

Correspondences

Roger Snell

I meet Etel and Simone about three years ago at Robert Grenier's house over the Christmas holidays.

I'm in Bolinas visiting Joanne & Donald with Dale Smith. One of many memorable things Joanne says during our visit I adopt as a kind of poetic credo:

"Poetry is supple; you should be able to open it and close it."

They take us over to Robert's little hermitage after dinner, which is in the back of a bigger house on the mesa.

Robert is hand collating the poems of Larry Eigner for the as-yet-unpublished *Collected Poems*. He is methodically placing each page in a different pile on a table when we arrive and continues to work like this throughout the night.

There is a tall yet sparsely branched Christmas tree in one corner with white lights. Robert is gentle and speaks softly. There are postcards of various paintings by Cézanne on the wall above the counter where the wine is. The only other thing I remember about his home is the tub in the bathroom. It has a giant red ring around the inside of it.

Etel & Simone show up a short time later. (I almost never refer to them separately.) Simone is elegant. Etel is small like my grandmother. I immediately want to adopt them but I don't say anything.

I don't say much the entire night. I prefer to listen. Dale talks a lot. He's a good talker.

The vintner Sean Thackrey turns up with bottles of his Pleiades wine.

After the New Year I write Simone and Etel a letter and send them my book, and receive a hand written note from Etel along with her new book *Seasons*, which is dedicated to Joanne. Sometime in May they invite Ann & I to dinner at their home in Sausalito to celebrate Lindsey Boldt's birthday. Who is Lindsey Boldt? I find out she's a young poet and their new assistant. Brandon Brown, whom I know nominally from the poet softball games David Hadbawnik used to organize, accompanies her. He is impeccably dressed. Both exude big bright smiles. Also at dinner is Maia Ipp who works at City Lights. She is with Nick Hoff, whose translation of Hölderlin's *Odes & Elegies* was published earlier by Wesleyan. Etel's new book *Master of the Eclipse* contains two epigraphs by Holderlin. Leslie Scalapino and Nathaniel Dorsky are there as well along with Stefano, a neighbor of Etel and Simone's whose twelve-year old daughter Simone is the godparent of.

What does all this mean? Nothing really. Except the fact that Etel & Simone, like Donald & Joanne, and Robert open up their homes to us as though we're friends they haven't seen in 25 years.

The two epigraphs from Hölderlin that open *Master of the Eclipse* are similar to the quotations Edgardo Cozarinsky's places at the beginning of his postcards in that they link Etel's "uninterrupted flow of little experiences and observations" to a vast storehouse of correspondences where, in Cozarinsky's words, "residues of reading" are "entrusted [with] the continuity of [her] own written words, the lighting, brutal or perfidious."

In her Introduction of Cozarinsky's *Urban Voodoo* Susan Sontag states that it is "an eminently cosmopolitan—therefore, transnational—book." This is a useful way to talk about Etel's entire body of work. "She writes in English after writing in French, yet she is also unquestionably an Arab writer" writes Ammiel Alcalay in his essay "Our Memory Has No Future."

Soon after that dinner Ann and I went to, Etel and Simone leave for Paris, and even though Simone's been back for extremely short stays, Etel has not been back in over two years.

Like Cozarinsky, Etel "writes autobiographical stories that are like essays, essays that are like stories." Writers that immediately come to my mind, with whom she shares affinities, are Luis Cernuda, Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, Abdelfattah Kilito, Rebecca West, and Juan Goytisolo.

Her work displays an uncompromising silence—in lieu of the endless chatter that surrounds us—and adherence to a core set of ethics that refute the irrationality of our current times.

She reminds me that it is this fleeting "pleasure in writing" that has the capacity to carry us all back to those one-word writing assignments she so loved as a child.

Edmond Jabès says "the child makes up words and writes them as he hears them . . . they make him become aware of his universe . . . it is only later that he will be disappointed when forced to write them according to the rules . . . and still later will the child resign himself and make an effort to respect correct spelling and understand the necessity of being understood, of being read(able)."

Etel remains close to this original impulse and shows us how to respond to the so-called rules and also how to respect the happiness we all seek from words. In this she is model reader and writer.

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"Cabin is a childhood word" (Hocquard)
"Childhood has a refuge in winter" (Daive)
"Childhood's sun is forever young" (Adnan)

i.

Apples Home

This sanctum; the scent of rotting fruit

ii.

California Exile

This escarpment: the bewilderment of days

iii.

Wires Sun

This morning; the spectacle of eclipse

iv.

Accretion Window

This light; the arc of blue

v.

Café Letters

This coffee; the grammar of clarity

vi.

Childhood Seasons

This house; the paragraphs of weather

vii.

Warp Cat

This heat; the boredom of progress

viii.

Orogeny Shadow

This hill; the fuse of twilight

ix

Grid Cézanne

This whiteness; the tops of trees

x

Occupation syllables

This disaster; *the burnt omelet of speech*

The second part of this appreciation was sent to Etel & Simone in a letter a year or so ago. At the time I was re/reading *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country* and Rosmarie Waldrop's translation of Jean Daive's melancholic yet beautiful *Under the Dome: Walks with Paul Celan*. Daive wrote his book on a Greek isle. Etel and Simone spend a good deal of time in Greece. The last phrase in *Correspondences* is from *Under the Dome*. The one-word "correspondences" and their brief explication were an attempt to connect through re/reading and filial admiration to my own desire for suppleness. To be able to open & close it. Poetry.