**A Brief Interview by the Editor**

Madeline Berns

In the process of compiling – and, in a couple cases, transcribing – these interviews, I began to develop a few questions of my own and emailed Alice in search of her answers. As a young woman, I feel compelled to learn from her in the hopes that one day, I may be as strong, creative, and inspiring as she is.

**MB:** Your poems have been very raw, emotional experiences for me. Just last week, we were passing around a recording of you reading “Primal Duration,” and quite a few of us cried. How do you think about the ways that your poems make people feel things? Additionally, many poems you write that carry significant personal meaning – such as “At Night The States” – still resonate with a wide audience. How do you think about the roles that loss and pain play in your poetry?

**AN:** I tend not to think about the audience's emotions when I write, but I sometimes think about that afterwards. Though I'm occasionally aware of trying to be unhurtful. I don't know if you've read the book called *At Night the States*, but it consists of short poems I wrote during the year after Ted died and then the longer poem with that title written two years later. The short poems are very exposed and painful, to me even now, whereas the long poem was written later and felt a lot different. I put the short poems away for a couple of years, then looked at them and thought that they might be of use to someone else who was going through the same sort of experience. I then decided to publish them, along with the longer poem, out of this sense of my being useful. I don't think I've made that gesture quite as directly since then, but once you do something you're kind of always doing it.

As for "Primal Duration," it's probably a poem that leads to the loss-and-pain answer. I assume you mean that poem and ones following it, the death of Tawny. This is entirely fictionalized, but made from my experience over the years. It's an event that's about loss and human cruelty at the same time -- but the death is that of a half-coyote dog. When I was around four years old, we had a little dog named Mickey that some people fed glass to. As far as I know it didn't happen to Marie, who was real. I can't seem to come to the point. Pain and loss are at the center of everything that happens to us because we die. I've lost a number of people who were close to me. It's there wherever I turn, so I deal with it.

**MB:** My research project is a compilation of your selected interviews, so I’ve been reading quite a few of them. What always seems to crop up is your femininity and occupation as a “poet-mother.” Do you ever get tired of interviewers asking you questions about being a female poet (surely they would never ask a male poet about being a male poet)?

**AN:** Sure. Though I haven't been asked the mother question lately since I'm so old! I still get asked the "female" part of it, I think people want to know how hard it's been. It was a challenge at the beginning, because there were so few of us writing poems. The subject matter had never been approached even by women, there was no tradition, no known way in. I still feel like the first one ever to write poems about pregnancy and childbirth in a direct way. The first one in the world. I'm just as interested though, in a question Tony Hoagland once asked me in a class at the University of Pittsburgh: he asked me how I managed to survive all those years without teaching or working at another profession. He's the only person who's ever asked me this, and I think he was just curious. It was refreshing.

**MB:** Growing up, many of my peers disliked poetry because of the way we were taught it in school. We were actually made to paraphrase poems and find the “hidden meaning” behind each line – and every semester, without fail, a Robert Frost poem was included in the mix. The process was so tedious, so mind-numbingly analytical, that many of us were turned off from reading poetry at all when not assigned. Did you have similar experiences in school, and how did this influence your becoming a poet? Having been a poet your whole life, how do you continue to learn about poetry?

**AN:** I didn't have this experience in high school, though I had it in college. In high school my teachers simply had us read poems aloud in class and talk about them a little. We all liked doing this, and I memorized certain poems without even trying. I remember walking out of the lit class in my junior year -- this in a small town in the Mojave Desert -- and a friend of mine turning to me and saying the line "rats' feet over broken glass" with complete bemusement. We had just read Eliot's "The Hollow Men" aloud and were trying to figure out if we liked it or not. When I got to Barnard College, the professors seemed snooty and opinionated sometimes. I'm remembering one instance now. There was a woman teaching a 19th century American literature class who asked us to select two poems by Emily Dickinson, one we thought was good and one we thought wasn't so good, the assumption being that since there were so many poems some of them wouldn't be as good. Isn't that awful? For the one I liked I chose "My life stood loaded like a gun" -- I don't have the book nearby so I can't look up the punctuation and exact wording, but it became a central poem in Susan Howe's *My Emily* *Dickinson,* it is really interesting and this teacher tore it apart*.* What a jerk!

I continue to learn about poetry by falling in love with poets or poetries I haven't read before. In the last ten or fifteen years I've managed to discover and be influenced by the late poetry of John Ashbery, the plays of Racine, the poetry of Lucretius, certain kinds of theory in Latin oratory, and so on. I also read what my sons write and think about what they're doing.

**MB:** And lastly, a cliché yet timeless question for writers everywhere: who are you reading right now?

**AN:** I read a lot of genre fiction. I'm reading the new Michael Connelly at the moment, but I'm also reading a book on the runic language, in French. Actually I'm reading it for the second time.

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“Alice Notley continues to live in Paris and makes frequent trips to the U.S. to give readings and lectures. Among her two newest volumes are *Eurynome’s Sandals*(Presses Universitaires de Rouen, 2019) and *For the Ride*(Penguin Books, 2020).”

*- Poetry Foundation, “Alice Notley”*