

THE SPEAK ANGEL SERIES

ALSO BY ALICE NOTLEY

- 165 Meeting House Lane*, 1971
Phoebe Light, 1973
Incidentals in the Day World, 1973
For Frank O'Hara's Birthday, 1976
Alice Ordered Me to Be Made, 1976
A Diamond Necklace, 1977
Songs for the Unborn Second Baby, 1979,
reissued 2021
Dr. Williams' Heiresses, 1980
When I Was Alive, 1980
How Spring Comes, 1981
Waltzing Matilda, 1981, reissued 2003
Tell Me Again, 1982
Sorrento, 1982
Margaret & Dusty, 1985
Parts of a Wedding, 1986
At Night the States, 1988
From a Work in Progress, 1988
Homer's Art, 1990
The Scarlet Cabinet (with Douglas
Oliver), 1992
To Say You, 1993
Selected Poems of Alice Notley, 1993
*Close to me & Closer . . . (The Language of
Heaven) and Désamère*, 1995
The Descent of Alette, 1996
etruscan reader vii (with Wendy Mulford
and Brian Coffey), 1997
Mysteries of Small Houses, 1998
Byzantine Parables, 1998
Disobedience, 2001
Iphigenia, 2002
From the Beginning, 2004
Coming After: Essays on Poetry, 2005
City Of, 2005
Alma, or The Dead Women, 2006
*Grave of Light: New and Selected Poems
1970-2005*, 2006
In the Pines, 2007
Above the Leaders, 2008
Reason and Other Women, 2010
Culture of One, 2011
Songs and Stories of the Ghouls, 2011
Secret I D, 2013
Negativity's Kiss, 2014
Manhattan Luck, 2014
Benediction, 2015
Certain Magical Acts, 2016
Undo, 2018
Eurynome's Sandals, 2019
For the Ride, 2020
At The Foot At The Belt Of The Raincoat,
2020
Runes and Chords, 2022

THE SPEAK
ANGEL SERIES

ALICE NOTLEY

FONOGRAF EDITIONS

Portland, OR

Fonograf Editions
Portland, OR

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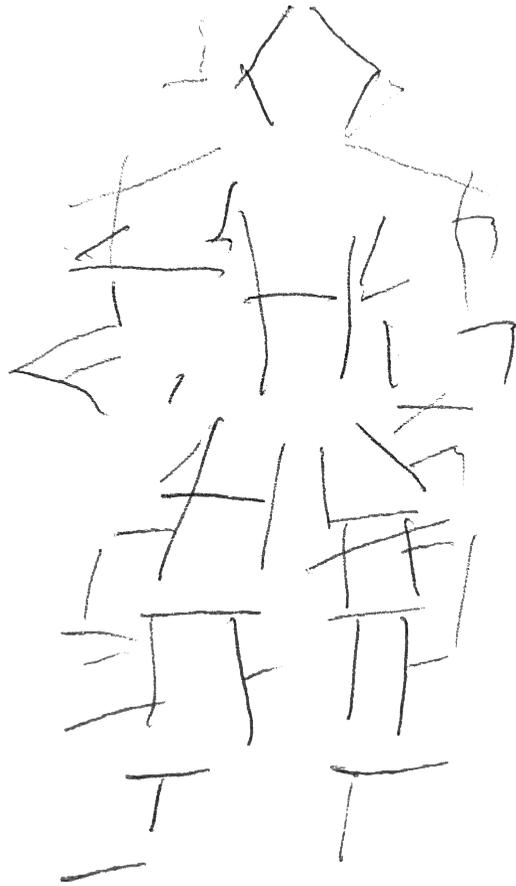


ILLUSTRATION BY ALICE NOTLEY

“Angels? I say Wings he says I flew over the time when I died”

PREFACE | *Alice Notley*

Welcome to *The Speak Angel Series*. It is long and perhaps idiosyncratic, but friendly. It is a good book for now—a time of covid and environmental crisis, wars and panicky immigration—since it offers a future. There always is one, a future; speaking cosmically, everything is immortal because there's no nowhere for something to become nothing in . . . I think. Anyway, I offer a future made of recombination like a collage, a pasting on of things by a massive regrouping of the dead and alive in order to begin again, at this point, whatever you think this point is. I'm quickly going to tell you there are six books in *The Speak Angel Series*, *The House Gone*, *Opera*, *Healing Matter*, *To Paste On*, *Out of Order*, and *The Poem*.

I begin with a dream about my mother's recent death—this is 2013— and a desire to use long lines for awhile. So the first book, *The House Gone*, becomes a journey in which I begin to lead everyone and -thing (people and mountains, quasars and whoever) to newness. One will keep forgetting what's happening, because whatever's happening at any time is Not the illustration of what's happening, it's what's happening. You don't always know who's speaking, because a conversation is like that. So I become the leader and I lead to a point zero, where the current description, on earth, of the cosmos, ceases to exist. We are finally on the “other side of the story.” There are inset poems and also a tale with variants—as usual I didn't know what I was doing until I'd done it. I saw this first book as somewhat literal happenstance, even though it obviously isn't. That I believed everything that was happening became the mode, for me, of the whole series. I don't remember when I knew I was writing a “series.” Somewhere, though, in this first book the phrase “the speak angel series” was given to me in a dream.

The second book, *Opera*, is a kind of extension of Book I, a celebration of leading and arriving and a series of pasting-on's—what could be included in the new collage. Everyone led comes to stand at the edge of a void, conversing. Gradually I began using caps for poetic stress, but emphasizing unexpected strings of words or phrases—not according to orthodox English verse patterns, but presenting what I was hearing in my mind. When I undertook to read extracts aloud to myself, I realized my voice was automatically being pitched into a sort of chanting or even singing. So the second book became an “opera.”

In the third book, *Healing Matter*, the protagonist, who is myself, takes off on her own, leaving all the “led” on the precipice of “ice” above the “abyss,” remaking. The protagonist enters the abyss. Writing this book I fell into a measure somewhat like that of my book *The Descent of Alette*, without the quotation marks of that book, as if there were no distance between my mind and the book itself. For the quotation marks in *The Descent of Alette* had created space between the author and the story, but in *Healing Matter* I felt no distance, though the events of the book are equally visionary. Two-thirds of the way through someone tells the protagonist (me) that he has been killed. That someone is Michael Brown, the young man who was shot, notoriously, in Ferguson, Missouri in the summer of 2014 while I was writing this particular book. He becomes a recurring presence in the series.

To Paste On, the fourth book, is more referential to the “real world” and contains a number of individual poems and forms. It isn’t straight narration, though what has become the general narrative of the series constitutes the background. But there are dreams of (my) friends, references to the war in Syria, and to Ebola; and Michael Brown is here. A number of longish poems about the remaking of the universe are offered as events of remaking and healing; the pressure to do that continues. To heal the universe.

The fifth book, *Out of Order*, is itself a deliberate collage. I wrote in a notebook, out of order, not filling the pages chronologically and sometimes cutting and pasting. I don’t remember exactly how I determined the final order, not by a method. The book is just out of order—everything is, isn’t it? Unapologetically, here and in *To Paste On* I present myself as intermittently crucified. Anyone is, aren’t they? I know I am.

Book VI, *The Poem*, is deliberately modeled on *The Descent of Alette*, that is formally, again without the quotation marks. It’s divided into four sections—which in this case are titled—and each section contains roughly the same number of pages as the corresponding section of *The Descent of Alette*. I don’t remember exactly why I did that. The book contains encounters with the dead and descriptions of how the dead make art; references to contemporary events—various people whose deaths occurred during the compositional process join the poem. There is a battle—between the conscious and the unconscious, there is resolution and restatement of the need to remake, the ability to remake, the idea that we are and will be surrounded by the broken, but pieces are there to remake with, the dead are there, perhaps time isn’t any more.

Though I do use “I” throughout these books it might be useful to the reader to know that I’m influenced by older public forms of art: Greek epic and drama, Latin rhetoric and epic, the plays of Racine. I’m always conscious of foundation myths and stories that keep getting told, within cultures and also from culture to culture. One way to look at this work might be as a posited myth—in the myth I posit myself as the leader of a reconstruction. It is fictive, but I’m not doing fiction. Take it as you want, as you certainly will.

At this point my forms are simply whatever I'm using *at this moment*. Probably there are two Alette-form books to balance each other, there's an opera because I started singing. There's a big collage because I keep saying collage is the form of everything, the way *you* are a monkey, a horse mane, a bird-throated breasted-mammal flower-organed species-eater. In the midst of writing the sixth book, in Paris in the year of various terrorist attacks, 2015, I was jogging at dawn in the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont and heard a man praying out loud in anguish and tears, hidden by trees and darkness, to the Seigneur, praying, as I remember it, for himself and his family. That is part of this book too. I don't know what happened to this man, and I'm not sure what "happen" is. This book, though he would never read it, is for him.

Alice Notley
January 1, 2022

FOREWORD: "A BROKEN HEART
STAYS OPEN" | *Robert Dewhurst*

Nature is a Haunted House—but Art—a House that tries to be haunted.

EMILY DICKINSON

It's not a normal experience, to write a poem.

ALICE NOTLEY

“Listen to people and make a poem,” Alice Notley once guided a group of young writers, in a summer 1978 presentation at the Naropa Institute, recorded to audiocassette and now archived in the garrulous ether of the internet.¹ Eavesdropping is poetry’s oldest trick—practically, its origin—and, she knew, as endless a source of information as Borges’s Library of Babel. All-knowing already, Notley counseled the class to stick with this exercise, a workshop perennial, of making a poem from the overheard. “If you’ve done this assignment before, or thought about these things before, don’t simply think you’ve done it and thought about it,” she insisted. “You’ll be doing it and thinking about it forever.”² True to this teaching, the enjoinder to write by ear has been perhaps *the* guiding imperative of Notley’s work in the nearly half century since, her vast and polyhedral oeuvre charting her own lifelong process of doing and thinking listening. *The Speak Angel Series*, an epic in six books written over two years and then revised for another five, is her most supreme act of listening yet.

Oracular and sometimes opaque, *Speak Angel* is an imposing work, spanning some six hundred and fifty pages and an array of poetic forms, its decidedly *unapostrophic* “I” inhabited by an ossuary of disembodied voices who speak to, and through, the poet. But here Notley’s readers will find themselves at home, in a “grand house of creation” disobedient to the apparent laws of the universe (never mind those of governments and genres), limited only by human imagination and courage.³ *Speak Angel*, by its own testimony, is an “epic of the dead,” and thus the magnum opus which yokes what have been Notley’s two primary avenues of investigation—epic poetry and death—since her dramatic turn to longer and more visionary forms in the late 1980s. Its strategies, though, run even deeper than that, to her origins as a poet of acute attunement to speech and the ambient.

1. Ted Berrigan and Alice Notley, “Visiting Poetics Academy: Ted Berrigan and Alice Notley,” reading and workshop, Naropa Institute, May 31, 1978, Boulder, CO, audiocassette 2 of 6, MPEG copy, Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics Audio Archive, Naropa University, <http://archives.naropa.edu/digital/collection/p16621coll1/id/1567/rec/3>.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Here and below, unattributed quotations are from *Speak Angel* itself.

“We’re simultaneous,” she tells us in *Speak Angel*, as she draws on seemingly all of her own past and present resources, and the entire history of poetry, to lead us—that is, write us—into a future exorcised of all dogma.

Then, at Naropa, Notley was talking about talking: about her practice of pulling others’ words, like found art (or at least art supplies), from out of the air and into her poems. Elevating the ephemeral oral into poetry with a single, alchemic gesture, Notley’s talk technique came right out of American modernism, an offspring of Stein’s aesthetic of “using everything” and the strong preference of certain post–World War II poets, via Williams, for the vernacular.⁴ Lew Welch, perhaps, best put across the latter view: “Language is what goes on when you open the door of a banquet-room and there are 300 ladies having lunch. . . . Language is speech. Any other form, the printed one or the taped one, is a translation of language. All poems are translations.”⁵ (This attitude, more or less emblematic of the entire countertradition of the New American Poetry, also had its corollaries in the emergent world of conceptual art; Notley has told the scholar Nick Sturm that she read “all of Andy Warhol’s *A* when it came out in 1969.”)⁶ Living throughout the 1970s and early ’80s with the poet Ted Berrigan and their two sons (Anselm and Edmund, now poets) in a small New York apartment that she would later describe as a “doorless railroad flat” whose occupants experienced daily life “simultaneously in each’s consciousness,” Notley’s poems opened themselves to include the chatter of her family members—translating, in Welch’s sense, from her home’s “polyphonic voicefulness” to the page.⁷ While Notley often integrated others’ voices into her poems silently, using a logic

4. Gertrude Stein, “Composition as Explanation,” in *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Carl Van Vechten (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 511–23 (518–22 passim). For some discussion of Notley’s affinity with the all-inclusivity of both Stein and Williams, see Heather H. Thomas, “Spectacular Margins: Women Poets Refigure the Epic; Transfigured Self in Innovative Long Poems of Alice Notley and Anne Waldman” (PhD diss., Temple University, 1999), 45–46. The progenitive metaphor is Notley’s own. Her 1980 lecture “Doctor Williams’ Heiresses” includes a letter which imagines that she and Bernadette Mayer were two granddaughters of a marriage between Stein and Williams: see Alice Notley, *Doctor Williams’ Heiresses* (Berkeley: Tuumba Press, 1980), n.p.

5. Lew Welch, “Language Is Speech,” in *Ring of Bone: Collected Poems of Lew Welch*, ed. Donald Allen (San Francisco: City Lights, 2012), 235–49 (236).

6. Nick Sturm, “Seeing the Future: A Conversation with Alice Notley,” Poetry Society of America, n.d. [2017], <https://poetrysociety.org/features/interviews/seeing-the-future-a-conversation-with-alice-notley>. (Sturm’s personal website indicates that this interview was conducted on September 16, 2017, and contains some additional raw material from the transcript: see Nick Sturm, “It’s Not the Way You’re Taught: From an Interview with Alice Notley,” *Crystal Set* (blog), October 28, 2017, <https://www.nicksturm.com/crystalset/2017/10/26/from-an-interview-with-alice-notley/>.)

7. Alice Notley, entry in *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, vol. 27, ed. Shelly Andrews (Detroit: Gale Research, 1997), 221–40 (227–28). The apartment was located at 101 St. Mark’s Place, on the Lower East Side, and its polyphony included more than the family’s own voices: as Notley writes, “I lived there altogether for sixteen years [March 1976–September 1992] and it was always full, of voices

of collage rather than narrative to make poetry from the materials at hand, the voices of her sons are particularly distinct in her works from this time. The daybook-style entries of Notley's 1981 collection *Waltzing Matilda*, for example, record a running commentary from the boys which makes for quick shifts and surprise endings, such as this hypnagogic exchange used to put one energetic poem to rest: "Mom / why don't / people read in the dark? They can't see the words in the / dark. I can. Please go to sleep now. Please, honey."⁸ Like a medieval amanuensis, Notley also trained herself during these years to memorize, for use in poems, conversations she encountered outside the apartment, her ears always open to the possibilities for spinning the straw of "spoken American" into gold.⁹

Notley's listening, though, has never been only naturalistic. As early as 1978, at least in ways rhetorical and whimsical, she began testing the idea of mediumship—writing, that is, as if poetry could communicate with the dead. "Jack Would Speak through the Imperfect Medium of Alice," a posthumous message from Kerouac to his own biographers delivered (if "imperfectly") by Notley, is still a fan favorite. ("So I'm an alcoholic Catholic mother-lover," it memorably begins, eager to arrest the pedantry and small-mindedness of the living.)¹⁰ Another poem from this time, "A True Account of Talking to Judy Holliday, October 13," entertains a dialogue with that deceased actress (and, of course, Frank O'Hara) in which the two women's voices become indistinguishable through the medium (as in art form) of "playing" (as in acting).¹¹ Teasingly, the adjectives in these poems' titles—*imperfect*, *true*—make a big difference, calling into question the veracity of all that follows. In 2014, interviewed by Corey Zeller, Notley preferred to leave that question open: "I wrote ['Jack Would Speak'] in defense of [Kerouac's] writing as if spoken by him—who

and bodies and objects, sometimes seemingly haunted by the dead" (ibid., 227). For a reading of Notley's "doorlessness" in terms of an "intersubjectivity" with philosophical resonances, see Thomas, "Spectacular Margins," 56–57.

8. Alice Notley, "Waltzing Matilda," in *Grave of Light: New and Selected Poems 1970–2005* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 116–34 (118). For a brief reading of these lines in the context of a critical essay on Notley's whole career (up to about *Disobedience*), see Maggie Nelson, "Dear Dark Continent: Alice Notley's Disobediences," in *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007), 131–67 (144). My thinking in this foreword is indebted to Nelson's insight that "many, if not most, of the concerns and tropes of Notley's recent epics have been alive and at play throughout her career" (ibid., 135).

9. Alice Notley, interview by Michael Silverblatt, *Bookworm*, KCRW, July 10, 2014, <https://kcrw.com/3tAlkOq>; and Berrigan and Notley, "Visiting Poetics Academy."

10. Alice Notley, "Jack Would Speak through the Imperfect Medium of Alice," in *Grave of Light*, 71–72 (71).

11. Alice Notley, "A True Account of Talking to Judy Holliday, October 13," in *Grave of Light*, 91–93 (93). Notably, "Jack Would Speak" and "Talking to Judy Holliday" share a publication history: both were written in 1978, first published in *Mag City* 6 (1979), and collected in Notley's *How Spring Comes* (West Branch, IA: Toothpaste Press, 1981).

knows? maybe he told me what to say.”¹² Even if neither “Jack Would Speak” nor “Talking to Judy Holliday” takes its mediumship completely seriously, both show Notley leaning into the idea, turning her ear from the domestic toward the departed, early on.

Since her entrance into epic poetry beginning in the late 1980s, Notley’s concern for speaking with and for the dead has deepened considerably, evolving from these early forays to take on a gravitas and global scope befitting the genre. As Notley herself has narrated, her turn to epic was inextricable from grief, compelled by the deaths of her stepdaughter, Kate Berrigan, in 1987, and her brother, Albert Notley Jr., in 1988.¹³ Notley developed the distinctive “chorale-like” line of her celebrated first epic, *The Descent of Alette*, while writing a pair of elegies for Kate and Albert: respectively, *Beginning with a Stain* (a thirty-one page sequence) and “White Phosphorus.”¹⁴ (This line, subdivided into smaller foot-like units which spotlight “infraline phrasing,” is reprised throughout *Speak Angel*.)¹⁵ Later, while writing *Alette* itself, Notley gradually came to understand it, too, as a sustained response to her brother’s death; Albert, not Alice, is the eponym for her protagonist.¹⁶ “Though I was writing it because of him, all along, I’d forgotten, because the poem isn’t personal, it’s public,” she has said of composing *Alette*.¹⁷ *Beginning with a Stain* and *The Descent of Alette* were first published together in Notley’s 1992 “compendium of books” with Douglas Oliver, *The Scarlet Cabinet*.¹⁸ In her remarkable introduction to this collection, Notley envisaged what has been her artistic agenda for the last thirty years: “The poet must prophesy the future, speak to it, educate it. . . . *Someone*, at this point, must take in hand the task of being everyone, & no one, as the first poets did. Someone must

12. Corey Zeller, “A Quick Interview with Alice Notley,” *Ampersand Review*, May 11, 2014. This online interview is no longer available at its original URL, but significant portions of it may be found quoted on other sites: see, for example, “Rachel Zucker on Alice Notley, Alice Notley on Alice Notley,” *Harriet* (blog), May 13, 2014, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2014/05/rachel-zucker-on-alice-notley-alice-notley-on-alice-notley>.

13. For Notley’s narration of this, see Alice Notley, “The ‘Feminine’ Epic,” in *Coming After: Essays on Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 171–80 (171–72).

14. *Ibid.*, 173.

15. Alice Notley, “American Poetic Music at the Moment,” in *Coming After*, 131–46 (138); for Notley’s primary discussion of this poetic line, see 135–37. By “infraline phrasing,” Notley means a marked emphasis on individual phrases within each line: as she puts it in *Speak Angel*, “Each line should be as full of events as every forgotten day.”

16. Notley, “The ‘Feminine’ Epic,” 178. As Notley adds here, the name also sounds like “owl-ette,” establishing *Alette*’s descent, as it were, from the guardian owl she meets underground, a figure modeled on her father (whom her brother was himself named for).

17. *Ibid.*

18. An earlier version of *Beginning with a Stain* was first published in booklet form as *From a Work in Progress* (New York: DIA Art Foundation, 1988). In 1996, *The Descent of Alette* would be republished by Penguin Books in a standalone volume with a wider distribution.

pay attention to the real spiritual needs of both her neighbors (not her poetic peers) & the future. We must find our voice, we must find a story—something that reproduces itself in the aether, not necessarily in bookstores. There must be a holy story.”¹⁹

Virtually all of Notley’s poetry since then has answered this call, in a myriad of forms and “fictions” loosely united in their listening for this “holy story,” quite literally, in the voices of the dead.²⁰ In the wake of *Alette*, Notley first undertook to write the sixty-page verse dialogue *Close to me & Closer . . . (The Language of Heaven)*, seeking to better understand the mysterious “black lake” which figures in *Alette* as “the gate to the rest of the universe, death, infinity, the one place beyond the Tyrant’s reach.”²¹ *Close to me*, by Notley’s own description, “is an attempt to contact death.”²² Her interlocutor in the dialogue is her father, Albert Notley Sr., who died in 1975, and her preface to the work testifies that his portions of the text were dictated. “I remember feeling very happy writing it, waking up mornings with my dead father’s voice in my head,” she details there. “In order to write his speeches properly I had to have faith that that was his literal voice I heard. I let the voice dictate to me exactly what to write with very little interference from ‘my’ rationalizing self. . . . I’m loath to say he didn’t really dictate his part of the poem; and I feel the daughter’s parts of the dialogue are nowhere as good as the father’s.”²³ *Close to me* was published, in 1995, bound with the seventy-page “epic-like” *Désamère*, which similarly channels the voice of the French surrealist poet Robert Desnos.²⁴ Both books, she writes in their shared preface, “search for a mystical ground common to all life”: *Close to me*, by soliciting an account of the afterlife from her father; and *Désamère*, through the narrative arc (and archetype) of a desert vision quest.²⁵ Since the appearance of these first post-*Alette* poems, Notley’s search for a mystical common ground and its accompanying conversation with the dead

19. Alice Notley, introduction to *The Scarlet Cabinet: A Compendium of Books*, by Alice Notley and Douglas Oliver (New York: Scarlet Editions, 1992), v–vi (vi).

20. For Notley’s first use of the term “fiction” to describe her narrative poetry, see her preface to *Close to me & Closer . . . (The Language of Heaven) and Désamère* (Oakland: O Books, 1995), n.p. The term has never been a good fit for what Notley does in these works, as her preface *here* suggests. In a recent interview, she elaborated: “Fiction is a veneer of life—it’s fictional and I don’t believe it or have any use for it but as escape from my mind. Poetry seems much more beautiful, truthful, and monumental to me” (Erkut Tokman, “Erkut Tokman Talks to Alice Notley,” the Poetry Society, Spring 2021, <https://poetrysociety.org.uk/interview-erkut-tokman-talks-to-alice-notley>). For further reflections by Notley on this topic, see also Laynie Brown, “A Conversation with Alice Notley on the Poet’s Novel,” *Jacket2*, March 15, 2013, <https://jacket2.org/commentary/conversation-alice-notley-poets-novel>.

21. Notley, “The ‘Feminine’ Epic,” 179.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Notley, preface to *Close to me & Closer*, n.p.

24. Notley, “The ‘Feminine’ Epic,” 179.

25. Notley, preface to *Close to me & Closer*, n.p.

have proven themselves immense indeed, motivating many subsequent epics and other, less easily categorizable long works. With a publication history that has lagged, as long as fifteen years, behind her prolific production, in chronological order of composition these include *Mysteries of Small Houses* (written in 1995 and published in 1998); *Disobedience* (written in 1995–96 and published in 2001); *Reason and Other Women* (written ca. 1997–98 and published in 2010); *Benediction* (written in 1998–2000 and published in 2015); *Alma, or the Dead Women* (written in 2001–3 and published in 2006); *In the Pines* (written in 2003–4 and published in 2007); *Songs and Stories of the Ghouls* (written in 2004–5 and published in 2011); *Negativity’s Kiss* (written in 2006 and published in 2014); *Eurynome’s Sandals* (written in 2006–7 and published in 2019); and *For the Ride* (written ca. 2009–10 and published in 2020).²⁶ In bardic fashion, each of these works, besides probing the nature of reality, has also addressed political (that is, public) crises: *Désamère*, the desertification of global warming; *Songs and Stories of the Ghouls*, genocides ancient and ongoing; *Eurynome’s Sandals*, issues of immigration; *For the Ride*, impending apocalypse; and so on, scaling her epic vision well beyond the bounds of this foreword. As Notley said in a 2014 interview by Karin Schalm: “I am, at this point, an epic poet—I am like Virgil, and everyone had better watch out because I am the one reshaping the myth and defining the world. I am international, interplanetary if you will.”²⁷

Speak Angel, first drafted in 2013–15 and now Notley’s most “current” (not to mention, longest) published epic, certainly expands her spiritual search into cosmogonic dimensions.²⁸ Like many of her earlier epics, it listens to the dead; and like much of her poetry since *Beginning with a Stain*, it seeks, in essence, to reveal and rewrite the origin of

26. The “written” dates in this sentence are reported by Notley, but, she writes, “it’s hard to be completely accurate: I would write a book a certain year, then tinker with it for years” (email to author, January 6, 2022). It is similarly tricky to inventory all of Notley’s “epics” or even “long works,” given the genre-defying nature of her writing and the fact that even her collections of shorter, individual poems are highly conceived, also, as books. In a 2013 interview by Lindsay Turner, Notley said, “Since I wrote [‘The “Feminine” Epic’ in 1995] I’ve written a lot of books, and I suppose each one has been a kind of an epic, although *Culture of One* [written ca. 2008 and published in 2011] was more like a novel” (Lindsay Turner, “‘At the Mercy of My Poetic Voice’: An Interview with Alice Notley,” *Boston Review*, November 8, 2013, <https://bostonreview.net/articles/lindsay-turner-alice-notley-interview-feminism-mojave-collage>). Another book that has appeared since 1995, *Certain Magical Acts* (written in 2005–13 and published in 2016), collects poems made between longer projects. Complicating the big picture further, Notley writes, “I’ve recently decided that I am now writing the same poem from now on forever and will include everything in it as project, with the stipulation that I can take whole chunks of it out and call them a unit too” (email to author, January 7, 2022).

27. Karin Schalm, “Alice Notley on Ghouls,” *CutBank: The Literary Journal of the University of Montana*, January 26, 2014, <http://www.cutbankonline.org/interviews/2014/01/interviews-alice-notley>.

28. On her asynchronous publishing history, in her interview by Sturm, Notley joked, “I’m usually about ten years ahead of everybody else so if I’m publishing what I wrote ten years ago then I’m current” (Sturm, “Seeing the Future”).

things. In a 2009 interview by David Baker, Notley reflected on this persistent interest:

After a couple of people dear to me died in the '80s, I read a lot of books by Mircea Eliade that asserted that the response of indigenous peoples to any crisis was to recite their creation stories, to sing the world into being once more, but each time being always the first time. I seem to have incorporated this idea into my own procedures. But I'm always, also, trying to find out what really happened at the beginning. I don't accept any of the stories I know, though I find some of them quite interesting: I'm looking for my own, true version. And I'm looking for the perfect singing of it, the exact and perfect rendering.²⁹

If anything, *Speak Angel* is Notley's vigorously renewed attempt to render this truer or more perfect creation story. "I'm looking," she writes lucidly in book II, "for an initial relation between all us." Since this "relation," as she will discover in book III, is poetry itself—in its "primal use," as the "organizing principle of spirit"—then the failing terms of our world are necessarily subject to revision. Poetry's highest purpose (and therefore, Notley's own), in other words, is nothing short of world-making.³⁰ Or, as she puts this more gracefully in book V, "only eloquence will recreate the universe." *Speak Angel* itself is this act of "eloquence": Notley's sustained attempt to "sing" so "perfectly" a new world emerges. Really, the book's first three lines say everything, asserting not the so-called materiality of language but something more like an occulted "language of materiality": "Our words are what is they say what we make / They don't stand for the universe what you see as much / Stands for them reality in the thicknesses shimmery."

To refigure reality in suitably thick and shimmery language is the challenge to which *Speak Angel* rises, and the reader should need little more to embark than, maybe, a few signposts. Notley's guides here are many, but they begin with the familiar voices of her father (who tells in book I a "meandering" "uncreation story," starring a possible variant

29. David Baker, "Evident Being: A Conversation with Alice Notley," *Kenyon Review*, n.d. [2009], <https://kenyonreview.org/conversation/alice-notley>. Notley included Eliade on a wide-ranging reading list that she prepared for another class at Naropa, this one in 1989, telling students: "I read the entire repetitive oeuvre of Mircea Eliade. You don't have to do that, but that's something I spent a lot of time doing." Notably, this reading list also included several indigenous creation myths: Harold Courlander, *The Fourth World of the Hopis: The Epic Story of the Hopi Indians as Preserved in Their Legends and Traditions* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987); *Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings*, trans. Dennis Tedlock (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985); and Paul G. Zolbrod, *Diné Bahane! The Navajo Creation Story* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984). See Alice Notley, "Alice Notley's Writing Workshop," reading and workshop, Naropa Institute, July 9, 1989, Boulder, CO, audiocassette 1 of 2, MPEG copy, Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics Audio Archive, Naropa University, <http://archives.naropa.edu/digital/collection/p16621coll1/id/2101>.

30. Speaking of dreams, which she has used to write poetry since 1971's *165 Meeting House Lane*, Notley told Maggie Nelson in 2002 that she believes that "life is a dream; that we construct reality in a dreamlike way; that we agree to be in the same dream; and that the only way to change reality is to recognize its dreamlike qualities and act as if it is malleable" (Nelson, "Dear Dark Continent," 156).

of Alette named the Alphabet) and her brother (who needs, and will receive, healing from the trauma of war). Notley's recently deceased mother, in a dream vision which opens *Speak Angel*, elects her daughter to "lead" the dead, announcing the motif of leadership (and "fate") that Notley will contend with throughout the whole series. More plot summary would spoil the story, and the author's own preface provides the broad strokes you will need. Look, though, for our protagonist, an American poet living in Paris named Alice Notley, to step into the black lake of old (now, a "cracked ice abyss" or "VOID of GRACE"); to reacquire the "universal tongue of creation" at the "zero point zero zero infinite" of all being; to collage together a new universe (or *past eon?*) with a call "to paste on"; to, Samson-like, tear down a false factory, on her way to slaying sadness; to correct the idea of the Big Bang, so that the universe begins not in an act of violence but rather like the stretching open of a wing; to restore chaos from "out of order" (rather than the reverse); to rehabilitate the "olde signes," such as the labyrinth and cross; to be crucified and cursed by rivals, then battle them; to transmute others' guilt ("opaque stuff unwanted stuff") into a particulate prima materia; and to minister healing to all manner of dead souls who arrive in and speak through these poems, from Michael Brown to victims of Ebola, the Syrian civil war, the explosions at the Port of Tianjin, the Kunduz hospital airstrike, and the November 13, 2015, terrorist attacks in Paris.³¹ Notley's narrative is not always linear, and it may help to bear in mind that dictum of Stein's about beginnings: "Beginning again and again is a natural thing even when there is a series."³²

Poetry has always been mediumistic, from Hesiod to Hannah Weiner.³³ The philosopher Avital Ronell has argued that writing itself is intrinsically haunted, a form of conversation that "always comes from elsewhere, at the behest of another."³⁴ *Angel* means "messenger," and for many years now Notley has been candid about her own messengers, the voices that she listens for in her writing chair each morning. Asked to elaborate on her communication with the dead in a 2016 interview by Shoshana Olidort, Notley said this:

People in my life kept dying, and each time they died I stood at this chasm, and the wall between the living and the dead collapsed. Gradually I just had the ability to see into this other world because these traumatic things happened to me. . . . Sometimes I think that there is no poetry written without the intervention of the dead. It's their voices speaking to you that allow you to find words

31. Considering *Speak Angel's* apparently autobiographical qualities, the reader might recall Notley's remark about the protagonist of *Désamère*: "She is myself, a fact that's not interesting except insofar as anyone realizes that one is a product of one's times" (Notley, preface to *Close to me & Closer*, n.p.).

32. Stein, "Composition as Explanation," 516.

33. For a comment on Hesiod's prototypical poetic mediumism, see Jed Rasula, *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects, 1940–1990* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996), 45–46. *The Theogony* is an explicit reference for *Speak Angel*.

34. Avital Ronell, *Dictations: On Haunted Writing* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), xiv.

from nowhere; they are the muse. . . . But also, you do rip yourself open if you go through the experiences I have, and you do stand on the chasm between life and death. There is communication, I am certain of this. I've also been ill and in my illness I've reached out further. The more defective you become the more you learn, the more you know, the more shamanic you'll be.³⁵

The Speak Angel Series stands at this same chasm, and dares to describe the view from its icy rim. It may be the most futuristic thing that Notley has ever written—aspiring to “remake the real,” to unspeak the living and the dead alike from the “bad art” of our “broken cosmos”—but it also carries forward the ethic of listening that she has led with since her earliest works. “Leave this perverse memorization of the details of / Other people’s imaginations and come with me,” she urges in this grand epic’s final pages. “I promise nothing but // To be in touch forever . . . A broken heart stays open.” Notley’s promise to stay “in touch” means more than ever in our paradoxically disconnected digital era, “this age of glass- / Fingered outreach that would make the tinman bleed,” reminding us of the virtues of more sentient communion and communication. Its six books like the sides of a cube or cosmic dice which might tumble us into a better existence, *Speak Angel* offers to lead us to “the other side.” Now, reader, follow.

35. Shoshana Olidort, “Between the Living and the Dead: An Interview with Alice Notley,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, December 25, 2016, <https://www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/between-the-living-and-the-dead-an-interview-with-alice-notley>.

I.

THE HOUSE GONE

Our words are what is they say what we make
They don't stand for the universe what you see as much
Stands for them reality in the thicknesses shimmery

We are in here and each presents a face eyes closed but is
The only conscious there really is I'm listening
I'll interpret for everyone dead or alive and make the words radiate
The story so thick with breaking up layers
That you have to be in it neweyed feeling your way
The winds I forgot your story you're going to overpower me
A mind is a wind the ancestor of any mind who thinks it's contemporary

The body presses on you until you leave it you're another body
All along why was I there it's the only way
The soul me just me tornout gold and outside it activity
We are all tornout gold

She lay on the bed old her hair in spangled braids
First I couldn't find her and I couldn't find who I was
You need a red one to get into the house of our identity
Said someone and who approved the secret I asked
Later no one knew it now no one knows it at all
You need green or red rectangles to get into the house of knowledge
I am the house of knowledge I say then put on more
Layers someone else says or they'll see how transparent you are
I am the one you think I am and also another
The dying body lay in braids with her soul showing
I'm speaking in my own language
Spangled with the breaking up of gold they come to get me
It's beautiful in death it's substantial
People with jars of being animals with eyes rocks with identity
No one alive permitted to see until now would you like to know something

The first word to know
In the secret language is
Soul I'm your bond
The universe bound to-
Gether its parts speaking
To each other

Denser than matter any mind thrills to know the further mind I am
She says lying on the bed a darker woman sits beside her
My attendant as I would attend you dark and dense as a secret

The dead created the world when they were still dead
I'm frightened don't be you'll just be dead or alive
I'm impoverished momma but you're okay and I'm dead I'm okay
But it's part of my story still that I resisted money and the things
My knowledge is that now you have to speak for us
I'm still poor you have to speak for us you're our leader

You want to know how love's dangerous if it makes us or we make it
I'm sitting in a lovefilled apartment I can't let go of
It's like the most luminous dots or molecules torn as a memory
Or when I loved you was that a memory of something else I say
Your lovetorn leader that is matter as it came to be this shattered story
The broken specificity whose pieces a man could sell I know
How the universe began he says but I myself know it didn't
Walking through layer after layer of distraction in the picture
We the dead were and are the dead walking this life
The warrior knows he can't forget he killed but I know
The exact beauty of my voice and then faltering

The tricks in my hands
Al says were just guns
But I know this story he
says death is full of what
I know

I came home and there was no one there anymore another story
The curse on our family shallow I remember
We have been taught curses I can teach it to you if you want
Death is now full of what I know each one says
Each molecule says and the molecules of death
Each layer of the picture hides another Daddy says I like that
I I say can't remember a thing how can I lead you write
What you're writing it's tall in here though I'm materially bodiless

I've already told all these stories in death we represent them
We can tell them for the first or last time again if we want
In our thoughts to each other and they can change
In the story where we emerge we are emerging from ourselves
As the dead are in a chordal stave of music no one composed
I am composing it hitting random notes on the piano
There is no random there is no chance event here is a piece of change rather

When there was nothing there was something this future on earth
The knowledge we're interested in is our own composition
Which we can't stop working on without clear understanding or method
It floats secretively near that no one's in control of but
We all are and must make beautiful I came home destroyed
We know your story already you don't know how I feel and never will

You needed a red rectangle to enter here's an oval of evil you'll want
I your leader swallowing evil which lights one up but then you have to resist
You needed it then have to resist it you're trying to make me need you
The man says to me but I am not that young this will pass
Before my mind sometimes when I'm dead then I'm running I
Can't come and drink with you yes you're running from something specific
Passing before my mind sometimes when I'm dead in the past or future
When you're dead Dad says a red rectangle is a visible idea
What is the secret he asks again what do you think it is
If we didn't need each other we wouldn't be the universe
The secret is that I've always wanted to be alone because someone
Hurt me bad someone hurt me and isn't very smart either
All this talk is what it's like to be dead he said you still don't have our
Speech though you are our leader our language is quickly thought
I'm trying to get it fast I know you are he says a story's faster here too

One layer he says one smoke-
Screen
One or two in my later
Life but far back the earliest one
Sometimes comes forward
My mother left the children by
My father and took the other two