

THE TITLE ALWAYS COMES FIRST

FIONA ALISON DUNCAN interviews poet, playwright, performance artist, and translator ARIANA REINES

portrait by STEFAN SCHWARTZMAN

Forbearant, aphasia, metonymically, invaginated, illbient, oblate, ablution

are among the words Ariana Reines has taught me through her poetry. 34 years old, she is the author of something like, eight books of poetry, three books of prose-poetry, three French translations, three plays, three art performances, and a series of sculptures inspired by Greek Herms*.

Villanelle, vintner, whinnies, and wineskins!

Reines’ work is physical. She’s combatted a man much bigger than her (Jim Fletcher) in the Whitney. She’s hired a tarantula named Rosie to explore her naked body in a gallery. And—a poet foremost—she writes sex convincingly. Like, “Your tongue is in my mouth / I will suck you through the god in my mouth...”

Ariana Reines is also an astrologer. She was practicing astrology the day we spoke. Monday April 24th, 2017. Mercury was retrograde. Ariana Face-timed me from the lobby of a Midtown Manhattan hotel having just finished an astrology “house call” upstairs. We spoke for over an hour about fathers, jokes, gifts, memory, Mercury, and more.

Eustachon, pugnacious, dissembler, perfidy, calumny.

Fiona Alison Duncan: Are you vengeful?

Ariana Reines: Uh, yeah. But only in very specific ways and it’s the last thing one wants to admit. I’m going to try and turn off my antenna.

What do you mean your antenna?

Oh, the part of my head transmissions pass through. But it’s not in my power to turn it off. I remember worrying that my second book was vengeful.

Coeur de Lion?

I certainly didn’t want to be a vengeful artist. Yes. That one. I think that probably the big struggle in my life, or in my youth, was my dad. I feel that I’m still fighting my father. It’s not pleasant to admit.

Is it actually your father or is it like...

The Father?

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Recognizing that it was my father actually helped bring some humor and charm to the situation. I also still often feel like when I write, I’m writing back to my father.



This is a Herm*

Is there something about writing that brings out dad?

Writing is such a primary and primal activity. It’s really physical, and thus it’s really esoteric. There’s things we don’t understand that come through it, the same way things we don’t understand come through sex. I just figure it’s some kind of sacred war, and I’m settling some kind of score, and my dad knows it, and I know it, and even though I’m not shit-talking him, he’s terrified that everything I do is shit-talking him, which is probably is, de facto, you know what I mean, if you boiled it down...

[Fiona laughs]

Am I making any sense?

Yeah. Totally. How is writing physical? Where or how do you feel the exertion?

Poetry is especially physical because the measure of the line is the measure of my breath. Me, my lungs, my body. It’s not that writing a poem is a physical exertion in itself. It’s that getting good at it has something mysterious to do with being made at home inside your own body. That’s its intimacy. This is true of prose too, and the most infecting and affecting prose becomes your metronome, your rhythm. Think of the way Proust pumps your blood, or Sebald, and marries your circulation to unfolding images.

When were you loneliest?

I’m going to answer the first thing I thought, even though I’m not certain that it’s true: fourth grade. I just had this memory of looking for four-leaf clovers outside the library in spring. For some reason it seemed like the loneliest. Maybe that’s when I first realized that you could feel alone, or realized that you were doing something by yourself.

It’s funny because my next question was going to be, what were you like before puberty?

I was really into ballet. And I think that I thought that I was Mozart.

When you did ballet, did you picture yourself doing it?

No. It was about the feeling. I was weirdly stupid, or I was very visually delayed—I didn’t think about how things looked, and I didn’t think about how I looked until really late.

Lucky!

In a way. Although when I realized...

How late?

Maybe my first or second year of high school? That’s pretty late for a girl. Before then I was obsessed with playing the piano and dancing and singing, and I’ve no idea what it looked like. I was really inside of it. I do re-

member lying in bed at night and telling myself that when I died I would be buried with my arms above my head in fifth position, that thought somehow consoled the fear of death in me.

Did you ever find a four-leaf clover?

Yes. I think that library was lucky. Peonies grew there, and I found many four-leaf clovers.

In a talk you gave in Montreal, you spoke about how our gifts can be burdens. Could elaborate on that?

It’s paradoxical because poetry is really easy.

For you?

Yes. But life is really hard. I think that artists can feel guilty for the ease with which their gifts flow and so we compensate in weird and sometimes gross ways. Figuring out how to carry our gifts and bounties is as much of a big deal as figuring out how to carry the things that seem really clearly to be burdens.

You often talk about “Mercury Poisoning.” What is that?

They say that it’s the Aquarian Age, or rather that we’re entering it, but I feel like Mercury’s stolen the primacy of the age. It is preparing us to become Aquarian, but in his way, by stealing the show as we walk in, in the way that he stole Apollo’s cattle when he was an infant. Because of the emulsification we’re all experiencing—of mind, of gender, of body, of seasons, of climate, of traditions, of blood—everything is somehow in a process of mix and dissolution. There’s theft and distortion, there’s hurt over appropriation, and there’s syncretism. There’s longing for roots and authenticity, and a kind of smoothing, queering action that is very Mercurial. It’s pouring sulfuric acid over everything we formerly took to be natural. All the things that Mercury rules, which is to say, the media through which we communicate—every intermediary, every medium, language itself, intellection itself, the negative space of intellection. All of those distortions, and crazy perversions, to me, that is what defines our age. So Mercury poisoning means being over-mediated, or having become socialized through electronic media too early, or having one’s consumption of it, or pervasiveness by it, be out of control. Also, thinking that you know what you think—Mercury poisoning. I obsessively tell myself this process is necessary, and I obsessively wonder (and worry) what it leads to. Like they say Millennials are not materialistic. I’m technically a Millennial—I’m the old hag of Millennials. If we aren’t materialistic, I see that as a marvelous effect of Mercury, not poison at all.

I was listening to this talk on YouTube by Avital Ronell where she said, “If we could communicate, we wouldn’t need to communicate.”

I love it. That’s Avital! Avital’s work is very important to me, and you just uttered the most Mercurial statement. That’s kind of the essence of Mercury. What is it? If we couldn’t... No, if we could, we wouldn’t need to. Yeah, that paradox is like the essence of language.

You founded a press to publish *Coeur de Lion*, Mal-o-mar—

That was a joke. The publisher, the whole thing. It was all fake, a joke. I just wrote the book and print-on-demand was a thing... I made it up.

I think people take you seriously.

Yes. Apparently. Sometimes.

I heard you say Mal-o-mar’s aim was rapid publishing, which I liked. The way many presses work—slow—you can end up publicizing something that may be very far removed from where you are now.

I knew it would ruin the book if I had to wait to publish it. I literally quit my job and wrote it in two weeks. It was the first time I knew that I was making a work of art. With the book before that [*The Cow*], it had just been coming out of me already. Maybe a first book is that way, you feel less in control. With *Coeur de Lion* I knew, This is going to be a work of art, and I sat down and I didn’t get up until it was done. I felt like I was going to atrophy if I didn’t get rid of it right away. If I could self-publish everything I would, it was so much fun.

Which part was fun?

Designing it, editing it, sending it out. I would mail it with cards I made out of overdraft notices, which my bank was sending me all the time.

Could you say something about your forthcoming book, *The Sand Book*?

Fundamentally, the book is about religious experiences. When Hurricane Sandy hit New York, I knew that I was writing a book called *The Sand Book*. The title always comes first for me. It turns out that it’s an avian book. It’s somehow related to the way that birds show up in all kinds of religious traditions and sacred books as teaching humans to speak.

How did you come to speak French?

I’m going to tell the long answer really quickly. My grandparents survived the Holocaust in Poland. They met in a displaced persons camp in Brussels and they had my mother’s older brother there. By the time my mother was born in the Bronx, the family was speaking French in the house, because their son had been born in Francophone Belgium. My mother basically transposed her not-Americaness from Poland onto France even though we’re not remotely French—I think it healed something in her fractured refugee identity. She wanted me and my brother to speak French. I went to a bilingual school when I was really little. I learned it, forgot it, then it became a thing I wanted to get back. I moved to France and I had lovers who could teach me. I still don’t know French perfectly, and I think it’s because I don’t know it perfectly that I speak it very nicely. My voice is prettier when I speak French, and my personality is just lovelier—I’m somebody else. There’s something about the effort that it pulls out of me that feminizes me in ways I enjoy.

I was hoping we could engage in a critique of Tiqqun’s *Theory of a Young-Girl*, which you translated from the French for Semiotext(e). In your introduction, you speak of the text having a spiritual deficiency.

I was worried about it causing more harm and confusion than opening up avenues for people to actually rebuild. It’s a really imperfect work, but I also think that we did need it in this country. I also feel like the book sounds like it was written by a man who resents that he wants to fuck a young girl and that she doesn’t want to fuck him.

Yes.

It feels that way. I can’t prove that was the author’s condition but it feels that way. So it’s just full of this kind of resentment that clouds it.

One issue for me is that the text mirrors back façades that many people, myself included, adopt in public. Those can be armor, costume, diversion—we put them on to survive, to get money. But what of this figure in private? Who is the Young-Girl, really?

I think the real answer to that will be found in the writing that women are doing. It’ll be really interesting in ten years, once a really good amount has accumulated, for us to see. It’s the literature that we produce, and the art that we produce, that will really make our souls. That’s the work that we are in the midst of producing, right now.

Selected Work by Ariana Reines



The Cow (2006) is Ariana’s first book. Dignified, chunky, and disgusting, it’s about cows as meat, women as meat, women as (dumb) cows, mad cow disease, and madness: the anger of crazy. Choice line: “When I die I will become everything A TUR-DUCKEN.”

Coeur de Lion (2007) is a courageous direct address to “you,” “Jake,” an ex-lover learning experience who we’d maybe be calling, starting circa 2013, a “fuckboy.” Ariana, btw, means Holy and Reines means Queen, and look how good her name looks with this title. Roar. Choice lines: “I loved you when you said / It is horrible what has happened / To Mediterranean culture.”

Adapted from Avital Ronell’s *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech* (1989), ***Telephone*** (2009) is a play starring Alexander Graham Bell and a patient of Carl G. Jung, “Miss St.,” who had a telephone inside of her. The play was commissioned by New York’s Foundry Theatre and was published in book form by Wonder this year. Choice lines: “Any voice can be freed from the encumbrance of its body! Free to travel miles and miles, over land and sea!”

Mercury (2011) is about alchemy, iconography, heredity, and communication. Ariana wasn’t yet into astrology when she wrote it. Choice line: “Poetry’s not made of words.” (But the one everyone puts on Instagram is: “WHEN / I / LOOKED / AT / YOUR / COCK / MY / IMAGINATION / DIED.”)

Thursday (2012) is a Valentine’s Day chapbook. Its “I” is familiar, from Ariana’s earlier works, like a reunion—she’s started to feel like a friend. As she shares colloquially, generously, beautifully, in shorthand, and we get: her humor, grandiosity, pop references, and sex. Choice line: “This is how I put words in your mouth.”

Tiqqun’s ***Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*** (2012) is a French treatise Reines translated for Semiotext(e). At best funny, at worst rapey, this violent deconstruction of a consumer ideal, the so-called “Young-Girl,” is effected through slogans, sarcasm, critical theory, and other abuses. Choice line: “The Young-Girl is the void that THEY maintain in order to hide the vividness o f t h e v o i d .”

The Origin of the World (2014) is a document of a naked performance, and memoir, a pamphlet put out by Semiotext(e) as part of their Whitney Biennale commission. Choice line: “It is such a relief to touch when you have seen too much.”

The Sand Book (2017) is what we’ve been waiting for. Choice lines: “I used to think the defining characteristic of a writer / Was not wanting to have her picture taken ever.”