

Alice Notley: Stranger Still

Born in 1945, Alice Notley is the author of more than twenty collections of poetry, including *The Descent of Alette* and *Disobedience*. Her most recent book is *Coming After: Essays on Poetry*. **-Douglas A. Martin**

Alice Notley writes in her *Disobedience* a question close to my heart: "If this is a diary / is it worthless / like life?" I'd copied this into my journal, before eventually spending a day in New York University's Fales Library to read her *Sorrento*, housed in the Downtown Collection. *Sorrento* is a diary of sorts in poems of a trip taken with her husband at the time, the poet **Ted Berrigan**, and their two children, Edmund and Anselm, now poets themselves, all of them present in the body of the work itself. The daily is not new to the art of Alice (*Alice Ordered Me To Be Made* is another of her titles). Readers may wander with her while she goes along; she gives them glimpses of the processes she's engaged in.

Notley tells me, "At a certain point I lost interest in the details of my quotidian life, but took on the day-to-day shapes made by my dreams, by the newspapers (politics), and by whatever imagined story I might be telling as it occurred to me to make it progress that day." This is a premise later books like the exile-driven *Disobedience*, the mythic *The Descent of Alette*, and work since September 11th ground themselves in.

"What originally interested me about diary writing was that a story shape was automatically created in the process of daily tracking. What I'm more interested in now is how the future is contained in the present; this is the sense I get from reading the papers at the moment. So I can stop writing whatever whenever I please, because, as Ted (Berrigan) said **Whitehead** said, everything that's going to happen is already happening." This paraphrase is familiar to me from Notley's introduction to Berrigan's *The Sonnets*. A certain assurance derives from following along the lines of what someone you deeply cared for and now carry only inside you once said. Or said that someone said. Fidelity to such sentiments may become a way to pierce and piece together our own meanings.

Uncovering what's at the heart of our words, we risk exposing ourselves in the midst of what's normally public. When I ask her if she

believes clothes hold memories—when I tell her why I want to know, having been beaten up in my slick **Todd Oldham** raincoat, wearing my green eye-shadow, on the **F train**—she says, "Yes, but the story I would tell you is so personal I will only half tell it. It involves a dress that belonged to someone dear to me: she lent me the dress and I wore it during my initial days with Doug (Oliver) and then she died in an accident. I still have the dress but I keep it at my mother's house."

Houses hold like histories and notebooks, like pockets.

Doug is her second husband to have died, also a poet, with whom she authored in 1992 *The Scarlet Cabinet*, a collection of their miscellaneous manuscripts. This collection included a first published version of *The Descent of Alette*, her female epic of self-quest via subway, among other routes.

What can you take with you when you go to a new place?

"When you moved to Paris, how clean a break was it?" I ask her. I want to know if it felt better to be there, while "we" were fighting with the French, over whether or not "we" should fight with someone else. Words are pocketed like this with quotations. I ask her if she ever thinks of coming back. I tell her about wanting to go away from here but not being able to leave my mom in this place.

From Paris, Notley e-mails, "I wanted to leave the United States but found the break shocking. It took years to get used to being here and I'm still a stranger. I'm still surprised when I leave this room, where my head functions mostly in English, and then walk out onto my street. I sometimes want to go back to the States out of loneliness, to be nearer my sons and my mother, but I don't want to re-enter the American mind—I might never leave it. American politics are obviously upsetting and repellent. It's more and more outrageous each day: like, *What will they have gotten away with today?* when I pick up the paper."

I ask her about beauty, because the snakes in *The Descent of Alette* are so to me. One has to be got past. One is mirrored all over. And just the other night I had told the dinner table that the word beauty no longer occurred to me. Yet in her poem her quotation marks coil gorgeously around and show me: "when the snake" "was the subway, we" "entered her walking over" "her long tongue" "her long tongue" "And inside her" "was red & white"// "& we looked out" "through clear scales" "Inside her" "was red plush," "was bone white" "was safe; and

we" "rode her" "as she slithered" "through the earth &" "its darkness"
"through the earth &" "its dark smell" "We let" "the snake swallow us,
take us into" "herself" "She had no"// "arms to hug us," "she gave us"
"her whole body" "We were in" "her whole self" "Safe in her whole self"
"When a snake was" "our mother" "When a snake was" "our train".'

Notley writes back, "Beauty comes in all by itself without your having to think about it, I find. But as for what it is exactly and its origin.... So last January my son Anselm was here and we went to the Pierre and Marie Curie University Collection of, I think the title is, Minerals. The specimens are sooooo beautiful. So, does beauty signify purpose in the universe? I asked Anselm. Are these meant to be beautiful? Does everyone and everything know they are? I think he answered I don't know, I don't know, yes." ❖