

**Selah Saterstrom**

Interviewed by Christian Peet

**CP:** I know I'm catching up with you just days before you leave for the MacDowell Colony, and I sincerely appreciate your taking the time to answer these questions. In the interest of time, I've pared them to a couple topics central to this issue of *Tarpaulin Sky*: seeing and the body, in relation to form and content.

**SS:** Thanks for the opportunity to consider these questions. Within many of them, there are other, bigger questions I don't have answers for. In those moments, I've tried to consider the ideas of the questions themselves, to celebrate the complexity that can be a part of writing, as I've sometimes experienced it.

**CP:** The first time I heard you read, you became my new favorite "poet." It was almost a year later when I saw *The Pink Institution*. The cover identifies it as "a novel." In looking at the forms of the individual pieces, especially those of the first and final sections, I might not classify them as fiction. Are they prose / pieces / poems? Cross-genre? Trans-genre? Or do these genre classifications break down at the level of the individual piece?

Looking at your new work, I'm wondering if there is a larger narrative. Are these new works pieces of a novel or some other extended fiction?

**SS:** These pieces are part of a larger, book length narrative. I would identify that "narrative" as a collection of images that have intersected and conjoined through time in such a way that feels right – inexhaustible, non negotiable. I am interested in the articulations that erupt as a result of these images being in relation. This is a process I would call "narrative." Like a weed growing between two concrete blocks of an interstate overpass. Despite smog and lack of nourishment, certain conditions are present so that a manifestation arises from the space between the edges of those blocks. I feel narrative as inevitable, evolutionary, like interstate weeds. Where there are things and conditions, there is narrative.

The trick is breaking the images until they yield the most poignant set of articulations...then arranging those articulations into a larger pattern that feels honest, is not exclusive, and has a poignance that deserves visibility [enter self doubt]. The trick of waiting, seeing, risking, failing.

Is this work fiction? Trans-genre? I don't know. I recently went through a period in which I was so hung up on what genre I was writing in that it became debilitating. During this time the election was going on and I dealt with it by reading loser's points of view through history. I started to read Japanese accounts of Hiroshima, which re-triggered years of previous Holocaust readings.

After atrocities, forms emerge, often called avant-garde forms. Looking at avant-garde as a literal translation, these forms may be "forward looking" but they feel more to me like forms of present moment witness. How does one speak after a violence that literally reconfigures the cellular structure of things, that, in its erasure, records the shadow of what is no longer present? Out of necessity forms arise to speak a language that must also speak these losses and transfigurations.

Thinking about these things, I realized it would be more productive and better for me to switch from the question: "what genre am I writing in?" to: "how can I be a more pure filter through which language can pattern the mystery of my concerns?" At this point I've chosen a sense of urgency over a sense of knowing.

**CP:** Regardless of its genre, the content of *The Pink Institution* assumes a variety of forms: extensive white space and justified text; "tableaus" with [text smears]; short, linked fictions collected as Childhood Objects, Maidenhood Objects, Motherhood Objects; and the more familiar 1-2 page prose passages complete with paragraphs and titles. In looking at your recent work, I see new forms. What are they? Are these forms organic? Received? How important is form to you? Is form a way of seeing, or the thing seen?

**SS:** There can be suffering and wisdom that comes with arriving at a form, whether that form is achieved through an excavation process or by imposing artifice. In both methods, one can feel - not how do I get to the end of this book - but how do I get to the end of a sentence...and that is humbling. I believe all forms can contain elements of the organic and the received because necessity is

always present. What feels more important than the formal method are the intentions flickering behind the veil of all the written gestures. These intentions have to do with being a better filter. Or as Grace Paley put it (I was recently told): getting all the lies out.

I've been thinking about the space of the page as an installation space, the text as installation. Some of the pieces express this more visually than others. But even when form is not working in this overtly visual way, every line, be it a recognizable sentence or not, is broken intentionally as I write. I experience form both as a way of seeing and the thing seen because it is simultaneously process and artifact.

**CP:** ["The muscles"] and ["State Bird"] look like stains on the page: two ink blots separated by two vertical dots hanging in white space.

The muscles		Some strangled
have been brought to		worms still blind
bone so there is		squirming but eyeless
completion. The	.	hung all
skin is an outer	.	seeing through no eye.
covering a skein		Summer jelly heating
bloodlessly peeled		rotten flooring.
are real ones		
which look different.		

**CP:** These ink blots could be ink or blood. A paint brush might have dripped these on the floor. Closer inspections reveal muscle, bone, a sense of "completion." The skin is the image made flesh, an "outer/covering," but even the label "image" has been "bloodlessly peeled," revealing "real ones/which look different." Not paint drops, but bits of meat. My instinct is to turn away: instead, I see worms.

What do you see? How does visual art inform these texts? What is your relationship to image? What do you see as the reader's relationship to text as image, as content? Does it relate to the function of the above form? To the two dots separating the texts?

Is this ekphrastic writing, or is this an act of witnessing?

**SS:** Maybe the best way to respond is to talk about how the pieces in this form came about on a personal level. For me these pieces were about bodily violence and what remains after the violence: the traces. I was thinking about rape kits at the time. I see this piece as words functioning as textures smeared onto glass plates for further examination and/or as a record of a bodily event. They've been in storage. So they also embody memory. Physical memory smears.

There is something perfect about how a smear looks because a smear never looks "wrong." One doesn't apply that kind of aesthetic judgment to smears. They are what they are. I cast these word textures in a wabi-sabi or im/perfect form. 'Perfect' in the Eastern and/or etymological sense as in, "knowing when to release/enter into the process of decay." Ikebano, the Japanese art of flower arranging, greatly influenced the aesthetic of wabi-sabi. Flower arranging began as a temple practice, then became a path to enlightenment, when, after a storm, instead of composting some flowers that had been ripped from the earth, a monk made an arrangement of them. He felt the flowers were worthy of appreciation and consideration because they were so perfect: they did not resist or judge where they were in the spectrum of experience, they did not resist or judge death. In the West we throw out the vase of flowers when they start to die, but this is precisely when they are perfect because they are in accordance with their nature. I sought a form that resonated with the nature of smears because it was important that these pieces feel like smears.

The colon between the word-smears is about juxtaposition. A kind of visual cue that narrative is at work...two things bumped up next to one another will yield some other thing. But in this case, that this kind of narrative can happen at all is important to the meaning of the piece. We wouldn't be looking at these smears and the subsequent narratives they birth had not something else happened that caused the smears to be collected in the first place. To stay with the example of

rape and the rape kit, this might lead to the question: why does rape happen? No cultural exegesis can adequately generate an answer that addresses the complexity of that kind of trauma.

Smears on glass plates may give logistical information (like DNA, like names), but they cannot give back what was taken (the violation they refer to). So juxtaposition allows you to position ethical considerations into the work. How can a singular proof of identity simultaneously exist beside/also be evidence of shattered identity?...and what does this tell us about the nature of justice? Form things – like line breaks, indentation choices, and juxtapositions – can presence these concerns in an immediate way so that the words don't have to explain or contemplate, but can exist as feeling, as presence.

**CP:** These images are immediate, stripped bare, raw on the page. However, despite the viscera, the work makes a point of stating that images of muscles are not “real ones/which look different.”

How do you negotiate the space between the image of a thing and the thing itself? How important is “real” flesh, is the body, to your work?

**SS:** I guess my response would be a continuation of the above - working with form and content so that, in union, they embody/become the thing rather than describe the thing. I've found when I do this, it is because of a need to speak about/from the body in the body's idiom. Words functioning, not in a utilitarian sense, but in a sensational one – rooted in the senses - textures. So that it is felt in the mouth or stomach first, rather than in the thinking mind. Maybe this is a desire for direct communication that begins on the nervous system. I believe in the immediacy of the body, in what the body knows.

**CP:** I once heard you say—and I may be paraphrasing incorrectly—that revision is a process of learning to see more clearly. Would you explain this?

Also, what is the importance of negative space, of what is not seen in your work? In *The Pink Institution*, God took the form of an eraser. Is revision an act of God?

**SS:** Ha hahaaaa...hell yes sometimes it feels like revision is an act of God because it feels like it would take an act of God to make a piece work. But seriously, in terms of revision as a phenomena that is act of God...I don't know. Because genocide, for example, is a form of revision. In turn this revision can lead to re-revisioned forms to speak about the experience itself. The process of remembering, also revision. Pollution: a process of planetary revision. Life, death, nature: revision. And so on. It could be that revision is a non negotiable character in the existential drama. This doesn't disinvite God into the scenario, but it doesn't place God as The Force causing the scenario. It's a big subject...does God exist outside one's own accountability?

We invoke revision in good and terrible ways, but it is a mode of surviving. Acquiring language as a child is a kind of revision process – one revises a semiotic understanding of self and world and the “I” is born, subject placement established. One is less likely to be eaten by wolves if one can distinguish one's self from the wolves. Being food doesn't have to imply your connections are rooted in dichotomy (you v/s wolves). It just suggests ways those connections might be expressed.

In terms of my own writing process, editing/revision is a space where I have encountered something I personally consider holy, but really it is very ordinary. It feels holy because it's rare. Again, Grace Paley's idea of getting the lies out comes to mind. When I'm at a place with a piece and I'm able to, if only for a moment, live with my own contradictions without somehow medicating myself, that can feel like grace.