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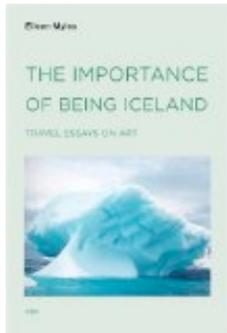
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August 2009

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The Importance of Being Iceland: Travel Essays in Art by Eileen Myles



I was reading, and loving, Milan Kundera's [The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts](#). It reminded me of being young(er), falling in love with Budapest, reading writers from Prague while drinking Hungarian wine and Bailey's (not at the same time, or, well, okay, yes, it could get gross), back when my obsession with Central European writers hadn't taken a dark turn into Holocaust research yet. The part on [Anna Karenina](#) was so beautiful. And then, I got to a section where Kundera suddenly compared lyric poets to children and novelists to adults, or some bullshit like that. I can't quote it to you, because when somebody disses lyric poets, I get so angry I can't read or breathe anymore. The displacement of born-gifted rhyming geniuses by workshop-trained, over-edited memoirists is one of this moment's tragedies. (And yes, some memoirists are poets, and some successful "poets" are not writing anything like real poetry. It is not about the genre, but the gift. Kundera has the gift, so he should understand that lyric poetry is not about innocence, but shape-shifting and magic. He kind of is a lyric poet, actually, so phooey on him.) I returned Kundera's book to the library and soothed myself with a book by some guy who tracks animals like bobcats with no intention of catching them, but just to understand them better.

Sorry for the tangent, but, Eileen Myles is a real lyric poet. She can't help it. She writes novels like a lyric poet, and she writes poems like a lyric poet. I saw her once at a conference in a windowless midtown Hilton, and she even sits on conference panels like a lyric poet. I was too shy to introduce myself. Her fat book of interviews, essays and one libretto involving Bjork, [*The Importance of Being Iceland: Travel Essays in Art*](#), is all lyric poetry, a jumble of strange songs in her inimitable voice. It's almost too much, too chaotic: Icelandic travel, other travel, bus tours, artists I've barely heard of, Daniel Day-Lewis and 1970s New York. Kundera's essays are pristine, elegant, gorgeous, Eliotic. Myles's are grimy, confusing and Beat. Starving, hysterical (or maybe mystical?) and naked -- they are always a little bit sad. She sees too much, everywhere, and she's never mean about it.

There's a piece, written in the early 1990s, where Myles takes stock of all the word poems overtaking the downtown art scene -- Leslie Dill's reworkings of Emily Dickinson, Kenneth Goldsmith's prints of words with soundalike endings. Some of the artists are people she knows. At every turn, just as I start thinking she's being overly kind about these pieces, given the deep lameness of some of the work, she infuses her honest little appraisals with a bit of translucent poison, and then at the end, she acid-burns us, quietly: "Meanwhile, I'll just go back to those famous streets where 1.6 million adults, I've been told, can't read a thing."

Like many lyric poets, she writes about home and homelessness. In one of my favorite pieces in the collection, "Box of Rain," she moves into a "homeless box," initially designed for the citizens of Rotterdam. She sets up on the corner of Madison Avenue and 73rd Street in my city. After buying a yoga mat to sleep on at the health food store (where they give me free organic dinners near closing) she lights up the box with a Coleman lamp and reads Vivekananda and John O'Hara. Myles listens to the city-night sounds and tapes part of a tee-shirt image of a Hindu deity onto her box. She ends up caught in a rainstorm, soaked, dreaming of choking, thinking about her heart opening and closing and how it might stop beating.

Though she opens her piece on Ginsberg, "A Speech About Allen," by saying that he was more of a star than a homosexual, we never forget that Myles is gay, female and working class. Even when she is writing about something else entirely. (Of course we never forget that kind of thing with Allen either.) She never lets us forget who we are sharing the city with, or who we are sharing the ocean with, or who we are sharing the world with, or who is applauding after a poetry reading, filling the room with "the frantic pink energy of human explosion."

There's plenty of dark (and light) humor throughout this collection. The kind that fans will recognize from Myles's fiction. The 2005 essay "Jim Fahey," chronicling her \$4,000 worth of cut-rate therapy at the Washington Square Psychoanalytic Institute on University Place, is one of the laugh-out-loud funny ones. The humor, however, doesn't quite make up for the way she keeps surprising you by making you cry. "Universal Cycle," a commencement speech, had me weeping -- with its business about poets and dogs and what it means to be a poet and why the death penalty is so sad, and her wishes for the graduating class:

"I hope you all find yourself sleeping with someone you love, maybe not all of the time, but a lot of the time. The touch of a foot in the night is sincere. I hope you like your work, I hope there's mystery and poetry in your life -- not even poems, but patterns. I hope you can see them. Often these patterns will wake you up, and you will know that you are alive, again and again."

Maybe what Kundera should have written is that it's brave as hell to keep being a lyric poet -- and to own up to it after you've grown up, after the world has lost its innocence, after you've seen the best minds of your generation destroyed by madness or corporations or simple fatigue. It is important to be Iceland --

without new lyric poetry, we forget. "There's a huge fear in the middle of my life that I must button something up and I can't," Myles writes in a 1999 piece called "How to Write an Avant-Garde Poem." "I won't. It stays open as much as I can."

In Iceland, Myles tells us, there was a kind of epic poetry singing called Kvaedaskapur, that started in the 1300s:

A Kvaedamatur sings both traditional poetry sagas and also writes his own new poems. Typically the Kvaedamatur denies authorship. He (or she. There were female Kvaedamatur too) didn't steal it. He just didn't *write* it...Typically a Kvaedamatur would go into a kind of trance state for seven months of the year (just in the evenings if I'm getting it right. Or maybe evenings were when he would perform for other people)...He lived in poetry all day long. It was his water, his language...The singer drops his energy at the end of the line but several other people come in (vocally) and sing the end of the line for and with him. They hold him up so to speak. One man said though he was referring to breath to his power, which faded as he grew old that what one chiefly needed to sing *kvaeda* is courage."

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Semiotext(e)

ISBN: 1584350660

216 Pages

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