Bathroom Songs: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as a Poet

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Bathroom Songs: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as a Poet.
'Shyly / as a big sister I would yearn / to trace its avocations,'

Or,

Who’s the Muse?

Mary Baine Campbell

‘Sisterhood is Very Complicated’: there’s a reason that epithet was ditched in favour of a dactyl with half the syllables. Still, it’s the truth, if not exclusive of its shorter, slighter sister slogan. Here’s a story of how Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick taught me that complexity. And its power too, even sorcery, a word that comes (no, not from soror but) from Latin serere, to arrange things in a sequence — particularly, in the case of sorcery, the lots (“sorts”) that make a fortune. It’s a story about poetry and making poetry. Or about making fortune, fortuna.

I used to feel kind of left out, in the ID450 Collective of women faculty and grad students (and a boat-builder, a math tutor, a childcare worker), mostly studying and teaching literature and writing at, or near, Boston University in the early 1980s.¹ By nature, just because I usually do arrange that, but also, and more particularly, because I wasn’t fat, or rather wasn’t seen as fat or understood as fat (though I’d always been fat secretly). Those I loved most in that group were, or anyhow saw themselves that

¹ For more, see ID450 Collective, ‘Writing the Plural: Sexual Fantasies,’ Criticism 52.2 (Spring 2010), 293–307.
way, above all Eve. Not that I didn’t love us all. But half of us were thin and half of us were fat, as far as we knew, and indeed I was at my very thinnest then, or so it scarily appeared, as I’d responded to the major heterosexual experiment of my youth (a traumatic one) by losing my appetite for two years. And the fat ones seemed to have a lot more quiddity: they were more radiantly, as the expression goes, themselves. There was more to them.

I was writing poetry like a house afire. It was not just a burning house, though it was certainly that, but the ski slope on which I, always acrophobic, skied down out of a prison into the humid world below. And then and there it seemed that Eve (an Eve who was writing Between Men but hadn’t written it, who didn’t have tenure and knew she wouldn’t get it there, who knew she was a genius) was writing poetry too, had always written poetry, and was a poet.

Not that I liked her poetry. I didn’t know what to say when she showed it to me, lots of it as I recall, though I recall from that first shock on encounter only ‘Sestina Lente’, the one poem I haven’t dared to reread since then, until I wrote this piece, the poem that sends a lover the dead severed head of her cat to beat off with and he does. It was way too grown-up for me. I felt bad for the cat. Others were full of French expressions and Fauré, references to expensive shops and to France itself, million-dollar words, abstractions like ‘this motion over time is a space’ (‘Penn Central: New Haven Line’) or ‘the confusion of the absence of the erotic’ (‘Sexual Hum’). I mean I knew she was a genius, but I liked my poems better. I was, as you might guess if you’re old enough, in love then with short lyrics neither I nor anyone would want to explicate. I wrote in sentences like Eve, and like Eve I love sentences. But I was a model of ‘How Not to Be There’, in the immortal phrase of her own short lyric later on: that was what I wanted. Not to be there. No wonder I felt left out! Those mere slips of poems were to be there instead, precipitated (as I explained) from the ether.

I was really, really glad Eve was a poet. And I adored every phrase and sentence and even single word — “snout”, “drag”,

140
“gesture”, “funny”, “whiff”, “vastation”, “granulated”, “rebarba-
tive”, “pudeur”—of her prose, and of the “sexual fantasies” she
wrote for ID450, often in verse, during our long drunken meet-
ings: she of course drank Bloody Virgins, but tolerated infinitely
the rest of us louts. Her poetry was, I knew, a resource, another
infinity, along with the live, sap-swollen ramification of her sen-
tences; it was good that something so “smart” (in her word) and
nuanced and refined and fully-uttered existed, could exist in
this brutal world. I pressed her to write more of it, to stay with
it; I organized a reading for her and two other shy faculty poets
at Boston University so she could come out as one. But I didn’t
like it. And she returned the favour—I remember a certain slant
of light, one summer afternoon at her Amherst house around
the corner from Emily Dickinson’s place, when she said she
“couldn’t get interested in short poems”, that there didn’t seem to
be anything there to get hold of.² By coincidence, my own just-
published first book of short lyrics was lying within reach on an
end table in the living room. ‘Oh well’, I thought sadly. I’d hoped
she’d like them, as it turned out—but why did I think that was
possible? Because they’d been precipitated from the ether? We
had our only ever fight the next day, over the word ‘gifted’. She
said she loved the idea of having been given a gift by what she
didn’t yet call the ‘queer little gods’; I gritted between my teeth a
savage line about tearing mine from my own side.³ The struggle
went on, or does in my memory, for kind of a while, everyone
watching in silence. I can call back the light and the feeling even
now, and the chair I sat on across the room from Eve’s, facing
her, though I know whose side I’d have been on if I were watch-
ing, and it isn’t mine.

That disappointment must have been the beginning, my first
incoherent single-celled knowledge that Eve was becoming my
muse. A fuller, closer, happier moment of that unfolding, a cell
division, came when we gave a reading at Harvard together a few

² For a related discussion of chunky ideas, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, The
³ For more, see Sedgwick, The Weather in Proust, 42–68.
years later: the poster (later the cover of *Novel Gazing*) showed two women in large, lush Victorian party dresses facing each other through a piece of glass—window? mirror?—touching each other’s fingertips. We introduced each other, we picked poems with each other’s ears in mind, we ended, at my urging, by reading ‘Pandas in Trees’, which is still my favorite poem of Eve’s, with the help of our friend Carolyn Williams as a Louise for the ages. That was the first time I ever played Eve on stage, or at least one of her: the last time face to face with my maker. I felt better loved, certainly, than I had in Amherst’s oppressive cathedral. But once again aware of myself as somehow skinny (which I hadn’t been lately, in the visible dimensions), ravenous, embattled, manic, *perched* there at most, hardly breathing.

By the time of my second experiment with heterosexuality, more successful and longer, Eve was simply my Muse, or rather a major avatar of that Muse, one I shared with my partner, a paleoecologist studying the end of the last Ice Age. Whenever either of us had anything to write, we began by reading something of Eve’s. For me, anything would do, it was the *fingerprint* of her writing that did the magic, not so much its touch as its graphic quiddity. I could open any of her books, anywhere, like fortune-tellers opening Virgil and reading the first verse their finger found. (For Jason, it was usually though not always her writing on the “depressive script”, as Sylvan Tomkins termed it and Eve immortalized it). Reading her gave me permission, the permission to think, and to think better than I would without her, to think with all my heart, and also to *speak*, rather than to inscribe the terrible sentences of academic “rigor” (“You can *say* that?”). I remember her asking, one late night at an ID450 meeting, surrounded by boozed-up ladies with their heads in each other’s laps: what’s so great about *rigor mortis* that academics should aspire to it?

This was around the time of getting excited by fractals, and by (as we had both separately done, for seemingly unrelated

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reasons) the twentieth-century Marxist-Buddhist-Neoplatonist genius of quantum physics, David Bohm, for whom:

> What I mean by ‘thought’ is the whole thing — thought, felt, the body, the whole society sharing thoughts — it’s all one process. It is essential for me not to break that up, because it’s all one process; somebody else’s thoughts become my thoughts and vice versa. Therefore it would be wrong and misleading to break it up into my thoughts, your thoughts, my feelings, these feelings, those feelings [...]. I would say that thought makes what is often called in modern language a system.\(^5\)

That’s a passage that makes it hard to talk about muses but easy to open Eve’s books, as I still do, to just anything, as if every moment, every character, were a portal into the implicate/explicate/generative manifold of the mind’s hologram, which is exactly like the universe, or at least David Bohm’s universe.

According to Bohm’s partner Basil Hiley at Birkbeck, his last academic perch — where I too found myself for a while when the second heterosexual experiment failed, “things, such as particles, objects, and indeed subjects, exist as ‘semi-autonomous quasi-local features’ of an underlying activity”.\(^6\) But does it seem likely that on the night I delivered the paper that became this chapter, the audience and I would have been drawn from all the odd far corners in which we were born to meet on Valentine’s Day in the ancient market town of York in northeast England, not far north of the tide-pool where the oldest human footprints outside Africa were found and lost again last year by the force of a “semi-autonomous quasi-local feature”?

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Maybe so. I think of the pre-Neanderthal footprints of Hap-pisburgh, in the silt of a prehistoric Thames, exposed by erosion to people to whom the estuary still matters, even as its matter dissolves. Local certainly, and like our own footsteps on the way, theirs were only semi-autonomous. But the difference between that phrase and Eve’s semi-autonomous muse is the difference poetry makes. Eve wasn’t or isn’t the muse of my life. She was, she is, the one who proved, in great swoops, enfolded curlicues, and slender, fraying tendrils of art and song, that ‘you can say that’. There were words to all her songs (even to her textile art). As soon as death knocked, she took voice lessons and wrote the lyrics of Fat Art, Thin Art.

I was very overexcited when the lyrics started to come! My muse writing short poems! My own poems, in turn, ground soon to a ghastly halt—or imitations of them arrived as a response to some imagined muse-sent permission to slack off, to not write my lyrics in defiance anymore but in the safe shadow of Eve’s, relaxed (as if hers were!), autobiographical (as I’ve never wanted or known how to be), trusting in that “ragged right margin” to make poetry where there was little more than the notion that if my shrink was a bad listener, and she was, surely there were better ones out there buying APR and Poetry Now. One of the minor regrets of my life is that I sent any of them to Eve. But she was of course kind and therefore silent. Her training in “How Not to Be There” hadn’t been wasted—I needed her not to be there, in the worst way!

Still, it interests me that we couldn’t both write short lyrics at the same time. Not that her own eruption into lyric had anything to do with me, but I suspect my own reduction then to junk poems and shamed silence had to do with her. How strange, when I was ecstatic over her poems, which soon became the interior wall-paper of my life! And I say “wall-paper” with love—I have always loved wall-paper, though only seldom does it live entirely up to my expectations for the genre. Still, those times have been enough to feed a love that, kindled in infancy, continues in the direction of my sixty-second birthday. The fibrous, powdery texture of the paper, the French pallor of
the colors, the weird two-dimensional world of the images drifting like untethered astronauts off into empty space, evenly in all directions: the writing on the wall.

So when I read *Fat Art, Thin Art*’s capacious dedicatory poem, it seemed obvious to me that the muse—in one amid a cornucopia of ways to read its ‘I/her’—was Eve’s ‘thin’ sister Nina, who had indeed run away with her ‘terrifying revulsions’ to maintain “her grueling aptitude for silence / and aversion” somewhere unknown to anyone. And she had recently come back: “This morning, she was at my side again. / It seemed so natural.”? “My eyes that dwelt then in her face”: I remembered Eve telling me how her sister had been her mirror when they were kids, though they were soon articulated into ‘fat’ and ‘thin’ by the family. I remember too, as others may who were in Manhattan that night, the shock of the photographs that looped among us continuously at the CUNY-sponsored celebration of Eve’s life in 2009:

- she wasn’t a fat child, she hadn’t been fat—not even in the 80s

and early ’90s when we were in ID450 together!

I wondered, wonder, if that sense of myself as paper-thin, one of the thin ones who write short, slender lyrics—the sense of myself as manic, brittle, breath-held, birdlike, perched to fly—was a way of incarnating Nina, whom I’ve never met—

- she wasn’t there at Eve’s memorial and neither was Eve—

and who seems to have flown away again. If so, it’s something I do a lot, without willing it. I find myself at the movies wearing the same heightened expressions on my face as the characters

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7 Quotations are from ‘Who fed this Muse?’, in *Fat Art, Thin Art*, 3–8.
whose subjectivity the camera highlights. I wanted desperately to be an actress after I saw my first play and for years thereafter — to be able to become someone, someone called into being by a desire. How stranger still to imagine Eve doing that, in the pair of poems about her sister:

Of course I identify with her [the kid tap-dancing at the airport]. Also with
the 3-year-old sister who (embarrassing)
clumsy from servitude
mimes every move she makes,

[...] simply because her big sister is making them.⁸

Strange because it asks us to see her opus, the love-child of her muse, as somehow Nina’s: as brought into being by Nina.

The only touch today, it seems,
the breath of my desire can make on Nina’s, is
through her shy windows now licked from within,
the joining of their gaze toward some other form of life.⁹

That second sonnet about Nina is about making poetry (surprise!). “As if / the furrows of my path to her / wore almost to the quick” — as if the ploughman’s furrows, the sharp-dug lines of verse turning at the bottom of each furrow to the next (that’s why it’s a “verse”, as in “re-verse” and “uni-verse”), were the whorls of a painfully deep-graven fingerprint; “as the eye’s ear from syllable to line / staggers its numb repeated drag / of the foot, mauled and mauling, that still though numb feels pain”, the feet of her iambic lines stumbling in the furrows of her craft “across the never again to be resistances / to meter —”. It’s a very hurting account, both of ploughing and of writing poetry, not to mention of walking (did Eve already have that bone spur on her

⁹ Sedgwick, ‘In dreams they’re interchangeable’, in Fat Art, Thin Art, 32.
heel?), also of reaching, lame and worn, that muse who appears in dreams as “someone [to be with] to make us” (the middle two letters of ‘muse’), and not just anyone, but: “my husband, / my big sister”.

‘Interchangeable’? Hardly that in the world of persons! But in the world of structures, it either is someone to be with “to make us”, as if it took two to tango, even just to be alive. That line about the eye’s ear reading is as mauled and mauling as it can be (at least if by line 8 of this sonnet you were still holding on to some notion of iambic pentameter promised in the first triplet): “of the foot, mauled and mauling, that still though numb feels pain”. Thirteen syllables, enjambed at both ends (and we know how that hurts!), an anapest, two trochees, two iambs and the mighty spondee: ‘feels pain’. I’m an intermittently, cane-dependent sufferer of plantar fasciitis, bunions and arthritis myself—as I write, my recently operated bunion ‘still though numb feels pain’—and that line gets right down into my foot. But what does it mean?

The reaches of “middle agency” are hard to get your mind around (no doubt they were harder still to find language for). ‘Who fed that muse?’ for instance—how many of us read that poem first, at least partway through, as a poem about Eve-the-poet, wondering if we’d fed her?

The first woman poet to publish a book of poems in ‘America’, Anne Bradstreet’s book was entitled, probably by her husband, The Tenth Muse. It’s a slip people often make. I’ve been making it right through this little story (including the sentence introducing Bradstreet’s book!), calling Eve my muse when it’s her poetry I’m trying to think about. Or is it her making? (That verb in English has meant both ‘compose poetry’ and ‘take a shit’. ) Anyway, the fusion of the syllabic feet and the bodily feet (hers, becoming mine) in that line—especially in their hurdling resistance to the meter that makes them feet at all—is like the

11 For more, see Sedgwick, The Weather in Proust, 79.
impossibility of telling apart Eve and her muse, Eve and her sis-
ter, and her sister and her husband. In this rereading anyway, 
where the “by heart / dull impulse of memory first speaks its 
part”. A line I never quite seem to understand, but rereading 
and memory, they’re like sisters, mirrors, lovers too. Spenser fa-
mously compared two lovers to two facing mirrors, but that’s 
not — quite — right. 

And what are we to make of that “other form of life” toward 
which Eve’s gaze joins Nina’s at her “shy windows” (‘my eyes that 
dwelt then in her face’)? Or when

One of us falls asleep on the other’s shoulder. 
An hour later when we peel apart: 
in the fat of the shoulder, artful, improbable 
brand, the double outside curve, 
an ear.¹²

It is perhaps strangest of all that Nina reappeared, after her long 
years of invisibility, a month or so after *Fat Art, Thin Art* ap-
peared in August, 1994. It’s as if the book — so wrapped/rapt in 
reflection, as it were, on or of Nina, so dedicated in its more 
recent layers to understanding the possibility, or maybe prob-
ability, of poetry as a touching of fingers to the mirror glass, a 
joining of gazes in the windows of the head, a food to serve a 
starving muse, who goes to the same school and the same sum-
ner camp — it’s as if poetry had *called out*. Poetry is, after all, an 
art of the voice, and the sign of it is the ear, branded (there’s that 
pain again) in the shoulder-fat of an “interchangeable” sister/ 
husband/ muse. And it’s as if the muse had answered. Who says 
“poetry makes nothing happen”?

But still 
the writer herself has been transfixed. 
Whether by that premature intuition of success

¹² Sedgwick, ‘One of us falls asleep on the other’s shoulder’, *Fat Art, Thin Art*, 
35.
early in the chapter, or by the lordly yoking to it there at the surface where I draw my breath of the submerged and wreathy Medusan sister muse melancholia by whose silence and rebellion gagging on coral — comes, at best, I guess any buoyant illusion of the ordinary joie de vivre.

Two arts that feed as one.

Fat art, thin art.\(^{13}\)

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\(^{13}\) Everyone knows there is one last line of poetry after these in *Fat Art, Thin Art*, but no one knows what it means: “Not iron, but the tin thrust in the soul…” That’s as it should be. In Bishop’s final words: “freed — the broken / thermometer’s mercury / running away”, if I may mix my elements. Eve did.