

Paths to iDeath

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There is a delicate balance in iDEATH. It suits us.
(Richard Brautigan, *In Watermelon Sugar*)

An autobiography is about an "I" and it traces a path. But the "I" and teleology have long been called into question by poets. This interrogation continues: wanderers blaze new trails. We propose to examine some very recent ones. For the "I" does not die of course. Incidentally, writings by poets about approaching death show "I" 's reaching out to others for amplification and enrichment, a supplement of overtones: "autobiography" it remains to the end then. The coinage of its purported opposite—"autothanatography"—therefore seems unnecessary as it might well label an empty category.

Victorian poets and some High Modernists after them had used dramatic monologue as a distancing device to unstick the "I" from the confessional lyricism they associated with the excesses of Romanticism. The protracted poems containing history Modernists and their inheritors came to write searched for other ways of defamiliarizing the "I." They tried to shake it off by swamping it with, even drowning it in, seas of non-subjective material. Scattered though its appearances became, the "I" stayed and never drowned. This blurring of partitions between epic and lyric in major long poems of the 20th century has led Paul Merchant to suggest that one might aptly call them "detailed autobiographies (84)."

Among the strategies used to try to fragment the "I" into negligible existence, a multilayered approach to (writing about) place has been the most-travelled road among American poets. For William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, Gary Snyder, Thomas McGrath and others, the relative permanence of place provided a substitute for stable identity in the more or less broken-up, more or less veiled versions of themselves to which they gave access. During a panel on poetry and autobiography organized in Marseilles in 2000, French poet Emmanuel Laugier stressed the relevance of Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of *the arts as vestiges*. Elaborating on Nancy's elaboration on the etymology of the word—*vestigium* ("sole, underside of the foot," "(foot)print") and of its cognate *vestigare* ("tracing or tracking") –, he usefully suggested that the autobiographical attempt in poetry might lead one to experience one's self as imprint, impression or footprint, all of those implying the surface of a space, with the 'hole-y' page of the poem providing a metonymic substitute for said space. Spacing itself out, Laugier writes, translating his own thinking into Nancy's cast, might thus be the only path that the reminiscing subject can follow to keep track of itself in as true fashion as possible to its transitive (and transitory) nature which also trans-fixes it: it is the transitive (and transitory) nature of being as existence which spaces out the subject in its very being. It has to be because America "is geography at bottom" and "SPACE (...) the central fact to man born in America" (Olson 15) that the spacing-oneself-out dimension of autobiography has exposed itself, surfacing and resurfacing. Section III of Charles Reznikoff's "Autobiography: Hollywood" can be received as the portrait of the auto-biographer at work, groping for its way:

I like this secret walking
in the fog;
unseen, unheard,
among the bushes
thick with drops;
the solid path invisible
a rod away –
and only the narrow present is alive (39).

Allowing for porous divides between types, and to keep to writers mentioned in this article, one might test the relevance of the following (probably rash) classification of American autobiographical writing in verse:

the "I"-as-place type: "I" spaced out. Non-linear life-story. As in Eleni Sikelianos's *The California Poem*.

the exemplary-"I" type: the more linear version in which History is the preferred background and paradigm; in which the epic echo resonates loudest. This "I" could be an heir to the 19th century. As in Thomas McGrath's *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*.

the "I"-as-crowd type: Walt Whitman's personist heirs: Frank O'Hara and Bill Luoma.

the naked "I:" Raymond Carver ; Edward Dorn in *Chemo sabe*. Clear storyline.

the "abstract anonymity" type. As in Ray DiPalma's work. Occasional autobiographical narrative is a piece of the puzzle.

On to the scrutiny of a few paths...

Although it takes up the "I"-as-place tradition, Eleni Sikelianos's *The California Poem* (2004) has new ways of losing the "I" to offer. It came out at the same time as *The Book of Jon*, a poetic biography of her father which includes photographs, letters and other authentic documents. The daughter-poet contributes *materia prima* to the story she tells: firstly, by her own presence in pictures showing her with her father; secondly, by poems she wrote and extracts from diaries that she kept and which relate to her subject. The book is a moving jumble defeating attempts at precise generic identification, floating in uncharted waters between biography, autobiography, memoir and poetry. It would seem that it is poetry which causes and enables borders to fluctuate to a point where they are finally erased. As the book's author, Sikelianos confronts head-on the question of versions in biographical and by way of consequence autobiographical writing. The book, she writes, "is for each of our versions of Jon, for the private version he had of himself, and for that perfect version hanging out somewhere in ideal space, where our most beautiful shadows are cast" (*Jon*, v). The same foreword inscribes the book to "all my tribe, and anyone like them" (v). The introductory note that follows it traces the motley filaments of the family's tribe and reads like an epic genealogy. From *The Book of Jon*, the first effort to give shape to the life of a man close to the author, radiate and echo potentially thousands of other also only partly adequate versions of it. Conversely, the book can be seen as the as yet only available distillate of all those criss-crossing stories. Notice that keen consciousness of the inevitable incompleteness lying at the heart of the attempt to tell the story of anyone's life is posted at the end of this second threshold of the book: "It matters that there are holes in a family history that can never be filled, that there are secrets and mysteries, migrations and invasions and murky blood-lines. These stories speak of human history (x)." Sikelianos concludes: "This portion of the tale is about my father, Jon" (x). The fragmented, heterogeneous, non-linear aspect of the book matches the gaps in the story: "here you are, part of a long, boring trend of absent fathers" (7). It also does because of the central absence, of the hole left by Jon's death around which the book revolves, for this is a book of mourning. Some of the blanks in Jon's biography are filled in by pieces of Eleni's autobiographical writing (with poems in them). The interlock between the two is occasional but the whole holds firm in spite of the holes because poetry and death have a long history of accommodating each other as Jacques Darras reminded us in a recent book. Poetry routinely allows for absence physically (skipped lines, blanks relied on). "The line break changes everything—it is a physical, mental, or spiritual breath/ interruption of time, and, even if there is a clear 'narrative,' the line break more clearly gives us a metonymical this + this + this + this, quite simply in the way it physically occupies space (Sikelianos, *Questions*)." But poetry also traps absence in a web, fixes tears. There is enough vacant space in *The Book of Jon* for it to contain, that is to say both accommodate and stem the tears of many.

The California Poem and *The Book of Jon* are companion pieces to each other. Their complementary nature largely flows from their autobiographical dimension. Asked in 2004 what role the ego—the lyric "I"—played in her work and whether language could 'let go of the ego,' Sikelianos answered there is no way anyone could achieve a total subversion of the "I":

language is infected with all kinds of things, the self among them, she said, recalling Burroughs' views, to the effect that, in Lyn Hejinian's words, "the self kept rushing back into language"¹ no matter how hard you tried to get rid of it. "Could we find more interesting ways to talk about it? Mostly, we have to muck around in unknowables, like, what IS the self? The limits of our epistemological capacities (*Questions*)." Also in 2004 but in a different interview and in answer to a question on how she was feeling then "about making something known in the poems," Sikelianos seemed to have moved beyond radical scepticism: "As a writer, I have become more and more engaged in the communication between me, or some part of me, and the poem. *The California Poem* feels like the closest I've gotten to a certain part of me. While there seems to be a general trend towards the savvy use of artifice, I'm developing an interest in the artless part of the art (*Dialogue*)." We shall see how this marks a departure from the continued stand of the most uncompromising among the poets of an earlier generation.

"August 9, 2005 (...) Given rapid and persistent cellular change are you yourself? Now? Now? How about now? And *now?*" (Ray DiPalma, *An August Daybook*). DiPalma was at the cutting edge of experimental writing right from the late 1960s. Epistemological suspicion of transparency and referentiality, of taken-for-granted essences had been reaching a peak. With DiPalma's earlier work, the notion that one might even provide a whole version of one's self is self-evidently ruled out (with a Poundian nod to Dante, however):

Finally he gets lost in a forest moving himself forward with facial gestures.

Deaf knew altogether I'm in my silence perplexed
 tuners being none himself myself dismiss a term
 of prevalence a prevalent term. One and the same
 thing.

I am naked to its furthest limits as a result. Sustain
 its legs however for the little matter of its logical
 possibilities. ("Scales" *Soli* 2)

"It is essential to labour the/ broken pot" (*Soli* 3). So much had gone to pieces—the plot(tings) of the self, the self itself lost in the Dantean *selva*—and making the most of the sharp-edged shards was the order of the day. "No one not no/ one" (5): dismissal of oneness is followed by a claim to the most general identity: "An extravagant anonymity after extravagance. After extravagance. Who knows what I am more than I am/now—only you and I now. Now" (*Soli*, 5). On being suggested recently that Olivier Brossard's remark to the effect that Frank O'Hara's taste for self-portrait went hand in hand with maximum distrust of autobiography might apply to him, DiPalma wrote back: "I would have no objection to being fit into such a determination. Nor would I reject Olivier's observation that sees my working bridging the NY School [in the spirit of the work of Frank O'Hara & John Ashbery] with Language poetry." O'Hara wrote: "The main thing is to tell a story./ It is almost/ very important" (200). But in the poem from *Soli* (quoted above) the forward motion on Dante's path seems frozen by all the state-of-being verbs that follow. Any sense of anticipated trajectory was expressed as thwarted from the start.

Experimentalists will often relent with the passing of time. DiPalma has stood firm in his non-militant but obvious commitment to writing that stays free of the romance of the personal. His river path has been one of words: in the recent "Paving the River," an anonymous speaker is probably reiterating the stance of the one sounding through him:

Substantiation only an afterthought—
 This is the story—or pieces of it?
 still enough in the voice to hold them together?
 the traction in the *saying* and the apprehension
 of all that remains hidden in the awareness of these pages
lost

¹ In response to our enquiry about the origins of the quote, E. Sikelianos wrote: "The quote is something I heard Lyn Hejinian say in person (and is thus (...) probably a misquote!)"

What is memory but an attribute
of negligence and confused priorities, blunders,
and wrong turns?

First find the music
following your own steps to its source
and only then with *efficient empathy*
turn to the blank page with what ink remains in the pen
? not with some blur of endeavour sanctioned by
a misguided sense of purpose appropriated from an earlier
inhabitant of the same illusory space— (*Caper* 27).

One may observe that movement is not arrested. But what absent “I” does is debunk attempts at shaping a homogeneous narrative retracing one’s “own steps.” The same agenda is obviously being pursued when DiPalma summons Wittgenstein’s authority—“What’s ragged should be left ragged (L.W.)”—in the February 13th entry of *The Ancient Use of Stone* (1998). It and the three other daybooks of the past decade stay true to obviated obviousness in “I” matters and avoid “easy” storied autobiography. Wariness of “patina—thought of as the spoils of secured alignments” (February 2) does not relent, echoing a line from a poem in *Motion of the Cypher* (1995): “When I speak of myself, I varnish and vanish” (60). An earlier poem from *Raik* (1989) was clear enough on the subject of ego-centred verse: “I want too/ to let you know I reckon/ it stinks when personare/ means resound I hear you” (40).

DiPalma’s daybooks are tangential to autobiography in that so few ‘ego—paths’ can be caught sight of in them. The quote from Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities* placed as an epigraph to *An August Daybook* sheds light on the function of the calendar tally in the work it introduces: “the clock (...) is a compensation for the failure of our activities to follow each other in a natural way.”² The objective time-markers are segueing operators used for constructing the minimal consecution necessary to a naturalness effect.³ The date heading each entry appears as the diarist’s concession to the trappings of the genre. Is anyone there? The record of these enclosed time units merely registers one fact: an anonymous subject has lived. *Jihadgraphy* spans a period of less than four months and is made up of forty-three entries. Each page is divided into three columns: the one on the right is entirely devoted to graphic work. The title and some graphics showing a plane against a backdrop of vertical tables or of a human falling head first with what looks like a collapsing structure above him are as many hints at the obvious: this is post-09-11 writing. That the writing “I”/eye was living in the vicinity of what happened is all that we can guess. This is about “probing the omission/ of a private point of view” (*Jihadgraphy*, February 19).

“FEBRUARY 18 Edge, the only unity.” “FEBRUARY 27: What remain/ are the edges of pursuit, the accidents of detail—(*Use of Stone*):” DiPalma’s diaristic works cover a limited span of time. They are clearly not to be mistaken for extracts from a journal kept over the course of a life. The limitedness of their time span is reflected in the fragmentary character of the entries written by one “[e]ngaged in constructing/ A series of events (*Use of Stone*).” Still, the constructor expresses faith in ulterior coherence if only vicariously, quoting Jack Spicer: “‘Things fit together. We knew that—it is the principle of magic. Two inconsequential things can combine together to become a consequence. This is true of poems too (February 12):’.” But coherence does not need a subject and one(s) life may not a story make. “Tell me things—not about your life. And I’ll give/the matter some thought. I’m looking for a place to go—/ but starting from a place I’ve never been” (*Mules*, July 15).

The last line of *The Ancient Use of Stone* may be a key to all that precedes it: “Enumerations of a mongrel detachment” (April 9). Detachment from the biographical-personal is achieved through a full array of distancing devices. As in “Paving the River,” the failings of memory are foregrounded. Embedded in both *An August Daybook* and *The Ancient Use of*

² Front page of author’s manuscript: see bibliography.

³ Williams’s 1928 *The Descent of Winter* was already presented as the notes of a diary also in an effort to do “without the intervention of expected norms of mediation” (MacGowan 403).

Stone are stories about lost manuscripts. An entry with a list of "PEOPLE I'VE FORGOTTEN" (August 18, 2005) can be found in the former. More signs of an intent to erase the "I" and its trappings can be gathered from *Jihadgraphy*—"March 22-24 (...) self-effacement consolidating resolve"—and, again, from *The Ancient Use of Stone*: "Amnesia and a footprint over the sigh (...) invite concern for a spotless record" (February 19th entry). Should the "I" 's record aim at ego-free spotlessness? As if to confirm that his way is to steer clear of the confessional, "Ascoso", a ten-page poem written by DiPalma during the summer of 2006, comes with this commentary next to its title: "Hermetic Anonymity," thereby expanding the realization that the more uncompromising part of the author's work is not to be found in the daybooks alone. In "Ascoso" he writes of "Prophetic clarity arrived at between *not yet* and *no longer*."⁴

Awareness of environmental emergency caused by humanity's recklessly overbearing occupation of the earth is what may account for Sikelianos's "I" 's writing of the self in ways that, while in direct continuity with the manner of former or older American poetic self-appointed spokespersons for the planet, renew its decentring. In the endnotes and "further acknowledgments (*California Poem* 190-3)" appended to the poem, Sikelianos indicates what her source material was: much of it is scientific and belongs to the fields of biology and anthropology. Her effort—an overrunning of the dividing lines between nature and culture—is much along the same lines as anthropologist Philippe Descola's 2005 *Beyond Nature and Culture*, a synthesis under the sign of 'relative universalism⁵,' in the same sense as a pronoun can be relative. Descola shows how strict partitioning between nature and culture is only one out of four main extant ontological delineations of the subject's properties. He terms it "naturalism" and contrasts it with "animism," "totemism," and "analogism." In "naturalism," only humans can be subjects and are gifted with interiority. Nature is either negated as wholly infused with cultural values or given absolute priority through the downright reduction of culture to the status of epiphenomenon. Although any subject's worldview may vary according to their culture, the objective materiality of the world is considered universal. With "animism," any non-human can be a social subject. The world's objective materiality is relativised and depends upon a subject's location in the 'chain of being.' Metamorphosis accounts for the non-human appearance of humanized non-humans. As with naturalism, it is the human subject's status which is relativised in totemism but not for the same reasons. The only fully-fledged subjects are the totemic ancestors who keep on generating beings and things bundled together within hybrid wholes sharing common properties owing to the circumstances in which they first appeared. They objectify the world thanks to their subjectivity whereas humans are objectified as subjects through the objects that [the totemic ancestors] subjectified. Humans' identities are alienated since they may just be made up of what traces were left in things by the originators of the class to which they belong. Humans are only subjects by proxy: a Pitjantjara Aborigine will thus refer to the Dreamtime Being of his birthplace as "I". The forms of materiality are relativised as "[n]on-humans are both bodies without interiority and totemic essences" (416). "Analogism" grants both subject status and the quality of objective materiality indiscriminately. Maintaining minimal ontological stability and orderly segmentation of the world is therefore the major difficulty involved. Hypostasizing the community world usually proves the surest means of ensuring the required degree of permanence: one exceptional singularity—God, Pharaoh or the Inca—is extracted from the whole to incarnate it and be its centre. More commonly, several—rather than one—ruling principles will be superimposed on one another to effectively guarantee stability. The analogic mode of identification tends to come with some form of actual territorial closure to ward off threats of dispersal. Sikelianos's writing "I" in *The California poem* alternatively embraces the four above ontological modes of subject-delineation. The writing of the life of one means the demise of that one and the birth of many.

There may be a seemingly perfect coincidence with the naturalistic mode: "Eleni, I" (85). It is the narrative of an identified human subject with memories ranging from the

⁴ Author's manuscript: see bibliography.

⁵ As the book is untranslated as yet, all subsequent citations are our translations.

elegiac—"I was a child making up a child's songs," (83)—to the matter-of-fact—"At 13, I acquired a good tan in California" (16). The subject's interiority, however, definitely does not belong to "that/solid, simple I" which has no other existence here than that of an ironical line break in the story of a departed friend: "he was that/ solid, simple I/ loved him." Eleni's "I" is another—"we don't say you be we say I is" (14)—and another unidentified voice recommends more distance and detachment:

Eleni, I
Does not kill as readily
As other animals

"to abstract from my one self love, to enter it
in generality (85)"

The first step towards generality is when "I" becomes two: "Eleni, Eleni (twinned)" (86). But two is/are enmeshed in all the traps of symmetry. As two endnotes, a diagram outlining neural pathways (48) and numerous other clues indicate, the starfish holds an enduring fascination for the naturalistic naturalist: "An *asteroidea* (starfish) begins as a bilateral entity, but does not stay obsessed with mirrors, mirror stages, self-reflection, binary modes" (iii, 190). And the author makes sure her statement does not remain unsubstantiated: " 'Phylum Echinodermata (Starfish, Brittle Stars, Sea Urchins, Sand Dollars) (...) is based on a plan of five' " (Hinton 191). The poet-scientist's naturalistic "I" is destabilized by the attraction of analogy represented by the many sea stars making as many possible centres—*The California Poem's* speaker is writing in New York— some (solar vs. oceanic) being poles apart:

(...) Can I be the discoverer
of the glorified form & function of sea stars? Sea stars
are. Can I be
the tapering rays & central discs, yellow
/ orange arms, heavenly body for blue
sharks to chomp upon? Sea stars
are (xx,191).

The subject's leanings do not just go towards an analogic ontology since the thought that the change from human to starfish will mean being eaten is a notion central to animism in which the trophic web of all those endowed with souls regardless of their physicality is based on a system of exchange: "[S]urrounded with misleading shapes and hidden souls, the animistic subject can only be sure of one thing: he eats therefore will be eaten" (Descola 397).

At other points, the myriad centres that typify analogy are hypostasized as the whole planet becomes the subject:

All sparrows' songs,
granites, grasses, collaborate, language
is a shape
the planet takes.

[poem in which the planet takes over] (190)

The autobiographical writing in *The California Poem* sometimes takes the form of the narrator addressing herself. This safest of dialogues is not free from complexity in terms of modes of ontological identification. A case in point is this reminiscing linked with the speaker's childhood. Starting "Yo, thou thouest," the sixteen-line passage ends with a symmetrical "It cleans you," laid out on the page in similar fashion to the introductory apostrophe. "Yo" is a way to attract attention. Given the Hispanic presence in California, however, the meaning of the word in Spanish—"I"—must be taken into account. What seems to be going on here is that "I" is attempting to get as close as she can to what she was by using a strictly second-person-singular personal pronoun rather than the modern generic singular and plural "you." And the clarification of her past identity that is being attempted requires that modes of identification incompatible with naturalism be allowed for. Firstly, the unstable mode of analogism: "little bird in the earth black back/ of the car—Oh, what's this—the/ car is an earth! The bird is a self! The / mask is human!" (35) As in the extract commented above, hypostasis oscillates between self and earth. Secondly, in the same passage, the speaker refers to "a river/ sibling," thus

switching to a totemic subjectivity. These complex transactions are part of the assessment which autobiographical writing always involves. Taking stock of the elapsed time may be an opportunity to put it behind one, in which case the writing of one's life can be equated with purposeful death-in-life in pursuit of rebirth. In this instance, the speaker concludes: "Now I'm planning on not being that person that I was" (35). Please note how, in true American fashion, the tracking of one's own footprints has involved the use of a car.

Writing a poem with many epic features—focus on beginnings, *agon*, with the conflict pitting the earth against its enemies, history (of nature), strong link with a territory, catalogues and lists, epic intertext—reinstates the speaker/ one as maker with agency and precedence. Eleni and a rival creator vie for prevalence. What is at stake is the subject's ontological status: hypostasised into an analogic unifying force or totemic? Mutual dependence, not conflict, characterizes totemism.

Listen: who's creating the world
here, Eleni or opossums?

(It's me against the animals in this
...)

Who
is of more use on the face of the earth, Eleni
or opossums? (58)

The opossum is given equal, hence totemic, status within the world created:

Readers, predestined victims, now listen
to all there is to say about anything, including
local anatomy,
autonomy of all opossums, opossum anomie

o, o, o opossum
oh, reader (66)

But they are both superseded by the land:

I think it's too late
...
to know where I falls
on the inside or outside of time/space

too late — the marked
body
of the land has

submitted its own
dream & question (73)

Totemic territory has the last word on the "I" and its addressees.

Occasional italicized voice-over at page-tops ensures narrative continuity. Likewise, the narratives of geology, of living beings' phylogenesis and of Native-Americans' myths harmonize, amplify and homogenize the sinuous story of Eleni's ontogenesis, broaden the scope of verisimilitude within which that narrative can unfold. "[M]y name/ was Dylan-in-the-grass-blue-grass" (51) or "The child is named Left Over Arms & Legs/ She Who Has Something Strapped To Her Back / She Who Can't Sleep" (34): such names become familiarized and not unlikely in the context of the anthropological records used for the writing of or included in the poem. Their deciphering is then made easier and the reader pictures younger Eleni as a mother nature's daughter self-conscious about her body and weighed down by a load she could not help taking on, which generated anxiety. Sikelianos's *The California poem* qualifies as "detailed autobiography."

Bill Luoma's "My Trip to New York City" and "The Annotated My Trip to New York City" are autobiography as group-autobiography. The destination is clear but a sad poem by

Douglass, one of the members of the group, about a possibly broken car “sets the stage for everything to come” (*Works and Days* 11):

if the car is old & broken,
wounded like the street,

broken like the broken parts
of these our broken lives,

& we remain? (11)

And, explains the “annotator” of the second work, “with dug’s beautiful poem i tried various lyric ways to riff but just got dross. what finally came out was my trip to NYC not a lyric a narrative autobiography” (132-3). The same “annotator” has scores to settle with language poets whom he calls “the police in different voices,” seemingly resenting what “they planted in [his] head because they were [his] teachers” (136). It looks as though he went about re-establishing the credentials of narrative but practises an art the exponents of which he looks up to, among them Lawrence Sterne (129) and Douglass: “He can open up five story rings and close them all if you’re patient” (14). Writing one’s self becomes infinite looping circuitry for there is no closing the unending circle of friends to whom one belongs. A notation in DiPalma’s *Jihadgraphy* would apply: “A bewildered trajectory shuffled/ through connections” (February 12, 2002).

A broken car then as the aptest vehicle for broken lives: “I had a vanilla milkshake at Topsy’s the night Helena died” (17). One person’s life was broken and it is this *Thanatos*-related part of the speaker’s life which seems to determine the fragmentation in the telling of it so that death can get lost. Another observation worth making is that the mere presence of one poem and mention of another inform a work otherwise mostly written in prose with the play with emptiness or the dialectics of sound and silence typical of poetry. The scattering of Helena’s ashes from an airplane by the narrator seems to be reflected in the dispersal of Luoma’s autobiographical narrative, like a reminder that fundamental disorganization remains inscribed in an “I” ’s story since there are two things “I” cannot say: “I am born” and “I die.” All the rest is play and the speaker and his group of friends never seem to miss an opportunity to play ball.

The question of the writing of the death of an “I” should finally be un-metaphored for American poetry provides rather unique examples of autobiographical writing conducted with the Grim Reaper in sight.

No longer the trace of an absent truth but the truth of an absent. Included in the last section of Thomas McGrath’s *Death Song* is the poem “Left Town.” It is a short diary covering the day of the death of a nameless “he” and the first five days following it: “On Tuesday/ A newspaper noted his passing” (115). The same trespassing of borders into a future from which “I” has vanished is found in “Route Song and Epitaph” (117) and “Last Will and Testament” (116). Related grammatical matters are broached in yet another poem entitled “The Language of the Dead”: “There is no grammar for the language of the dead. / The only verb is intransitive” (109). This would still leave room for a subject. The poem continues: “No punctuation except a period. / In that dictionary — / Nothing. / Or a single noun.” Grammatical consciousness—there are two verb phrases an “I” cannot be the subject of—is part of the awareness of ultimate instability. The fiery theatricality of McGrath’s Irish-Americanness in his strongly autobiographical *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*—a Communist’s communal portrait—still present in the first section of *Death Song*, has given way to a spare, gaunt writing in which the angle of the slant to “truth” is much more closed, as in this methodical farewell to all siblings (110-11). A form of obliqueness persists as mounting silence is being filled by the speaker’s last persona: like a Native-American, he is singing his death song, thereby strengthening the shredding autobiographical thread. A persona is filling in for the vanishing autobiographer just as the hole of nearing absence is filled by projection into daily life after the “I” ’s demise.

Section Six of Carver’s *A New Path to the Waterfall*, more exclusively than the rest of this last collection, is interlarded with quotes from Chekhov which Carver made his own, laying

them out on the page with line-breaks and giving them titles. Tess Gallagher speaks of a collapsing of the distance between Carver's language and thought in his last writings. That distance was never considerable. The collapsing, however, may be as complete as can be in the blurring of the demarcation line between Carver's own work and that of other writers to whom he felt close. Greater truthfulness to one's spiritual and intellectual self is attained through plain exposure of debt to others. Carver's path to his "I" 's death is followed in company of one already dead whose words have gone on living with particular force in himself. "I" is "I" and someone else. It is still being invented as the clearly autobiographical poems—"What the Doctor Said" (149), "Proposal" (151-2)—are matched by anecdotes from the world of Chekhov's inspirational stories. In fact, "his" "Proposal" to "her" in the face of death is also about joining one's self to another and about truth: "Oh lovely, oh lethal / entanglements. In such a world / to be true" (151).

The poems in Ed Dorn's *Chemo Sabe* span a period of five years during which he fought a losing battle against cancer. The author of *Gunslinger*, the epic-length poem with characters sniffing "autotheistic chemical[s]" (60), and hilarious passages debating the death of the "I" — "I is dead, the poet said.// *That aint grammatical, Poet*" (56) — writes the path to his death as a chronicle of his forced experiments with various drugs. Like Ginsberg specifying at the end of the poem under what drug the text was written, Dorn's "I" goes on with his experimenting this time with state-of-the-art drugs used for treatment of cancer. Some poems are dated: it is a daybook of sorts. These drugs too can modify perception—"Chemo du Jour: The Impeachment on Decadron."⁶ So the stability of the "I" is acknowledged as vulnerable. For all this, there is no letting go of the ego. True to poetic diction and to his own lifelong progressive political leanings—"I'm with (...) every defiant nation this jerk/ Ethnic crazy country bombs", "I" personifies his tumor and turns it into a hostile, alien force, envisioning his and "her" joint cremation as a moment of joyful victory. Dorn's abrasive humour never flags. Like McGrath, this last battle is an opportunity to assert his truthfulness to his tribe. "Tribe" is actually the title of the collection's second poem: "My tribe came from struggling labor / Depression South Eastern Illinois/ Just before the southern hills start."

Actual autothanatology does not exist. What comes closest to it appears to result in assertions of life and life's commitments, unconcerned with formal deconstruction / reconstruction of the self even if poets' occupational consciousness of otherness and fragmentation within themselves always returns. The question is: does one want/ need such writings? They will make moving and useful prayers for a lay extreme unction. In other respects, though, they are bound to miss the mark. The writer of an autobiography never reaches the end. Poets more detached from the actuality of the physical world may therefore not see any necessity in such accounts of the narrow path to deep west and would rather push on with explorations of the enigmas of meaning, writing unheard-of autobiographies of their paths in the mind's Dantean forests or attempting to inhabit Pascal's two infinities in hard-science-saturated detailed autobiographies in which "I" painstakingly undoes itself. This is the delicate balance in *i-Death*.

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⁶ This book is unpagged.

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