

On *The Truant Lover*: Juliet Patterson in conversation with Gabrielle Civil

Q The title of your book *The Truant Lover* is quite evocative. Are you a love poet? Is this a collection of love poems?

A I am, yes, fundamentally a love poet and in many ways, *The Truant Lover* is a collection of love poems. A friend aptly observed that the book as whole “observes love held, love lost, love transcending—the triad”—and I think that’s accurate. Many of the poems in the collection are full of doubt and uncertainty, but at the core, attempt to address the spiritual power of an open heart. I’m interested in the complexities of love, but not just romantic love—but rather, love as a state of being. How does one act from love in this modern society? What does it mean to commit oneself to a life of love? How can this kind of romantic tradition find meaning in contemporary society? These are the kinds of questions the poems attempt to address.

Q *The Truant Lover* takes up the writing of such women poets as Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, Lorine Niedecker and Rae Armantrout. How do you situate yourself vis-à-vis a tradition of “experimental women’s writing”?

A I feel as though I very much belong to the tradition of Dickinson and Niedecker because of a desire to map and express the interior life lyrically. I think Dickinson and Niedecker (in very different ways) were interested in constructing a poem that didn’t depend on the rules of material reality—the poem attempted instead to describe itself to create its own world. I also love the way both of these poets held a deep appreciation for nature and beauty and I think there’s an interesting juxtaposition there, between a love for the world (the natural world) and the need to express one’s innermost “nature.” It seems to me a very dynamic approach that gives commentary to the question: What is nature? I sampled some of their language in some of the poems in the book, because I was interested in creating a kind of collaborative voice among us. It is also a gesture of admiration and homage, but I guess I was really interested in thinking about how some of the language of these poets might enter into a contemporary context to change or alter it. In many ways, I also wanted their company in my efforts to sincerely address post-modern uncertainty and love. Innovative writing, particularly by women, has been so important to my growth not only as a writer, but as a human being: encountering the mind working within a poem. To reveal this kind of consciousness is really revolutionary.

To articulate not just the mind, but the heart and even the soul, requires great skill and fortitude. I admire this so much in the work of many experimental writers, as I think it teaches all of us a new way to be vulnerable with each other. I am deeply influenced by a tradition uncompromising in its idealism to reclaim language. I guess that’s how I view my “experiment.”

Q Poetically, how do you relate yourself to lyric, fragment or sentence?

A I can’t imagine being anything other than a lyric poet. Lyric really is the reason I am a poet. As much as I love a good sentence, I’m not very capable of constructing one (without a lot of effort) in my mind. The fragment, for me, seems to cut closer to the articulation of the heart. The fragment also presents a lot of fluidity and freedom in a way that is very different than the sentence. Somehow, fragments seem more akin to other ways of expression to me—paint or dance—they begin to move away from our expected notions of language and take words to their breaking point. I’m fascinated by the possibility of enlivening and transforming language—for me, that’s really the crux of poetry. Of course, I do also write in sentences, but again, what interests me is the unexpected, the surprise.

Q In “To a Reader,” you write: “No bodies in bodies stand / oppositely.” How do you negotiate the mind / body split? How does this connect to the traditional reunion of reader and writer or text? What does *The Truant Lover* intimate about reading overall?

A I’m glad you ask this question, because the mind/body split is really a big concern for me in terms of our modern culture. In the West, particularly, I think we suffer from a deep division within ourselves and it’s something that we desperately need to heal. On the surface, it sounds very simple to unite the body and mind, but it’s really a very profound practice. Poetry has been one kind of engagement that has helped me to develop a relationship to the body—not just as a writer, but as a reader, because, again, I think a lot of the work of poems happens through metaphor and image; tools that naturally encourage us to have an experience with the whole of ourselves. What I am really talking about is the imagination—a kind of imaginative play that all of us know naturally as children. Imagination seems to fuse the body and mind without any effort and it’s something we’ve really lost in American culture. We don’t actively engage our imagination, nor do we regularly employ creative thinking. How does this connect to the traditional reunion of reader and writer? Or reader and text? When I am teaching, I encounter a lot of students who seem to be reading entirely for meaning. They want to understand (more than experience) a text. I think that’s very interesting. It’s a cultural expectation, of course, for the reader to want to understand a text. We encounter language (a tool most of use everyday) and expect direct meaning, but what I’m talking about here is the narrow definition of “understanding” that I encounter in so many readers. Can one understand with the body? Can one have an experience that is not centered in rhetorically-driven language or meaning? This brings up an entirely different question about our educational system and how many of us are taught to encounter text, but the point I hope to make with my own work is one of direct experience. I think I am really interested in atmosphere, drama and emotion as a poet and the hope of the *The Truant Lover* is to invoke new ways of reading; imaginative play, I guess—that’s what I aiming to have with the reader.

*Gabrielle Civil is a black woman poet, scholar, conceptual and performance artist originally from Detroit, MI. She has shown her performance work nationally and internationally; and, her chaplet of poetry “Glints” was recently issued from WinteRed Press. She is an Associate Professor of English at The College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, MN*