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OBSESSION IS REASON ENOUGH

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Diane Wakoski's career as a serious poet started during her undergraduate days at the University of California. She had been writing poetry since childhood, but at Berkeley she was catalyzed by a series of encounters and discovered possibilities. Putting behind her the sentimental and unpublishable juvenalia she had been writing, she began to discover her serious calling, first by imitation and experimentation and then by finding that liberating wedding of form and content. During the years since, she has honed the tools of her craft, has, of course, developed; matured; but it is amazing in retrospect to see how quickly she discovered her voice and with what energy she pursued her muse.

In Berkeley she experienced not just the first independence of going off to college but, rather, a radical breaking away from family and Fullerton, from a past bounded by small town, by unimaginative lower middle class propriety, by the silence of those who had little to say. She experienced as well the liberation offered by a great university. The worlds of learning and creativity expanded radically for her into both the realms of the past and the regions of possibility. She was able to live experimentally, act out what could only have been fantasies

in Fullerton, imagine new myths to live by, if not invent new selves, at least express repressed corners of her self. The possibilities were many, the examples before her abundant and liberating, the demands put upon her exacting; for Berkeley was true to its image -- both a distinguished university and a community dedicated to ferment. She plunged into those separate sides of the student experience and made them inseparable. She brought them together in poetry -- in classes and workshops, in student publications and readings, in the way she lived and worked and acted. The communal yeast came not from Berkeley alone, for she arrived there while the Beat renaissance taking place across the Bay was still in flower. And eventually she would extend her own activities there, reading at the Poetry Center and at the Bread and Wine Mission.

She was not only surrounded by new possibilities -- objects, books, people, movements, ideas, but noticed and nurtured by her professors, most notably Thomas Parkinson, Josephine Miles, Thom Gunn. She read for courses and on her own -- Chinese poetry, French Surrealism, Greek tragedy, French Symbolists, German Expressionists, Imagists, Dickenson, Whitman, Lorca, Yeats, Stevens, Jacob, Stein, Levertov, Apollinaire, Gilbert, Spicer, Ginsberg. Through her interest in the Beat poets, she came to know the work of Beat artists, particularly the assemblagist Bruce Connors. And through LaMonte Young, a fellow student, she heard her first concrete and electronic music. She worked under a medieval painting of the crucifixion in the Morrison reading room, studied photographs of Michelangelo's sculpture. It all fed into her student poetry, some of it eventually becoming part of a more mature manner. She not only

wrote poetry herself, but critiqued and edited, worked for Occident, the student literary magazine, eventually becoming its editor. She helped start a series of broadsides, Penny Poems, published by Occident, and herself sold them in town. She organized public readings and occasional semi-public ones in her own apartment, cryptically advertised in the campus newspaper, conventicles intended largely for the student poets of Berkeley. Of these latter, one of the participants recalls:

up the stairs we trooped, past bikers and spaced-out starving artists, on nights of full moon or Fridays the thirteenth, and into Diane's pad -- the Occident crew and friends, and whoever else responded . . . sometimes sixty in all. The gallons of cheap red went round as we settled on the floor on thin mattresses; the candles were lit and the lights killed, and one candle went round from poet to poet as we read in turn, for hours into the night -- with Diane now not so much queen, as priestess of the ancient rites.

It was "hokey and self-conscious," as he admits; but Diane delighted in the mummery of these Byronic excursions. Yet it was the seriousness and the intensity of her commitment which permitted such frivolity. Poetry became an enveloping fact, both a private and a social act, a way of life. "The society of poetry," the same contemporary says, "gave her an excuse to work out, to indulge her opinions . . . with a relish less malicious than playful, as if she were exploring a social role and finding it to her taste." As though, one might add, she had found a mask which fit.

Her first-remembered poem, written at age seven, was about a rose bush; and the bulk of her earliest writing, including that done during

her first year at Berkeley (1956-1957), shared some of that naiveté. It was sentimental, expected, dutiful. As a kind of five finger exercise, she had for years been writing sonnets, so many that she came to hate the form. She submitted some to Occident, a cycle to the seasons written in her first year at Berkeley. "Summertime is something that you can touch," she says in "Sonnet to Summer," "Hot dusty grass; powdered, squishy warm dust/ Between your bare toes that fill you with such/ Longing for a tall, frosted drink . . ." "Sonnet to Winter" is hardly better. The dusty decor of "poetic diction" learned in high school fits out a conventional and received scene: "Naked trees stripped of their sylvan attire/ Cast shadows on crusty roads, once grass-grown." And though the poem's persona hints at a troubled and solitary darkness: "Alone, I search for something I require," that intimation is set against a togetherness distressingly reminiscent of Pooh Bear's "Hum": "While others sit before a roaring fire,/ Toasting toes, warming nose, I roam alone."

What is most interesting about these effusions is the suddenness of her abandonment of them and the distance of technique and sensibility that she traveled in the few months between their composition and that of such poems as "After Looking at a Painting of the Crucifixion by an Unknown Master of the 14th Century" or "Love Poem," both written in 1957 and included in Coins and Coffins (1962). They are the earliest of her poems to be published in book form, amongst the earliest to be published anywhere; and while they are student exercises, they are also giant steps on the road to independence. In them she abandoned the sentimentality of idea and convention which had dominated her work till

then. Though her immaturity flavors them, the ideas expressed are suddenly more muscular, the imagery, the form more astringent, the prosodic sense both more liberated and personally controlled.

In "After Looking" she abandons iambic pentameter, syllabic count, for more organic considerations such as natural breath stops, emphasis gained through the surprise of caesura:

It is not so much
 that he was a good man,
 betrayed by his friends,
 or killed by the stupidity of his time.
 Hanging by his side are the two other men
 equally betrayed --

Her imagery and vocabulary are of her time (no more "sylvan attire"), establish an immediacy of relationship:

how else were thieves caught without fingerprints,
 lie detectors?

She was freed to invest some of herself in her poem. She first describes, establishes a scene, offers facts, then begins to speculate, and suddenly becomes highly personal. Having set the scene, she says:

The pain he felt
 could not have had much to do with right and wrong.
 The pain could not have been greater for him
 than for those other two,
 the thieves also hanging
 by their own flesh,
 gradually being ripped open
 by the gravity that inevitably pulls down.

Your painting makes me furious --
 describing spiritual pain,
 when the man was being literally torn open
 without anaesthesia.

This outburst of rage (blunted by the anachronistic "without anaesthesia") is followed by a return to the visual field of the painting, and with it the poem becomes metaphysical, personal, and unexpectedly richer in meaning while still observing the periods and rhythms of speech, of oration nearly:

Gold
 is embossed on his robes:
 honor
 Thirteen-hundred years late.
 I rebel if you are telling me that
 after the fact
 there is nothing but honor.
 Now,
 seven-hundred years later,
 I ask you something more,
 being young,
 but still remembering those yellow stars that looked
 remarkably like the Florentine master's
 gold halos,
 and not understanding pain
 or wanting to die for what I believe,
 or what I am,
 by birth.

By borrowing the yellow stars of David from the prose poems of Max Jacob, whom she had been reading, she insists upon Christ's Jewishness and therefore, in this context, upon his humanity. Using this cluster of image and idea, she compares the suffering and martyrdom of Hitler's victims with that of Christ and associates his commemorators (blinded by their belief to his humanity) with their tormentors. And then, in a foreshadowing of a poem to come a year or so later,

she appears either to take on the cloak of Jewishness herself or to empathize to the point of confusion with it. Her rebellion at the end, against the possibility of dying for what she believes or for what she is by birth, seems almost gratuitous given her age and condition, and curiously abstract when placed in conjunction with either the crucifixion or the concentration camp. It results in part, certainly, from the need for closure in this youthful poem; yet the readiness to empathize indicates not only an unwillingness to die for being who she is, but also a paradoxical willingness to be somehow someone other than who she is, an eagerness to shed an inheritance in order to create a new self.

Whatever self-conscious, 'student' qualities the poem has, we have here no more squishy dust of summer leaping up between our toes -- nor regular iambic rhythm, nor Pooh Bear hums. Instead, freer and more personally controlled rhythms and line lengths, and because of the reduction in the number and kind of formal constraints, a greater possibility of the poet entering the poem. She enters it, in the fugitive, almost subliminal willingness to wear a mask. Ultimately, what is most interesting in this poem is that fleeting glimpse of the emergent, empathetic poet aborning. It is the first intimation she gives of what will become the central fact of her poetry and her life -- that the two have become deliberately and inextricably confused, that each is the mask for the other.

"Love Poem" offers a text book case of the young poet using a model in order to depart from it. Denise Levertov's Here and Now (1957) had just appeared in City Lights' Pocket Poets Series, and in it was her "Love Poem":

Maybe I'm a 'sick part of a
sick thing'

 maybe something
 has caught up with me
certainly there is a
mist between us

 I can barely
see you
 but your hands
are two animals that push the
mist aside and touch me.

Ms. Wakoski's attention was caught by the free verse, and by the dramatic narrative form, but it was surely attracted as well by the protagonist's dissociated view of love. Here was a situation to fit her need. She decided to make her own version of it, almost as an exercise. What she did, in essence, was outfit the central idea or situation with more strikingly concrete and surreal imagery;

Tree, where are your fingers?

 They are dead.

Tree, where is the summer?

 It has gone mad, chasing the sun.

Tree, who is the girl
with fingers like twigs?

 She is dead.

I cannot understand her hands.
They are like twigs; and the sun,
it has died in her hair.

 I love her and she is dead.

Tree, why are you trembling?

 From her hands like twigs
 and the dead sun in her hair.

I killed her, Tree;
I killed her.

The twigs scratched, and the sun is like
the dead bodies of bees twisted in her hair.

Tree, where are your fingers?

On her hands and in her hair.

Denise Levertov's poem is the more suggestive, the more focussed of the two, but it is also the less complex. Its effectiveness lies in the immediate integrity of impression it conveys, whereas Diane Wakoski's poem contains more complicated and less easily parsed signals -- though in their way no less integrated. In this context, the chief interest of the latter stems from what it indicates about her and her development. Not only does it illustrate her emerging concern with imagery, but it contains the seeds of subject and symbol she would later elaborate. By putting "Love Poem" alongside "Black Leather, Because Bumble Bees Look Like It" (written only slightly later and published in Four Young Lady Poets, 1962) we see that the dead bodies of bees are really abandoned children; and in the light of much of her subsequent work we know that the sun is ideal love or lover. In other words, she has taken Ms. Levertov's example as a means of approaching what would become her real subject, the simultaneous necessity and failure of love.

The principal intellectual influence swaying her at the time these poems were written was exercised by Professor Thomas Parkinson, whose writing course she was taking as a sophomore. He would become her mentor and as a paternal surrogate the kind of supporter who gave her confidence in herself. Their relationship, according to a fellow student, was "warm, deep and genuine," and it persisted through her university career. She says, in a Preface to Virtuoso Literature for Two and Four Hands (1974), that it is to him, to his belief in her,

that she owes her being a poet. He helped get her started in what must have been a superb course, introduced her to the poetry world across the Bay, imported some of the action and passion of that world to the campus. "Parkinson brought it home to us through his strong involvements in that scene -- the high point being, perhaps, when 200 people jammed his class to hear Ginsberg read his Kaddish amid awe and tears." [Rossman, p. 100] And he continued to support her efforts through suggestion and public praise, singling her work out from amongst all the student poetry in Occident.

In his writing course, he assigned an impressive reading list, expected not only that the students would read it but that their writing would stem from this reading and that they would be conscious of and able to establish the connections between what they had read and written. To students who too often simply want to express themselves in an onrush of diffuse feeling, such a rubbing of noses in the self-conscious aspects of imitation and creation must have had its benefits. In Diane's case the lesson, though a much more complex one, took and helped shake her out of the immaturity and sentimentality which had characterized her work. He had a reputation not simply as a clear, incisive mind, but as a severe critic, a man unwilling to praise mediocrity in order to avoid hurt feelings. He became in some sort a momentary surrogate, the difficult-to-please father figure whose praise she worked long and hard for -- and finally attained, but not without giving up the conventional models and girlish ideals she had brought with her. His reading list affected her enormously. She caught his enthusiasm for Whitman and Dickinson; but the unexpected and single most important item for her on that

reading list was Gertrude Stein's Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas. The rhythms and structures of the prose had a revolutionary and catalytic influence: "It changed my whole way of thinking. . . . And this is where, I think, I first got turned on to repetition, which I use a lot in poems. I wrote a whole notebook of poems in that class, and I've never published any of them, but they imitate Gertrude Stein."

[Catherine Petroski, "An Interview with Diane Wakoski," Chelsea, August 1973, p. 45.] She was affected as well by the flat but brilliant neutrality of tonal surface. And a more general result of the encounter was to encourage her experimentation with prosodic quantity, with phrasing. She thought, she says, "If Gertrude Stein can do that with prose, why can't I do it with poetry?" [Interview w/ DRS]

In addition to the kind of influence that Parkinson exerted (and to a lesser extent Professors Bensimon and _____, who charted her reading in French Surrealism and Greek tragedy), other lines of force directed her in the immediate. For one, she entered the communal life of Occident and its student poets and English majors, shared their enthusiasms for the Imagists, German Expressionists, French Symbolists, above all for the Beat scene which gave them the example of poetry as public performance and as a way of life. Her good friend and fellow student Michael Rossman says, "in her tenure there Diane exposed herself to a rich drift of influences," one of which was his "own passion for Lorca." It was a brothy pond.

In parallel to entering the life of the student literary magazine, she became involved in the bohemia of Berkeley's coffee house and street scene, led a life increasingly experimental, osée, bizarre, erratic, frantic.

She redirected the sublimations of her earlier youth, indulged in symbolic actings out of the frustrations and needs, the obsessions which had been building since her childhood. The combination of momentary triumphs and lingering doubts, of pleasure and pain that such a life provoked was a goad to an intense search for inner paths, a search not without wrong turns, avoidances, and rejections. Her inner confusions were more explosive than the intellectual expansion she had been undergoing and ultimately even more necessary to her poetry.

In 1959, in her junior year, as her personal dilemma intensified and her poetic skills increased, she began to find ways to enter her poetry more forcefully and meaningfully. She joined a poetry workshop directed by Thom Gunn, who along with Professor Parkinson exerted a powerful influence on her development, who taught, in important ways, disciplined, encouraged and, as an established poet, accepted her. Under his tutelage she wrote a series of increasingly effective, controlled, crafted poems; and she began to tap her own self-discoverings and their attendant fantasies and inventions. She had, simultaneously, turned for help to a psychologist through whom she was more purposefully directed to her childhood and to her own dreams (which reenforced her attraction to surrealism), to the fascinating algebra of personal myth. Eventually the curative of analysis lost out to an inventive narcissism, the basis of her notational system, to the amalgam of dream and childhood in the creation of personal myth, symbol, image readily adapted to poetry. And as she, as the multiple selves of her imagination, began to enter her poetry, she became more than just a student poet. As discipline and self-discovery, craft and subject, form and content merged, a recognizable voice emerged. The first visible sign occurred in "Justice Is Reason Enough," to which we shall return.

* * * * *

If her career as a serious poet started in Berkeley, its antecedents and sources lay in an Orange County childhood; and it is there and to that time that we should turn. She was born in 1937, as the depression dragged on, matured into self-consciousness as World War II imposed its own austerity. With a younger sister she was raised by her mother, with the help of her mother's brother and his wife, in a two-bedroom frame cottage they all shared. Complete with sagging front porch and banging screen door, it lay on the edge of, was involved in the life on an orange grove, whose round, dark green trees and golden fruit harbored in their shade secret places cut off from the realities of the glaring light, dusty furrows, the rows of oil heaters outside. Even those smudge pots, rusty objects by day, came alive on cold nights, creating a magical, alien, threatening faery land. There was room here for the imagination; but her people were silent, German stock from North Dakota, people who did not expect much and had little to say, who were limited by diffidence, by a fatalism born of many disappointments and few expectations, of the prairie in conjunction with the depression. In the midst of that reticence, she was a screamer, jealous of her infant sister, furious at her father's absence, keeping the household in turmoil, often dandled and cradled into calm by Uncle Elmer, the avuncular surrogate for the missing father.

Her father had been a sailor when he married and left the sea; but unable to support his young family ashore, he reenlisted in the Navy when Diane was two. His decision to leave, ostensibly made to help the family financially, surely had been motivated by other considerations as well. Except for occasional, brief, and increasingly infrequent visits, he never really returned. The growing estrangement between the parents ended in divorce a few years later, after he was posted to the east coast. However gradually, non-violently, even almost non-verbally (as seems to have been the case) the final, legal separation came to pass, the original departure created an enormous sense of loss in the child; and the father's subsequent rare visits served to reenforce both her infantile sense of omnipotence (that she could reverse the irreversible) and her original feelings of loss when, each time, he departed again. As a child, she was convinced, that when he did return it was to see her; for it was she who was the interesting one, not her mother, who had failed to hold him. And still, of course, he always left her too. She suffered a profound narcissistic injury which was surely reenforced by this process of repeated departures and from which she could never fully recover, thus creating a considerable ambivalence toward herself and her parents.

Her responses to the loss of her father parallel those described in psychoanalytic literature dealing with fathers and daughters and with one-parent children. Suffering from the "absence of oedipal reality," she endowed her father "with magical power either to gratify or to punish." (Neubauer, 1960). Neubauer summarizes a case reported

by Fenichel involving an "ambivalent, disappointing mother and a totally ungratified child," a description which fits Diane Wakoski's feelings about her childhood. "The child's longing for love was frustrated on all levels; her aggression against the mother was repressed; she turned to an identification with the idealized fantasy of the father . . . only to be always disappointed since no man could be the right one." (1921). One of Leonard's (1966) case studies, "Laura," had lost her father through divorce, blamed the loss on her mother, had an exaggerated competitive relationship with a younger sibling, became antagonistic and rebellious toward her mother, and developed an image of her father so idealized as to be caricatural, an image lacking in elemental humanity. "She wanted him to be someone she could feel proud of -- a Czar, a Premier, a General -- but at the same time his image took on a frightening aspect of cruelty and violence." ().

Mythic characters of this sort -- George Washington, the King of Spain, the mustachioed motorcycle betrayer -- would come to dominate her poetry as father surrogates, sometimes fierce and cruel, always exaggerated.

According to Wolfenstein (19), "The common pathological consequences of the loss of a parent" are an "inability to renounce the lost object," a "persisting demand to be taken care of," a "vindictive rage against the world at large," and an "effort to force the lost parent to return" by means of self-inflicted symbolic repetitions of the loss, usually (in the case of a girl who has lost her father) by means of impossible affairs in which the subject ends pining for an absent lover while cherishing the unrealistic hope

of his eventual return. In each repeated instance there is an attempt to requite the tragedy with a happy ending. That things yet again turn out badly to the shocked surprise of the patient is related to the repeated scotomization of warning signals. The same splitting of the ego instituted in response to the father's disappointment are noted and at the same time denied. The insistence that the present unpromising affair must end in a happy union is a repetition of the demand that the father must return." [433-4] Implicit in these repeated attempts to undo the original injury is a dual attitude toward reality. In cases where loss of a parent is compounded with severe narcissistic injury, a seriously split view of self occurs, the ego associating itself on the one hand with the idealized image of the father and on the other, particularly in cases where loss occurs because of divorce or desertion rather than death, identifying its abased self view with the mother, the fellow failure.

While in college Wolfenstein's young woman brought this ongoing attempt to undo the loss to an intense symbolic level. At a moment when her low self-esteem had been displaced by the opposite view -- that she was exceptional, she started looking for her "male counterpart," a young man with traits of mind and character like her own, which is to say that the syndrome was heightened in this case by the blended overtones of narcissism and incest. A similar situation developed in Diane Wakoski's life at Berkeley. She found a "male counterpart" and, what is more, perceived in her find the symbolic and poetic possibilities of those overtones. She was at the time in serious training in Thom Gunn's workshop and in therapy. The reasoning of the one offered the symbolic complexities and densities of

meaning the other needed. She was able to transmute the spark of these only partially resolved perceptions into her poetry, first into "Justice is Reason Enough," and then through that poem into an evolving personal myth which would become the cornerstone upon which the major part of her poetry is built.

The facts surrounding the writing of "Justice is Reason Enough" provide very real insight into the origins of a poem and, in this case, of a poetic career, for it is, as she regards it, her first important poem. Thom Gunn had assigned the making of a poem in a set form; and she, rather than choosing an extant form, set one of her own, an acrostic based on part of the first line, "He, who once was my brother," the words determining stanzaic form. She adapted the central image from Yeats's "Leda and the Swan," changing the swan into a gull and Zeus into a brother who cannot sustain his flight into fantasy, who, freighted by the guilt of his incest with the "I" of the poem, plunges wingless from a cliff to his death. The narrative situation has the sister forced to explain to her mother the brother's fantasy and suicide virtually as though she had no part in it, almost as though she were an innocent bystander:

Mother took me back there every day for
over a year and asked me, in her whining way, why it had
to happen
over and over again -- until I wanted
never to hear of David any more:

How could the "Diane" of the poem tell her unimaginative mother about her brother's dream?

the gull beating its wings
effortlessly together until they drew blood?

Would it explain anything, and how can I tell
 Any one here about the great form and its beating wings. How it
 swoops down and covers me, and the dark tension leaves
 me with blood on my mouth and thighs. But it was that dream,
 you must know, that brought my tight, sullen little
 brother to my room that night and pushed his whole taut body
 right over mine until I yielded, and together we yielded
 to the dark tension.

The "I's" repressed aggression against her "whining" or
 "disappointing" mother emerges only barely disguised as contempt. It
 is interesting to note that "Diane's" explanation will not focus
 immediately upon her own participation, as though the mother-daughter
 rivalry were a recognized and accepted fact, that the distance between
 them were too great or painful to bridge, to discuss. But the major
 locus of interest lies in the attitude of the speaker toward the event,
 and it is ambivalent. She describes him as her "tight, sullen little
 brother" and the act, which seems virtual rape, as "ugly." But she
 also despairs of being able to tell "anyone here about the great form
 and its beating wings," the language establishing a tonal ambiguity
 by recognizing in the act magnificence and beauty as well as ugliness.
 She succumbed to more than force, succumbed, indeed, with him: "together
 we yielded to the dark tension." Her negative reactions are centered
 in part upon her mother's inability to understand (that the brother-
 father preferred the daughter to the wife) and upon her repeated need
 to explain -- that is, the negative response lies partially in its
 association with the mother.

And the explanation forthcoming at the end of the poem can
 best be understood if one accepts the daughter's ambivalence:

Mother asked me why every day for a year; and I told her justice. Justice is reason enough for anything ugly. It balances the beauty in the world.

Justice meted out for what? For having committed incest? Is this the conventional response of the super ego? Or for desertion? He is punished because he could not sustain the flight of his desire, could not, as her father could not, love and stay with her, a position Ms. Wakoski affirmed a decade later in "Love Letter Postmarked van Beethoven": "a bullet for my brother who could not love me without guilt." (MB 18).

Where in Diane Wakoski's imagination did "Diane's" incestuous brother David come from? His name had several sources. She had been reading poetry by Max Jacob, whose images of the Star of David fascinated her; and she had recently met a fellow student and poet, a Jew, whom she liked. She began to associate his Jewishness with the idea of King David and his attractiveness with that other "beautiful boy," Michaelangelo's "David," photographs of which she had been studying.

A letter of hers, written on December 23, 1958, and accompanied by a typescript of the poem which she had recently completed, offers more clues. It is intense and vivid, yet mannered and ambivalent. She has "finally begun seeing a psychiatrist," something she says she should have done sooner because she is "very mixed up right now." Yet she adds, the doctor probably cannot do her any good "since I am as capable as she is of rationalizing about my problems." She describes a life of contradictions -- "looking more and more frantically for something that won't just bore me incredibly, for someone who will intrigue me in the manner that I am supposed to intrigue the 'Avenue' bohemian society of Berkeley." Yet, in the midst of this "far-out"

(her term) search, she says, simply, "I need someone warm and loving," someone who will be constant and protective but who will allow her her own liberty. "I feel like the 19-year-old in Simone de Beauvoir's Mandarins, really jaded and almost too old for frivolity," to which she adds a good-little-girl marginal note, "all of which makes her a rather sad sort of human." Reversing her field again, she says, "I take games seriously now, (this is known as art)." Then she comes to the matter toward which her letter has been tending. Indulging her ambivalence toward reality, she enters fully into the serious game:

One of the strangest things that has happened to me recently is my involvement with a Holden Caulfield-ish youth (very young and brash and exciting who is, I think, my peer in the world. . . . The thing with Michael is that for some reason he reminds me intensely of my brother, David, whom I am sure I have never spoken of previously to you. One of the early sources of emotional tension in my life was David (perhaps you recall that it was difficult in the beginning of our friendship for me to refer to you by your Christian name?) who was my twin brother and who committed suicide under somewhat unusual circumstances. There was a period in my life when I had a complete mental block about him and refused to recognize the fact that he had ever existed. Knowing Michael and getting involved in almost the same sort of incestuous relationship with him that David and I had, being reminded every day of an old and electrically charged way of life has put every emotional reserve to its utmost test.

The ambivalence of her attitude can be felt in the curiously inappropriate vocabulary and tone, through the elaborate organization and structure of the "revelation," the distanced, "literary" quality of supposed fact. She had not spoken previously of her brother because she did not have one. In curiously contrived language, she refers to her putative affair with a "peer" (her "male counterpart") as an

"involvement with a Holden-Caulfield-ish youth," describes her brother's suicide as taking place "under somewhat unusual circumstances." "Somewhat unusual," indeed! The almost off-hand, nearly coy manner in which the main revelation is sandwiched in near the end of the paragraph ("getting involved in almost the same sort of incestuous relationship with him that David and I had") is clearly inappropriate to the pretended emotional content unless, of course, this is a game, a deflection, and the real emotional content lies removed from the revealed fact. What we see is carefully contrived literary effect -- and there is the essential ambivalence, for this is psychic material which is deeply meaningful and painful and which serves as the substance of a publicly played game, an attempt to be intrigued and intriguing by being "far-out," a form of narcissistic self-indulgence. The game and its excitement also, of course, involve the "youth," the incestuous surrogate, through whom she hopes to defeat reality and reestablish the fantasy of an "old and electrically charged way of life" which "put every emotional reserve to its utmost test."^{*}

The literary point of all this is that she has begun to find the means of using her internal pain and psychic confusion, which emerge as poetry, as art, by means of an intricately played game. The artist's own need for art, which is the basis of the reader's use

^{*} Curiously, perhaps so that the relationship would not end, it was never consummated, according to her testimony. She could pine for him in suspended anticipation, not after being abandoned. The then "youth," Michael Rossman, has since written to her: "I don't know who I was for you, your poetic David aside; but you were my sister." (Margins 103).

of it, can be clearly seen by this use of the game which substitutes a more aesthetic and satisfying and less confusing pain for the unreasoned pain and confusions of life. Where "Justice Is Reason Enough" fits in an aesthetic assessment of her canon is debatable, but it does represent the first time she was effectively able to turn her psychic obsessions into literary resources. In that sense this poem is a cornerstone, not only in that she has begun to discover her subject (and thus will begin to find her voice as a poet) but also in that she has found the process of mythicising (which she would later term "developing a personal mythology") upon which the body of her poetry is largely based. And she begins here to act out her compulsions, to use her life in order to make poetry, thus in some measure losing self in letters.

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The effects of the psychic injury can be seen not only in the development of a personal mythology but in her use of image and metaphor as well. Immediately following the writing of "Justice," she created a sequel to it which uses and expands some of the same imagery. "From a Girl in a Mental Institution" carries the theme of incest to its logical metaphoric conclusion and, at the same time, reveals further complexities in its sources. Not only does her brother reappear here -- as a suicided gull, but the girl of the poem too becomes a gull, one which rocks aimlessly, tossed by the waves, in a rhythm not its own. In her alienation, as she looks down from her masthead perch, she sees "children tucked, sleeping, into the waves;" but she does not like the waves: "They/ Distinctly Say Things Against Me." It was the speaking waves that took away her brother, "when he

dove in and never came/ back." "The waves," she continues,

have torn the sleeping children to bits. I
see them scattered on the crests now.
There -- an arm floating by.

leave me alone, i have not hurt you
Stop pulling my wings,
my beak, Don't You Hear Stop It.

There is nothing more horrible than hands
like ancient crabs, pulling at one. And they cannot
hear because they have no ears.

I have no ears.

I am a gull. Birds have no ears. I cannot hear
Them
or anyone.

The fingers on the dismembered arm, floating
in the waves,
can point and make signs
but I will not hear
the waves
telling the fingers odious things about me.

I will not watch their obscenities
pointing to the bottom where the children are buried;
where he is buried;
where I am buried. (Trilogy, pp. 17-18)

The meaning of the girl's paranoia in this occasionally Eliotic passage becomes clearer if we know that two years earlier, in 1956, Diane Wakoski had given birth to a child, and that, unmarried, deserted by the father, she gave it up for adoption. The fact of her having the child rather than seeking an abortion is fascinating in its implications and in the symbolic and imagistic possibilities it would offer her poetry. In somewhat literal analytic terms the child can be seen as a substitute

for the penis she never received from her father in their unresolved oedipal relationship. In more homely terms, she replays the original situation, asserting the loss by giving the child away. Having the child also served as a reenforcement of her effort to make her boyfriend act out the return of her father by himself being a father. At a higher level of abstraction, she insisted upon continuity by having the child, upon the possibility of love, that is, upon the possibility of being creative.

We begin to see that David, the incestuous brother of "Justice," is not only Michael, the young man in Berkeley, but this even earlier "youth," Roger, the father of her child, the first of the surrogate lovers, who in her view betrayed her because he heeded the whispering waves of convention. Because of his betrayal and abandonment, she was forced to give the child up. The waves of the poem thus have destroyed for "Diane" the couple, the child, love, continuity, all of which now lie buried and pointed at by the disembodied, accusing fingers. In other words, though having and losing the child were real, the transaction was a highly symbolic one which permitted her in some measure to equate two kinds of creativity -- biologic and poetic, using the one to answer and ease the failure of the other while at the same time so substituting the one for the other as to nearly confuse them. It is a conception so pervasive as to be one of the unifying themes in the whole body of her work, an idea so basic that it is the source of much of her theory and practice. It surfaces in her statement that poetry is as interesting

as the person who writes it, in her belief that the individual can become emblematic. It is the basis of her career-long practice of converting the daily events of her life into the substance of her poetry and in the reverse imitation of converting the events of her poetry into the substance of her life.

That the intimate relationship between the two kinds of gestation was actively on her mind can be seen in the same letter in which she talks about the "Holden Caulfieldish youth."

I think I will tell you about a few of the fantastic colorama dreams I've been having, which began as one dream and snowballed first by occurring over and over again, night after night and then repeating with the embellishments and developing so that I now write them down upon awakening because they are a source of very great excitement to me. They not only have all been in color . . . but are also catalogue dreams, particularly synthesizing my attitudes and relationship to poetry. [fn, my ital]

The dreams are pretty clearly only partially creations of the night, though they are deeply embedded in the subconscious. In their reported state they exist as amphibians on the shore between the waters of sleep and the rational, quite dry land of wakefulness. They are, to some extent, literary creations which well up out of the subconscious.

The dreams have similar settings and decor. Each occurs in a room with "green silk . . . everywhere." "All the participants were men except . . . Gail . . . (the girl Roger fell in love with but not the one he married), . . . Joan, my former roommate, . . . Adele." They appear in separate dreams, she says, though as she warms to the staging and telling of her story, she compresses the separate dreams

into one and gathers all the women into it. And she renders the decor increasingly magical, precious, and literary. The men, in each of whom she has a strong interest either poetic or erotic (or both), file into the room carrying objects symbolic of them.

Thom Gunn who had written a poem about a hawk and its tamer, which had impressed her by its "gentleness," enters with a hawk in hand. Roger with a domestic teacup and saucer. Still others appear: the "captain" with a small silver clipper ship ("I wrote a sestina about such a little silver ship"); Jack Anderson with a beautifully bound book containing treasures -- fairy tales, magic spells -- and a silver ink stand with quill; Jim Armstrong with a golden chess set. Michael comes in with his recorder. Al Frank with a large-linked chain ("Al had been writing a sonnet about a man being chained to his carnal self"), and Hans with a large navel orange. They are variously described as "knowing everything about American literature and a lot about Yeats, has a very bad reputation with young girls," or as a "thoroughly Victorian grad student in English . . . whom I have a crush on but who considers my world immoral," or as "one of the gods in my pantheon, a Viking and very beautiful," or as "one of my fatherly lovers," or as "my Flemish lover . . . who disapproved of my games." Cats come in with each of them, disappearing into Cheshire smiles except for three, a Siamese and a smoky grey Persian, which sit on either side of her, and a kitten, which curls up at her feet.

She is moved by the beauty of the green silk but afraid that one of the women, her rivals, who have scissors in hand, will, like la jeune Parque, cut this symbol of life and continuity. Gail (whom

Roger had loved) starts to cut it, but the Siamese slashes her arm. Roger catches her blood in his teacup. He takes the scissors and cuts off her long black hair, which falls on the green silk. Gail turns into Adele, and Roger cuts off her long red hair which falls beside the black locks. She then becomes Joan, and Roger cuts off her long blond hair. With their hair gone, the girls vanish or, as Ms. Wakoski puts it in an interesting slip, "were vanished." Roger lights a fire and burns the hair, which flames brightly, then pours the cup of blood on it, which makes a great flare. As the hair and blood burn, she falls asleep, and when it stops, she awakes in the dream, picks up the quill and begins to write on the green silk. "As I wrote, everyone said, (and I blush to think of it now) 'What lovely things you are writing, Diane.'" Her ability to write, it would seem, comes either out of the "vanishment" of her rivals or out of putting the long hair of feminine beauty and the blood of love and birth behind her -- so that poetry is born of the death of love and life. If we take all the women to be extensions of herself, as we might were we dealing with the subconscious, the latter seems reasonable.

In another dream, she is in a room with a table set in it. It is "obviously" the home of Roger and Babs, his wife, who is wearing a lavender sweater. Streams of people enter, each carrying an object. All the men of the first dream are there with their objects, though Michael now has a toad with a jewel in its head. And there are some new ones: Jose with the marigold, "he used to bring me a marigold every time he came"; Joe leading a unicorn, Duncan with a bull fighter's cape,

John with a mask, Morton with a silver flute. Again their connections are either poetic or erotic: "one of my lovers who is very handsome," "one of my sources of 'living language' . . . and he is becoming a good poet." Roger goes out and comes back with green silk: "There is green silk everywhere, and everyone gasped and murmured, 'How lovely,' and he replied, 'for the guests,' and smiled at Babs." When everyone is assembled, the three women come up to the table behind which Roger and Babs are standing. Roger takes four wine glasses, fills them with sparkling white wine, removes four huge pearls from a necklace and drops them into the glasses. Then, "to each of us he offered a glass." Joan drinks hers and turns into a coral colored snake. Adele drinks hers and changes into an eagle which takes up the snake and flies out an opening in the ceiling. Then Gail (whom Roger had loved) drinks hers and instantly falls asleep, crumpled on the floor. He offers the last drink to Diane, who cries out, "You have killed them all with the jewels," that is with the milky pearls in the white wine, a sexually potent symbol. "Why do you want me to die?" He answers, "Drink. It is magic." She screams, "No," pours the wine over her hair, which begins to grow and to sparkle from the drops of wine that had become jewels twisted in her hair. Then Babs, the wife, moves over to the couch saying, "I must sleep to make the child in me grow," and some of the people in the background speak up saying, "Gail also sleeps to make the child in her grow," and Roger smiles, saying "My children are growing in them." "Again a great burst of anger flared through me and I said, 'I will never sleep for no child will ever grow in me.'" Mike says, "That's not true. I know your future and it isn't barren. No

one who loves is barren.' As he said this I began to weep, but my tears also turned to jewels. 'It is because of justice that your tears are like jewels,' he said." Roger then prepares another glass of wine and offers it. She is terror stricken and refuses. Thom Gunn twits her for writing sestinas, a "crippling form in the English language," and the subject of poetry having been brought up, the others say, "Write us a poem, Diane.' I smiled yes and felt very happy. I lay down on the floor, wrapped in green silk and said, 'I must sleep so that the poem will grow in me.'"

If it "is because of justice" as she says of her dream, that her "tears are like jewels," it is so because it is just that beauty should come out of pain, that poetry should flow out of betrayed love. Though no child will grow in her, she will not be barren. Because she loves, she is able to wrap herself in the green silk of life and beauty and to sleep so that a poem will grow in her. Nonetheless, the beauty, the poem, will come out of the pain of betrayal, out of the destruction of life and love. It is hardly astonishing, therefore, that associations of dismemberment and wounding, of pain and cruelty, with the idea of love, with lovers and fathers and children, would become one of the major themes in her poetry, even in that which does not obviously deal with her father.

The cruel bird-lover, whom we have met in "The Girl in a Mental Institution," reappears in "Dark Windows" (1960), this time a hawk who pecks out "Diane's" eyes:

I am blind,
 the windows of my house forever dark. My arm
 does not flinch from the rigid bird
 gripping its leather branch
 and again,
 again,

wished she were still with him, though she knew that it was impossible for her to live with a man who would provide her neither the ordinary satisfactions nor even an income, "a man . . . whom I would have to support." "I could not take it," she continued, "as much as I care for him, I could not take his world again." (10/29/62) She does not mention that she had had a child by him also, and that she had again felt obliged to give it up because once more she felt the father would not assume his role as provider-protector.

The impact upon her poetry was immediate. In "Possession Poem" (1961) she again used bird imagery, but now the bird, no longer a cruel hawk, is named "Silence," is the symbol of her children, who have flown away:

a figure that comes and goes,
mainly a dark shadow
always slightly over my head,
-- sometimes in my dreams at night.

As it flies over the "lake filled with mirror fish," this bird of "many disguises" reflects other meanings as well, becoming the unspoken reproaches of her silent mother, the conventionality which whispers about unmarried mothers, becomes even in some measure herself, whose response to the world, though written out in poetry, was still silent resentment, not yet anger, was still unspoken.

In "Discrepancies" (1962) Diane Wakoski returns to the imagery of "From a Girl," to the "dismembered arm floating/ in the waves," waves in which the children had been "tucked, sleeping." Images which had only been associated, she here compresses; and the speaker's hands, cut off at the wrist, become her children who have "gone away."

When I sat down
 to play the guitar
 I found both hands had been cut off
 at the wrist.
 But they were both willing to learn
 to play regardless
 and I agreed upon instruction.
 For years
 I used to watch them play
 when I was tired or lonely --
 like two children dancing,
 or skipping rope --
 but they have grown up
 and gone away.
 Lord, how I miss them,
 my hands,
 my children.

The image of the two hands which she used to watch as they played, "like two children dancing, / or skipping rope" works better for the piano that Diane Wakoski played during all her youth than for a guitar, the piano that she gave up in 1959 at about the time she moved in with La Monte Young. One feels not only that she associates those playing hands with a carefree time previous to the moment when life would turn biologically serious, but that she gave up this gift from her mother, who had provided the piano, the lessons, at a time when she was about to start living in hoped for permanence with a man:

I haven't touched the piano in 10 years,
 perhaps in fear that what little love I've been able to
 pick, like lint, out of the corners of pockets,
 will get lost,
 slide away,
 into the terribly empty cavern of me
 if I ever open it all the way up again. (MB34)

In "letter to the West" (1964) she pursues the same compression of image with astonishing economy, almost to the point of explanation:

The bone of my hand
forms a bird, as if to fly away.

David R. Smith