

LITTORAL MADNESS

Like everything in the past, everyone remembers it differently, and some of the people involved hardly remember at all. We're talking about something that happened more than seventeen years ago. But on January 23, 1998, which was a Friday, friends of the late writer Kathy Acker drove from San Francisco to Fort Funston park, about twenty-five minutes away, to scatter her ashes. She'd died two months earlier at an alternative clinic in Tijuana, where she received palliative care for late-stage, metastasized cancer.

The ash scattering—like the wake at Bob Glück's house on December 13 and the memorial reading at Slim's Bar where Michelle Handelman was booted off the stage for no reason she can recall—devolved into a kind of black comedy, the way these things often do. I remember Cookie Mueller at Jackie Curtis's memorial, standing up on the stage of La MaMa halfway through an evening of readings and monologues, blinking back tears as she faced the dark auditorium. She had no speech prepared. "I thought this was supposed to be a funeral," she said to the room. "Not a variety show." Speaking to Sylvère Lotringer, the artist Steve Brown recalled how the elegantly planned Nembutal suicide of Danceteria emcee Haoui Montaug among a small group of friends ended with a plastic bag over his head. He

was a large man, in the late stages of AIDS, and whoever arranged for the pills had underestimated the dose. Before time accelerated, deaths among friends in the art world were like salt to a sting, bringing unresolved feuds to the surface. Now we care less, or are nicer.

Around this time last year, when I started working on what may or may not be a biography of Kathy Acker, I imagined beginning the book with the melee at Slim's Bar, or at the wake, where a group of friends gathered to transfer her ashes from a box to an urn, or at the scattering. To describe these proceedings would be to stage an establishing shot of a movie that uses a single protagonist to traverse an entire milieu. Although she wrote first-person fiction and gave hundreds of interviews in which she was asked to recite the facts of her life over and over again, these facts are hard to pin down in any literal way. Because in a certain sense, Acker lied all the time. She was rich, she was poor, she was the mother of twins, she'd been a stripper for years, a guest editor of *Film Comment* magazine at the age of fourteen, a graduate student of Herbert Marcuse's. She lied when it was clearly beneficial to her, and she lied even when it was not. Perceptive readers of Acker's work have observed that the lies weren't literal lies, but more a system of magical thought. As Dodie Bellamy notes in her essay "Digging Through Kathy Acker's Stuff": "Over and over, Acker tells the same tale: the mother is pregnant with the daughter, and the father leaves. The mother blames the daughter and tries to abort her. The daughter's body survives, but not her unified self. . . . Is it true? Does it matter? . . . Acker liberates libido from Freud's repressed underworld." But then again, (didn't she do what all writers must do? Create a position from which to write?)

Acker's life was a fable, and to describe the confusion and love and conflicting agendas behind these memorials would be to sketch an apocryphal allegory of an artistic life in the late

twentieth century. *It is girls from which stories begin*, she wrote in her last notebook. And like other lives, but unlike most fables, it was created through means both within and beyond her control.

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By the time Acker died, at age fifty, she'd known thousands of people. Since her divorce from her second husband, Peter Gordon, in 1979, she'd had no long-term partner. She'd lived, at different times in her life, in San Diego, San Francisco, New York, and London, a half-conscious rotation between cities familiar to her. "I think she was just always trying to find her community," the technology writer R. U. Sirius told me last year at a Mill Valley café. Michael Braccwell, who'd known her in London during the mid-1980s, concurred. She'd bought, then abandoned an apartment in Brighton. Her friend Gary Pulsifer doubts she ever spent a night there. Estranged from her remaining immediate family, she'd known poets and bikers, leather dykes, tattooists, philosophers (astrologers), renowned artists and writers (bodybuilders, psychics), promoters, and editors, and she'd slept with a great number of them. In London, she played chess with Salman Rushdie.

She'd lived in San Francisco between 1990 and 1996, teaching a class in New Genres at the Art Institute while trying to find a more stable, tenure-track job anywhere in the U.S. During those years she worked out at a Gold's Gym, published two novels, toured constantly, recorded CDs, and added an enormous, impressive tattoo across her shoulders and upper back to the series of pictographs already inscribed on her body. *Literal madness*; images written not just as words on the page, but as pictures on flesh. The tattoo—an enormous lizardlike fish overlaid with a garland of flowers that morphs into a sleek airborne bird—was done in the style of Ed Hardy and took weeks

to complete. Her friend Kathy Brew recalls Acker coming into her office in the Humanities Department after each session and saying, "Honey, would you put some cream on my back?" After the last session, Brew grabbed her camera and took a much-reproduced photograph of a bare-chested Acker astride her 650cc motorcycle. "We were just playing around. It felt like two girls playing dress-up, or something." Brew was newly divorced, and during those years the two hung out a lot, talking about being single, desire, and intimacy, and then in '94 Brew moved back to New York.

By the time Acker left San Francisco for London in July '96, she'd stopped talking to a lot of her former friends in the city's literary worlds and cyberpunk scene. With some, there'd been feuds. Others couldn't handle her medical choices and denial of the cancer, which had been diagnosed in April that year. When she returned to San Francisco in September, she was no longer closely in touch with anyone from her old extensive and disparate circles. From a hotel, she called Aline Mare, an old colleague from the Art Institute, and asked for help. She'd known Mare years before in New York, but in San Francisco their friendship had been distant, at best. Mare recalls running into Acker holding court at parties and openings, looking into the middle distance beyond her old friend. "Oh c'mon, Kathy, I know you," Mare felt like saying. Acker told Mare she was sick, and although Mare was now working full-time and caring for a young child, within minutes of arriving at Acker's hotel room, she had a strong feeling—"I have to be there for this." Sharon Grace, another SFAI colleague, became a key part of Acker's support system in San Francisco during those weeks before her friend, the writer and artist Matias Viegner arrived from L.A. and arranged for her move from the UC San Francisco Medical Center to American Biologics, the only alternative clinic in Tijuana that would accept cancer patients at such a late stage. They arrived

with a Buddhist nurse in a rental van on November 1, the Mexican Day of the Dead. By the time Viegner returned to San Francisco with her ashes, everyone knew of her illness and death. There'd been a fundraising drive for her clinic expenses, a few of her closest old friends had traveled to visit her in Tijuana, and thousands of emails about her condition had been exchanged. A strange sonnet was posted online less than two weeks after her death by the "Acker Society" of Gothenburg, Sweden:

These news are not for real

We have nothing more to feel

Death again has put us in trances

But You will always be in my dances

I cannot take much more

What on earth are we here for?

You were a prostitute, some kind of whore

Kathy, You have made your final score

Acker died a month after arriving in Tijuana. During the last weeks of her life, Matias Viegner became her constant companion, her next of kin, overseeing her treatment at the clinic, coordinating visits from friends, and acting as a clearinghouse for all the related communication.

They'd met some seven years earlier, when Acker gave a reading with Dennis Cooper at Beyond Baroque in L.A. They connected immediately. She'd just moved back to San Francisco from London. Viegner invited her to read at CalArts, where he taught. He'd see her when he was in San Francisco, and sometimes she'd ride her motorcycle down to L.A., where she'd stay at his house, and they'd drive out to the hot springs. Viegner traveled to see her in San Francisco after she underwent

a mastectomy in April '96. Her boyfriend at the time, Charles Shaar Murray, had flown in from London to be with her during the surgery. When Viegner arrived, he found Acker miserable, weak, and pissed that he hadn't come sooner. She wanted to be taken care of, but not treated as if she were sick, which he found impossible. He had a strong feeling then that she was going to die. As he would write later, "I knew she was going to die and how she would die and that I would be there because I wasn't afraid of it, or if I was it was minuscule in proportion to her fear of it, so it was blotted out."

After the mastectomy she turned her back on Western medicine, a decision she'd eventually describe in an essay, "The Gift of Disease," and a libretto, *Eurydice in the Underworld*. She stayed in San Francisco for three months after the surgery, consulting psychics, astrologers, healers, nutritionists, and a past-life regressionist in Marin County. By July, her healers agreed that she was cancer-free, and as planned, she left San Francisco to live with Shaar Murray. Two of the practitioners Acker consulted would later be indicted for medical fraud in other cases. However, those closest to Acker came to agree that the claims of her healers were more metaphoric than fraudulent. Which was not unlike the extrapolations in Acker's first-person writings and interviews, which, if misread as *literal* truths, could then be dismissed as false.

Acker's domestic arrangement with Shaar Murray didn't last long. Two months after arriving, she bought an apartment in Islington and continued the work of self-healing. Living in a temporary one-bedroom apartment in Roanoke, Virginia, for a visiting writer job at Hollins University the following spring, she felt depleted and tired, a condition that she insisted could only be because of her and Murray's relationship problems and this new dislocation. Returning to London that summer, she fell sick again with an illness she ascribed to *littoral* poisoning: walking

with Murray on a towpath beside the Regent's Canal, she dropped her Evian bottle into the river. He scrambled down to retrieve it, and she told herself and her readers and friends over and over again about how she'd contracted a viral infection when the polluted water seeped under the cap. She was reacting to tainted water—he'd given her poison to drink—it wasn't cancer at all!

This assault prompted the last rupture between them. As Murray wrote later, "[T]here was one blowup too many. This time, neither of us made the conciliatory phone call which usually brought us back into each other's arms." Alone, exhausted, and isolated in her Islington flat, she saw no point in staying. Viegner and others thought she should move back to California. In early September she flew to San Francisco via Chicago, where she'd performed for three nights with the Mekons, checked into a hotel, and consulted her healers. She didn't reach out to Viegner or other old friends until mid-October. As Bob Glück recalls,

"She attributed her illness to bad water. She was very constipated, and instructed me to bring a certain enema. I couldn't find it, and so she didn't use the one I brought, because everything was done according to Frank Molinaro, her astrologer, and he had not authorized this one. She called him every hour or less, consulting him on every move. He passed out business cards at her funeral. Isn't that incredible? As though Kathy's fate was an advertisement for him.

"I gave Kathy a back massage. She was very thin. I tried to figure out what to do for her—she was in deeply serious pain, the kind of pain that makes you frantic. It seemed to me she had entered a magic world. She did not really want to associate with people outside it."

When she finally called Viegner, he offered to drive up and bring her back to his house in L.A. to regain her bearings, but when he arrived, he saw that she was clearly too sick to be moved. He, Aline Mare, and Sharon Grace convinced her to go

to a hospital, where doctors confirmed that the cancer had spread to most of her body.

I don't understand, she told Viegner. I have cancer everywhere. My healers told me I had no cancer. When I asked my master healer, the teacher of all the healers, he told me he saw no cancer because I would not let him see cancer; he can only see what I let him see. So teachers are mirrors.

* * *

Her body was cremated at the Funeraria del Carmen in Tijuana, and somehow Viegner, who was now her executor, transported the ashes across the border in a sealed aluminum tin. The question became, what to do with them? Acker left no instructions about the arrangements, because she did not want to die. She'd been coaxed into writing a will only when Sylvère Lotringer posed the question of what would become of her work as posed as a hypothetical game. A flurry of emails passed between Viegner and Ira Silverberg, Acker's former agent and friend. A mutual friend had offered his garden, but that didn't seem right. "Let X find other fertilizer for his garden. You should do as you please," Silverberg wrote. "I still think a little in San Francisco, London, and NYC would be nice," he proposed, not unreasonably.

A few miles away from the clinic, people continue to visit the gravesite of Juan Soldado, a dubious folk hero whose remains are interred where he was shot by a firing squad in 1938. Candles and stones, bracelets and pennies and figurines. *Thank you, Juan Soldado, for bringing my son . . . Thank you for granting my emigration . . . Thank you with all my heart for the protection you gave me in my hour of anguish, the small engraved plaques and handwritten notes say.*

To remain in one place is either privation or luxury. No one I know who's died in my lifetime, no matter their age, has been

interred in a grave. No matter how loved or accomplished or distinguished these friends have been, there are no scholarship funds in their names, no plaques, no memorial benches or arches. The reasons for this, I suppose, have been detailed in such books as Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, but I still find it hard to accept. Where to inter the remains of those who live in a state of perpetual transience? He divides his time between New York and Maine, between Berlin and L.A., between Jakarta and Sydney, the bios all say. Why not the ashes?

In San Francisco, Viegner and other friends found a French *beaux arts* vase in an antique shop that would serve as an urn. A decision was made to hold a memorial wake at Bob Glück and Chris Komater's home on Saturday, December 13. People would speak, and there'd be a ceremony to transfer the ashes from the can to the vase. The dining room table would be used as an altar, and Sheppard Powell, a Buddhist practitioner, diviner, healer, and longtime partner of the poet Diane di Prima, would be asked to preside.

Seventeen people gathered that night at Glück and Komater's house. Powell led the group in a meditation, breathing in fear and confusion and chaos, breathing out calm and peace, and then he recited a Tibetan chant for her spirit's release. There was a publicity headshot on the altar, some lilies and a little stuffed dog. As Kevin Killian recalls, the house "was filled with New Agey type people who had helped Kathy in her last years. Tattooists, bodybuilders, motorcycle girls, S/m practitioners, herbalists, it was almost like an upstairs-downstairs thing . . . Kathy had hired most of these people at one time or another—they were the service people, I thought snobbishly; but very few artists or writers who were her peers . . ."

"The ritual had this creepy otherworldliness to it, this sacredness," Dodie Bellamy would write in her diary the next day. "As if Kathy were behind the scenes directing our movements . . ."

And people were shedding real tears—Kathy's chosen truly loved her—nice people." A young Amazonian woman named Juliette who knew Acker from Gold's Gym cut open the can, and then people were asked to approach the altar alone and commune with the ashes by scooping a cup into the vase. Bellamy couldn't do it. Killian dipped three fingers into the jar and licked them off his hand. Ingesting her ashes was a symbolic means of reincarnating some of the dead hero's genius; he'd done it before, with his friend Sam D'Allesandro's remains. Viegener was horrified, but then he did it too. As he'd later write, "What hit me most was that K would have no choice about whom her ashes inhabited . . . whatever the meaningless relation between ashes and human, some choice was made available again . . . My first decision as literary executor." Although mostly, Aline Mare recalls, it was messy. "It works best," she emailed last week, "with a paper cone."

* * *

Viegener selected the Fort Funston park site because he remembered how much Acker loved walking there. A short drive south of the city, the park has a spectacular view of the open Pacific. Wide paths dotted with wind-dwarfed cypresses and junipers cut over the bluffs. At the park's steepest point, it's a two hundred-foot drop to the waves.

People arrived at the park that afternoon in separate cars. It was a smaller group than at the memorial. Acker's friend, the editor Amy Scholder, had flown in from New York. Aline Mare and Sharon Grace were both there; Bob Glück, Viegener, Shepard Powell, and the astrologer Frank Molinaro. Mel Freilicher, a longtime friend of Acker's from San Diego, may have been there. As people got out of their cars and assembled, Molinaro passed out business cards. The general plan was to release the ashes into

the sea, although Scholder wondered about this because she recalled that Acker feared drowning. But then again, as Viegener recalls, "She was afraid of death, period, in any concrete way, although it runs through all of her work."

The group took a steep sandy path down one of the dunes, and Viegener carried the urn. Aline Mare recalls Sheppard Powell reciting Diane di Prima's poem "Litany (for Kathy Acker)," written in response to Rudolph Giuliani's attempt to shut down the *Sensations* show at the Brooklyn Museum because of Catholic protests against Chris Ofili's painting *The Holy Virgin Mary*, which was spattered with elephant dung—

our lady of mandrake

our lady the bayou

our lady of subways

our lady of blind cats

our lady of albino alligators

our lady of desperadoes

our 300 pound lady who sits on stoops

in a house-dress in the summer night

our lady of tenements

—although in a literal sense this seems unlikely because the exhibition wouldn't open in Brooklyn until October 1999, but in any event, it is a great poem. As the group scrambled down, Viegener and Scholder paused to wait for the others, and Frank Molinaro, the odd one out, the one nobody in this group liked, rushed up and grabbed the vase from Viegener's hands. The astrologer ran toward the sea tossing handfuls of ash and bone while he proclaimed—"You're free, Kathy! You're finally free!"—before Viegener and Scholder wrested it back. It was bitter cold, and no matter how hard they tried, no one could toss the ashes into the waves, because the wind blew them back.

It hardly felt final. Viegner and Scholder waded into the sea with the final remains. After that, everyone trudged back up the dune and drove to the Beach Chalet bar up the road to talk and have drinks.

POLITICS

(1971-1973)

Between grief and nothing. I will take grief.
—(Jean Seberg quoting William Faulkner's *The Wild Palms* to Jean-Paul Belmondo in Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless*)

New York City, 1971:

The bed, rarely made, floats in a room painted orange with big violet stars.

She spends most of her days and nights in the bed, sleeping and writing. Her hair is cut short. Twice, unable to do anything with it, she shaves it all off.

The inside of the closet is violet, matching the stars. The room could be anywhere, really, although in actual fact it's on the sixth floor of a building in Washington Heights, upper Manhattan, straddling the corner of Broadway and 163rd Street. There are gates on the two skinny windows, facing north onto 163rd. Even in 1971, the old prewar building, with its large corniced lobby, has seen better days.

The bedroom is spacious and shabby. When they arrived in New York, they scavenged for furniture in a friend's basement. There's a black, red, and white Navajo rug, a commode and two nightstands, a wood breakfast table and two matching chairs.

Mornings, the sound of the boiler kicking on wakes them up early, and they go back to sleep. Steam heat moves through the pipes, but it never fully warms the room. The apartment is on the top floor. Down the hall, a staircase leads up to the roof, and sometimes she goes there to look at the view. There's a second bedroom in the back of the apartment, with a desk and a typewriter, two sleeping bags, some spare clothes, and a piano that belongs to her boyfriend's estranged wife but still hasn't been moved. That winter, the United States invades Laos, Charles Manson is sentenced to death, and New York is rainy and cold. Two rival factions of the Black Panther Party engage in retaliatory assassinations. Four people are killed. No one will ever know if the shootings were carried out or provoked by FBI infiltrators.

The woman who lives here is twenty-three, soon to turn twenty-four. Kathy Acker, nee Alexander, grew up in New York, but returning after six years away, she feels alone and estranged. Her family's apartment on East Fifty-Seventh Street is just a few miles away, but she never goes home. Her parents still live there, and she does not want to see them. She won't visit her grandmother, who lives in a hotel apartment on West Fifty-Fourth Street, because she's convinced that her grandmother is in collusion with them. When she thinks of her childhood at all, she remembers the green walls and red flowered curtains of her hated bedroom in *the 57th Street prison*.

I'm ugly, I'm not ugly, she writes, if I dress eccentrically enough. I'm hideous with my short hair and druggy breasts.

Her boyfriend, Len Neufeld, is twenty-eight, but he seems a lot older, in a seductive way. Sitting up under the covers one night, she records how he lies beside me reading *The Presentation of Self* waiting for me so he can get some sleep he works tomorrow his hair's pushed back into a ponytail and wrinkles are lining the top of his face.

His plan, when they moved here together from San Diego the previous May, was to finish his dissertation, but each day the plan moves a little further away. He owes \$100 a month in child support to his soon-to-be former wife and another \$20 a month to the lawyer. He'd been invited to study linguistics at MIT with Noam Chomsky, but like Acker, he sees himself as a writer. In the bedroom together, they write down their dreams.

On weekdays, Len Neufeld works in midtown at Burt Lasky's editorial agency, but he makes almost as much every Sunday, when he and his girlfriend perform in the "live sex show" at Fun City, a Times Square emporium owned by Marty "King of the Peeps" Hodas. They take the subway to and from work, where they earn \$120 a night for performing six shows, twenty or thirty minutes each time.

Bob Wolfe, a hippie porn entrepreneur, got them the gig in December when he was hired by Hodas to manage the club. Arriving back in New York in the early summer, they'd scoured the classified ads in the *Voice* for nude modeling and sex loops, anything really that would buy them some time.

GIRLS WANTED \$75-\$100

Per shooting Figure Modeling & Films. No experience necessary.

Call Robert Wolfe Studio 255-2711

Wolfe's Fourteenth Street basement studio would soon become the ground zero of New York's adult film industry, but the audition Polaroids of nude hippies taken in 1971 offer a baffling clue to the mores of that era. Clothed in their nakedness, affectless girls with flat features and long, stringy hair stand in front of Wolfe's camera, presenting themselves matter-of-factly, without guile, without shame. The women are either refusing to sexualize their bodies, or they don't have a clue how to do it. Just one year

later, Linda Lovelace's *Deep Throat* would revolutionize the porn industry and take it mainstream, but until then, any white girl with breasts who was more or less height-weight proportionate would do.

Neufeld and Acker had already performed in perhaps a dozen film loops and photo shoots at Bob Wolfe's studio. As an attractive straight couple without drug habits who showed up on time, they found themselves highly employable. When Wolfe offered them the Fun City job, it seemed like a good situation: with the Sunday-night money, Acker could stay home and write without taking a nine-to-five job. The two months she'd spent as a file clerk for Texaco between her freshman and sophomore years at Brandeis convinced her that she wasn't well suited to "robot" employment.

Besides, unlike in the film loops, no one in the sex show had to have actual sex. The performers wore costumes with feathers and jackets and furs: the more clothes they had on, the longer it took to remove them. And the sex show performers were allowed to invent their own semi-improvised scripts. These scripts could veer off in almost any direction, so long as they reached the conclusion their heterosexual male audiences all waited for: full beaver spreads, the display and massaging of breasts, faux masturbation. Acker and Neufeld were more audaciously digressive than most of their colleagues. In one of their favorite routines, she played a patient confessing her sexual Santa Claus fantasies to her aroused psychoanalyst. They worked her shaved head into the act: she's become Joan of Arc, she's completely delusional.

The young woman who writes in these notebooks likes the sex show because it takes her as far as imaginable from her Upper East Side private school childhood; she hates the show because it's degrading. She banters with customers, but then they jerk off under their raincoats. Sometimes she thinks she's reached a dead end in her life. Should she go back to school, become a fashion designer? Neufeld seems to encourage this. He wants her to be

self-supporting, which, she assumes, means he doesn't want to be responsible for her. During the four months they work at Fun City, she keeps several notebooks in tandem. One notebook records her actions and thoughts; another her dreams. She writes all the time, willing herself to break down the boundaries between waking and dreaming. *You have to become a criminal or a pervert*, she writes. *I find I can only talk to those people who are loose in the ways they live to the extent of perversity a strange addiction to 42nd Street.* At readings, when people ask what she's doing, she never says writing. Instead, she tells them *the sex show*, and they say wonderful, great. Later, she hates herself for it, but she still loves the attention. There's no escaping the fact that the Fun City room smells of ammonia, piss, semen. Her dreams about childhood are scenes of escape: a river, a park, a small bit of earth in the cold, damp late autumn. Outdoors and alone, she feels strong . . . *the beginning of a great joy*, she writes in her diary.

Often she describes herself, Neufeld, and their friends as "angels." There are good angels, bad angels, angels who live just as spirits. *The angels are making me into a distortion pulling out my eyes destroying my brains.* Meanwhile, *The show is like the lowest way to make the basic bread completely without responsibility except for the twenty minutes after I get onstage.* Backstage between shows, she writes in the notebooks. She writes in the restaurant next door during breaks. She writes sitting in bed under the covers while Neufeld's awake, and she writes in the apartment's back room when he's asleep. The neighbor downstairs complains about typewriter noise. *[O]ur writing is a religious act and has no other uses.*

2 TO 4 SENTENCES
EVERY DAY

she writes in her notebook that March, although most days she writes a lot more. Apart from the few hours each week she spends at Fun City, Acker's two jobs in New York are sleeping and writing:

I can sleep 16 hours a day after a while the distinction between waking and sleeping consciousness disappeared a semi-controllable continuum in which animals and men resembled each other, she writes in January.

And two weeks later: *this writing is getting to be like junk I'm going crazy doing it want more I decided to write so much a day have to write so that I keep in touch with my feelings not to over-write.* Acker isn't alone in these experiments. She reads Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs, the instructions for reaching simultaneous wraparound consciousness that will eventually be published in *The Third Mind*. She reads Bernadette Mayer, who is already writing durational texts, graphing the process of emotive thinking. As Acker notes in a diary written several months after quitting the sex show, *B. Mayer's work list of daily events facts (whatever "facts" means) collage from Emma Goldmann's [sic] autobiography I feel her work touches reality I distrust my own "USE only words which directly correspond to images" (Burroughs) what the fuck is going on here?*

Still, in a literal way, she feels completely alone. She doesn't know other writers. Neufeld's friends are much older. His mentor and friend Jerome Rothenberg lives with his wife, Diane, in an apartment on the fifth floor. At work with George Quasha on *America a Prophecy*, an enormous anthology of American poetry from pre-Columbian to present times, Rothenberg is then forty years old and at the height of his fame as a great man of world poetry. He knows all the writers: his address book includes entries for Paul Celan, Julio Cortázar, Henri Michaux, LeRoi Jones, Daphne Marlatt, George Oppen, and Paul Blackburn. Acker has a huge crush on Rothenberg—to the extent that she shows him her uncensored diaries, complete with her romantic and sexual fantasies about him—but he leaves for a Visiting Regents' Professorship in San Diego that January. Almost fifty years later, George Quasha recalls Acker's strategic naïveté. Despite the shyness

lamented over and over again in her diaries, Quasha insists, "I'd never known KA to act shy, even if maybe she was. She was intentionally sexy, and I felt her coming on. But I didn't bite."

Neufeld recalls gatherings where people argued about the likelihood of totalitarianism within American government. His friends were an uptown crowd, more intellectually serious than the romantic bohemians at the St. Mark's Poetry Project. At home, they discuss D. H. Lawrence: he faults the absence of social theory in the novels; she thinks he lacks empathy. [Reading Lawrence] *I feel like I'm reading my future history I'm finding out who I could be.* At a party with Neufeld in Riverdale, Acker hears the men talking about current affairs in America, the Lieutenant Calley court-martial, the youth revolution, and it doesn't mean anything. When she talks, they accuse her of personalizing. *Kathy you're always wrong . . . the government is made up of thousands of officials not business, they tell her, and she disagrees: I say [the real power lies with] the 1% who have 99% of the money . . . She feels like a freak with these people. It will be another few years before she sees she's ahead of her time, and longer before others agree.*

She suffers from pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), made worse by the contraception she uses, an IUD coil, but she does not take the pill because it makes her breasts even more draggy. Exploring their sexuality, she and Len Neufeld stage three-way encounters in the apartment with ex-lovers and casual friends of both sexes. Is she really a lesbian? Is he bi? Often, she wonders if he really loves her. She writes with contempt about *the whole glorious sexual revolution*, but this doesn't mean she doesn't think about sex all the time.

When she and Len Neufeld hear Patti Smith read at the St. Marks Poetry Project in February 1971, she wants to be her. *I have no way of meeting her of course I won't I probably like being shut in myself safe in the 42nd Street half fantasy-half real underground god forbid I should actually talk to someone who also writes.*

On Valentine's Day, my fucking (crossed out) goddam grand-
mother just sent me a card saying call me I should lick her ass the
shits they're so bugged I don't lick their asses any longer . . . let them
fuck me acquiesce in all their holy judgments without saying why
. . . they are doing their best to destroy me . . . I decide that my
grandmother didn't send me anything I'm going to deal with them by
not dealing with them there are no more parents no more passive
feelings it works so simply I'll wake up in the morning wanting
Lenny to be next to me I'll kiss the kissable cats masturbate shit get
some tea and bread

* * *

Len Neufeld remembers leaving San Diego for New York with Acker in late May, 1970. "We decided quickly. There was a mutual enthusiasm," he recalls. They were still married to other people, and, he remembers, they flew because he was leaving the old, beat-up car that he shared with his wife to her and their three-year-old toddler.

Married, like Acker, to his first serious partner when he was nineteen, it wasn't the first time Neufeld fled. He'd left two years before with a woman named Dolly when he and his wife, Martha Rosler, were spending the summer at the University of Illinois while he attended a workshop at the Linguistics Institute in Champagne-Urbana. Until the late 1960s, even on the East Coast, fornication was a prosecutable offense that offered grounds for eviction. Like many of their contemporaries, he and Rosler got married so their families and landlords would stop harassing them and leave them in peace.

Alone with their baby in the American heartland, Rosler promptly moved back to New York when Dolly entered the scene. At twenty-five, Rosler was already a practicing artist. For a while she supported herself and the baby doing freelance editorial

work from a sublet on the Lower East Side. Six months later, Neufeld's romance with Dolly was over. When he was offered a prestigious National Defense Fund fellowship to do doctoral work at UC San Diego, he flew back to New York to ask Rosler if she'd like to get back together and move out there with him. In New York, Rosler considered her options. "I thought, I can go back to San Diego, because I can't breathe here. I had to work all night and take care of the kid all day, I was dying." She remembers driving back across country with her husband and child; she remembers lying outside their tent in Arizona looking up at the stars and thinking, "Why am I doing this? Oh yeah, because life is a hell of a lot easier in California."

Like Neufeld, Rosler had done her B.A. in linguistics, but for the last several years she'd been making photomontages, and she had every intention of continuing her work as an artist. Eventually her marriage to Neufeld would end, and she'd find that her decision to move to California had been the right thing. After Neufeld and Acker left for New York, she stayed in San Diego and enrolled as a graduate student in UC San Diego's new, famously radical Fine Art Department. Within months, together with Fred Londonier, Alan Sekula, David and Eleanor Antin, and Miriam Schapiro, she became part of a group that devised a new form of political artwork, fusing conceptual art strategies with on-the-ground leftist and trade union activism. A photograph taken in 1980 shows Rosler addressing a home study group, holding a copy of the magazine *Radical Teacher*, #13.

* * *

Kathy Acker lived with her husband, Bob Acker, for more than three years before she met Neufeld. They'd met at Brandeis when she was a sophomore and he was a senior. He was planning to go to graduate school at UC San Diego, and rather than break up

and continue depending on family support for her tuition, she left Brandeis and followed him. The wedding took place at her family's Long Island beach house in 1966 on the Sunday of Labor Day weekend. No one expected the marriage to last, and it didn't. Until the marriage, her family still harbored hope that she'd find a rich husband. They were Upper East Side Austrian Jews. Bob Acker's parents were Polish Jews, and he'd grown up in lower-middle-class Queens. Kathy Acker described herself as a German Jew. A hierarchy then still prevailed among New York Jews, descending from German to Austrian to Russian and Lithuanian, all the way down to the lowest-ranked Poles.

Thirty years later, walking around New York City with the media theorist and writer McKenzie Wark, Acker stopped next to the carriages outside the Plaza Hotel and said, *We had our honeymoon at the Plaza Hotel. Jews had theirs at the Plaza, WASPS at the Sherry-Netherland.* Wark was Australian, fourteen years younger than she was, but even so, he sensed that "there was something dreamlike about the New York she was showing me. Like a fable." In fact, she and Bob Acker had left for San Diego right away. A rare family photograph shows her in a white dress and veil, smiling and cutting a cake next to her tall, handsome husband.

They arrived just in time to start the fall quarter and rented a spacious Victorian house on B Street, just south of downtown San Diego. Bob Acker enrolled in the History Department, and she signed up for classes to complete her English B.A.

Acker's accounts of her life, in her books and in interviews, were always selective. She never wrote about or discussed her years with Bob Acker, and Bob Acker himself has little to say about their time together. He graciously replied to my emails, but in our brief exchange he remarked, "I'm surprised there's any interest in the subject. I never see her books in bookstores anymore, and I visit bookstores pretty often." "History," he added, "is hard to do!" A retired attorney, Acker didn't seem eager to play

a supporting role in his long-ago former wife's history. I imagine her living quietly during those mid-'60s years in remote San Diego, although doubtless ambivalent about whatever it meant to be a "young wife" during the *Peyton Place* era.

Before leaving Brandeis, Acker had been one of a handful of classics majors. Years later she'd boast that her undergrad papers were read by the renowned structural linguist Roman Jakobson, although this seems unlikely, since he taught at Harvard. Even if, as she'd elaborate, her Brandeis tutor had studied with Jakobson, it's hard to imagine the tutor sharing an undergrad student's papers with him. But to lie is to try. Like most fabrications, the story contains a kernel of truth, or at least of desire. There's no doubt that Acker wanted to study at Harvard with Roman Jakobson—or rather at Radcliffe, its sister school, because Harvard wouldn't enroll female undergraduate students until 1975.

Brandeis, known at the time as "Jew U," wasn't her first choice of school. By her mid-teens Acker was fiercely precocious, an outstanding student at the Lenox School, a staid and somewhat mediocre Upper East Side private girl's institution that has since merged with Birch Wathen. But until she met the future film scholar P. Adams Sitney, her knowledge of culture didn't extend much beyond the Lenox curriculum. Acker met Sitney at a summer study intensive at Trinity College in the summer of 1963, when she was sixteen, between her sophomore and junior years of high school. Sitney was eighteen. Two and a half years Acker's senior, he was about to begin his first (and, as it turned out, his last) semester at Yale, studying classics. A dazzling polymath, Sitney's poetic passions that summer included Charles Olson, Ezra Pound, Virgil, and Sextus Propertius. Acker had just discovered the Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. She was

already dating another Trinity summer student, but she found Stiney and his poetic enthusiasms deeply intriguing. Stiney remembers the sixteen-year-old Acker as "very intelligent, eager, wonderfully curious and slightly wild in a ragamuffin mode."

That fall, Stiney left Yale to organize the International Exhibition of New America Cinema and moved into a rooming house in New York near Cooper Square. There, he and Acker began an intense three-month affair. Still in school uniform, she'd catch the subway downtown to his place, where they once met Gregory Corso. Sometimes they met at the Film Culture and Film-Makers' Cooperative office on East Twenty-Eighth Street, where Stiney knew everyone. He introduced her to the Gotham Book Mart. They met Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, and Carolee Schneemann and visited Dick Higgins's pre-SoHo loft, where Stiney and Jackson Mac Low were absorbed in typing and editing Stan Brakhage's *Metaphors on Vision*. Her eyes opened wide. They attended performances of Jean Genet's plays and Brakhage's films. On these occasions Stiney's more paternally presentable friend Robert Brumbaugh, who was still a Yale student, posed as a decoy boyfriend to pick Acker up from the 57th Street prison. Years later, Acker would write about how *P. Adams made super-8 films of me taking off and then putting on my school uniform. Perhaps this was his version of porn. I loved porn. One day, he asked me to edit his magazine, Film Culture [sic] . . . I was shocked . . . I did not understand how a grown-up man could think that I knew anything, much less enough to edit one of the finest contemporary film magazines.* In fact, as Stiney recalls, he shot one three-minute film loop of her naked in bed . . . a teenage fascination with nudity. "It had nothing to do with pornography. She never expressed any interest in pornography then." (That would come later.) Nor did she edit *Film Comment*, although she once ran an errand for the magazine. "The truth," Stiney concluded, quoting Stan Brakhage, "is always more interesting."

By the end of that fall, Stiney left New York for Europe. Until she moved to West 163rd Street with Len Neufeld, they would not see each other again.

Given her high grades and the broad range of culture she acquired in her mid-teens, Acker had every expectation of attending an Ivy League school, like Stiney and most of his friends. Radcliffe, with its faculty drawn from the still all-male Harvard, was most elite female school of that time. Cecily Selby, the Lenox School principal, was a Radcliffe alumna, and she promoted the school among her best students. Acker applied and was stunned when she was rejected. Her high school friend was stunned when Susan and Linda Mueller, applied to Radcliffe and were rejected as well. The Muellers also applied, and were accepted, to Sarah Lawrence, Bryn Mawr, and Wellesley, elite female schools that didn't interest Acker at all. She applied only to Radcliffe and the intellectual, coeducational Brandeis.

Former classmates of Acker's concur that as Lenox School students, the Muellers were bred for success. They were WASPY and smart, well-groomed and pretty popularity seekers. At Lenox, the Mueller twins were Acker's only real peers and academic rivals. If they were young men, or perhaps if they'd been born female thirty years later, the Muellers and Acker might have formed a brilliant alliance: the two "perfect" girls and their dating, intellectually voracious counterpart. But, as it was, they were pitted against each other in a competition that entailed not just brains and imagination, but classic good looks, grace, and poise. It was a fight Acker could never win. And so she loathed them.

No sentimentality here either, Acker wrote, with a nobility worthy of Antigone, on her page of Linda Mueller's Lenox School senior yearbook. *God knows how many fights, dirty or clean, spoken or unspoken, minor or major, we've had—but without you, I would have gone to sleep . . . I don't know what sort of people*

I'll meet at Brandeis but I'm sure that I'll meet no one with as much drive and personal power and magnetism as you have. I can't say that it has been a pleasure to know you, for our relationship has not been in that realm, it has been a challenge . . . I think that if we had met in different circumstances, mutual respect would've overcome our ambition-causing animosities . . . no need for best wishes, your own personality is too magnetic . . . —you must succeed, Kathy

Although Acker never sought them out after their years at Lenox, the Mullers would haunt her for the rest of her life. At West 163rd Street, she dreams that they're in a fire together: *I had failed in some way . . . I had to impress them or learn how to deal with them.* Back in San Diego a year after splitting with Neufeld, she'd write:

I hate the Mueller twins because they're the only people who are as intelligent and beautiful as I am; the head of the school encourages the Mueller twins and I to fight so we can raise the intellectual standards of the school.

In London, when she was forty-two years old, she'd write:

R was thinking of poisoning the Muller twins. The Muller twins were German. They had long straight blond hair and were strong. Since they were the only pupils who were as intelligent as R, they hated R and R hated them because they were equals.

Though R wanted to kill them . . . as yet he had only pissed into both of their camel hair coats.

Three years later, living in San Francisco, she changed the Mueller's names, but had still not forgotten them. As she'd write in *My Mother, Demonology*, her second-to-last published book:

I thought about the Jones twins all the time, until my thoughts about their evil were forced to pop forth into the open . . . I knew they were evil because they had long, straight real blond hair and were German.

They looked almost exactly alike.

The most disturbing factor was that they were more intelligent than me. We were the three most intelligent girls in the school, if not the most intelligent the school had ever seen; my imagination soared, but I was a slob, whereas the Joneses were clever, neat and precise.

Liz Leventhal, the Birch Wathen Lenox School archivist, allowed my researcher, Julien Raffnor, to copy the Lenox School yearbook for Acker's 1964 class. Tracing the names of the students, Raffnor looked up some of these former classmates. Fifty years later, they remember her vaguely, a mysterious figure from the long-ago past. Jean Lindenbaum Herskovitz, who appears as the schoolgirl Jean in Acker's 1973–74 *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, remarked that, with her "esoteric" mind, Acker would have been academically more suited to Spence or Brearley. On the other hand, Brearley and Spence were famously sparing in their admission of Jews. In the early 1950s the Lenox School was unofficially known as the only "white glove" Upper East Side private girls school that was widely open to Jews, and Jews numbered roughly 70 percent of its students.

A photograph in Acker's class yearbook shows a five- or six-year-old child that might have been the young Kathy, wearing white woolly gloves and a matching wool bonnet. Expectant and smiling, she's stretching her small arm to reach the brass handle of the school's massive front door. In fact, Lenox was open to virtually any white student whose family could pay the tuition. The classes were small, but as Ellen Bilgore, another former classmate, recalls, there was little cohesion within their small class

of twenty-four girls. Some were rich, living in ivory towers with all the entitlements. Others came from abroad. Some were jocks, some were bookish, others were into drama. Personalities clashed. Bilgore recalls that Acker was rarely seen not holding a book, a series of totems signaling that *she was smart*. To Bilgore, the sage Kathy hoped to project to the class was that she cared more about books than about being part of the group or making nice friends—at least *not with them*. She shocked her sophomore-year classmates by announcing that she'd already had sex with three partners. [T]he actual physical pleasure was of course minimal, she'd concede later on in her diary, compared to the pleasure of becoming who I wanted to become. At Lenox, Bilgore recalls, girls were forced into a false, claustrophobic intimacy, a life that revolved around cliques and competition. The students were academically tracked into A and B groups, an injustice Acker would later reprise:

I don't see Jean in classes. I'm in section A and she's in section B. They stick the rich kids in section A and the poor ones in B, they want us to learn that poor means stupid. We hate them but what the hell... Blow up the school.

"Don't quote me," another classmate later texted to Raffinot. "Cathy [sic] was always what we used—in the days when one was really innocent—to call a 'slut.'"

I read the high [sic] School
book. Wow. She was really
off the wall. Drugs?
Insanity??

... Why is anybody writing about
her, except as

a clinical study? ...
I am riveted that what I
saw when she was little
bubbled up into what she
became. I see a screwed up little
girl.

... And an "adult" ravaged by
drugs and real, clinical [sic]
crazy ...

... Poor thing
seems to have been alone,
with no one to lock her
away, and get her better.

... It is so odd that this is
being treated seriously

Like the emperor has no
clothes.

I have to say that there is
brilliance there. But it is so
perverted

By the craziness.
What got this started?

We shld talk again when
you can tell me more.

Right now, I have to watch
Wolf hall!

All the former classmates Raffinot spoke to recalled that Acker was known at the school for being intellectually, socially, and

sexually precocious, but, at the same time, neglected, unkept. The school had a half holiday each Friday. Everyone in their class took turns inviting each other home to have lunch and spend the free afternoon together, except for Acker. Nevertheless, on her yearbook page, Acker appears as pretty young woman with gap teeth, full lips, and a shoulder-length flip.

Some people think that Kathy is a beauty; others claim that she is an existentialist; but Kathy says that she is just plain Kathy.

the yearbook committee wrote on her page.

Whatever she is, she's different. She's more intellectual than many members of her class; she reads more; and she acts more avant-garde. She practices a studied nonchalance, taking things in her stride, letting trivial matters in one ear and out the other. Her close friends complain of her "stupid look." This look is only the facial expression that she uses when she hears the names of baseball players and television actors that she cannot recognize. It is possible that in the next shipment of books to India Kathy might be added to the cargo, for it is noticed that she often has unreasonable arguments with Mrs. Bacon. Despite Kathy's exotic, but sometimes eclectic mind, she might, one day, return to Lenox, as the Post Laureate.

Although she never wrote or even thought much about Acker after high school, Linda Mueller Vasu remembers her well. To her, the rivalry between Acker and her and her twin sister, Susan, was more of a friendly, academic competition. She agreed with the other ex-classmates about Lenox: it was a school without strong admission standards that assembled a weird mix of girls.

At school, she believes, Acker wasn't sufficiently recognized, which only increased her defiance. Looking for any opportunity to make herself seen and heard, Acker walked the halls of Lenox with Modern Library editions of Dostoyevski, Gogol, and Turgenev, their covers face-out for all to see. "Kathy," she said, "was a rather unhappy, though intellectual committed member of the Lenox class. It is easy to see the Formation to Mission of Kathy Acker in the tiny crucible that was Lenox in NYC at the time."

After Wellesley, Mueller attended graduate school at Columbia University. She studied semiotics with Sylvère Lotringer, whom Acker would meet several years later at a benefit party downtown for *File* magazine. When Raffinot reached her, Mueller-Rasu was teaching *Oedipus Rex* at the Connecticut girls' school where she now works, and it seemed uncanny to her because, preparing to speak about Acker, she'd done some online research and observed the way her life and career have been treated as mythic. "Kathy," she said, "was a mess. She had the look of a young girl who was neglected. Not just that she didn't care, but that no one cared. Not her mother or anyone else. Her shoes were scuffed, her clothes were ruffled, she smelled bad. Nobody ever went to Kathy's apartment. The only time anyone ever saw her mother was at graduation. She was always in the margins, a shadow." Like Linda and Susan, whose parents were also divorced, "she related strongly to Thomas Hardy, with his elegant descriptions of disappointment in life and in love, and intractable fate."

Fragments of memories, nightmares, and dreams of the school recur throughout Acker's writing. Lesbian schoolgirls, schoolgirls as Sadean subjects and whores, but most of all, a feeling of deep isolation. Like the images of William S. Burroughs's *St. Louis* childhood and his cast of underworld characters lifted from boyhood pulp fiction, with such colorful names as Salt Pork Mary and the Sanctimonious Kid, a handful

of ghosts and screen memories float across all of Acker's work—the silks in her grandmother's bedroom, Laure the Whonish Schoolgirl, gray cities, the Times Square live sex show. These are snowy Central Park Christmases, a girlish mother, a boorish stepfather, a wealthy but disappeared biological father. These are the lesbian schoolgirls, the despised Mueller twins and Miss Jean St. Pierre, their beloved English teacher. *Miss St. Pierre was the youngest of our two literature teachers, and therefore poor, she writes in My Mother, Demonology. Though poor, Miss St. Pierre ruled over the library. I ran away to here . . . In this place, Miss St. Pierre, who looked like my mother except that she wasn't beautiful, showed me books to read.* (In 2003, the real Jean St. Pierre, who'd long since moved to the English Department at Phillips Academy, received an award for outstanding teaching.) *In the school that I attended I learned, seemingly by chance, that pain, if anything is a bad smell. And I tried to run away from the pain named childhood the way you would flush a huge shit down the toilet. I've been running ever since.* The masochist O of Pauline Réage's novels who appears in Acker's 1983 *Great Expectations* will become "O," short for "Ostracism": *I knew that I didn't belong in this society of only girls; I was strange; I tried to hide my strangeness . . . The girls couldn't ostracize me because I wasn't one of them . . . All of Us Girls Have Been Dead for So Long, she writes in Pussy King of the Pirates, her last full-length work.*

She toughened up when she went to Brandeis. Her friend Mel Freilicher recalls her hanging out with "the very coolest upperclassmen" and shoplifting from Design Research. As her dorm mate Sue Shapiro would later confide to Len Neufeld, she was known for having very loud sex in the dorms. When she made a halfhearted attempt at slitting her wrists, two of her dorm mates slit theirs, and the resident adviser begged her to stop before they all bled to death. Notwithstanding her dramatic, rebellious behavior at Brandeis, Acker read all the time.

Acker finished her B.A. at UC San Diego in May '68 and began earning credits for an M.A. in English, but the classes held little interest for her, and her graduate studies didn't last long. Bob Acker continued his history degree. There was not much in San Diego to do. Even when she was no longer enrolled, she spent most days on the campus, tutoring Greek and attending the Poetry Club. At home she baked bread, designed and sewed her own clothes. Bob Acker was often depressed. Coconed together against a harsh world, their best times were spent playing cards, chess, and Go. It wasn't until the next fall that Acker's world opened up, and she met the two people who'd become her first important mentors and her lifelong friends.

* * *

David and Eleanor Antin drove out from New York in June '68 with all their belongings crammed into an old Cadillac. David was going to start teaching that fall at UCSD. They were in Phoenix, he later remembered, the day Andy Warhol was shot. Three days later, checking into a desert motel, they heard the radio news that Robert F. Kennedy had just been assassinated. Both Antins had grown up in New York. They'd been deeply involved with the downtown cultural world, but they'd gotten bored by the end of the '60s. The scene had become glaustraphobic, anxious, and inbred, and they saw no reason to stay there. "[It was] the last gasp of Minimalism . . . Pop was over. So was the great Judson Theater stuff." Eleanor Antin would later remember. She'd just finished *Blood of a Poet Box*, her first major conceptual work, comprised of a collection of microscope slides filled with blood drawn from one hundred poet and artist friends and acquaintances. She wasn't exhibiting yet, but everyone knew about Antin's project. Giving Eleanor blood had become part of the scene. At house parties, performances, and openings, she'd bring out her Sewing Susan Kit

packed with cotton, antiseptic, and needles and prick people's fingers. Eleanor Antin was then thirty-five. David was thirty-seven years old, and they had a year-old son.

When David Antin's friend Allan Kaprow declined an offer to teach at UCSD and proposed him instead, they both thought, Why not? The job would entail directing the university gallery and teaching some classes in writing and art. Teaching had never been one of Antin's goals. He'd never taught a class in his life and had no idea what to expect. But as he'd write later on in his poetic essay "California—the nervous camel," his boss, the artist Paul Brach was unfazed. Brach assured him:

*... till be very good people
will come to your classes they wont know what youre talking
about youll be talking about art till make them feel better because
youre talking about it*

Neither of the Antins had spent any time in California, but when David flew out to take a look at the job, he was impressed by how provisional everything seemed. A small earthquake hit the same day. Watching the palms shake and water spill out of the pools, he thought, "This is the right place to be." Whatever the future contained was already there. California, it seemed, would either lead the U.S. over a cliff or lead it back to safety. The La Jolla campus, built on a tract of land obtained from the U.S. Department of Defense, struck him as a group of scientists "standing around with an open checkbook under a palm tree." Conceived as a retreat-like research institute, the sprawling campus had opened just eight years earlier. Located at the heart of the U.S. military-industrial complex, the new university was committed to supporting cutting-edge work, not only in the sciences but in the arts and humanities. To the disgust of the larger San Diego community, the Marxist philosopher Herbert

Brandeis found refuge there after losing his tenure at Brandeis over a series of political feuds. The local branch of the American Legion offered to pay Marcuse's salary if he agreed not to teach any classes.

Later, perhaps attempting to position her work within an intellectual history where it rightly belonged, Acker would claim that she'd followed Marcuse from Brandeis to UCSD, or that Bob Acker was Marcuse's assistant and chief acolyte. In fact, neither she nor Bob Acker attended Marcuse's classes or knew him at all. If anything, they and their friends were at odds with him. In his essay "time on my hands," David Antin would later describe the great man as "a kind of middle European intellectual, sort of elderly intellectual, who used to kind of parade down the La Jolla streets with his hands behind his back as if he were walking down the streets in some wonderful German city peering at the bakery windows, looking longingly at whipped cream cupcakes." When a Marcuse acolyte attacked Martha Rosler's work, the whole art department rose to defend her.

Those who accepted invitations to leave the East Coast to teach at UC San Diego found themselves well supported financially but intellectually and culturally marooned in different and similar ways. As Antin would write:

*it was 1968 when I first visited and I was sure that I had been
returned to 1952 all the women wore white gloves I hadn't seen
anything like this since the fifties and even then living in new
york I hadn't seen very much of it and here there were the people
who lived in la jolla in rancho santa fe and on point loma theyre
pleasant people awfully pleasant as pleasant as wonder bread the
men wore dark blue blazers with brass buttons and cream colored
pants with check shirts and they all watched the stock market...*

Shopping for a fridge shortly after arriving, he found the walls of the Solana Beach used-appliance store covered with photographs of Adolf Hitler.

L-5 wasn't even completed at the time we moved into solana beach and south of oceanside it was still a little two lane road then but eventually a few years after we came they completed it still there were relatively few cars running on it especially at night at night it was like watching a kind of eccentrically programmed light sculpture after ten pm car lights would show up once every five minutes or so and if you went to your front window or stood...

... on this sloping lawn and looked toward the highway after ten o'clock you could stand there for five or six minutes before you saw two or three cars go by...

Once he and his family were settled, Antin had to figure out what and how he would teach. He knew that when undergrad students signed up for a poetry class, they assumed they'd be challenged to bare their innermost souls. Reluctant to deal with hundreds of bad student poems, much less the real pain from which they arose, he adopted a quasi-Oulipian rule. "Look," he recalls telling them, "I'm not good at psychology. But do me a favor, let's work this way. You can write about anything in the world you want except... somebody else knows more about it than you, and it's already in a book in the library. Go to the library and steal it."

Acker became close to the Antins as soon as they met. She gossiped and talked about art with Eleanor, babysat for their kid, and sat in on all David's seminars. She'd already decided she was a writer, but she didn't know what or how she should write. Teachers and older writers talked to her then (as they talk to young writers still) about the importance of "finding her voice."

but it seemed to her that she, like most of her friends, had many shifting identities—or maybe none. Likewise, the idea of inventing a plot and creating reliable characters seemed absurd: a stretch not worth making. Antin's idea that writing could be composed of and around other texts removed that pressure and offered entertainment and freedom. Eventually this technique, which would come to be called "appropriation," became central to Acker's style and intellectual strategy. *This writing is all just fake (copied from other writing) so you should go away and not read any of it*, she'd write in her 1983 "Translations of the Diaries of Laure the Schoolgirl."

"Go to the library," Antin instructed his class, "find someone who's already written about something better than you could possibly do at this moment in your life, and we'll consider the work of putting the pieces together like a film. Within about four or five weeks," he said, they were "producing wonderfully quick, shifting beautiful things, like race drivers shifting gears." Throughout her career Acker would describe how she'd apprenticed herself to David Antin. The idea, he explained, wasn't just to cut and paste things by rote, but to find the connections between disparate realities. "A piece of Aeschylus and a plumbing manual have to be brought together in some sort of way. You could make it be like a car collision on L-5... or then again, "you might want to slip things into each other, as if Aeschylus was being sodomized by the plumbing manual." After a while the students began finding the library too far to walk and began faking it, all the while claiming they were using found sources. Freed from the demand of creating "original" work, they started making things up. Antin, who thought he didn't know how to teach, became one of the most popular teachers at UC San Diego.

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Acker and Len Neufeld met while they were both sitting in Antin's poetry class in the fall of '69. She was already one of its academic career in linguistics, he wrote poems whenever he could. Like her, he wanted to be a writer but wasn't sure yet what that meant. "Kathy was beautiful," Neufeld recalled when we talked at his Brooklyn apartment two and a half years after her death. "Very sexy, very interesting. She dressed sexy, she had curly hair, she wore little round glasses. She was full of energy and ideas. And she was writing poetry, although she hadn't published anything yet."

He looked her up to exchange poems the day after the class, and things between them clicked right away. They got together within weeks, maybe days. "The first time, we were sitting with a friend of hers, Bee, talking and playing foosie—and Bob Acker looked away. She gave me such a look . . . So when we left, we found a little restroom in one of the buildings, went in and locked the doors and used the couch.

"The fact we were both married didn't mean shit. In 1969 I was twenty-six, twenty-seven years old. Kathy was twenty-two, twenty-three. Martha and I were never happy. I was looking for an escape. I felt inadequate in my marriage, but not with Kathy. She demanded very little of me. She needed support and approval and willingness to go along and be with her, and that was easy."

Similarly, from the first months of her marriage to Bob, Kathy felt trapped. She knew she'd been wrong about marrying him, maybe wrong about marrying at all. In New York with Len Neufeld, she considered the end of her marriage with some confusion, but not much regret. Writing in one of her notebooks at West 163rd Street:

Acker came over yesterday and we tried to talk or I tried to find out who he was and he wanted me to become come to me in the prison we had been. I was trying to get rid of my parents in my mind and

feelings and to have the calmness to do what I wanted or to find out what I wanted or why he wanted a permanent Acker cock worshipping who was also intelligent and reasonable looking given 20-year old junkie standards of good-looking so friends and strangers would think you must be quite a man to have such a wife also someone to pick up his clothes after he dropped them on the ground which his good Jewish mother when she came to San Diego yelled at me for not doing and to wash the dishes we both needed someone to hang on to for life because we were scared and made schizoid

Among their group of friends, many of whom had married just to have sex in their late teens, casual hookups were common. From the time they got together in San Diego, and later on in New York, Acker and Neufeld saw other people, often at the same time. As Martha Rosler recalls, "You went to a party and you got stoned and you felt like sleeping with someone, you slept with them. They were a friend . . . And it was all very low-key. You could sleep with a friend without it becoming something."

But soon Neufeld and Acker's relationship did become something. Acker called Neufeld at home endlessly, asking for help and complaining about her depressed, angry husband. Could he help her get Bob out of bed? And each time, he went. Soon he began bringing her back to his and Rosler's Solana Beach home. Since their child was still too young for day care, Rosler spent most days at home making art and taking care of the kid. Soon, much to Rosler's chagrin, Acker's presence became part of their domestic routine. "Oh," she thought. "Hi Kathy. That's nice." She recalls making dinner for them "while they're doing teenage things, making big posters for poetry readings. I remember one scene where I'm putting stuff out on the table, and they're sitting on the floor under the table drawing posters. And I thought, I've been married to this guy for six, seven years by this point. What's wrong with this picture?"

Finally, things fell apart when Rosler came home to a locked screen-porch door one afternoon and found them in bed. "I thought: this is a message to me, and I'm getting the message." She told them both to get out. Within days, Len Neufeld moved into the B Street Victorian—"a big wood house painted green—no, it wasn't especially fixed up"—and Bob Acker moved out.

Neither of their exes were thrilled with these new arrangements, but everyone did their best to adapt. Often, the two couples hung out with the Antins and other friends to talk and play chess. As Rosler recalls, "Lenny was madly in love with her. And very happy, very satisfied." At twenty-two, Rosler recalls Acker's look as "sort of beatniky. She was sweet. It was a familiar form—she'd been to Brandeis, she was a Brandeis type, you know? Sleek and clean. Jewish and smart and self-confident, but also vulnerable. Her persona was about being the victim—a kid from the Upper East Side pretending to be a waitress down on her luck." Rosler was already deeply involved in antiwar and other political movements; Acker and Neufeld were not. Rosler wondered why Acker needed to take up with Neufeld just to leave Bob. "She needed to send out these calls for help—rescue me. Which is hard to respect. Kathy was sending up balloons saying *Rescue me, rescue me*. She tried to seem fragile." But then again, Rosler observed, "Kathy's whole persona depended on an endless series of reflecting, fictive personas, like a hall of mirrors." Regarding child care, Rosler and Neufeld arrived at an uneasy detente. To Len Neufeld, the months he spent with Acker in San Diego were exciting and happy. But they'd decided to be writers, and they both knew that New York was the best place to put out their work and meet other writers. As soon as he finished his coursework, they left for New York.

Kathy had had PID. It really upset her. We had to pay for a doctor. Before that she was very aggressive sexually—she was very out there, with different people, doing different things. One of those people who—she never feels alive or like herself unless she has a cock inside her. So PID was devastating.

—Len Neufeld, interview March 8, 2000

In New York, they moved into the huge, empty five-room West 163rd Street apartment Neufeld had once shared with Rosler. For a while, he continued receiving his fellowship checks, but once it was clear that he was no longer enrolled, the payments stopped coming. Within weeks of arriving, Acker had acute pain in her pelvis and abdomen and went to the hospital. There, she was diagnosed with pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), an affliction most common among women aged twenty-one to twenty-five who have—or have sex with people with—multiple partners. As she'd write four years later in *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*:

I move to New York because I write and want to meet writers. I have no money, no way of getting money, no friends in New York no parents. Get Pelvic Inflammatory Disease, walk into Columbia Presbyterian clinic: woman vomits blood over floor . . . [T]hree hours later I'm now in shock slightly hallucinating doctor gives me four shots of penicillin in ass . . . gives me endless bottles of synthetic opium and Nembutal so shut me up. A month later I'm even sicker.

And again, in *I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac: Imagining*:

I had come to New York to be an artist: I thought I had to go to New York to be an artist. It was summer. The air became hotter and hotter. People, driven crazy by heat, hit each other over the

heads and pissed on each other's faces. To relax: they stole cars, I became extremely sick. I was living with this wretch on a half couch and a single mattress in a large empty room. We were being in "bed" about two in the morning. Suddenly I knew I was dying . . . My lover called the cops, came back to me. He told me I probably wasn't dying. I was screaming too healthily.

The hospital was the worst hell I had ever been in.

Frighteningly ill, she needed doctors and medicine. She asked her family for help, but they refused her. Grudgingly, they'd accepted her withdrawal from Brandeis and her marriage to Bob Acker, a far cry from the future they'd imagined for a girl who'd come out at a Jewish society ball and attended the Lenox School for twelve years. And now, still married to Acker, she'd fled once again with a graduate student with no real profession who was already a father and married to somebody else. No wonder she'd caught PID, a chronic condition frequently caused by such STDs as gonorrhea. When Acker skipped the rehearsal for the Jewish debutante ball to go out with P. Adams Siney, her mother had slapped her in the face and called her a whore; had she been wrong? [They pissed on me when I was sick, she'd write in her diary, obviously didn't give a damn if I died then called me up and told me that I had given my father a heart attack. She felt truly poor for the first time, and completely alone.

Thinking about how to get money, she and Len Neufeld looked through the *Village Voice* classified ads. The minimum wage in New York at the time was \$1.85, which made Bob Wolfe's ad, New York at the time was \$1.85, which made Bob Wolfe's ad, with its promise of \$100 per day, deeply appealing. Neither Acker nor Neufeld had ever done sex work before. Still, the

Fourteenth Street studio, with its roster of casual amateurs, didn't seem like much of a stretch from the ambient sexual encounters they and their friends were already having. Sometimes, as she wrote in her diary, her long-ago avant-garde mentor and boyfriend P. Adams Siney would stop by the apartment and say, *let's see your tits, let's see your cuntie*, and then for a laugh Neufeld would appear and they'd goad the staid scholar into having a three-way. Was this any worse? Since getting together, she and Len Neufeld enjoyed an open relationship, although as Neufeld concedes, perhaps he more than she. Nevertheless, at the time, the entrance to Wolfe's Fourteenth Street studio didn't seem like a descent into a fiery pit. More like, a good gig. The films were hard-core, but as Neufeld recalls, "Kathy wasn't scared, because it was a safe situation. If she liked the other person, she enjoyed it. Often I took her, even if we were not working as a couple."

Throughout her career, in book after book, Acker would describe the cyclic despair of doing sex work to buy medicine so she could keep on doing sex work, crafting these months of her life into something more allegorical than her actual life on West 163rd Street. In *Algeria* (1984), she'd reprise most of the Santa Claus skit as a comedy:

Omar: There are lots of men out here. (Pointing to the audience and looking at them with wide eyes). They're all staring at me and they're waiting for me to take my clothes off.

Harlene (knows he's got a real loony this time): Miss Fendermass, this is a private office.

Her years in New York with Len Neufeld would be retold as a fable: a young woman's descent into an endless vortex of exploitation and poverty.

[She] had such a bad ovarian infection she'd be screaming with pain if either touched or if one bit of the pain-killing synthetic morphine she was shelling out \$100 a week for to kill the pain so she could keep working to pay for the pain-killer wore off—if it all wore off. . . .

Before she worked the sex show she had earned all the money she needed especially the money for all the medicines by starring . . . in sex films. She had thought of earning her money this way because when she had gone to a top Eastern university a doctor friend had told her her face was ravishingly beautiful. She had gotten these beginning model jobs by looking in the back pages of the *Village Voice*. Then men had told her she was too nice a girl to be an escort and why didn't she go back to school or they pulled her Leonard away from her breasts and told her her breasts were too large or too small. She was very ashamed of her breasts. She hadn't been getting money for a while and more important than money, though that's all-important, she had to keep working to show herself she was surviving whatever she had to do.

—*Great Expectations*, 1983

Over the years, as she experienced new forms of grief, the tone of these stories and their effect on the narrator would shift. Her picaresque tales about a young woman's economic survival in old-time New York during the era of sexual liberation would be recast as dirges. Engaged, in her early forties, in a disastrous sadomasochistic affair with a married lover, and suffering what seemed like a public professional humiliation when her UK publisher issued an apology on her behalf to the mass-market writer Harold Robbins for her appropriation of a fragment of one of his novels, she'd revisit these early experiences as something more somber and fatal, a meeting of Eros and Thanatos. No longer Moll Flanagan, she'd use her recollections of sex work to enter the deathly, delirious space of Nagisa Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses*.

I started writing a sex show to abolish all poverty and change the world, she'd write wryly in *Nymphomaniac*. But in her 1988 novel *Empire of the Senses*, she recalls the desperate voyeurs who sought sexual gratification in the masturbatory contemplation of this remote object of Janiasitic desire . . . the way in which patrons of seamy burlesque house fell prey to its psychically disturbed perversities, the degradation of the performers of the Miss America beauty pageant minds on parade in the tradition of the *Miss America* beauty pageant but also were forced to watch this deterioration. . . . In other words, the primal urge of sex had become a revolting phenomenon.

Two years later, writing under the influence of William Faulkner's *The Wild Palms* in her fifth full-length novel, *In Memoriam to Lenny*, the Len Neufeld character—referred to in earlier books as "Lenny" or "L"—would become "my rapist": Taking my medicine and holding my clothes about me, my arm linked through the rapist's arm, as if we were the figures in a tarot card, I walked into light. . . . The rapist and I were linked and I hadn't died. Since I hadn't died, I no longer felt pain or knew any of the problems I had had. . . . After her visit to the rich doctor, for weeks she lay in the improvised cot in her boyfriend's and her apartment except when she was working in the sex show to pay for the expensive antibiotics she now had to take. . . . When he was off work pimping and he could relax, my boyfriend took acid. Describing their Santa Claus routine, she writes: the doctor was beginning to control her. As control always works, through imagination. . . . "Are there really men out there who want you and, if so, how do they want you?" As he said this, the doctor's right hand reached under the girl's skirt. . . . The audience could see that his hands were beginning to give her pleasure. "Is your body lying?" . . . The doctor was beginning to control. So the girl turned around and kissed him.

During the months she was writing *Identity*, she was walking outdoors under a bridge with her married lover, and when he told her to strip, she did. He caressed her skin with a knife, and

she knew then that he might kill her. At the time, the idea of this death made her feel peaceful and good, which she later found more than disturbing. It's as if there's a territory, which she later found last page of *Identity*. The roads carved in the territory, she writes on the known, are memories. Carved again and again into raw like wounds that don't heal when you touch them but grow. And five years later, in *Pussy, King of the Pirates*: [T]he sex during the sex show had sex her over the edge, over every edge, over her self, flying until all that was left was sky and endless blackness. During the loss of herself, she had become scared. O realized that she wanted this sex, that she needed it, this sexuality that she had known when she was a whore.

Disinclined toward conventional narrative but determined to write constantly, producing a book at least every two years, Acker worked and reworked her memories until, like the sex she described, they became conduits to something a-personal, until they became myth. This was the strength, and also the weakness, of her writing.

...

I want to bring in the total way we experience, she wrote in her 1971 West 163rd Street diary . . . if I put all this down step by step maybe it'll be obvious how things work . . . I'm wondering if in this stuff I'm not going slow enough . . . which is what fucked up my last series . . . I want to be able to put down on the spot how I experience each event even these words make it seem like there's an inside experiencing mechanism and an outside event because I constantly change lie forget the lie was a lie on top of that I want a record of the way in which I remember . . .

It was probably February. By now they were working one day a week at Fun City, and there was plenty of time, and enough money, which she liked to spend: a ring for \$18; a \$75 designer outfit: I maniacally spend everything presents to keep us me going

don't think Lenny needs them I never save a cent I then sit and brood we have no money . . .

More than anything else Len Neufeld recalls of that time, it was Acker's determination to become a writer. "She was very dedicated, almost desperate to find herself as a writer, and I think she did do that. She was struggling hard, she was making progress, but she was frustrated."

Late that March, the other shoe dropped when the vice squad raided Fun City. The couple were performing one of their skits, and the officer claimed that Neufeld had his hand on her genitals. Arrested for public lewdness, they were booked, fingerprinted, and interviewed by a young cop who asked them, "Are you on drugs?" Acker used her right to a call to phone P. Adams Siney, who'd watched them perform at Fun City, but it was Bob Wolfe who bailed them out the next day. The night she spent in jail would inspire "THE WHORES IN JAIL AT NIGHT" section of her 1979 story, *New York City in 1979*.

The charge was eventually dismissed with a fine paid by club owner Mary Hodas, but the case dragged out over several court dates. We had to be in court at 9:30 the third session for our public lewdness cases the court-room was the big fat sinking stomach of a politician . . . the fucking lawyer kept taking forever 5 million deals with the DA . . . most of the criminals were black may they live forever it's the asshole of the shittiest bureaucracy that will exist, shed write in her diary. Or, as she'd recraft the scene in *Great Expectations*: [t]he hippy male was wearing a Bill Blass suit. The hippy female was wearing a middle-price gray suit with an ascot. They wanted to show the judge they were a cut above his usual defendant . . . Then the boss appeared and walked up to the judge . . . "Haven't I paid you enough?" "Not here," the judge loudly replied.

As Neufeld recalls, they weren't especially scared or upset about being in jail. Still, they'd had enough. Unable to actually quit Fun City, they had a screaming fight with Bob Wolfe and

got themselves fired. Acker successfully filed for unemployment and Neufeld got her an off-the-books job doing part-time secretarial work in Burr Lasky's office.

Poorer, but no longer conflicted about doing the sex show, Acker and Neufeld stepped up their own forms of sexual experimentation and became enmeshed in a maddening quadrangle with the composer Jackson Mac Low and his artist wife, Iris Lezak. Iris loved Lenny more than anyone she'd met for a decade; Lenny liked sex with Iris and encouraged Kathy to try it. Kathy supposed that her boyfriend never felt fully at home in his body, and giving pleasure to women helped ground him. Although, she later wrote in her diary, *I'd like to kick her guts out and tan her flesh apart*. Len Neufeld recalls that at the time, Acker didn't have any female friends. But on the other hand, she was finding that Lenny's desire to *fuck the women we meet . . . separates me from other women and forces me to as usual live in a male society the straight women aid in this collusion . . .* Iris begged Kathy to sleep with her husband in order to keep peace between the two couples, and Kathy tried it, but even though she admired his work, she found Jackson Mac Low a bit weird, and she wasn't attracted. After that, Jackson developed a huge crush on Kathy, which went unrequited. Finally, when his marriage to Iris Lezak ended, Jackson told Kathy he'd never love anyone except Iris for the rest of his life. He missed her terribly. *[T]he political economic and social repercussions of this lunacy are our death the funeral position of this country*, Kathy concluded.

Still, she continued to write, to this kind of lunacy, and through it. She began titling her diaries, as if they were deliberate works, which in a sense they always had been. Even though "Poems 5/71—6/71" contained no actual poetry, she was a poet, in the sense of the word as she and her friends understood it. Eleanor Antin's *Blood of a Poet Box* included plasmonic samples from Carolee Schneemann and Yvonne Rainer because Antin

considered them "poets in the real sense, in the sense that all good artists are poets."

On May 7, 1971, Acker read at the St. Mark's Poetry Project open-mike evening. It was the first time she'd read in New York, and she went home ecstatic. As she'd write in "Poems 5/71—6/71," *I read this aloud in St. Marks last night warm responses from the women listening made me realize that I was writing for other women so they'd feel connected*. In a letter to Jerome Rothenberg, she reports, *I decided I wasn't a poet unless I read my stuff publicly aloud so Lenny & I went to St. Marks last night the open shit and it was very beautiful I feel all religions all these women were coming up to me afterward and saying your stuff was really great it really moved me so I'm feeling terrific . . .* As she'd affirm in the diary: *to make this poem not only my blood but my work I have to angelically constantly publicly read this aloud publish it make myself known and heard*

Rothenberg was impressed and touched by her work. He offered to show it to someone he knew at Dial Press, whose authors included Elizabeth Bowen, James Baldwin, and Norman Mailer, but she was wary. *I don't think I want to publish with Dial*, she wrote him. *[I'd] have to stress the 42nd Street shit that's only I part and is NOT what my writings about love love Kathy*

By the end of the year, her living situation with Neufeld had badly deteriorated. Her handwritten December diary, signed and titled "DIARIES | DIARY OF THE WORLD" recounts fights and slammed doors, brief reconciliations, and misunderstandings. More pertinently, for the first time, she divides the text into sections with a series of intertitles, a technique Acker would use throughout her career in all her published writing. *END OF THE DIARY: DREAMS IN THE NIGHT*, she writes at the top of one of the

pages. She writes about genocide, beauty, and plagues, and she wonders, *Does language correspond to reality? Can you get to the language in a certain way? Yes (because I'm a poet). Don't separate from sensual reality (diary). In what way? . . . Magical connection (real magic) between putting-down-word & reality. . . . If I think too hard or too programmatically & fast I get away from what's happening.*

And here, the record drops off. In New York until the summer of 1972, she wrote *The Burning Bombing of America*, a short but rambling and self-conscious experimental work that remained unpublished until after her death. Whatever notebooks or diaries she might have kept or letters written between January 1972 and the last months of 1973—when she started writing *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*—have disappeared. Over the years, in New York and London, as her reputation became more established, she sold notebooks and letters to bookshops and dealers to raise extra cash: perhaps these papers exist in private collections. *I gotta go . . . I just feel so lonely with you*, she'd finally tell Lenny Neufeld in August 1972, and for two years after that he was devastated. It's likely, however, that during her last months in New York she formed friendships and acquaintanceships with other peer writers.

There's no doubt that Acker attended Bernadette Mayer's seminal *Memory* exhibition, installed at Holly Solomon's 98 Greene Street loft in February 1972. The show was substantially reviewed in *The Village Voice*, and—like Antin's *Blood of a Poet Box*—everyone knew about it. Two years older than Acker, Mayer was already a key figure in New York's performance, art, and poetry scene. Between 1967 and 1969 she'd edited the influential *O to 9* magazine with Vito Acconci. Like Acker, Mayer was a student of classics. Born into a working-class family in Queens, orphaned in her early teens, Mayer's training

took place in Catholic schools, and she received her B.A. from The New School.

Consisting of 1,116 photographs taken over thirty-one days in July, the exhibition was accompanied by a series of audiotapes of Mayer reading from her journals and notes recounting each day. Even more rigorously systematic than Acker's writing experiments, *Memory* parsed the author-as-subject's perception to a point of near schizophrenia. As the scholar Liz Kozz has written, "Whereas the very intensity of surface detail in Mayer's *Memory* paradoxically atomizes personal experience into an endless flow of pictures and recited recollections; its authorship is distributed among various functions that don't necessarily cohere into a single self."

"After I finished doing it," Mayer recalled in a 2007 conversation with Charles Bernstein, "I totally went insane." Mayer entered intensive psychoanalysis and persevered with a follow-up, textual project, *Studying Hunger*. The book begins:

Listen

I began all this in April, 1972. I wanted to try to record, like a diary, in writing states of consciousness, my states of consciousness, as fully as I could, every day, for one month. A month always seems like a likely timespan, if there is one, for an experiment. A month gives you enough time to feel free to skip a day, but not so much time that you wind up facking off completely.

I had an idea before this that if a human, a writer, could come up with a workable code, or shorthand, for the transcription of every event, every motion, every transition of his or her own mind, & could perform this process of translation on himself, using the code, for a 24-hour period, he or she or someone could come up with a great piece of language/information.

Anyway

when I began to attempt the month-long experiment with states of consciousness, I wrote down a list of intentions. It went like this: First, to record special states of consciousness. Special: change, sudden change, high, low, food, levels of attention. And, how intentions change. And, to do this as an emotional science, as though: I have taken a month-drug, I work as observer of self in process.

And, to do the opposite of "accumulate data," oppose MEMORIES,

DIARIES, find structures

And, a language should be used that stays on the observational/notes/leaps side of language border which seems to separate, just barely, observation & analysis. But if the language must resort to analysis to "keep going," then let it be closer to that than too "accumulate data." "Keep going is a poet; accumulate data is a poet.

Also, to use this to find a structure for MEMORY & you, you will find out what memory is, you already know what moving is. And, to do this without remembering.

Bernadette Mayer would become an important, though never acknowledged influence on Acker's subsequent work through the mid-1970s. She made a great deal of effort to strike up a casual friendship with the more established and accomplished writer. After leaving New York, she wrote postcards and letters to Bernadette Mayer and other writers she'd met at the St. Marks Poetry Project: Barbara Baracks, Harris Schiff, and Jim Brodey, but her most continuous and apparently one-sided correspondence was with Mayer.

In July and August 1972, Acker paid an extended visit to San Diego with Mel Freilicher, David and Eleanor Antin, and other old friends. Neither she nor Len Neufeld knew it then, but this summer trip would precipitate the final ending of them as a couple. She gave a few readings in San Diego, and while she was

there, she combed through the notebooks she'd kept in New York. Typing and retyping these fragments, she composed a single text. Was it a poem or a story? The distinction would not matter much yet. In any event, she created a disjointed but emotional narrative, changing some of the original lines in the diary to make them sharper and stronger. *I'm sick of fucking and not knowing who I am*, buried in one of the earlier handwritten diaries, would appear as the final line of the text as a more strident, declarative statement, a manifesto of what it's like to be twenty-three: *I'm sick of fucking not knowing who I am*. Most of the excerpts she used were accounts of the shows at Fun City. She describes the look and smell of the club and the people she met: pimps, junkies, whores, and gay party boys, with their stories about busts, bail, and prison.

Years later, in an interview with Sylvère Lotringer, she would recall: *I was working in a sex show in Forty-Second Street and I had two lines, the poetry and the sex show . . . It pretty radically changed my view of the world . . . You see people from the bottom up, and sexual behavior, especially sex minus relationship—which is what happens in 42nd Street—is definitely bottom. Then you see it in a different way, especially power relationships in society . . . And I think that never left me.*

She typed up the text, double-spaced, adding the colophon *Papyrus Press, San Diego 1972*, and brought it to an offset printer. She was twenty-five years old. It was her first, self-published work. She knew then that the rhetoric of the New Left didn't begin to describe the existential situation in the United States as aptly as the dynamics of sex work. Her collaged text described her brief and partly self-willed season in hell in long, run-on sentences. She offered no explicit analysis of this situation. There were no explanations, confessions, apologies. She called the work *Politics*.

THE CHILDLIKE LIFE OF THE BLACK TARANTULA

(1971-1974)

you have abnormal childhood you will have to live childhood over again.

—Kathy Acker, "Journal Black Cats Black Jewels" (1972)

Solana Beach in 1972 was a sleepy, shabby Southern California beach town within reasonable distance to cities but surrounded by the natural world, where one could live fairly cheaply. Rents were low, and there wasn't much there to buy. Twenty-four miles north of San Diego, about two hours by car or train from L.A., it was popular with surfers and retirees. Originally developed in the 1920s as a housing tract for migrant citrus workers, its main street was set back from the beach by three blocks. The town had a public library and a movie theater, several bars, a massage parlor, a new Vons supermarket, and a cluster of mom-and-pop stores. Not everyone had cars. UC San Diego students hitchhiked along Torrey Pines Road to the La Jolla campus fourteen miles south. Often, drivers rolled down their windows to ask their pedestrian neighbors if they needed a ride.

By the spring of 1972, Acker's relationship with Len Neufeld in the apartment at West 163rd Street was in limbo. They hadn't yet broken up, but most nights they slept in separate rooms. She

was afraid to break up, as breaking up would mean moving out of the apartment, and she wasn't totally committed to her life in New York. Since the first open-mike reading she did at St. Marks one year earlier, she'd become better known, but she was still somewhat intimidated by her peers: *those uptight-about-fame con-descending creeps in NY*, as she'd describe them in a letter several months later to Jackson Mac Low. Of course she wanted fame too, but at the moment it seemed out of reach. And so she fled. She had a little money saved from working off the books for Burt Lasky while collecting unemployment from the Fun City job. Instead of using her savings to rent an apartment and suffer through another summer in New York, she decided to go back and stay with her old San Diego friends while she figured out her next move. Mel Freilicher and other Brandeis friends were still there, and David Antin, who wholeheartedly believed in her and her work, remained an important influence.

During the two years she'd been in New York with Neufeld, the Antins had left their small Solana Beach bungalow, hidden behind a wall of oleander trees, for a much grander, shambling stucco house with a big terrace, perched on a bluff overlooking the beach. Len Neufeld and Martha Rosler's house in Solana Beach was where Acker had found refuge from her marriage before things blew up and she and Neufeld left for New York. As she was still reeling from *the shock of going from a really protective environment to a totally frightening environment*, arriving back at Solana Beach early that summer must have felt like a return to the womb. The town hadn't changed much. Shady eucalyptus trees lined the thoroughfare that passed through the Torrey Pines State Natural Reserve. Tall bluffs guarded a wide sandy beach. The town itself was anchored by a big, half-empty parking lot. A photograph from Eleanor Antin's *The King of Solana Beach* series produced in 1974 shows the artist dressed as Charles I, addressing four of her "subjects"—skinny long-haired

surf kids drinking beers—from a park bench on the bluff above the town parking lot.

It's probable that David Antin helped Acker arrange the offset printing of her pamphlet *Politics* at what appears on the colophon as "The Community Press," but beyond this, there isn't much documentation of what she did during those West Coast weeks. Mel Freilicher was separating from his girlfriend, finally coming out as gay, and it's likely that Acker moved between the Antins' at Solana Beach, the UCSD campus, and Mel Freilicher's Del Mar apartment, just one town away. Her prose poem "Journal Black Cats Black Jewels" is dated Summer 1972. In it, she writes: *room over San Diego without purple head father pick up grains water-press onions goats mumble are ecstatic descriptions I am I . . . In "The Revolution and After," another prose poem written around the same time, she writes: even among freaks am freak . . . go moving San Diego Santa Cruz San Francisco Bolinas Seattle no where to move into all rooms too expensive \$60. Maintain life indefinitely I'm running out of money \$ doesn't exist . . . and: your stuff isn't personal enough you don't think program through thoroughly you'll never write (survive) you don't deserve notice consideration longing cook sweep clean all two-year-past work is O.K.*

By early August she was looking for a ride back to New York. Peter Gordon had just finished his music composition B.A. at UC San Diego. He graduated a year early because so many of the school's classes were of interest to him. He and a roommate were sharing an upstairs two-bedroom apartment at 136 ½ Sierra Avenue in Solana Beach. Gordon had turned twenty-one that June, and he celebrated his birthday by taking his first acid trip. He was still somewhat involved in an on-again, off-again romance with a graduate student, Winifred Mastro, who was one of Acker's and Freilicher's old Brandeis friends. By August their romance was mostly off, as she'd started sleeping with one of Gordon's professors.

Peter Gordon's plan was to take a road trip to New York with his friend JW before returning to Solana Beach and beginning a UCSD graduate degree in the early fall. JW, who'd already come out as gay, was another Brandeis émigré. Gordon and JW applied as drivers at a drive-away car service in San Diego and were given a late-model Pontiac sedan. When Acker found out about their trip, she offered to come along for the ride. Gordon wasn't uncomfortable about traveling with JW—the scene there was very relaxed about sexual orientation—but he thought having a girl along for the ride would be fun. Suddenly the trip seemed more interesting to him.

They left San Diego in the late afternoon and drove all night, gossiping about mutual friends and discussing books, music, cooking, food, aesthetics, and philosophy. Gordon explained how he found himself in a quandary, not sure how to reconcile his coolly formal, compositional ideas with his love for playing rock and roll. To Acker, the answers all lay in form. The disjunctive poetry she wrote was a way of capturing the fragmentation of her life in the Times Square sex show and everywhere else. Approaching Flagstaff, Arizona, around dawn, they got off the interstate on Four Mile Road to stretch their legs and piss. Acker scrambled up a desert boulder, peeled off her Indian hippie shirt, and lay out to soak up the early-morning sun. They'd been talking nonstop all night. Catching sight of this topless woman on a rock, Gordon walked up and remarked, nonchalantly he hoped, "Tits." She looked at him and even more nonchalantly replied *Do you want to fuck?* He said, "Why not?" It was a scene straight out of Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point*. He climbed up on the rock. She was twenty-six, five years older than he was, and she knew just what to do. They lay out on the boulder fucking while JW stood beside the car and watched. In Albuquerque that night, they ate bad Chinese and checked into a motel. JW slipped out discreetly so

they could fuck more. By the time they got to Kansas City, they were romantically involved.

On August 23 in Liberal, Kansas, Acker sent a postcard to Bernadette Mayer in New York:

Coming in crazy. Becoming Kerouac, then too many men. Secret messages for you. No \$. Working my way ha-ha am seeing the country—no more paranoia. Love love Kathy

Acker and Gordon were still together when they reached New York. He ditched other plans, deciding to stay with Acker and Len Neufeld at the apartment on West 163rd.

As Gordon recalls, "This was the early '70s, things were still quite fluid sexually, so for Kathy and Lenny to have some sort of arrangement didn't seem weird. I stayed in Kathy's workroom, which had a bed. For as long as I knew Kathy, she always wrote in bed. I pretty much stayed in Kathy's room and didn't really cross paths with Lenny. I had various stuff to do and was out in the evenings when Lenny was around. He had a job, so he was gone during the day and was in bed by the time I came back. He did show up while we were in bed once, pretty upset when he got the idea I was around for more than a night or two. But aside from that, I was spared whatever drama was entailed."

Ten days later Gordon flew back to L.A. to stay at his family's home in Tarzana as he'd originally planned. A rush of correspondence followed him from New York: "I was staying at my parent's house," he says. "And letters would arrive with the envelopes inscribed around the edges with slogans like *WHY NOT FUCK NOW? WHY NOT COME NOW! DEATH TO THE FAMILY! THE FAMILY IS THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL!* in red and blue marker ink." But Gordon's parents, a writer and a psychotherapist, were more amused than shocked.

Preparing to start the fall quarter, Gordon returned to San Diego alone. "For me," he recalls, "it was all very fast and intense. We had this hot little affair, and then . . . three weeks later, in late August, Kathy shows up at my doorstep in Solana Beach with two bins of clothes, dozens of cartons of books and three cats."

Acker moved in, and his roommate moved out. Here was the solution she'd been looking for. She had to separate from Neufeld, but without the pretext of a job or graduate school, she could never have moved back to San Diego on her own. She'd tell Barry Alpert in a March 1976 interview, *I had to get out of New York for personal reasons*. Already she was discovering the power of truncation when creating an artistic biography.

Acker and Gordon would stay together for the next six years, supporting each other's artistic work intellectually and emotionally, collaborating on performances and radio shows, eventually leaving San Diego for San Francisco, and San Francisco for New York. They married in the throes of her first cancer scare in February 1978, although they were no longer close, and separated later that year. Eventually they would both come to find their mostly asexual relationship too confining, but the first years Acker spent with Peter Gordon were the most peaceful and among the most productive of her life.

It sure is nice to wake up and walk out of the door in a bathrobe see the sky no one wants to rape me, she wrote to Jerry and Diane Rothenberg soon after she arrived back in Solana Beach, making sure—as she almost always did—to add a dash of sexual frisson to the letters she sent to her mentor and his wife. *I've got a wife named Peter*. After two dark years of being sick with PID and hovering around the edges of a literary competition that she knew she couldn't win, Solana Beach was a reprieve from her old

life in New York. This time the age gap between Acker and her partners was reversed. Gordon, five years younger, was unequivocally her best friend. Soon she'd begin referring to him as her brother. The two settled into a domestic life that allowed them both room for relationships and sexual adventures with acquaintances, strangers, and friends. Their Sierra Road apartment was just a block away from the new Antin house, and the two couples became close, constant friends. A shared dog moved between the two domiciles. Often Acker babysat for the Antins. She and Gordon made money by modeling for Eleanor Antin's life drawing class. When Eleanor was mailing out her *100 Boots* postcards, she trusted Acker and Gordon to meticulously hand-write the six hundred addresses on her list.

Almost immediately Acker began a new round of writing experiments. Her long poem *Homage to LeRoi Jones* samples from, and responds to, Jones/Baraka's short novel *The System of Dante's Hell*. Published in 1965, *System* powerfully signaled Jones's break from his Beat contemporaries. It was, as critic Robert Elliot Fox writes, a fugitive narrative that described "the harried flight of an intensely self-conscious Afro-American artist/intellectual from the neo-slavery of blinding, neutralizing whiteness, where the area of struggle is basically within the mind." Another long Acker poem, "Excerpts From: Entrance into Dwelling in Paradise" is a mash-up of, presumably, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and her own notes:

the gate was arched like a great hall and over walls and roof ramped vines with grapes of many colors; the red like rubies and the black like ebonties; . . .

. . . and into wine quenched in me anguish what really reality is what paradise is Nixon wins Biggest Land-slide in History what paradise is One Million People Die . . .

. . . I don't talk about my self (feelings) I don't know how to begin wrapping around a I see few people but Peter find other people make me tense set frenzy in a way I don't like myself to act I dislike Peter when he's my only company . . .

To Eleanor Antin, Acker's first round of Solana Beach experiments seemed a bit self-indulgent, even forced: "It was the usual free-form confessional stuff." Four years later, Acker herself would dismiss these attempts as *Prose poems, lyrical images . . . Jerry Rothenberg was a huge influence. Pretty, very pretty sort of things. I don't remember much; they're awful*. But her discipline in conducting these experiments was unwavering. She was still searching for the right compositional strategy to use in her work, what others might have described as "her voice." She and Mel Freilicher talked about starting a new magazine, *Before 30 Except George*, but the project never got off the ground.

After finishing *Homage*, she wrote to Bernadette Mayer and her then partner, the filmmaker Ed Bowses:

dear Bernadette! dear Ed! This typewriter doesn't work and neither does my spelling or typing! Enclosed find poem/writeout of beginning of story by L.J. MY POEM [Homage to LeRoi Jones, 1972] I'm doing the same thing process of cut up to all writing I'm doing it it feels terrific! There are no poets here besides David so I'm going crazy . . . All I do is write have sex talk about my sex and other peoples! I don't have any money owe \$400 to friends looking madly not too madly for job. I really love doing cut up like destroying everything and making music out of it I especially like writing absolutely anything I want because I know it's going to be destroyed . . . this place is paradise if I can survive absence of poets and BOOKS. Send books will pay commission anything I'll send

POEMS BACK LOTS OF POEMS ENDLESS NUMBER OF CUT UPS NEED
POET TALK LOVE Kathy

Over the next three years Acker would write to Mayer at least a dozen times.

Reading beyond Acker's exuberance—whether spontaneous or forced—it's clear she was asking the older writer to read her in-progress work and trade her unpublished poems for free books. Except for two brief postcard notes about the logistics of a reading at the St. Marks Poetry Project that she arranged for Acker early in 1975, Mayer's replies, if they exist, have not been preserved.

Acker's letters are an anomaly within the Mayer/United Artists magazine archive where they are preserved. With painful and almost tone-deaf eagerness, Acker chatters on about her own writing, her finances and debts, her crushes and sexual flings. *Dear Burning Dot*, she writes in 1974 from Albuquerque, *Spring is here sex sex. Slept w/ 2 wonderful men in Albuquerque & feel wonderful; left Albuquerque & feel miserable, sad.* From Solana Beach, spring 1973: *By the way . . . could you give me info about a guy I think you know Dan Graham. This is scene: I met him at David's (Antin) for various reasons known & unknown developed super crush on him, called him up, "will you sleep w/ me?" "yes" slept w/ him one night. That morning he says "call me Friday," like he really wants to see me I call him no answer 2 days later get hold of him, he acts like I'm the biggest creep possible . . . I'm hurt mainly 'cause I'm confused . . . if you have any info, pertaining to subject, please reply, any info is of interest. From San Francisco, 1974: *I'm just broke like crazy so I'm bugging anyone to send me free books in my Jew mood you don't need to fucking yell at me . . . I'm just fuckin freaked like I haven't yet used anything to kill pain for all those abortions but goddam aint going to fuck no one without vasectomy unless he/she got NO cock at least no sperm the cats are having a great time . . . A few months later: *I gave a friend of mine a blow-job in the bathroom and I met Ed Dorn so I felt totally fantastic . . .***

The poets Susan Howe and Alice Notley were among Mayer's other correspondents at that time. Exemplary of literary friendships, their thoughtful, neatly typed letters convey their responses to books (Laura Riding, Geoffrey Chaucer, Simone Weil, and Virginia Woolf), their pregnancies, their families and mutual friends in prose that is circumspectly sparing of the word *I*. Like Mayer, Notley grew up working class without independent means. Although they both lived close to the bone and were often broke, their letters rarely mention finances. Instead: "I found my old notebook from when I was reading [Laura Riding's] *The Telling* but it didn't bring back enough for me to remember why I thought it great. It is based on the following peculiar notion (I think): that everyone has access to memory of a time before they were born, 'when Being was not number,' and the terrible division into men and woman hadn't taken place . . ."

When Mayer, while working at the St. Marks Poetry Project, scheduled a reading Acker had been asking her for months to arrange, Acker changed her dates three times and then asked the other writer to fund her plane fare by applying for a New York State emergency artist loan. *money, she wrote, is a problem. No more phone here, to get money for my books Peter & I are borrowing begging & not eating cause Peter's father don't have no more money.* In a postscript Acker adds: *I figured out my male stars are David Antin, L. Wiener, Ashley Peter. Dan Graham on outs. You & E. Antin my female stars.*

Handling these letters with archival gloves in the sanctum of the Mandeville Special Collections Library at UC San Diego, one is tempted to give them an evidential weight they couldn't possibly have had when they were written and read. Throughout the 1970s postcards and letters were used for all kinds of loose talk. An off-peak three-minute long-distance call cost \$1.00, about two-thirds the hourly minimum wage, while a stamp could be bought for 11 cents. Like all correspondence, the content and

tone of Acker's letters varies according to whom she is speaking and what she hopes to achieve. She was always extremely focused. Still, immersed in the Poetry Project's anti-celebrity ethos and self-supporting since her mid-teens, Mayer must have found Acker's entreaties somewhat nervy and strange.

Years later Acker would avenge her own awkwardness: *[Performing in the Times Square sex show in the 1970s] put me in such a different class as anybody else, she'd tell Larry McCaffery in a 1990 interview. Being in that kind of world made me see things so differently. For instance, I could see that politics were what was involved in separating me from the St. Mark's crowd because they were basically upper-middle class, while Forty-Second Street wasn't. (The New York and post-New York School scenes that coalesced at St. Marks were notable for the emergence of such high-literary writers as Ted Berrigan and Ron Padgett, who'd attended state schools thanks to the GI Bill.)*

Though Acker and Mayer were born just two years apart, the differences between the letters from Mayer's other correspondents signal a deep generational divide.

One block away from the beach, Peter Gordon's apartment on North Sierra Avenue occupied the top half of a two-story bungalow. The entrance was in the rear. Perhaps shaking the sand off your feet, you entered it on a makeshift wood staircase, built when the landlord converted his house to a duplex. The front room, used as a bedroom, faced west toward a sliver of ocean beyond the bluff. While Gordon attended his classes, Acker liked to sit up in bed writing notebooks in fat, cursive script. Later she'd go into the workroom to type up her finished pieces. San Diego was paradise, but she had to be careful not to be lulled into inertia. She wrote every day.

Gordon lived on a stipend from UC San Diego and some modest parental support, but as they were more or less splirting expenses, Acker needed to find some kind of job that wouldn't impinge on her writing and the morning dream-drift she channeled into her work. Their friends among the ex-student crowd in San Diego were editing textbooks for a local publisher or working as room-service waiters, complaining about shit jobs that ate up their time. But there were a handful of strip clubs around the county that catered to sailors and workers. Most of the women who worked there were hippies, dancing one or two shifts a week to get by. They chose their own songs off the jukebox and improvised costumes from thrift stores. It didn't take Acker long to decide that stripping would be a lot better than full-time "robot" employment. She called herself "Target" and "Kathy Kat" and worked for a small local mafia that rotated the girls from club to club between sets in a pink van, keeping the flesh fresh at every establishment they ran.

While the Fun City job in Times Square was a descent into hell she'd attempt to unravel in writing for the rest of her life, stripping in San Diego felt benign, almost light. As Mel Freilicher would write five years after her death, "In San Diego, she rather happily worked as a stripper . . . Kathy, aka 'Target,' would do an interpretive strip to 'Che' by Ornette Coleman, after carefully explaining to the audience of mostly sailors who Che was and why he was so venerable." As she told Barry Alpert, *[San Diego was] a nice place to work as a stripper. I worked in a nice place. You didn't get much money, but sailors turn out to be very nice people. But there was nothing to do. Waiting backstage for the van, she listened to her coworkers talking about bad boyfriends and drug busts and reprised their stories in a text she'd title "Stripper Disintegration."*

She danced for a while and then quit and tried tutoring Latin. But there wasn't much work, and tutoring paid only \$5 an

hour. Eventually she took a job at the massage parlor in Solana Beach. The Antins' veterinarian, who was a regular, became an admirer and offered to help her, convinced that she could do better in a higher-end brothel a few towns away. They all had a good laugh over this. From there, Acker drifted back into working the clubs, but it was really no joke. She was about to turn twenty-six; she had to come up with a more sustainable way of supporting herself. She and Gordon were already planning their move to San Francisco. He wanted to finish his M.A. at Mills College with the operatic composer and ambient music pioneer Robert Ashley, and they both thought they'd be happier in a real city. But they couldn't leave until he finished the spring quarter in June.

Finally, that spring, she came up with what seemed like a genius idea. She was a writer supporting herself in the sex industry: why not *write* about sex and stop stripping? But to do this, she'd need an advance. The story she'd tell Jackson Mac Low, and many others, was that she and Peter Gordon asked his father if he could help out by being her patron while she wrote the first book, which she'd call *Rip-Off Red, Girl Detective*.

When I fact-checked this story with Gordon last year, he replied, "I can envision my dear late father reading about his patronage of Kathy: looking at me with an arched eyebrow and a slight suggestions of a wry smile." Gordon's father was no Maurice Girodias. Far from being a patron, he was a writer himself, supporting his family by working for Voice of America and writing scripts. Nevertheless, Acker seems to have been determined to cast her boyfriend's dad as a patron and, by extension—even more gratifyingly—as a substitute father. Since cutting ties with her own family three years before in New York, she'd had friends and mentors, but no one who offered real financial support. As she'd write to Jackson Mac Low that summer, *I live with Peter, my brother, friend, lover, who's the first decent wonderful blab blab his parents understand I'm their daughter &*

they've accepted my fantasy of a real brother-sister relation & his father's supported me for the last 4 months (minimal, but support!) so I could write Rip Off Red, which is the most wonderful help I could get from anyone & for the first time in my life I feel free & open enough to try to risk myself in order to deal with myself & find out about stuff. Still, her real patron was Peter Gordon himself: "I shared whatever I had with her, and we scraped and struggled for money."

Among the "stuff" Acker was finding out during those months was the difficulty of maintaining sexual relationships with women: she didn't have sex with the women she loved, and she didn't love the ones she had sex with. This was a conundrum Acker would continue pursuing for most of her life. But the myth she devised of the Gordon family's financial support during those months gave her the confidence boost that helped her to finish the book. *I'd love to fuck the whole family*, she wrote.

Written in the first person and hung on the slenderest narrative thread, *Rip-Off Red* follows Rip-Off Red, Girl Detective and her boyfriend, Peter Peter, as they investigate the abrupt murder of Spitz, a glamorous young woman who sat next to them on a plane ride from the West Coast to New York. Slightly drunk, Red masturbates under her coat to a montage of fantasies that become true when Spitz suddenly kisses her. She and Spitz slip out to the bathroom to have sex. The narrative giddily, often hilariously, swerves from pulp fiction's terse present tense—I *have to find out how Spitz was murdered*—and tough-talking wise cracks to lyrical flights of pornography. There were plenty of precedents for paperback porn published by highly literary writers—from Alexander Trocchi's string of "erotic novels" written in the mid-1950s for Olympia Press, to Diane di Prima's 1968 *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, to Fanny Howe's 1966 *Vietnam Nurse*, an antiwar story told as an erotic romance for Avon Books's popular "Nurse" series. Still, with such passages as

I have to disintegrate my mind to the point my mind is insparable from the common mind or my "unconscious." By thinking, dreaming, following sexual and other desires, and by inflaming you with sensuous images, we can get rid of the universities, the crowded towns, the bureaucracies. I call up images of myself, or just images . . .

it's hard to imagine that Acker ever believed *Rip-Off Red* could be sold as commercial porn. But that's not the point. More important, while writing *Rip-Off Red*, Acker turned away from the "pretty, very pretty" lyrical prose poems she'd been laboring at since arriving in San Diego and found a sustainable method of working. She was now writing books.

That May, while she was still writing *Rip-Off Red*, Acker composed *Some Lives of Murderesses*, a delirious, blunt, and fragmented first-person text that would become the first part of *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, a six-pamphlet serial. In *Some Lives*, she transposes fragments of such obscure mass-market biographies as *Rogues and Adventuresses* into the first person and intercuts them with her entries from her own diaries. Cut and paste, snatch and grab. Five years after attending David Antin's poetry seminars, she'd discovered a way to use his compositional mandate—*go to the library, steal!*—for her own purposes.

The six installments of *The Black Tarantula* would establish Acker's reputation in the art and avant-garde literary worlds. The goal she states toward the end of the final installment—I was interested in "fame" as one end: (1) people whose work I want to find out about would talk to me, (2) I would somehow be able to pay for food rent etc. doing something connected, (3) artists I fall in love with would fuck me—would soon be at least partly realized. Throughout her career she'd be asked over and over about how she started her work as a "plagiarist" or "appropriationist" when

she wrote *Black Tarantula*, but when she talked to Barry Alpert in 1976, her account hadn't yet crystallized into an origin myth. As she explained to the critic over lunch at an Indian restaurant, she was bummed about an unrequited crush [on artist Dan Graham] and thinking about changing herself. And at the time

There were other women . . . art world women like Adrian Piper, who were doing pieces about changing themselves, changing parts of themselves . . . Martha Wilson, for instance. I simply didn't know it. That's interesting to me that people get interested in the same problem at the same time without directly influencing each other.

. . . I was very interested in the use of the "I." So I went to the UCSD library . . . and took out whatever books about murderesses I could get. I figured, of all the people I could figure out I'm not, I know I've never murdered anybody. At least directly. I picked out books that were anything as long as it wasn't psychological. Crappy novels like Blood on the Carpet I remember was one I picked up . . . I didn't deal with any fiction in TBT [The Black Tarantula]. It was reporting . . . I didn't even want to deal with the problem of fiction. I took these books home . . . and then I sat down and wrote out . . . I tightened up the language and played games with it. Basically I just copied . . . only I changed the third person to the first person, so they'd seem to be about myself. And then I set up sections within parentheses what were just diary sections . . . about who I was, what I was doing . . . train of thought stuff . . .

So there were two I's in the book, the I without the parentheses and the I within the parentheses . . .

Gradually what happened was the two I's started playing games with each other, becoming one. It was set up as a cold-blooded experiment about what would happen.

Written in the historical present—the tense most often used in Latin histories—*Some Lives of Murderesses* uses the same form minus the Chanderlesque hard-boiled detective affect. She worked on it quickly and didn't go back to revise. *I become a murderess*, she begins. *I'm born in the late autumn or winter of 1827. And: I'm born poor St. Helen's Isle of Wight. 1790. As a child I have hardly any food to eat. Tonally, there's a comic resonance with the arresting "I Dreamed" Maidenform underwear ads, ubiquitous during the 1950s and '60s: I Dreamed I Was Wanted . . . Took the Cue . . . Was a Toreador in My Maidenform Bra. Meanwhile, the "I" within parentheses agonizes: I call up D in Los Angeles do you want to sleep with me when and where . . . No call three days later I have to see D I don't know him hello I've got a ride to Los Angeles lie . . . We don't touch talk about anything personal until we get to motel never talk about anything personal spend night together . . .*

The experiment works. It's a lighthearted act of Arraudian cruelty. Almost magically, the diary writings Acker had been trying so hard to lift into poetry are transformed into literary *matériel*.

She showed her new work to the Antins, and they were impressed. Eleanor insisted on sending the piece to her friend Carol Bergé, who edited the popular literary magazine *Center*. When Bergé wrote back that the work had no merit and its author was most likely schizophrenic, they devised a new plan. Before Eleanor Antin found gallery representation, she mailed postcards of frames from her ongoing photographic series *100 Boots* to a list of six hundred friends and acquaintances. She mailed the cards out once a month. It didn't cost much, and it gave her a deadline. People began looking forward to them. Where would these boots go next? To a church or farm, to a strip club or government building? Although Antin's DIY strategy has come to be seen by art history as "incorporating a method of

exhibiting into her work which navigated its own way through the art world and around traditional gallery shows," at the time it was the only means Antin had of showing her work. As David Antin would later explain mail art, "It was poor people's art . . . Anybody could do it if they had the intelligence and the energy. And Kathy had both intelligence and energy. And she had desire." He gave Acker the *100 Boots* mailing list, and she decided to repeat Eleanor's strategy. Instead of sending out *Lives of Murderesses* as a one-off pamphlet, she'd expand it into a serial aimed at the insider audience the Antins had already amassed. Calling herself the Black Tarantula, she'd write and print one installment a month, mail each one out to the list, and see what happened next. She'd call the series *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*. Eventually the six installments would be gathered and presented together in Acker's first non-self-published book. Until then she was content to remain anonymous, her real identity known only by hearsay. The art world hadn't changed that much since Eleanor Antin produced *Blood of a Poet Box* in 1968. Everyone who mattered then *knew* that the Black Tarantula was a young woman named Kathy Acker. Then, just as now, rumor and hearsay were far more effective tools for advancing a nascent reputation than plastering one's unwanted name all over the place.

Almost immediately Acker talked the Solana Beach newspaper into letting her print the pamphlets for free on their press. By now it was June. She and Peter Gordon were leaving for San Francisco the following month, and she still had to finish up *Red*, print and mail out the *Murderess* pamphlets, and begin a second installment. She pushed herself hard and developed an ulcer.

The next pamphlet, dated June 1973, was called *A Point-to-Point Comparison Between My Life and the Life of Moll Cutpurse, the Queen-Regent of Misrule, the Roaring Girl, the Benevolent Tyrant of City Thieves and City Murderers, the Bear Lady*, and it

begins: *I'm born crazy in Barbican, four years after the defeat of the terrible Armada.* Soon she switches to the parenthetical "I": *(I making money. I have two main problems: (1) how to earn \$200 to \$300 per month to eat, pay rent, without becoming a robot and with my clothes on (2) do what I want which is real, approaches reality. End of my life.)* Immersed in her readings of eighteenth-century novels, she adopts the declarative voice of the picaresque narrator and states the history and hopes of Every Female Late-Twentieth-Century Artist to startling and comic effect. Already, Acker's parenthetical "I" is becoming more strident.

[T]he *Black Tarantula* series, she writes to Jackson Mac Low, coming out once a month is basically my way of making myself schizophrenic w/out the censor . . . I'm doing this after reading a book by Mary Barnes & Joe Berke . . . also many accounts by schizophrenics, Laing, books on Tibetan Buddhism, the whole Kingley Hall crew etc with the idea that if I do this slowly & don't scare myself by sudden shocks I'll be able to deal w/ other people more honestly & directly, evolve new ways of being w/ people . . . crack up the old identity god. So I copy texts (get rid of style, expressionism in writing) and become the people of the texts: *Black Tarantula #1* . . . was trying to crack myself by making myself incorporate obviously foreign identities . . . *Black Tarantula #2* was another crack, I identified strongly w/ Moll Cutpurse, so I took cracks at my feelings of identification. All rights for this shit, now I'm crazy as a bedbug. No, but very real openings in the mind have been reached, so something's happening. I'm not sure of all the implications of what I'm doing . . .

"Dear Kathy Aker [sic]," the Black Mountain poet Fielding Dawson wrote that July on the back of a card from the Russian Tea Room, "I received your long story, and read it last night. It is very very good, your voice is fresh and so new as to be a bright influence on anyone seriously involved in writing. Keep up the good work, and if I can be of any help, let me know. Your style . . .

is utterly refreshing, as is your humor and your divided self; the fantasy projections are in anger and emotional foundation: completely articulate, as is the suspense, and hysteria at the end. You make it work. You are the original . . . and strong. Bless you. PS: I've been after a verbal tone & surface lucidity for years. You achieve it as something natural."

In San Francisco, Acker and Gordon moved into an upstairs apartment at 46 Belvedere Street, three blocks east of Golden Gate Park, in the heart of the Haight-Ashbury district. Still sick with the ulcer, she writes to Jackson Mac Low: *I couldn't bear leaving SD but had to, couldn't make \$ in SD except by stripping & couldn't stand doing that any longer, needed more input than my 5 friends . . . I thought SF would be a good alternative to NY . . . Peter wanted to get to a city, I could lead more of my double sexual life in SF etc. Even though I still haven't gotten over the jolt of entering another new environment . . . I feel I can live here: I live near the park & the beach, I can find part-time work, more stars, artists are so open here, like already these two people just offered, they hardly knew me, to illustrate my pornography, & everyone wants to hear about what I'm doing.*

Instinctively, she avoided the local poetry scene with its stars and acolytes and began writing Part 3: *I Move to San Francisco. I Begin to Copy My Favorite Pornography Books and Become the Main Person in Each of Them.* Her readings on schizophrenia, which may have been prompted by Carol Bergé's off-base response to her work conjoined with her own efforts to "crack herself up," begin leading her back to the mindscape of childhood: a cosmos of wonder, sensation, and fear that will become a basis for all her future writing. Channeling Violette Leduc's lesbian schoolgirl novel *Thérèse and Isabelle*, she recalls her early

years at the Lenox School and the dangerous thrill of intimate female friendships: "I think Miss St. Pierre's a lesbian" Jean whispers. I can't tell Jean about everything, who I like and hate, she'd reach too far inside me rub against the open veins . . . "Do you like being in school?" I ask Jean. "No, I want to do whatever I want to do fuck everyone . . . I want to blow my identity outwards, away, until I'm always running in a black ocean under a black sky and I can control my emotions" . . . Blow up the school.

Almost immediately she begins writing Part 4: *I Become Helen Seferis, and Then Alexander Trocchi*. The pamphlet begins with the epigraph *I've always feared most that someone will destroy my mind*. In it, she collages descriptions of sexual frenzies lifted from published pornography with excerpts from her own diaries. *As the man's cock enters me, every muscle of me begins to shake, every nerve begins to burn and quiver. I'm both liquid and solid. I'm completely pleasure*. By now, she's writing her diaries to use as material in this new work. *I'm no longer interested in my memories, she writes, only in my continuing escalating feelings*. She describes herself approaching the point of complete dissolution she'd looked for in childhood, *a black ocean under a black sky*. She finds that sex is the best way to get there. *I'm speaking to you directly. Complete disorder exists*. She'd never cared much for recreational drugs, but *I use psilocybin, mescaline, pure acid; occasionally hash as an aphrodisiac*. Around the same time, she begins drawing dense, intricate maps of her dreams in fountain-pen ink on large sheets of paper. Flight patterns of birds move across regions with names like *The Plains, The Village, and The Childhood Land* and line drawings of lions and wolves, trees, huts, and streets. A spiraling path leads past a lighthouse; then, at *the magic place*, the path dissolves into a cluster of circles. Small hand-printed captions describe the journey:

I have to
stop at the
right huts to
buy the right things
We walk up and around through the sand
birds sit on top
of each branch
A tree which is
the world which is
my back. Its branches
are moving. Making
sound.

Her maps look like Australian Aboriginal maps of the Dreamtime; they look like the map of the Hundred Acre Woods on the endpapers of *Winnie the Pooh*. They're completely original.

In September, Gordon began classes at Mills, working mostly with Robert Ashley. Ashley—who'd taught at Brandeis in the mid-'60s when Acker was a student there—soon became a powerful influence and a friend to both Gordon and Acker. As a musician, Ashley was exploring some of the same terrain Acker sought to access through her writing. Control, loss of control, the circumvention of rational thought to receive new information from the individual or universal unconscious. While at Mills, Ashley was beginning to work on *Automatic Writing*, which would become one of his signature pieces. Afflicted with a mild case of Tourette's, he'd become fascinated with the eruption of "involuntary speech," the vocal tic that characterizes the syndrome. He wondered if the sound-making urge that overcame him during these episodes was linked to his work as a composer. Wasn't "involuntary speech" a primitive form of composition, erupting from the unconscious? As he'd write later, "[D]uring the

time of composing *Automatic Writing* I was in a deep depression, because, among other things to be depressed about, the world was not interested in the kind of music that I was interested in. I was out of work, so I decided to 'perform' involuntary speech. The performances were more or less failures because the difference between involuntary speech and any other kind of allowed behavior is too big to be overcome willfully, so the performances were largely imitations of involuntary speech, with only a few moments here and there of 'loss of control.' These moments, triumphs for me, are documented elsewhere."

At Mills, Gordon and Acker become friends with the composer Jill Kroesen. A student and later collaborator of Robert Ashley's, Kroesen was finishing her M.A. in music composition that year. Kroesen and Gordon briefly became a couple, but then changed their minds. The three friends hung out together at 46 Belvedere and gave themselves pseudonyms. Acker was alternately the Black Tarantula, Rip-Off Red, Gold Lamé and Silver Lamé. Kroesen was Fay Schism ("Fay Schism begins in the Home"), and Gordon called himself Art Povera. They put their utility bills in Art's name and deployed a system for receiving free long-distance calls that worked for a while, until it didn't. Acker and Gordon hosted a Sunday-afternoon radio show on KPOO 86.5 FM, *Poor People's Radio*. Friends such as Robert Ashley and Terry Riley stopped by to perform and do interviews; Acker read from the Marquis de Sade while Gordon played records by the Les Six composer Arthur Honegger. Their place at 46 Belvedere was an ordinary hippie apartment, as Kroesen recalls: a couch in the front, not much other stuff, but printed cloth everywhere.

In the fifth installment of *The Black Tarantula—I Explore My Miserable Childhood. I Become William Butler Yeats*—written in San Francisco that September, Acker intercuts the autobiographical writings of William Butler Yeats with chronologized scenes from her childhood, presented as "evidence." *Age 16: My mother tells*

me while my father and sister are listening that my father's cock is 100 wide and short for her, he doesn't fuck her enough. I show I understand what she means. That fall, the Chilean president is deposed by a CIA-backed coup; General Pinochet's troops round up five thousand alleged dissidents in the National Stadium. In Chile, thousands are tortured and killed. At home, the Watergate trials drag on ad infinitum. Philip K. Dick writes *A Scanner Darkly*, Erica Jong publishes *Fear of Flying*, and *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* stays at the top of the best-seller list for thirty-eight weeks. The Black Tarantula writes,

NIXON MURDERS CHILE

AGNEW MURDERS NIXON

THE POOR STARVE, EAT THEIR

CHILDREN

while reaching back through the past to recover the texture of childhood. Sensations drift into the text, and she records them. *Everything is incredibly beautiful*, she writes, and *My childhood dream: (narrow down to process)*. Images of her estranged mother haunt her.

"A cold dry windy day clouds blowing through the sky shine and shadow. A dead leaf brushes my face. The streets remind me of St Louis . . . red brick houses, trees, vacant lots. Bright and windy back in a cab through empty streets . . . 'I hope you find your way . . . red brick houses, trees . . . the address in empty streets,'" William S. Burroughs writes in *Exterminator*, published that year. In *The Black Tarantula*, Acker recalls a scene from her early childhood before her half sister was born. The passage will flicker through much of her writing in the coming decades like a Super-8 film loop:

My mother puts on black fur-lined boots with two-inch-pointed heels over her tan stockings, an orange-brown tight sweater over a white bra, she has large soft full breasts, a straight orange-brown skirt brown and blue triangles running down her thighs. Bright red lipstick and pink powder. Over this, her black seal coat. She looks young and pretty. We go out of the apartment together, down to the street where it's snowing, three blocks away to my favorite park. Pure white covers over the lower level: the basketball court, skating rink and adult swings, completely: the upper level where sensuous, jungle gyms, and sandboxes used to be, looks like a magic woods. My mother and I play together; she tells me she's my sister. We go to a drugstore to get ice-cream sodas; a man asks her if we're sisters.

My mother tells me my "father" isn't my real father: my real father left her when she was three months pregnant and wanted nothing to do with me, ever.

Beyond the Black Tarantula's brash, trash-talking persona, what's remarkable about this early work is the intensity Acker arrives at: accessing fleshy, emotive fragments of female experience within a framework of formalist rigor.

* * *

"Your phenomenology is phenomenal," Jackson Mac Low writes her in January after receiving a full set of *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, Parts 1–6. "I dig it the most. I don't get this stuff about people being bored by it . . . I don't believe it & I don't think you do."

Mac Low offers to fund her next series with an inheritance he expects to receive from his mother's estate. Reading her work triggers an extraordinary eight-page addendum to his brief letter, in which he dissects his recent sex and relationship problems with his estranged wife, Iris Lezak. "O Kathy, I'm so lonely when

she wasn't here. I was crying for a couple hours this morning, even though we're going to meet for a concert (Joan Jonas tonight," he writes. It's as if reading her work has suddenly given the fifty-two-year-old poet/composer permission to talk about his most intimate feelings.

Acker completed the final installment of *The Black Tarantula* by mid-September. She approached three print shops—all of which declined to produce the text-only pamphlet because "it offended their morals"—before she found someone willing to accept the work. Depressed by what she perceived as a lack of response to the later parts of the series, she collapsed with exhaustion in November. She was still dependent on Peter Gordon for financial support, although they were hardly a sexual couple any longer. One or two nights a week she slept with their mutual friend Rich Gold, an arrangement that semi-pleased everyone. [1] *decided this whole country world me is totally not totally but SO MUCH controlled by money interests the best thing I can do is find out how those money-powers work on me, she wrote to Mac Low. I sort of tried to commit suicide it was really awful and I hope I never return there again.* In an unpublished text titled "Diary II," she describes two attempts: *I slice open the skin of my left wrist and face with a razor blade I had taken a week before from Gil's house, the razor was too dull; the next day I knotted a black scarf around a light fixture, Peter walked in . . . I now want to find out who's controlling me economically and why.* She thought about turning the text into a new *Black Tarantula*, but then didn't: *it would bore the shit out of everyone.*

Throughout the decade Acker's letters contain many accounts of illness, abortions, fatigue, and suicidal depression, problems that continued to plague her well throughout her forties, but "all of these things," as her friend Roz Kaveney later recalled, "were completely compartmentalized."

During the weeks she was deeply depressed, Acker learned of some stocks and a small trust set up in her name by her biological

father a number of years before. It was as if, by writing about her disappeared father as the Black Tarantula, she'd conjured him. Together, the funds amounted to about \$350 (\$1,950 in today's money), but they'd been withheld from her for years by her parents. When she threatened to sue them, they agreed to release the funds and, "under certain conditions," pay for a trip to New York. Her mother's husband, Bud Alexander, was present at Acker's birth, and he was named as her father on her birth certificate. Acker always knew that her *real* father had abandoned her mother when she was just three months pregnant, but during this contretemps, Acker learned her biological father's name and occupation for the first time. Her mother's long-ago disappeared lover Donald Lehmann was the CEO of Wildroot Cream Oil, a Buffalo-based family business that had been acquired by Colgate-Palmolive in 1959.

Acker never contacted Donald Lehmann, but she continued to think and write about his abandonment throughout her life.

As she was going to read with some friends at the Poetry Project on February 18, she accepted her parent's offer. Early that month, she flew to New York. It was during this trip that she met the artist Alan Sondheim, with whom she'd make *Blue Tape*: an intimate, antagonistic video work that haunts him to this day.