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# Spies Like Us

On the Road With Myles, Rower, and Mueller

By C.Carr

**WALKING THROUGH CLEAR WATER IN A POOL PAINTED BLACK**  
By Cookie Mueller

Semiotext(e), \$6 paper

NOT ME

By Eileen Myles

Semiotext(e), \$6 paper

IF YOU'RE A GIRL

By Ann Rower

Semiotext(e), \$6 paper

Cookie Mueller, Eileen Myles, and Ann Rower all emerged from the Downtown milieu of the '80s as self-mythologizing reporters. Or am I trying too hard to find the common denominator? Mueller acted Off-Off Broadway and in several John Waters movies and wrote for hip rags like *Bomb* and *The East Village Eye*; she died of AIDS in 1989. Myles was part of St. Mark's Poetry Project for many years, and more recently began to stage her work on the performance art circuit. Rower's experiences—and the way she tells them—became the basis for the Babysitter character in the Wooster Group's *LSD*. . . *Just the High Points*. Certainly, each writer brings a different degree of self-consciousness to the job of the seeing "I."

Mueller's *Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black* collects the autobiographical chronicles of a quintessential free spirit. Her willingness to take risks in pursuit of the "interesting" often leads Mueller into trouble, and I couldn't help pondering how different it is for men and women to be free—or "mad to live" as Kerouac once put it. That romantic image of the Subterranean, howling and on-the-road, never included us girls because women can't have the same adventure, and it isn't for lack of trying.

Mueller's account, for example, of hitchhiking to Cape Cod from Baltimore (with Mink Stole and another actress) is a woman's on-the-road classic. Just finished with work on the Waters film *Multiple Maniacs*, the women get picked up by "gigantic honkies," and . . . well, the story's title. "Abduction and Rape—Highway 31," works as a rough plot summary. Separated from her friends, Mueller eventually escapes her would-be rapist—while he's asking Jesus for a hard-on—and spends the night sleep-

ing in a forest.

Her stories are anecdotal, like wild history related to a friend. Mueller stuffs a novel's worth of material into the Haight-Ashbury piece alone, where she encounters the Manson family, rides out to a free San Quentin concert with the Grateful Dead, and freaks out during a satanic ritual. She also does a lot of drugs, describes (without affect) a rape she didn't escape, and notes that she can see Janis Joplin "rattling her pots and pans" in her kitchen across the courtyard. The information feels almost that compressed and, no matter the subject, that even in tone.

Mueller didn't have an easy life, but whether she's describing her work with Divine or a moment of trauma, she opts for giving it a light-hearted spin. Here she is working on Waters's *Pink Flamingoes*: "We would all eat shit, catch on fire, fuck chickens, but we wouldn't do close-up crotch shots. There has to be a line drawn somewhere." And here she is after accidentally burning down a friend's house: "Howard and I hysterically grabbed a huge plastic container with a lid on it. We carried it out carefully, whatever it was; we would risk our lives saving it. Later we found out it was the garbage."

While she certainly had the material for it, Mueller was not a writer much interested in evoking pathos. The exception is "Last Letter," which turned out to be her final piece. Perhaps it only indicates that she couldn't apply that kind of sentiment to herself, because "Last Letter" is about a friend's struggle with AIDS—not her own—and it includes the text of the letter she got from him the day he died in 1982. (Mueller also lost her husband, Vittorio Scarpati, to the disease two months before she died.) The letter suggests that the epidemic is punishing "all of us 'high riskers'" for being different. "There is a deepening horror more grand than the world is yet aware," she wrote. "To see it we have to watch closely who is being stolen from us. Perhaps there is no hope left for humankind, not because of the nature of the epidemic, but the nature of those it strikes."

Eileen Myles is another who values her differentness. As a poet, bohemian, lesbian, she becomes the heroic anti-hero of her poems. "I think I will/ be the anti-/ christ. Rather/ than simple/ Eileen Myles./ Poor she. The/ anti-christ/is me. I/ died at the/ age of 33/ yet I/ walk the/ streets of/ the

east/ village joyful/ and remorseless/ like a cruel/ & perfect/ poem." The poems keep mapping this persona, so appealing in its balance of grandiosity and self-consciousness.

Myles is an observer-poet more than a philosopher-poet. "There is an argument/ for poetry being deep but I am not that argument," she writes. Far from un-deep, however, such a line is typical of the wry self-assertion in these poems. She seems to be erasing her mark as she makes it. "I am/ absolutely in opposition/ to all kinds of/ goals. I have/ no desire to know/ where this, anything/ is getting me./ When the water/ boils I get/ a cup of tea./ Accidentally I/ read all the/ works of Proust./ It was summer/ I was there/ so was he. I/ write because/ I would like/ to be used for/ years after/ my death."

The work from the '80s collected in *Not Me* is plain song, observations of quotidian life. Very seldom do her words call attention to their wordness. And they are very lean poems visually. Often the lines are just two or three words long, so the verse runs down the page like a ribbon. In one poem, she describes writing in notebooks so small they permit only two or three words a line—itsself a very female and secretive way to work. And the halting or hiccupping quality it gives the line adds to the poem/persona's fragility. "You can hardly/ hear it, my/ poetry. It's/ in danger of/ vanishing/ if I don't write/ it down."

On first reading, the collected poems seem uneven, but perhaps it's just their different styles. Some have a sort of narrative drive: "I never got first honors/ I got Second Honors/ Mainly I wanted to play/ saxophone. . ." Some have that stream-of-revelation flow: "I'm a remarkably/ spiritual creature,/ I am. Lifting my little/ bow & arrow, poignantly/ requesting guidance/ from the trees or/ my feet, or continuous/ coffee." Then we have what I think of as the stand-up poems, bemused in tone like the others, only more so: "My attempts to remain/ obscure have not served/ me well. Starting as/ a humble poet I/ quickly climbed to the/ top of my profession/ assuming a position of/ leadership and honor./ It is right that a/ woman should call/ me out now. Yes,/ I am a Kennedy./ And I await/ your orders."

Myles is another female adventurer, and many of her exploits are recorded in prose in a couple of those tiny Hanuman Books.

(Don't miss "Bath, Maine" in *Bread and Water*.) In an essay at the end of *Not Me*, she speaks of "going out to get a poem, like hunting." Indeed, I finished the book with an impression of a peripatetic poet on a mission to find . . . herself? No. To amplify herself. To live large. A good quality in a woman, an excellent quality in a lesbian.

Who is that person, though, who is defined by one's own language? Ann Rower is preoccupied with what she calls "the tension between real life and invention." *If You're a Girl* ends with that tension illustrated—the Wooster Group interviews Rower, then turns transcript to script. The book includes both.

During Timothy Leary's first year at Harvard, Rower spent almost every weekend at his house in Newton, Massachusetts, working as a babysitter "though more often for visiting dignitaries than kids." The Wooster Group incorporated Rower's recollections into the first part of *LSD*. . . *Just the High Points*, a piece about excess and repression. The Babysitter was seated at the far end of a long table, where men took turns reading at random from piles of books by '60s cultural gurus, Alan Watts and Allen Ginsberg and so on. I still remember the adenoïd drone of that voice (Rower as played by Nancy Reilly): "Yeah, yeah, you know, I mean, like, you asked me if it was like a party or something. It was more than a party, it was, like, you know, a revolution or something." The Babysitter was the voice of, like, you know, reality.

The LSD material is just the last quarter of *If You're a Girl*, but that tension between "freedom and fidelity" informs the whole. A story called "Trick or Treat," for example, begins as fiction—which to Rower apparently means changing a few names, exaggerating a few details. In the second and "factual" part of "Trick or Treat," she shows part one to a friend who's become a character in it. "My stomach was in knots. I never should have let Neil see it. I never should have let any of them see it. I never should have written it. Maybe." She'd remembered things wrong—according to Neil. Rower then writes a new ending based on his memory, because she likes it better.

Rower is the autobiographer as unreliable narrator. The very first story, "Vito in Europe," is about lying and illusion. Our narrator is suffering from blackouts but submits to hospitalization and even a spinal tap rather than tell the truth about her drug habits. Her "episodes" stop when she switches to a different kind of speed—but she tells everyone they ended when she got a divorce. Fiction surrounds her doctor appointments and a voyeuristic relationship with a photographer who lives across the way: "To legitimate my obsession I say I'm writing a story about it. In the story the writer is writing a story about a photographer who lives across the way who is photographing her life." At the end of "Vito in Europe," when she finally wears her contacts (she's been lying to the eye doctor too), she sees for the first time the photographs pinned to the neighbor's wall across the way. They're of her. Can we believe it?

"I wanna put back the lie in Li(t)erature, as in Li(f)e," writes Rower in an endpiece called "transfiction," a form she developed while transcribing the Wooster Group tapes, when she occasionally felt the urge to change her own words. "In transfiction, you utilize this tension, you let your hands do what they want to on the keys, from being faithful down to every um, and, er, every pause and beat of the original spontaneous spoken words, to modifying it slightly, changing plot and finally writing dialogue no one ever spoke to throw it into another world. This kind of tampering seemed dangerous, like injecting cyanide in the grapes or putting LSD in the Chicago water supply, and I liked that feeling."

Rower, Myles, and Mueller make for an unlikely set of dangerous characters, but each transgresses the norm in her own quiet way. They are the first "operatives" published in Semiotext(e)'s new "Native Agents" series, edited by Chris Kraus and Sylvère Lotringer (Kathy Acker's *Hannibal Lecter, My Father* is forthcoming). Each subverts from within—not only the culture, but the traditional idea of self. ■

eileen myles

# it

could be  
verse

Meter, she wrote.



Eileen Myles is forty, sober, in great shape, and in every way beautiful. Her small apartment is a mess. Her large dog is chewing on my leg. She has one coffee cup. A poet for twenty years, Myles has just published her first major collection, *Not Me*, out this month from Semiotexte.

INTERVIEW: So why do I make more money interviewing you than you did from publishing your life's work?

EILEEN MYLES: Yeah, I got a hundred-dollar advance. But every time I write a poem I'm filled with joy about how lucky I am to be a poet. One day last week I wrote this very fast poem and knew it was one of those beautiful ones written in a moment of heat.

I: What is your perspective on the NEA debate?  
EM: If anything comes out of all this strife around censorship and art, it should be that the art

community starts to talk to the world, starts to want to know about the world. Sure, we should tell them who we are, but we should find out who they are too, because they're not dying to meet us.

I: What are you thinking about sex lately?

EM: I've been thinking that what I really want to do is enjoy women. Appreciate them, admire them, listen to them, talk to them. I met someone recently and suddenly felt drawn to her. It turned out she was a poet. We went to a coffee shop, and I decided just to listen to her and not think about whether I wanted her to be my girlfriend or how to get her into bed. I had this whole new sense of freedom.

I: Are you ever going to paint your apartment?

EM: It's a depressing color, huh? Should I move?

I: How much rent do you pay?

EM: Two hundred and forty dollars.

I: Forget it.

SARAH SCHULMAN