

## INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTINE HUME

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*Blake Bronson-Bartlett*

Blake Bronson-Bartlett: How did “Ventifacts” come out?

Christine Hume: I found it buried in my body, malformed but alive until I am not. The sounds we don’t recognize flying out of our huge mouths: voices of the furies, of the sirens, the babbling of Kasandra, all those horrifying female sounds burbling up in a female body. The dreadful groan of the Gorgon, whose name, according to Anne Carson, derives from the sanskrit word garg (think gargle) meaning a guttural animal wail that issues a great wind from the back of the throat through a distorted, dilated mouth. Literally, a ventifact is a “wind artifact.”

Two things distinguish ventifacts from gizzard stones: 1. Ventifacts occur in groups that number from several score to several thousand wherever there’s wind erosion. 2. The smooth or polished surfaces of ventifacts are spotty; i.e., some surfaces are smooth or polished whereas other surfaces are not.

BB-B: What strikes me about your essay, from the outset, is that it writes itself into a poetics of the elements, which is all too well established, and yet I almost forget because, in several ways, the essay clearly sets its own terms, its own possibilities, and then pushes beyond them, suggesting far-flown associations. You buzz at the interstices of an assembled tradition by means of, for example, your riffs on Hopkins, and I also think of his journals. But then I would bring to the table Henry Darger’s “Weather Journals” and think about his interest in the wind in relation to winged warrior girls. How do you see yourself staking out the wind along these quasi-mystic lines? Or, if not Nietzsche’s valley, what land do you see yourself blowing through?

CH: In the flattest of places, this wind blows through my daughter’s second year. Motherhood breaks open the world, knocks the wind out of you and gives you a second wind reanimating the obvious, the elemental. Just as pregnancy is a way of being haunted, childhood continues the sense of a world possessed, inhabited with mys-

terious, invisible tributaries. I wanted to catch — in Hopkins' lexicon catch the inscape, find the instress — the serial portals of this experience — the jointedness of motherhood, with its open doors to toddler visceralities.

But you are right the wind is an exhausted subject. It is what refused to be finished in my book *Alaskaphrenia* (apparently "wind" is one of its 100 most frequent words) and dragged its tired ass out of there, a post-heave, a late exhalation not drawn on any map, as Melville says, "true places never are." But as if in response, Alice Notley: "There's a map formed out of a spiderweb / With holes, empty torn places." The cunt, post-baby. Another gust comes through via Djuna Barnes: "We are but skin about a wind, which muscles clenched against mortality." As an underthought, Melville again: "Would now the wind had but a body: but all the things that most exasperate and outrage mortal man, all these things are bodiless as objects, not as agents." The outrage — quotidian, allegorical, scientific, divine — in Djuna Barnes' night Watchman who finally answers your question: "I'm a fart in a gale of wind, a humble violet, under a cow pat."

BB-B: With your maternal body on the line, "Ventifacts" induces heavy breathing. The reader finds the "shape of music" and the "shapes of wind as language," but these structures "cannot go on" — the body returns. Is "Ventifacts" "écriture feminine"? Is language gendered for you?

CH: I would not restrict my sense of writing to French feministic theories, but certainly I like to rub my face in them. The tangles of gender and language fascinate me: how does language participate in the regime of gender? Yes, I want to know, I want to investigate this in a polyvalent fashion, forever.

BB-B: Can you describe the ideal conditions under which your essay should be read? On the way to work? In the bath? In what way does the wind your readers will, inevitably, release, break from the "writing machine"?

CH: Reading "Ventifacts" is ideal when (1) while someone sleeping on you, or partially so, say a sleeping leg pins you down or a head dozes on your shoulder or a small baby cat naps on your entire

torso (2) you are standing uncomfortably in wet socks and ill-fitting shoes in a bookstore or library and someone is pulling at our other hand (3) you are moving in a car, on a train, ship, or plane, or while walking (4) you are exhausted but can't sleep — whatever conditions that would allow for frequent re-readings due to spontaneous interruptions, a sensitized sense of the vulnerability of those you love, and a full proprioceptive and kinetic intelligence.

BB-B: In “Ventifacts,” and in your poems, glass is a sensing membrane, a surface for projection against which others are perceived — and it sounds. In fact, there seems to be a musical scale of objects in your work. Is this the nature of objects in the world? What is the nature of objects in the world?

CH: Language is a “sensing membrane, a surface for projection.” Sensation — inducement and control of sensation — is the pulse of my essay. To control sensation is to betray it, so the essay attempts to deal with the overwhelming, to process it in pieces or pulses. Every sensation inducts its own rhythm, a catalyst to consciousness. Perhaps these correspond in a kind of scale, like Beaufort’s scale of wind, which is based on empirical experience. We know a near gale, for instance, by these indications at sea and on land: “Sea heaps up. Some foam from breaking waves is blown into streaks along wind direction. Moderate amounts of airborne spray. Whole trees in motion. Effort needed to walk against the wind. Swaying of skyscrapers may be felt, especially by people on upper floors.” Even reading this, my heart quickens. Rhythm makes every listener/reader a participant. Rhythm “bends time to give it to time itself, and it is in this way that it folds and unfolds a ‘self’” (Jean-Luc Nancy). The nature of objects in the world is relational, is rhythmic.

BB-B: If you were to found a new branch of the natural sciences, what would it be called? And if there were a research center erected to fund its field work and house its experiments, what would it be called? Where would it be located?

CH:

Failurology

Institute of Attempts

Housed in a feral building repurposed by an experimental architect in Ypsilanti, MI

Here are the remnants of a failed essay on failure as an attempt to explain/demonstrate the study of failure:

Writers have a deep sense of the work failing, even a so-called finished or published work. When I read my poem aloud in front of an audience, I am aware of this: I am lending to my writing a voice that always seems to fail the language.

When I am talking to my pre-verbal baby, I lend her a language that I can understand — I provide both sides of the conversation. This is not only a falsification of her voice but it's a failure to recognize her language and her inclination toward imitation of nonspeech, onomatopoeia and nonEnglish sounds, sounds that have no representative function, but are not meaningless.

Think of Jakobson's "apex of babble," an infant's vast capacity of sounds that must be partially lost to learn a single language. The loss of a limitless phonetic arsenal is the price my child must pay for the papers that grant her citizenship in the community of English-speakers.

When I teach her my language I fail to keep other languages alive and I fail at my ability to discover or reach beyond foregone conclusions.

My daughter's stubborn sounds of attempt display the powers and deficiencies of language itself, an incompetence built into language, a verbal uncertainty that threatens my own fluency. After all emotional or intellectual intensity sometimes correlates with verbal insufficiency, which correlates with imaginative success. This paradox is best captured in music or tones of voice, that sounds and silence link us to our earliest states of being. Cadences lie less than words.

I may speak to my daughter in words, but to her they are not words.

Language is the child's way of exploring and seeking pleasure. Language leads her back to bodies.

My failure is necessary for my daughter to learn language. My

failure is also necessary for my own writing. I feel no assurance in what I write, I rewrite and erase, I am endlessly enmeshed in a work that cannot end, because I am always looking back at what I write. When I look back I see terrible things that petrify me and terrific things that make me want to go other ways, or in multiple ways at one time.

What do I teach her? That all knowledge is a reduction of the unknown to the known.

Blanchot paraphrased: A writer is her own first dupe, and at the very moment she fools other people she is also fooling herself.

A writer realizes that failure — the thing that forces her toward editing, correcting, negating what she's already written — is also the very thing that insists she keep writing, adding more words, trying out new formulations and arrangements. Failure is necessary, but it is also impossible.

I attempt to work with and through my own failure, my guesses at who she is and what will help her keep becoming. If I dedicate myself to motherhood, I dedicate myself to answering the call of this failure, the sense that the voice and language I lend to my daughter will help her take her own form (not mine), to help her understand her own choices, to help her attain a greater sense of her possibility and future, which includes the possibility of failure.

BB-B: If you were to build a machine, what would it do? How would you build it? Would it be a mother/daughter project? A family affair?

CH: I asked my family, and we came up with a machine for everyone (at the table): this contraption would produce paper dolls with fancy masks on whenever we wanted them; it would do limited run off set printing with full color at no cost; it would systematically eradicate factory farming. It would be built out of sheer will, something we have collectively in abundance.



Juna's Paper Doll Mask Machine (2009), 12" X 36"

BB-B: Why did you make the decision to break from prose to verse about two thirds of the way through "Ventifacts"? I notice that you sometimes alternate between forms in your poems (in "Total Things Known about Motion," for example). Do you not draw such formal distinctions? Do you have any views on the historical inscription of literary forms, or whether or not they should, or can, persist?

CH: I've always been attracted to the prosimetrium, an ancient form that alternates between prose, traditionally the philosophical and narrative frame, and verse, traditionally the lyric emotive personal insets. Though I don't enact these distinctions here, I did want to issue a similar electromagnetism, to create alternating currents that would propel the reader through the piece. In "Ventifacts," the break out into breakage actually isn't quite verse. These are sentences beginning again. They are a list, and this list needs air and space, this list needs the structure of a ladder. The reader moves down the ladder, and to do so is to be "rung" like a bell, to find resonances. To move through the "wrungs" is to find yourself suddenly in a narrative.

The other side of this answer is that I try not to reinstate the terms of binary thinking that controls how we, especially in the academy, think of writing — fiction or poetry, scholarly or creative, literary and nonliterary, etc. Difficult but often-necessary not to think in these commodities, which invariably influence the ways we comprehend or fail to comprehend what we read. You asked in another question, one I didn't answer, about the different pleasures and challenges of "conventional" vs "lyric" essays,<sup>1</sup> and my answer now occurs to me: Adorno's "Essay as Form." One boon of "nonfic-

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<sup>1</sup> The question was: As a poet who rites "conventional" essays (for American Women Poets in the 21st Century, for instance) and "lyric" essays, what are some of the challenges and triumphs of writing in each form?

tion" is that it's defined only by what it's not. That's a freedom I can deal in. Adorno says, "By transgressing the orthodoxy of thought, something becomes visible in the object which it is orthodoxy's secret purpose to keep invisible." And earlier on: "The way the essay appropriates the concept is comparable to the conduct of someone stuck in a foreign country speaking its language, instead of assembling it from elements as is done in school. He will read without a dictionary . . . As certainly as such learning remains exposed to error, so does the essay as form; it pays for its affinity with open intellectual experience without security, which the norm of established thought fears as death." New approaches to genre kick up heteroglot dynamics, generate expectations, and expand linguistic and formal possibilities in unforeseen ways. The current branding of "literary hybrids" predicates a fairly stable of set genres; it's a frame I've used for over a decade, and I'm only recently realizing how limited it is, how ever more meaningless and useless and odious.

