke and that you were a likely person to hit up for this escort scheme she had begun.

EM: And that poetry is just a fence! It's just a front for something else. Which is sort of true. In a way.

EM: A front for the living...

EM: Yeah! And then that opens up into all the class stuff. Does one have the right to take this occupation on, if you don't have the bounty to back it up? Wouldn't that just be the most foolish thing, of all, to kind of just waste your life?

EM: So, apart from the near miss of prostitution, and the assumption that behind the poet's storefront some other real industry is going on, I wonder if I can stay on the topic of poets' jobs. Of all the great small, edgy portraits of people in *Inferno*—from Part Smith to Bill Knott to Kathy Acker to Joe Ceravolo—I think my favorite is the one of the poet and actor Michael Lally, who calls Eileen up into his office, at the Franklin Mint, which was, like, a reprint publisher, right? Where he had a day job, in the 1980s. He gives her as an assignment Hart Crane.

EM: O, I worked so hard on that, writing a little pamphlet for the person who would not ever read the works of Hart Crane, telling them instead everything they would need to know so that they could seem like they had.

EM: There is a little chapter in the novel called "Hard" that is about, what to me was a surprise, his influence or—if not influence then—the formative interest you took in him at that time. You write, "I don't think you were supposed to become as steeped in your material as I was with Hart." And it was his line "twisted by the love of things irreconcilable" about which you write "That was it, that was being gay for me, the slant moon, with the slanting hill," and you go on, "The line just never undid itself. It was unbelievable." Clearly you were invested in him in a certain way, in his knots of irreconcilability; you go so far as to notice that the age of his death was the same as Oscar Wilde's cell he writes his early poem "C 33" about, and the same as your childhood address at 33 Swan Place. And it is interesting that you took Hart Crane as a job, especially because I think of him as a poet who took all kinds of jobs, as you say, writing a crappy ad for a perfume company, for instance, being sort of placed and displaced in an economy as a poet, bumbling around and house sitting and that sort of thing. So, I'm interested in how Hart Crane factored into your development in your twenties as a poet and also if his example makes you consider poets' jobs any differently.

EM: Well, first of all I can't believe nobody has ever made a movie about the life of Hart Crane. I mean, it's so beautiful, the locations—and the drama and the madness. It did propose a certain kind of job description for the poet, which was so wonderful and mishapen: that you might meet Charlie Chaplin and then perhaps you would be in a hurricane on Key West. It was a trailer for being a poet. But most importantly his language was so light and so swift and so archaic and modern all at once. There was a sense that nothing had to get resolved is what I felt about his work. It was an architecture of contradictions. As a young gay person

reading Hart Crane and thinking about Hart Crane, it really spoke to my sense of not fitting *ever*, that the queer piece was the ill fitting piece and poetry was the place where you accommodated that ill fitting perspective into its own kind of web of interfaces. I mean, the story doesn't end well. The sad attempt to be a woman's husband, a straight man—just that attempt squeezed him right off the boat into the water.

EM: After he had been "disgraced", as he put it, knowing very consciously, thinking always about his mother in some way, that he had been de-Graced or dis-Graced. That was the last thing he said, right?

EM: That's great. "I have simply disgraced myself." Yeah, and it was so military in a way, it was just like this notion of masculinity that he had failed. But, just thinking about all of that brings me back to the score again. You know, what is the true arrangement? You know, what are you building, is it an architecture of words or is it just a new relationship to everything that one hopes to keep striking?

I think about concrete music, which I hit upon a lot when I was reading and thinking about Iceland. At first, it was just recordings of rain, and the interface between technology and nature, which seemed like a new romantic handshake, and composers were into that, and slowly it yielded happenings. And someone I'm really excited about is Robert Whitman, who was a huge Dante fan. But he did these—I saw a bunch of these—performances when I first came to New York, and when he talked about what he thought happenings were, it was concrete art, which was the interfaces between all these media. How can you put words and bodies and film and music together—and the audience, and the night. It just seemed like such a beautiful utopia, but those were the big questions of the sixties and seventies and, I think are also the things that really connect to this kind of web-driven strange moment we're in.

You know when in the nineties people talked about what was virtual, I don't think people in the nineties could have imagined what it feels like now, to be so displaced and connected at the same time, all the time, everywhere. It presents us with a different shaped problem, but almost more necessarily, almost more urgently, in figuring out how to do this thing, we need to decide what its poem looks like, this moment's. Does it resemble all the technology or does it resemble one human gesture, or does it resemble something between people and animals?

EM: We have Hart Crane, who was himself serially unemployed or unemployable and who was taken care of by Otto Kahn, a grudging patron investing in his promise, and his artist friends out on Long Island and upstate New York, who sort of tolerated him and his habits and exploits, and James Schuyler, your friend and mentor and charge, who was the object of much concentrated care from his friends who created a nominal and actual *foundation of care-giving* for him, the foundation that hired you, and they comprise with others a part of this odd corner of literary history and, particularly, queer literary history that is made up of house-sitting and house-guesting. In *Inferno* too, in the subsection "Honors and Awards," Eileen accepts the keys to the manor and grounds of a home in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, owned by two artist friends she has impressed or befriended. I wonder if you have any thoughts about the identity perpetually as *guest* and how that relates aesthetically to either freedom or indebtedness in 20th century queer literature, or in poetry generally?

EM: Well, I think I both want to make Maynard G Krebs jokes about being a freeloader and a bum and I don't like to work, and all of that, but actually I work a lot and always have, and I guess the only—if not defense then—way you step away from the idea of yourself as a freeloader is to keep doing your work passionately and with great integrity. Having wealthier friends is sort of like fleetingly having good parents at last, and you sort of simply want not to disgrace whoever has decided to give you a beautiful place to stay for a few months or a few days. So it comes with the territory that you want to make something for them or with them or about them. I dedicated a number of books, or thanked the couple that helped me in a number of books, but they had already decided they didn't like me for something that—well, why go there? But then you suddenly have all this information about these people, and are you suddenly a bad dog who bites the hand that fed you, because there's that part of being a writer where you're always alienating your family or your friends or your lovers by displaying them in a light that might serve you or your poem or your story but may be not how they want to be presented. I changed names of course in the novel. So yes, it affords you a new kind of writings: when I was in Pennsylvania it really was the first time I spent time in nature as an adult in a conscious way. It was like an artist colony where you're put in this other space, to mutate.

EM: Perhaps the most poignant passage in *Inferno* is about home and feeling at home, which is, as you suggest, different often than how one feels with one's own family, when you're describing the particular style of belonging that was afforded you at Ted and Alice's house. You write, "That was my favorite feeling in the world. To be already on the inside and see who came in." Can you describe that more, being on the inside and what that feeling is?

EM: Part of it was that it had not been released to me, I was a very temporary guest and had the run of the place in a very temporary way, but it wasn't like they went away and gave me their house. What they were doing is letting me enter their reality, as they lived it. Which is such a different thing from, say, the wealthier person who sort of throws you an extra house. This was—there should be a word for the act of someone actually simply letting you into their language and home and seeing what their experience is. Is it simply friendship? There were people like Rene or Ted who I've met over the years, who were like, "C'mon." And it's something that I've enjoyed doing with girlfriends, younger people generally, where you decide to share these eighteen hours, or this stretch of time, or this evening, and you feel kind of like Fagin, or something: "we're going to do it this way," you know.



had his orange and maroon plaid shirt on. It held him to earth like the flowers in the vase. And his poems have some of that quality.

And to say this sounds kind of corny, and cheesy, and easy, but I mean it in every single sense of a culture, he was a one-man *culture*, with these deep problems that he kind of both moved towards and fled from by these strange, beautiful, comfortable assemblages of flowers and people and remarks and private jokes. Sometimes it was like he was a sort of dowager at some lovely lunch that went on forever. And I'm sure he was alone for a huge amount of that time. It was almost like he stayed at the party in his head, and so it was like a gay life that could go on forever. Cause he certainly was a beautiful young man, in Europe, at a certain time, and was probably very good at being that guy, and wrote poems inside of those rooms, or began to write poems in those places, and I think never stopped...being the beautiful baby. Because that's who he was when I met him, you know, when I was just a kid, and I was hired to attend to him.

In the same way that when I think of my family, and my dad being a total alcoholic, everything was entirely orchestrated around this man who was often passed out on the floor. He was power baby, and that's who Jimmy was too. So that, it's like a difficult emblem that everybody endorses. So I think that's an almost Robert Frost-like accomplishment, especially in the worlds where he is accepted and read and people are excited about him for a number of contradictory reasons. His disturbing poems are oddly resolved. With all the unevenness of nature. With all the horrible scariness of nature. It's an interesting, lovely place. And even to say that there's a place for loveliness, what an incredible thing to assert. And there's a certain kind of wastefulness, too, which is something I think about a lot in writing and poetry.

EM: He's a gatherer and a dropper. And you get the sense in a Schuyler poem that it could have gone a number of other different ways; that is, you feel the selecting eye and the selecting perceptiveness in his poems. Of all the poets whom I've read, I would say your poems resemble his most, and I wonder if that's true for you. When you talk about a poem stopping before it's resolved and, if a poem, as you suggest, is like walking and its lines aren't going to be even or evenly long because, well, I don't notice this streetlamp for the same duration as I notice that girl crossing the street, so why would the formal cues of a poem be more organized than perception is, I feel that way about Schuyler's poems. And the *dedicatorines* and the *towardsness* either to an addressee or to the reader I also recognize in your work, and there's something about the way the poems can kind of stop and the reader continues to tumble forward that feels proprioceptive, walking, full of ambulatory life. So, is Schuyler for you that kind of central, aesthetic influence?

EM: I guess he is. It's funny. I know I get compared to him a lot, and people know that I worked with him and became a friend of his, but you have somehow managed to convince me of it more than anyone ever has before that it's true. I mean, the way you described it is absolutely the way—I mean I liked how he did what he did better than the way Frank O'Hara did it. You know? I mean I've learned so much from John Ashbery. And so many other poets mean so much to me, John Wieners, Creeley, and lots of individual poems by people rather than their whole bodies of work—I mean Lucille Clifton has a couple of poems I always teach, always think about. But you know, to the extent that Jimmy presents the possibility that you can turn on a dime, makes doing that in a poem feel possible, and it does just happen to be something I do know about reality.

And I think the thing that's funny about being influenced by somebody or learning a lot from somebody is that nonetheless you're a very different person and you know very different things and you go to very different places you know? Cause I can think of people whose work has been really influenced by mine, and as much as I can listen to their work and think, *Fuck*, I could have written that line, or maybe I *did* write that line, I more than anybody else know how much that person diverges from my work, because of the whole utterly different set of concerns they have. Like, Jimmy's beautiful life is not my beautiful life. I don't necessarily mean to *defend* myself from that suggestion. It is massively true, in so many ways. Because he welcomed me not only into his house but also, I think, into the house of poetry, in a big way. And he—I don't even know if he said it now—but there were poems of mine he let me know he thought were really great, and nothing made me happier. And I don't think it was because they were like his poems. But it probably was, too.

When I think about students, when I think about poems of theirs I love, they do sometimes remind me a bit of my own but also of something I wouldn't think of doing. So, there's the poem you could have written but wouldn't ever have. And you just feel like you've handed them a tool, or a vehicle to sort of drive someplace you never wanted to go.

EM: That reminds me of one of my favorite parts of *Inferno*, the last chapter, which is called "Moving," about another kind of practice and tutelage, which again has invitation and visiting inherent, and a notion of space—if not the poetry field, then—the house or the room that you're let in, in which to act as a mover. You use the term, a Sanskrit word I guess, *bhav*, meaning the organization and the spatial relationship and interrelationship of things within a room or arena, including people's relationships, and there are designated people, teachers or gurus, who have the ability or who take on the responsibility of moving those things around, moving the *bhav*. Can you talk about that, maybe in terms of teachers and students particularly?

EM: The way I see it is funny and silly because I never went to a carnival and picked up that hammer and hit that thing and made the bell ring, but that's what I'm always picturing, in this cartoony way—this contraption-like way of being with people in a room. And the thing I like most about the notion of the *bhav*—I found it in Isherwood's biography of Ramakrishna, his teacher's teacher, was the notion of the *bakhti yogi*. The *bakhti yogi* goes into a room and gets people to chant and tell people stories, and it is very much like teaching, like all the things

we do. I think of the bio pic of Lenny Bruce, Lenny, and Dustin Hoffman as a sort of pre-famous Lenny Bruce comes backstage and says, "Ugh it's like cement out there," referring to the audience, and it is that thing that anybody who deals with performing or teaching knows all about.

It reminds me, too, of when I co-edited *The New Fuck You* in the nineties (Liz Koza and I plus everyone) because we were fed up and distraught about the quality of lesbian anthologies (there was actually a moment when lots of gay books were being published, and every mainstream publisher did a lesbian poetry anthology, each one shittier than the last), so when Semiotext(e) agreed to let us do *The New Fuck You* we decided that it should be a book of lesbian *reading*, not lesbian *writing*, so that it would be our attention that was being invited rather than our desires being framed by this book. So when I think about what I love about the notion of the *bhav* and the job of the *bakhti yogi*, it is the suggestion that you're addressing and even directing a commune—that's what you want, and that seems good. And it doesn't even seem to be about inciting the reader for this purpose or that purpose, but to only know that we must move.

I remember when Ted Berrigan's daughter, Kate Berrigan, died, not too many years after Ted died, and I was still very much in that community of people, that poetry community in the East Village, and the loss of Ted had been huge, a huge absence, and he had this twenty-five year-old daughter who was walking across the street with her young husband, across Houston Street one day, and a motorcycle ran a red light and hit her, and she was killed instantly. And nobody knew what to do with it except to think "How can this be?" I remember a bunch of us went to the memorial service at St. Mark's Church, and a rabbi addressed the group, and he said, "We're here because"—how did he put it? He said, "We came together today because that's what people know how to do." And, oddly, it was such a consoling thing to hear, because we didn't know anything, we didn't know what to make of Kate's death, but we did know to do this, and he was just reminding us of that.

EM: And that was moving, that was this kind of moving, that all you knew how to do you had already done. We are here, here we are.

EM: Exactly. He told us how we are—what we had done, to suggest that it was good.

EM: I feel like this is related to what you describe, in its humility, as this special secular vocation, the job of someone who has lived and loved enough in language to come into the room and move those things around that need moving, and move the pressure, move the *bhav*, and to validate that here we are, we are this we. I mean, are the two things related to you?

EM: I feel like that's the kind of teacher I am, too. I sometimes feel like I'm the worst teacher, but I have great classes. And I don't know exactly how that happens, but I feel like it's that thing where you're half controlling, and half absent. And I tend to feel happy with what they become, I felt that way this past semester, because I felt like this writing class was just really cooking, was just kicking ass. You know, I think a lot of teaching is moving yourself and them around, and hoping it lands someplace good. And understanding that you probably aesthetically need to be shaking them up rather than fixing their poems.

EM: Maggie Nelson gives some critical attention to your line in the poem "Therapy," from *Sorry, Tree*. "I say always go to the party," which I take to mean something like "don't let life pass you by" or "yes is better than no thanks" and it seems a sentiment you're known for. And, so it's interesting that your novel nearly ends with the words, speaking about poetry, "Know when to leave the party... Just finish your line and get the hell out of the room," which has the opposite sense. Was that a conscious thing?

EM: In the poem where I wrote the line "Always go to the party," the next line is, "which doesn't mean I do." I've certainly had events in which it seemed impossible—you meant to go, you were definitely going to go, and then for some reason you didn't, and you really wish you went. And, if anything the point of the thing is not so much to advocate, some kind of stance but something lighter... I do believe in that turn-on-a-dime thinking; if you're vacillating, then it's best to move and get out of that vacillating pattern. I should, I shouldn't... "Then leave, or go." Because I think those are the decisive moments of writing or living. And this is spoken as a truly indecisive person. So I do know the sweetness of lightness, because I'm not always light.

EM: "Go on your nerve," as O'Hara recommended, but Frank O'Hara often kept going and being irresolute or ambivalent within a poem.

EM: They're awfully full poems.... Yeah, when I think about it, they're really different. The idea of leaving the party is truer than going to the party, because leaving the party really is about writing, not living—and we often will do the wrong thing; you'll often not go to the party when you should have gone or you just stayed too long, and you really shouldn't have done that, and you shouldn't have done it like that... but the thing that is so great about what we get to do in language is: you get to go back to the place where you were wondering, and maybe not so much act right as point to that place. And I think that probably is not unlike the person saying, "We came," you know, "we came, and that's really all we know."