

JUL-AUG 2009

POETRY

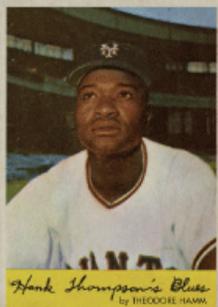
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INCONVERSATION

Eileen Myles with Jeremy Sigler

by Jeremy Sigler

On the occasion of the poet's new book, *The Importance of Being Iceland*, Eileen Myles welcomed fellow poet Jeremy Sigler to her East Village home, where she has been since 1972, to talk about her new work and more.

Jeremy Sigler (Rail): You look great in a tie, you know.

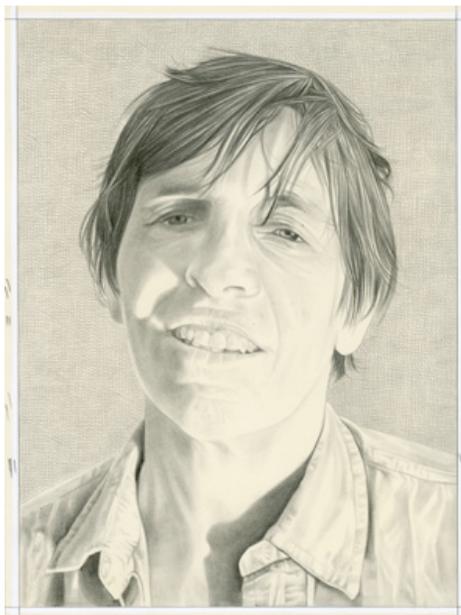
Eileen Myles: Oh, thank you.

Rail: I was jealous when I saw the author photo on the back cover of your new book.

Myles: Yeah, I love ties.

Rail: Coat and tie. That was my school uniform for 12 years.

Myles: Yeah, I think it's a great look. I went to Catholic school, so I also had to wear a uniform. I was always really jealous of the boys' clothes. I would sit there and draw men in ties. In high school for a dance, once, I convinced all the girls in the freshman class to spray their hair another color and wear madras ties and boys' striped shirts. It was the only way I could wear what I wanted. I'm all for the collective.



Portrait of Eileen Myles. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

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Rail: I think they were grooming us to be businessmen. But it was interesting the way some kids could find a way to wear those clothes in a rebellious way.

Myles: Yeah, yeah. Like we had to wear black loafers in high school, but brown loafers were what you wore in the 60s. So, we would carry brown loafers to school and then change into them. Everyone would roll their skirts up to be kind of jagged punk mini-skirts after school.

Rail: I’m pretty critical of the J. Crew catalogue, which I have to confess I love looking through because something about it relaxes me. The stylists need to go a little baggier. They come up with this artificially rumpled look, but it doesn’t capture the same rumpledness I have in mind.

Myles: I feel like I have a certain prep element that remains a constant because I grew up in Cambridge and Boston and Arlington. It was sort of a thing that seemed to represent the good life in a certain way. When I was younger, androgyny was so important to me because I went from praying to be a boy, to accepting that I was female, to cutting some deal with reality for a number of years until I could do whatever I wanted to do. And now I don’t think I own a piece of clothing that isn’t men’s clothing. Oftentimes, I’m passing as a male and people are calling me “sir,” and then other times somebody’s saying, “tell the lady,” or “ma’am,” and I’m thinking, like, “What’s going on?”

Rail: So if someone calls you “sir,” are you complimented?

Myles: I enjoy it. I don’t feel triumphant, but I feel like a private wink-wink to myself. Sometimes you get called “sir” by a person and in the next moment you feel anger from him because you’ve made him feel a little like a fool. I was at this uptown theater going to the bathroom. There was a long line of women waiting and everybody was feeling the tension, and I was getting glared at, not because I was a masculine-looking person using the women’s bathroom, but because I was taking another woman’s spot in line.

Rail: One time I accidentally walked into a ladies’ room—I missed the sign completely and went right into the first open stall, and when I came out there was this line of women there

and they were like, “What’s this guy doing?” They were really mad at me, and I thought, “you know, it’s better that I didn’t know what was going on, that I was just this spaced out guy.” It’s permissible if you’re really spaced out—it’s permissible to do just about anything. That’s why I really like Chauncey the Gardener in *Being There* because everything that happens to him is an accident. He is blank and malleable in a way, it’s like he is merely what people perceive him as.

Myles: Jerzy Kosinski was really ahead of his time, on so many levels. I mean, he had a uniform made that was an official uniform of no particular country, and he would travel around in it, and get all this respect just because he was in a uniform. He was smart, *Steps* is one of my favorite books.

Rail: I’ve never read *Steps*. In fact, I’ve never read *Being There*; I’ve only seen the movie with Peter Sellers, and I’m a huge fan. I made it into a student play one year down in Baltimore. This Egyptian guy Latfi Nathan played Chauncey. I had him in a pinstripe suit and of course the famous executive-style bowler hat.

Myles: My goal is to have fewer and fewer clothes. Because it seems like if you have a few shirts that you love, you know, buy one or two shirts a year. Like one shirt dies, get another one.

Rail: This brand of A.P.C. jeans, which I’ve now been wearing pretty religiously every day for the last ten years or so. They take back your worn jeans if you’ve broken them in according to their rules, which means you basically never wash them.

Myles: Right.

Rail: And so I wear them every day, break them in, and then one day when the crotch is like gone, and there are holes in the knees, I just walk right in and walk out wearing a brand new pair for free.

Myles: You’re kidding. That’s amazing. Wow. Renewable jeans.

Rail: Let’s talk about your new book—not a book of poems, but of collected writings: *The Importance of Being Iceland*, published by Semiotext(e). It must have been many years in the making.

Myles: Yeah, it was tricky, because the work spans like twenty or thirty years, and existed in a lot of formats. I was dealing with things that were written on typewriters, and electric typewriters, and word processors, you know. So it's sort of like my whole kind of filing system of paper and digital files. So that's a mess, and then there's the range of subject matter and all the different edits. With reviews, in a lot of cases, what I wanted to work with were the original drafts.

Rail: In the intro essay you have this line about how much you like art writing because it's so "pitchable."

Myles: Yeah, "pitchy."

Rail: Pitchy. At *Parkett*, where I'm an editor, we get many pitches. And I send out my own sometimes too. I pitched this interview, you know, to the *Brooklyn Rail*.

Myles: Being that kind of writer, working that way with editors, can be very glamorous. Like a knight-errant—the most romantic way to say "freelance." You know, you're sort of a warrior in a landscape that is changing shape all the time. I remember saying the word "pitch" to Bob Perelman, and his eyes lit up, and I realized that concept was foreign enough to him that it intrigued him, and I realized that's exactly what's beautiful about it. That's the thing I was most interested in when I was putting this book together—kind of an imperfect map of imperfect attempts. As a poet, you want to connect to the world, and in many ways you don't get to. Maybe you do, on an ideal plane, by all the readings and relationships. But, as a poet who writes about art or other things for hire, it's like you go right into the monster, and you find out what it wants.

Rail: When you said the word "relationships," it made me remember going to the doctor the other day. He was going down this checklist: "How are your knees, your back, your relationship?" And I just froze, and I was like, "uhhh." I didn't realize he was referring to my wife Cory [Reynolds], and all I could visualize was this sort of baroque network of people, and then to imagine the effect each could be having on my health at any given moment. Like, this one causes my heart to race. So, tell me about the Daniel Day-Lewis interview in your book. That's a great piece, done originally for *Index Magazine* when Cory, incidentally, was the editor there. Was that your idea or

hers?

Myles: Daniel Day-Lewis’s dad is a poet, Cecil Day-Lewis. So I think Cory knew they wanted to interview him, and thought we’d have chemistry. We did have a wonderful conversation—it hasn’t happened yet, but we were all ready to become friends; he even gave me his phone number in Ireland.

Rail: Nice.

Myles: Yeah, *Index* did that amazing pimping thing in journalism where they rent you a little room in the Hotel Grand for a few hours. And of course I knew that the unequalness of our relative powers in the world meant that I would be there early, and I would be ordering room service to bring up coffee. It reminded me of the days when I would drink, because I didn’t want to drink too much coffee and be out of my mind when he got there. But I was sort of pacing nervously like we had a date.

Rail: He obviously respected your calling in life too.

Myles: Right. And what was interesting about him was his performance, because what made him comfortable was to give it to me, it was absolutely an opportunity for him to act. It moved me to let him do that with me. I had to relax and “be myself,” which I guess was my performance. But, what was really funny was that he threw the gauntlet down unwittingly by coming in with a crew cut. I had been thinking of my first question in anticipation of his hair, and then I was thrown off.

Rail: He was probably in another role already. Actors go from project to project to project; they never have time to sit around and eventually ask, “What do I want to do next?” Like I’ve often thought, the prelude to writing a poem is sort of bottoming out and arriving at this bored state, then come the poems.

Myles: Yeah, but sometimes I’m so busy, and I’m walking up the stairs of my apartment, and I’m just full of all my shit—all the things I have to do and all the things I’m worried about, and my deadlines, and everything—and the thought comes into my mind, like, ugh, like, another day, I’m just too busy to write a poem. And when that thought can formulate, it’s like I want to get it—there’s a certain leveling gesture where I say,

“No,” and poetry gets to enter that space. In the midst of the too-full life, I get to say, I want to do the stupidest thing on earth, write a poem.

Rail: So you recently left San Diego—you went there to teach—and you came back to New York.

Myles: Yeah, I mean I sort of started to figure out how to write poems there, but still, like, as a petri dish, San Diego could not be my life. I think the micro scale of what a poet’s life is like, what the gesture is that creates a poem or a poetic atmosphere—that’s our studio. We are more conceptual than anybody can imagine. The state of mind is the state of poetry.

Rail: Yeah.

Myles: I miss San Diego, like taking a left in my truck on that street corner, and the house that I like looking at, and that big tree, and a particular corn chip I bought at the bodega, my lemon tree. I still own a house in San Diego, and I feel certain that nobody’s picking lemons off the tree. The poor little tree can’t hold all those lemons. But the possibility of a life of many conversations was not there, and that was what I’d been bred on. You know, like that Benjaminian thing of all the shocks that we live with in New York. There’s something very local about it, I mean consciousness. How things impact my head winds up being what I produce. I kind of want there to be a lot of pockmarks and crevices. I want a lot of engagement. I even had an astrologer who was like, “You know you’re not gonna get involved with anybody until you go back to the East Coast.” And I knew it, it was true. I had been like flying back to the East Coast for dates for like several years. So there was that too. And it’s funny with the bicoastal art world lesbian thing—somehow meeting somebody, or having something happen, I just didn’t feel it there. It felt kind of asexual. And New York doesn’t.

Rail: I heard you say once that your idea of being a poet in New York was shaped by reading Frank O’Hara, and that his poems had given you a sort of map to New York, something that you could literally use when you arrived.

Myles: I think O’Hara’s kind of amazing because he keeps being ahead of the ball in a certain way. He’s in a certain way

one of the most technological of poets, the way he talks about picking up the phone, about intersecting with the machine—a kind of fluid engagement with not just New York, but the world. Some jerk in the Times proposed that O’Hara’s whole career was based on one line about Lana Turner.

Rail: What’s the line?

Myles: He’s walking down the street, looking at the headline all over the papers on the newsstand: “Lana Turner has collapsed.” He read that, and then had his whole day gathering, gathering, gathering, and then the end of the poem is, “Lana Turner, get up.” It’s like working within the machine of the culture in a way that’s completely 21st century.

Rail: Well, and people don’t understand how much appropriation or cutting and pasting John Ashbery’s doing, taking snippets from the newspaper or funny things he hears on TV. Like when I worked for John Ashbery—I was his secretary for about a year—I couldn’t believe how much time he spent reading the papers, and watching TV, and then at some point he’d turn on some Schoenberg or something and disappear into his writing room, and I’d just hear the typewriter start clanking away. He was so tapped in to pop culture, and so much was feeding into his work at all times. You could just think of all these ducts leading into his brain, and then back out.

Myles: Poetry’s like a valve.

Rail: Perfect.

Myles: And when you get to look at a poet in action, that’s exactly what you see. It’s circuitry. And sometimes when I talk to young poets, instead of being into this valve idea, they’re preoccupied with deciding whether to go to graduate school or not, and critiquing various writing programs. I mean all a poet needs is a great window. Not literally, but a job or a life, a profession, a relationship—something where you’re really connecting and observing something that is really alive. If you have that, that’s all the education you need.

Rail: I think people of my generation are anxious (maybe like your students) about that window. I’m still worried, for example, that I won’t be able to survive in New York even

though I've been here almost twenty years already.

Myles: Right, but you know I felt that way in my forties too. I was feeling exhausted. I was pushing too hard. And it was just like, something's got to give. Even though my rent was low, doing 95 things, burning the candle at both ends. And it was like, how can this be good? How can this be productive? And the answer and the problem is energy—how to keep accessing it.

Rail: That's inspiring; it reminds me of your wonderful graduation speech in the new book.

Myles: Yeah, Hampshire. In 98.

Rail: And their parents are there too, and what does one say to these kids who are about to embark on their lives, knowing damn well you don't want to be so "inspiring" that you cause them to run out and buy a pen and pad of paper and become a poet. I mean the cliché is that you could risk leading them astray, right?

Myles: The thing that was intense about being invited to give a commencement speech was that it basically afforded me the opportunity to say what was intense about being a poet, which was that, at all costs, a poet must not make platitudes. Nobody needs them. Our job is *not* to give the speech, but to clean the spot we're standing on and say, look, I'm not going to give you a fake future. And I hope you have a real one.

Rail: Can we discuss pedagogy? You've probably taught all over the place by now as a matter of survival.

Myles: I have taught in a bunch of places, but mostly here in New York where I also studied. At some point, when I was trying to figure out how one makes a living, I wound up at the Poetry Project. The workshops were free, and the stance was that the poet who was teaching you was not an academic, but a working artist. The Poetry Project was one of those great projects created in the 60s to do something for alienated youth in the East Village. So the idea was artist as cultural hero, as peer model. Alice Notley, Ted Berrigan—they became friends, but they were my teachers. They acted like we were in the world, the way they talked about poetry, the way they told us to go to galleries. Basically the message was to go out into the

culture and look and consume. Be.

Rail: Yeah, I've become good friends with a few past students. There's often this camaraderie. Not just that you've helped them, but that they've helped you.

Myles: At the Project there was this fluidity because there was basically no institution between us. We were just in this room. And of course, it was the seventies, so you brought beer and cigarettes and pills. You would hopefully stay up all night long after the workshop. The room was big. We were pretty young, too. But also, when I came to New York, I was reading a book by William Irwin Thompson, who was a cultural historian. And he was talking about the "individual as institution," about Warhol and Beuys, and I remember adding [Gertrude] Stein to the list. And O'Hara seemed that way too. And I kind of had a fantasy about becoming one of those people. So what I did was put out my sign, basically on the wall at P.S. 122, at St. Mark's Church, and St. Mark's bookstore, and in a different light, the gay bookstores, and just basically said, "I'm teaching a workshop."

Rail: I recognize some aspect of this from my teaching at the Maryland Institute, where I always thought, "There is this larger institution, and they really don't know what I teach and they're maybe kind of suspicious of me because, for one, I'm a poet teaching in an art school, but also because of my experimental assignments that they would hear the buzz about, such as my band class and stand up comedy class, and the play I'm directing; they keep telling me that I'm the 'popular' teacher, which is actually an insult." But they kept offering me a contract for another semester because they realized I was responsible in part for keeping this whole body of wayward, disillusioned students enrolled.

Myles: Yeah, when I was trying to set up a graduate program at San Diego, that was my plan too—to have an institution inside of the institution that was really bringing the outside into the inside, teaching the inside how to make an outside. I suppose at a certain point I felt a little heartbroken because I realized there really was an institution of academics, and they really did basically have you by the balls.

Rail: Right. So can we talk about another of my favorite essays

in your new book, which is your very short and incredibly potent piece on James Schuyler? You were covering his first reading ever, which took place late in his life at Dia in the 90s. Your text is basically just an acknowledgement of the duration of the applause, the incredibly lengthy ovation he received.

Myles: And the embarrassment it created on his face. It was probably the greatest moment I think I've ever had in the poetry world. Though I have to say, it was a pretty great moment when Ashbery read at St. Mark's, like a week ago, and he got a standing ovation. We just had to salute him. But the Jimmy thing was special because it was kind of like getting something you didn't ever expect to get—like a big collective orgasm.

Rail: You were pretty close to Jimmy.

Myles: It started that I was his assistant—that's what we called it. His friends created a fund, hired a lawyer, hired me, put him in the Chelsea, because Jimmy had been identified at that point as someone who needed a lot of pills to stay together, and he was not to be responsible for taking those pills. That was my job. And so basically I was with him for like five hours a day, seven days a week, for five months, to make sure that he ate and took his pills. The thing that was so amazing was that he was my number one favorite poet, and I had been told that I would never meet him because of this condition. I was standing at a reading one night, basically I was whining about my broke-ness, and somebody said, "Here's a job, I don't know if you want this." I was like, "You're kidding." It was sort of like, "You're gonna put me in a room with my hero, seven days a week?"

Rail: Amazing.

Myles: I think there's a certain kind of personality that can be the assistant to the famous older poet. And I was intrigued by that role, but I'm too narcissistic, I'm too self-serving and just not together enough in my own life to serve somebody else's life that thoroughly.

Rail: Yeah, well I remember how I started working with Ashbery. John Yau took me out with John Ashbery after a reading he gave at the Russian Samovar, and so we met, and

then the very next day Yau called me and said, “So, um, J.A. needs a secretary and thought you might be interested.” So I hung up the phone with Yau and then J.A. called me like two minutes later, and when I heard that classic voice on the phone that I’d up till then only heard at readings, I was in shock. But after a while, it got to be confusing because John Ashbery was perfectly content hanging out and procrastinating, and sort of sabotaging my efforts to be productive. And David [Kermani] wasn’t so happy that after like five hours with John, we’d managed to write one Guggenheim recommendation and get about halfway through the pile of mail.

Myles: That’s amazing. God, yeah. It’s interesting to recognize that every kind of assistant job includes a certain amount of laziness and relaxation. Not all the time, but intermittently I have somebody who’s my assistant, and as soon as they arrive, all I can think is, “I don’t want to work! Let’s go to the movies!”

Rail: So Eileen, with you I keep getting this image, or concept really, of the poet standing naked in his/her boots. Just like Frank O’Hara on his famous book cover, which was done by Larry Rivers. I think this is my idealization of the poet.

Myles: There was a furor about that painting being hung in MoMA, because Frank was a curator there, and so it seemed wrong for the curator of the museum to be in a naked pose in one of the paintings. But they both knew what they were doing. It was this collaborated outrageousness.

Rail: But it says less about being nude and more about the idea of being “without anything.” It says to me that all a poet really needs for survival is a pair of boots.

Myles: And it has do with a sort of outsidersness, and maybe wanting to be shut out ultimately. So I feel like, in a way, that’s exactly the problem of being a poet and our relationship to institutions, because I feel like as poets we must stand naked in our boots, and because of that “must,” in some way it will always kick us out of institutions, and we will never entirely belong. I think there’s a way in which we have a problem of never belonging because of this very need. It’s a pretty sexy problem. So I think we sort of have to suffer it gladly.

Eileen Myles will be reading at ARTBOOK@X, located at West 22nd Street in the former Dia Center for the Arts space, on September 10, 2009 at 7 p.m., and, at Spoonbill & Sugartown, located at 218 Bedford Avenue, Williamsburg, Brooklyn, on September 15, 2009 at 8 p.m.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeremy Sigler has published two books of poetry and spends his days in Brooklyn or on the Jersey Shore.