

GUARDIAN

Comic book hero Bryan Lee O'Malley

MARGINALIA 3: It's always National Novel Writing Month around here

REVIEW 7: A reader

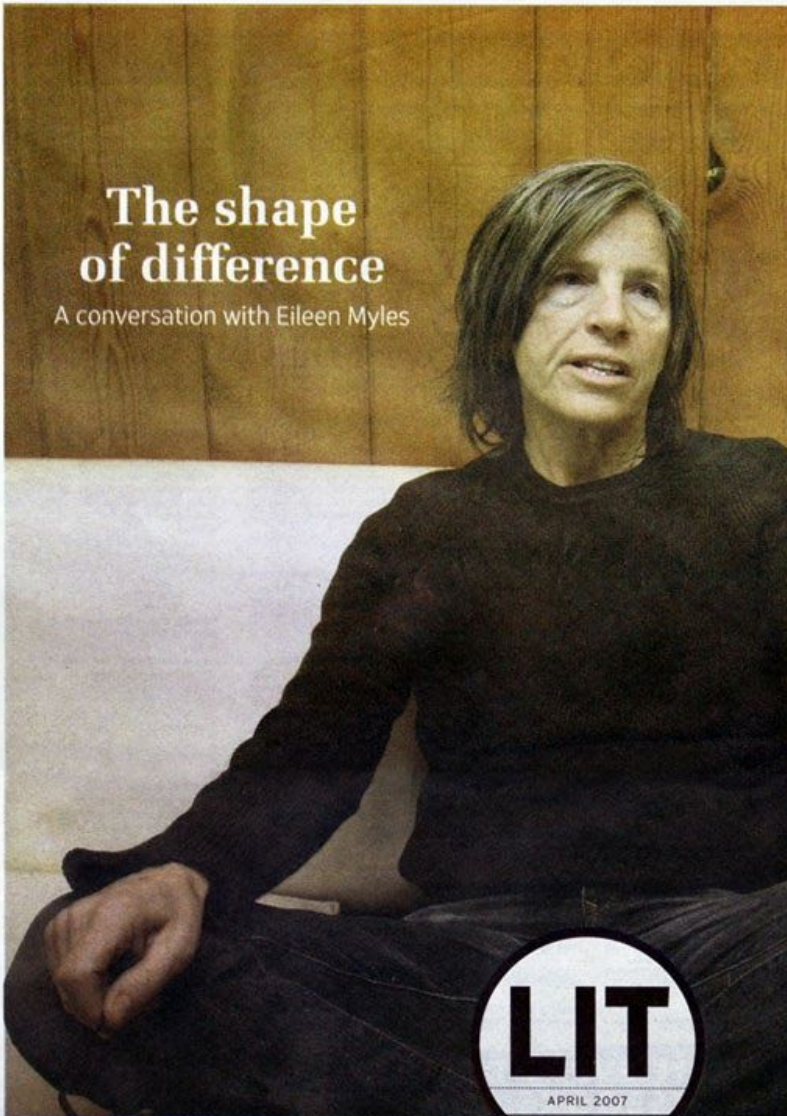
SHORTS 8: *How I Became a Nun*, by César Aira | *Fighting for Air: The Battle to Control America's*

ONLINE Author events, Jonathan Raban's *Surveillance*, and the return of the economic

By Michelle Tea
> lit@sfbg.com

The shape of difference

A conversation with Eileen Myles



INTERVIEW There are two kinds of years: years when poet and writer Eileen Myles publishes a book and years when she doesn't. The first kind is best, and 2007 is looking pretty sweet with the publication of her poetry collection *Sorry, Tree*, a sophisticated jumble of thought and observation that reads like you're sitting shotgun in the poet's brain, hitching a ride through her day, with all its wistful blips and deep churns.

In addition to poetry collections including *Skies* and *Maxfield Parrish*, Myles is the author of the short-story collection *Chelsea Girls* and the novel *Cool for You*, both of which trudge through alcoholic, working-class femaleness, exposing the painful and the tragic and leavening it all with blunt hilarity, style, and gossip. Alongside the writing that has made her a longtime indie-culture hero, Myles ran for president in 1992 and wrote a political opera called *Hell*. In 1997 she said yes when I asked her to lend her talent to the Sister Spit all-girl performance tour, and she traveled across the country reading in company with all us lesser-knowns who idolized her. And now she's agreed to lend her shine to a new generation of female writers and authors, jumping in the van in April for Sister Spit: The Next Generation.

CONTINUES ON PAGE 4 >>

Myles CONT.

SFBG *You're from Massachusetts, became a New York City literary icon, moved to San Diego to teach, and recently shifted to Los Angeles. Where are you right now?*

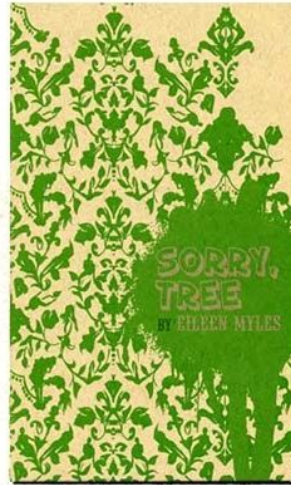
EILEEN MYLES I'm in my office at school at UCSD. It's the next to last week of classes, and my class Experimental Autobiography has gone really well, and I'm glad. I also just opened my e-mail, and it was a guy telling me that there's a reading in San Diego called "Attention Eileen Myles" at Voz Alta. It's because there was a recent article in SD's *CityBeat* magazine with me on the cover, and I spoke frankly with an ex-student and friend about San Diego. That I sort of love it, that it's boring, conservative, and so on. I mean, it was frank. And of course, the paper got some really angry but essentially homophobic letters to the editor. That I was talking about my perverted frustrated sex life, when really I just said I was a lesbian.

SFBG *Do you feel inspired to explore California in your writing like you have with New York and Massachusetts?*

EM Oh, totally. This is so different from New York or New England. Just the shape and the size of the leaves, for starters. How warm affects writing and being. How different it is to see a lot of people on the street, as opposed to seeing a lot of cars on the freeway and being in one. And how you can actually start to love it. Though it's a little sad. I think it's good to live different. I intend to keep doing that, and California is the shape of that difference now. Totally — or totes, as a friend here says. Have you heard people say that? I never heard it before. "Totes." Not the little rubbers ladies put on their heels but "totes." A nickname for totally.

SFBG *Why are you apologizing to the tree in the title of your new book?*

EM I was mowing the lawn, and I backed into it and almost knocked it over. It reminded me of my government and all the developers killing the world, killing the little tree. It reminded me of my love life. Killing me and inventing me again. Also, you know, when I was a baby poet, one of the extended family of beats, a poet named Ray Bremser, came to St. Marks Poetry Project to read. He was really drunk, and he was sitting on a chair, and he couldn't even sit up. He kept falling off the chair and beginning his reading again. He kept saying, "I am a tree, I am a tree." I looked up his work, and it



was something he had written a long time ago. I also think I'm him.

SFBG *I wish you would run for president again.*

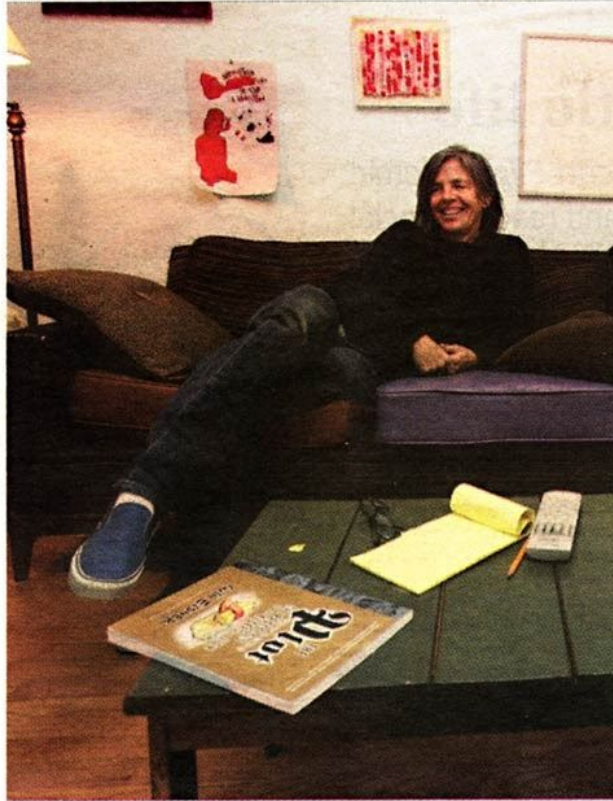
EM I'm still doing it. Once you've run for president, you never stop running. All presidents are ex-presidents; all candidates remain so. It's like in grade school you have your hand raised. I'd like to say something. It was how I could say things political at that time, 1992. If I was a candidate, I would have a platform from which to speak. It's like how various poets create institutions as stages for themselves. I went to Russia after my campaign thinking I was on a junket. It was actually really hard because no one in Russia knew who I was. I wasn't even Jimmy Carter. But that was like my campaign too. Moments of vast lyric obscurity.

SFBG *What's inspiring in poetry right now?*

EM Very mixed. I'm reading Yvonne Rainer's autobiography. I read a new translation of Rumi by Zahra Partovi. I read Maggie Nelson's new book in manuscript. I've been reading Rae Armantrout's new book, Peter Gizzi's, Matthew Rohrer's, also from my press, Wave Books. And stuff from last year, a book by Lara Glenum — I'm so excited by her work. Cathy Wagoner, a young poet at school, read last night. Steven Perez. He'll be at CCA next year. The world is creaming with poetry.

SFBG *Will you talk about the time span that the poems in Sorry, Tree came out of? What was going on?*

EM Oh, Michelle. Sure. The oldest is 2000. So it starts with a romance, a new relationship — well, midnew. Really new was in the last book, *On My Way*. And you know, around the



Eileen Myles meditates on boredom, difference, reinvention, and running for president. | PHOTO BY ANGELA CARONE

World Trade Center, and deciding to come here, and then poems written while taking a hundred thousand planes across America, swimming home to New York. The thrust is seeing America change and me change and the landscape change, and a loss of the feeling of home. When I went to Russia, it was after perestroika and not yet as crazy and hard as Russia is now. I think. I haven't been there again. But I was interviewing a lot of people, and I remember this guy, an artist and a poet, explaining the radicalness of the change in the people due to the change in government. What it was like to be no longer Soviet. We have lost our bodies, he cried. He meant they lost their collective. I've felt something like that. And I wanted that. I mean, it was already happening, in the nation and me. One's body is different in California, and in a relationship and out of one. Living together and then living alone. You never live alone like you used to live alone. It's a new alone. So navigating all that. Weirdly, the piece I mentioned in the paper here was called "Alone in San Diego." That was a little mean. Please don't let the *Guardian* call this that. But living next to things rather than in them, kind of. Looking for new connections. Which for me basically means starting to live in LA.

SFBG *What writers are you into right now?*

EM You, of course. Always Renee Gladman, anything she does. I just read Joan Didion's pretty-new book. Again, Yvonne Rainer. Marina Tsvetaeva ... I was in a reading in New York that was about this Russian poets' café in 1917, the Stray Dog Café. I knew the men's work, but I didn't know her, so I'm going off in that direction now. I got some Russian on the brain, it seems. Maybe I think this country's turning into Russia — it's been happening for a while. I mean, we're all being surveilled. I'm reading Mike Davis's book about San Diego — it's called *Under the Perfect Sun: The San Diego Tourists Never See*. I guess the anger I've provoked has made me interested again. **SFBG**

SORRY, TREE

By Eileen Myles
Wave Books
96 pages
\$14

READING

March 30, 8 p.m., free
Dog-Eared Books
900 Valencia, SF
(415) 282-1901,
www.dogeaaredbooks.com