

Joanne Kyger ↓

Send to Anne R.

There are ways of being in the world that make clear it need not be a place of endless contention or a trial to permit passage to some imagined elsewhere. Poetry, of all the arts, has made insistently articulate all the patterns of human prospect and illusion; but it has also seen, paradoxically, where it is we live literally more than eyes alone have been able to. Because no world, of whatever disposition or proposal, is simply there. It is a human invention and no reality will ever be otherwise.

Early poems of Joanne Kyger's made very clear that her place was not be the one simply familiar, for that time at least, and her Penelope had no accomodating patience for the vagaries of Odysseus' meandering. In that way she is one of this generation's clarities, that we cannot longer indulge an habituated paternity that wants the authority of force and feels that women are somehow an addenda to the real business of life.

She arrived in excellent and curious company--Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan both recognized her power as elders, and her various brothers, Richard Brautigan and Gary Snyder among them, could understand certainly that she was an unequivocal equal. She brought to poetry a remarkable humor, a wit as deft as one might wish for, and an almost confusing demur in respect to prizes or any such games poets play.

Like Laura Riding, she has had no interest in the usual market place of this art, the anthologies, appointments, etc. Yet this fact has nothing to do with a Puritan austerity of purpose. Rather, she lives so explicitly where she is and with what she has as daily factor, that some projection of it all into the vacant generality of usual ambitions has never been her interest. No doubt it has cost her a general reputation, so to speak, but she of all people would hardly value such an immaterial advantage. She plays a far tighter game, if that's the point.

She lives in an incredible place, some few miles north of San Francisco, on a high bluff just at the sea's edge. She is a Westerner and, as with those friends noted previously, it proves an absolute way of seeing we have known in ways too distracted by the misogony of Robinson Jeffers or the ambition of Kenneth Rexroth, albeit an absolute condition in the work of either. Possibly the force of that specific world is of such order it requires no designation or concern. Her old friend Phillip Whalen put it best in one of his poems: "Let's call it the Pacific." Best one let such wonders speak for themselves.

Robert Creeley
June 6, 1968

Interview with Paul Watsky, *Jung Journal*

Paul Watsky: I'd like to explore the question of how you became you, the woman of what has been termed, "A disciplined openness," who by her early twenties, despite being raised in the household of a career naval officer, was one of a very few females accepted by the San Francisco coterie of radically unconventional male poets, many of whom were unabashedly gay.

You, yourself, have said that during the 1950s, "Very few women set out to be independent thinkers," and that in those days you "didn't find many women I could talk to in any interesting way, who thought about being intellectually independent—or making that a goal or aim."

What were you like as a little kid?

Joanne Kyger: I learned to read when we moved to Lake Bluff, Illinois, in 1941. I was five years old. And from then on everything was an "awakening." I learned to read. I learned to write, play the violin, ride a bicycle, ice skate, experience the seasons, see "nature." We stayed through my sixth grade. I found everything I needed to know. Lake Bluff was a really small town with a library. I think that's why I like Bolinas, because it has a small town's circumference, it's intimate, and has a great library.

Learning to read was wonderful. I was an insane reader. I read everything I could. I would take out thirteen books at a time, all that the basket on my bicycle would hold. I read really fast. I would read up and down the page, skip a lot of words in between if I didn't understand them. Thank God there wasn't any television then. I probably would have been glued to it.

My closest relations were my mother and two sisters. My father was in the war during the early Forties. In 1949, we moved to Santa Barbara, where I went to high school. I had some excellent teachers, one on the school newspaper where I was the features editor, and Henry Brubeck, the orchestra leader, who was Dave Brubeck's brother. I played second violin valiantly. Then I went on to UC Santa Barbara, where I had some more excellent teachers: Hugh Kenner, who taught Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, and Paul Wienpahl, who taught Wittgenstein and Heidegger. He showed us how Heidegger's "nothing" was the bridge into D. T. Suzuki's Buddhist nothingness.

My early home life: a bit chaotic. My parents stayed together for twelve years of marriage, and my father was away in the war about three years of that time. Mostly, it was my mother and my two sisters that comprised the household.

What kind of people were your parents?

Well, my mother was a Canadian, from a family of eleven, who had moved down to Long Beach around 1914. There had been a big economic downturn in the part of Canada they were from. My grandfather

Interview with Trevor Carolan, *Pacific Rim Review of Books*

Trevor Carolan: At some point you encountered the Pacific Northwest poetry contingent—Lew Welch, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen. Is it possible to quantify what their influence brought to Bay Area arts and letters?

Joanne Kyger: Perhaps in terms of work specific to location. The Six Gallery reading was a meeting, a collision of all the groups—the Pacific Northwest, San Francisco, Ginsberg/the Beats from New York. You had Michael McClure, Philip Lamantia, Rexroth as the M.C., Kerouac was there, Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen. Spicer was going to be part of it, but he was stuck back east, and Duncan was in Majorca or teaching at Black Mountain. It wasn't only the San Francisco people who were blessed by the alchemy of that historic event.

Somewhere in all of this there's the East West House that you were involved with . . .

Essentially, East West House was modeled after the Institute for Asian Studies when Alan Watts, among others, taught other like-minded people in Asian Studies. It closed and a group of students decided that they would start a communal house in which people who were interested could study Buddhist texts, Japanese, and go to Japan. Snyder had already gone there on his own. Gia-fu Feng, a translator from Chinese whose edition of the *Tao Te Ching* is still circulating, was living there too; also Claude Dahlenberg and Philip Whalen. Gia-fu went down to Big Sur and became part of the beginnings of the center at Esalen. I was there at the East West House in 1959 for a year and the house had been running for some years by then. They had sort of loosened their constraints and allowed women and other non-Japan-directed people to live there, but by then I was planning to go to Japan. There was an overflow of people from East West House and so they started something called Hyphen House, which was the hyphen between East and West. That was a few blocks away in what is now Japantown. Close by there was the Soto Buddhist temple where Shunryu Suzuki was invited to come and be the priest for the Japanese community in the Spring of 1959. He started zazen practice in the morning, open to everyone. He became the catalyst for beginning the Zen Center of San Francisco. I learned to sit there, during the year I spent at the East West House before going to Japan.

Before we head to Kyoto, can we get some sense of what the Pacific Northwest poets brought to arts and letters in San Francisco? A nature literacy? For example, attention to birdlife, to local flora is persistent throughout your writing . . .

In July

Geraniums

Taking a walk in the morning
the warm mist like rain

Jack picked a nasturtium about 7

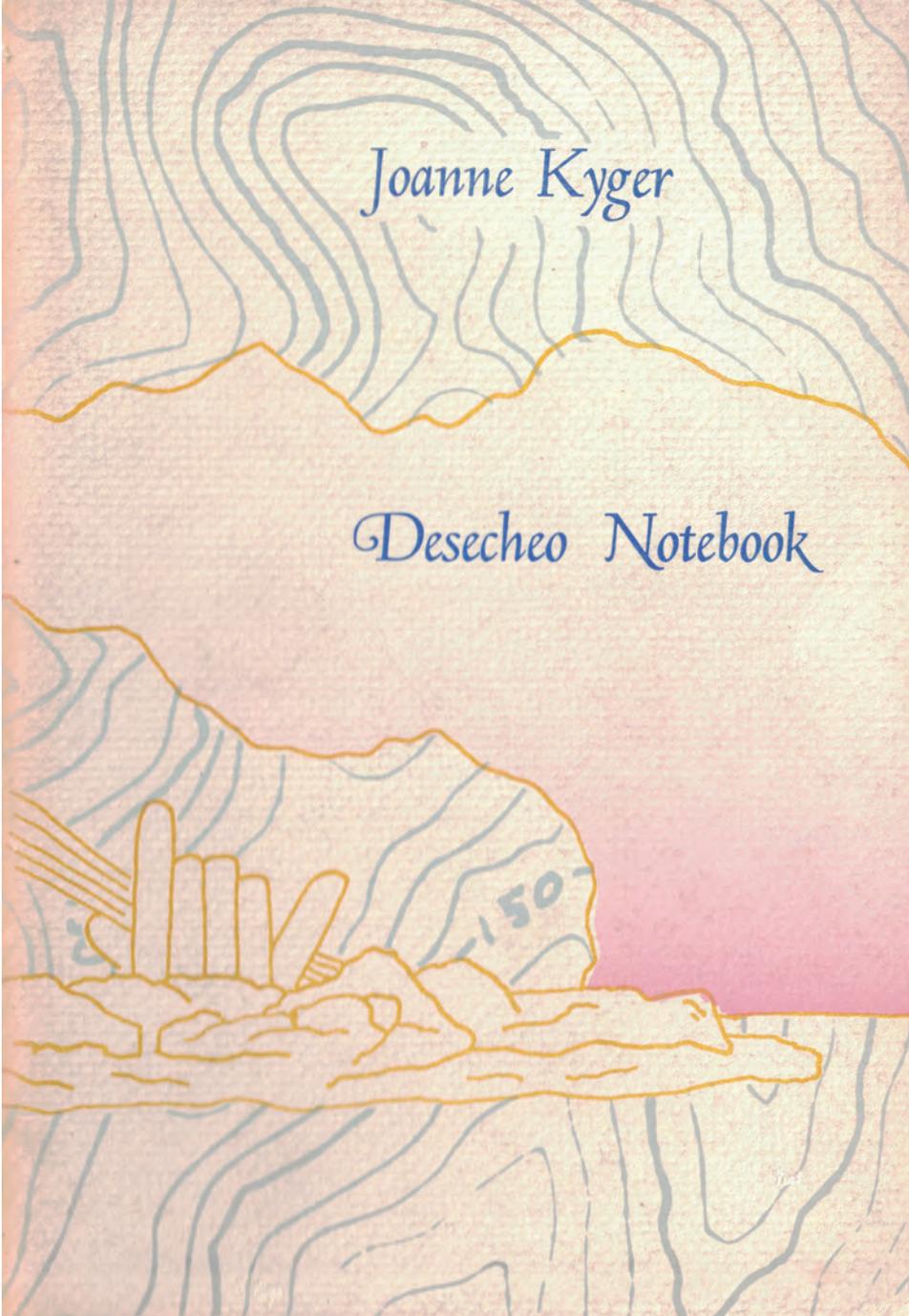
Quiet lake with water lilies
no one harms anything that comes down there

the family comes with smiles
thru the large luxurious rooms of the house
scattered thru in white clothing like flowers
take your time, take your time

this is a guest house where all are taken care of
the great and good sun comes out, the sun is a star



In 1968, Joanne completed a residency at the first year of the National Center for Experimental Television in San Francisco (NCET). Collaborative videos and films, using synchronized psychedelic visuals, sound loops, and feedback were created between poets, painters, musicians, and filmmakers and eventually shown on public television (KQED). The producer behind the project, Brice Howard, also worked on video vignettes with Charles Olson and Robert Creeley. Joanne's project was *Descartes*, an eleven-minute black and white video based on her poem "Descartes and the Splendor Of—A Real Drama of Everyday Life. In Six Parts." Her principal collaborators were filmmaker Loren Sears and musician Richard Felciano.



Joanne Kyger

Desecheo Notebook

Out the window October 27. on the verge '87
of the first rain)
(right showers a week ago)

mocking bird
flicker pecking ground
Anna Hummingbird
Gold crown · white crown
Fox sparrow · Song sparrow

September 22, 1989. Friday

Can you imagine: Just like the swallows
of Capistrano: The Ploche of White Crown
& Gold Crown arrived on the button yesterday
Just like they did last year Sept. 21;
Fall Equinox

In the garden still waiting to jump into feeding
station under window ~ which has not been
used until they left last April.

A strange insect this
morning along with

Scrub jay is a black
head stellar jay

Interview with Dale Smith & Michael Price, *Jacket*

Dale Smith: Your poetry is very much in your mouth. You hear the voice thinking and exploring, revealing . . .

Joanne Kyger: It's a physical voice, yes. I think that's the best you can do sometimes, trying to "score" it as closely as you can on the page. I'm always amazed that this isn't taught more. How to translate the voice to the page, to get the little subtleties of breath and tone, or change of tone or character emphasis.

There's one really good essay that I've never been able to find again, I think by Williams. He says, okay, let's get this all down: a period has three breath stops; a comma has a breath stop, a semi-colon, a breath stop and a half. Empty space means nothing goes on but breathing until you get to the next word, etc. You're scoring your reading. Otherwise you follow this boring convention of the straight left-hand margin, a kind of cookie-cutter block stamp.

DS: You've mentioned before your daily practice of writing in a journal.

Yes, and in this daily writing, you don't have to think of it as "poetry," you don't have to think at all about what "kind" of writing you're doing. You're writing some kind of un-self-conscious open utterance, being as clear as you can, or as muddled as you want. You're not writing for anybody. It's spontaneous.

DS: It seems definitely un-self-conscious. Because when you sit down to write a poem and think, okay, this poem's got to be this or that, that's when poems really get bogged down. They're most free when you can step out and not be self-conscious.

Right. Know how to step "out" of what you call a form; wake up. Keep word energy flowing. That's why I love travel writing. When people on trips write about what's happening, they're out of their own familiar habitat and experiencing something new, strange, awful. That can produce very fresh and inspiring writing. Very human, very vulnerable.

DS: You're very vulnerable when it's a place you don't know. Do you write for anybody in particular?

I think there's a kind of address that goes on all the time, especially to your peers in poetry. Once you've published, you do realize someone is hopefully going to read your words.