A draft of "7 Days," written in 2015.
"I don't want to shovel poetry into people like it's information. I want it to be perceptual, like a dot."

The Art of Poetry No. 99

EILEEN MYLES

Eileen Myles has lived in her East Village apartment, where this interview took place, since 1977, and yet, entering her studio, I got the feeling she'd just moved in or was ready to move out—both make sense, because she is itinerant (since our conversations last summer, she's been in Dublin and Lisbon and Oakland and Paris and Provincetown, Massachusetts, and several other places) and because she and her work are unsettled in the best sense: restless, disturbing, changeable. She has no imitable manner, no manners. She has an interesting art collection, but no clutter. Her only built-in furniture—a sort of combination bed-desk-bookshelf—was constructed by her painter friend Philip Shinnick while he was dog sitting in 1995 (Myles was in Russia). Otherwise, she has her brilliance and her stabilized rent.

The author of nineteen books of poetry and prose, Myles is often referred to as an "institution"—
the way one speaks of a terrific restaurant that’s endured the waves of gentri-
fication as a “New York institution.” But the word bounces off her: there is
nothing official about her, nothing staid or still. She is exemplary for more
and more young writers precisely because she has gone her own way.

During our first talk, we ate scrambled eggs in front of an ineffectual fan.
On subsequent visits, I brought iced coffee and stone fruit. There was no small
talk and no dead air.

—Ben Lerner

INTERVIEWER

The cliché is to end an interview with a question like, What’s next for Eileen
Myles? I thought we could start with that. You’re working on a book about
dogs, aren’t you?

MYLES

A particular dog. It’s about the first dog of my life—a pit bull named Rosie
I got in 1990. She was my longest relationship. She lived until 2006. When
she was dying, I was living in San Diego. It was so boring and I spent the
whole five years I lived there anticipating her death, really aware of time.
At one point, I got a video camera and I would just take it with me on
these long walks with Rosie. I thought I was making personal cinema, chat-
ting while I shot, though in fact what I said was completely boring. But
the actual walk and my bad camerawork were beautiful, so I transcribed
it exactly. The book’s a lot of things but one is our walks, which are inter-
cut with everything else. This is really what I do—on some level my writ-
ing’s just a really medieval account of what’s there. A loose and meticulous
copy. What’s there is often fantastic. Like when I first got Rosie, I looked
into her eyes and thought, This is my father. I was eleven when he died
and I was always obsessed with him. It was a joke I had for the sixteen
years of Rosie’s life—that my father came back as my dog just to hang out a
little more.

Also, I find myself thinking that maybe this is the last AIDS book, which
is not to say that people aren’t still dying of AIDS, but not like they were
in the eighties and nineties. I lived through so much dying that it almost
became commonplace. And I had Rosie through all of that time, too. I’ve
had her through the time of so many relationships that bloomed and failed. She’s the metonym for so much stuff.

INTERVIEWER
How old was your father when he died?

MYLES
He was forty-four. It was an alcohol-related accident. He was successfully drinking himself to death. He’d reached the point where he had convulsions whenever he stopped. There was a piece of furniture in the house that was there when my parents bought it, and they wanted to get rid of it but they couldn’t angle it down the stairs, so they decided to push it off the roof. They got it out on the roof outside my brother’s bedroom, and we were all told to go downstairs and watch. It was Saturday and it was my sister’s birthday. We’re all waiting downstairs, in the gap between the houses, and my father yells, Here it comes, and he comes flying down and lands at our feet. The story was that he had a convulsion. Because he was exerting himself, he had a fit and he went over the roof instead of the dresser. We lived near Arlington Center, which is northwest of Boston, and fire trucks and everybody in the town were suddenly on our street. But he came to—he woke almost instantly after he hit the ground—and went to the hospital. He had pounding headaches for the next two weeks, and he went for an EEG, but they had crappy instruments in 1961, and they sent him home. I was in school that day, in seventh grade, and there was going to be a party that night, the first girl-boy party I was allowed to go to. Junior-high sex. There was total excitement that day in school. I got in trouble for laughing as we were all going down the stairs, so the nun said, Eileen Myles, write “I will not talk in the corridors” five hundred times as punishment. It was like a prompt. Does Sister Ednata know how many poems she unleashed with that command? When I got home, my dad was taking a nap on the couch. My mother said, Why don’t you just set up a table in the den and do your punish task there so you can keep an eye on him. I’m going to go out and hang clothes. She’s in the yard and I’m writing “I will not talk in the corridors,” and he starts to make weird sounds and he died there right in front of me, his face changing colors and the death rattle and the whole thing and I just kept writing “I will not talk,” “I will not talk.” And then he’s dead.
Jesus.

**MYLES**

Yeah, that's *my* trauma. And I don't know if this is *my* family or the working class in general, but nobody ever talked to me about it. It was never discussed, not one time. Except once about twenty years later. I went home to visit my mother in Arlington and out of the blue she goes, I know you were alone in the house when your father died—like we'd been just talking about it.

**INTERVIEWER**

How do you understand that moment?

**MYLES**

It's the insane scale of my family. Is it humor? Our brand of silence? I think she was just verifying the facts to me, that I wasn't invisible, that she did understand what had happened. I think. Part of her knew that was necessary. My mother was an orphan, and she wore her own suffering like a badge. We were like children of concentration-camp survivors. She was always telling us we had it so easy—*she* was four standing on a chair doing the dishes, *they* made her work hard in all those houses she was passed around in. I'm sure she *was* beat up and sexually abused, but she's always in control. She's also sort of a miracle in a way—very strong. I mean, I really love and admire my mother.

**INTERVIEWER**

Did she and your brother and sister notice that you had a way with language? Do they say, We always knew Eileen would be an artist?

**MYLES**

Oh sure. I was like the family clown. The middle child entertaining. I was a lousy student, but interestingly the nuns always let me write plays or do drawings, endless special projects. I made art when I was a kid so I wouldn't fail in school.
INTERVIEWER
I remember reading somewhere in your work that your brother was "the smart one," the one on whom the family hopes were pinned.

MYLES
I was the creative one and Terry was the genius. He was supposed to go to Harvard. It put incredible pressure on him, to his detriment I think. My younger sister was kind of on her own. My brother and sister never liked each other. They are still fighting. I always had the freedom to come out from behind—which is kind of a female position. I was reading on my own for years—novels, a lot of sci-fi—and doing my special projects in school, which even meant organizing a band and writing songs. It was the sixties, so there was a little bit of a peace-love, Sister Corita tone to my education, and I made things as a way to survive it. If I had been a good student and an achiever, I might have been excited by a more systematic approach to writing than what I do. People loved to throw around the word *rigorous* in the eighties. I'd go *bleh*. When I started to pull something out of the pool of incoherence, it was exciting in itself. Later, I found theory next to the bed. I had girlfriends who went to college after I did, and they'd be reading Fredric Jameson or the Situationists or Deleuze. My girlfriends introduced me to those books, not the poets of my generation. If it didn't come through the bathroom or the bedroom, I didn't find it.

INTERVIEWER
Your fiction uses all kinds of material from your life. What does the frame of fiction or nonfiction do for you? How and when do you choose to present your work as one or the other?

MYLES
What's fictional is arrangement—what follows what. If somebody is lying to you, part of what they're doing is hiding things, omitting stuff, changing the order of things. And that's fiction.

INTERVIEWER
You address the question of working from life explicitly in your fiction and poetry. In *Chelsea Girls*, for instance, you as narrator anticipate that people will be furious seeing their lives used as material.
Right. And I answered by saying, This is my life, not yours. It's my material. The tone's maybe a little bit hurt. It's Schuyler-esque. You tell it cause you're lonely—you're the only person inside that life.

INTERVIEWER
You took care of James Schuyler at the end of his life. How did you come to know him?

MYLES
I was at a reading at St. Mark's and I needed a job. I was telling Charles North how broke I was, and he said, I know a job you could have. I don't know if you'd want it...

INTERVIEWER
What was the job description?

MYLES
Really, they needed someone to give Jimmy his pills and spend time with him. He had burned through all the friends who had been willing to let him stay in their homes and live with their families. That was over. He'd had a lot of breakdowns, and there was nobody left who was going to let him into their intimate space. His friends were already in late middle age. Jimmy was in his fifties. They got a lawyer and created a trust fund for him. They got him a room at the Chelsea. They got him me. And I had to move his papers and his clothes out of the Allerton, which was this dive hotel around the corner where he'd moved after burning down his room someplace else, and I moved his crap from there over to the Chelsea. This is all exactly in Chelsea Girls. My writing has made me a redundant human being.

INTERVIEWER
I don't remember if the burning down of the room was considered deliberate.

MYLES
He did what anybody on a lot of pharmaceuticals does at some point—he took them all. Whether it's suicidal or absentminded. He was definitely
smoking a cigarette, and the room went up. The day after I spoke with Charles, I went to the Chelsea, where they had already installed him. He was lying on his bed with this long hair.

INTERVIEWER
He was a big man at that point, wasn't he?

MYLES
He was skinny. He got fat after I got my hands on him. I would make him cheeseburgers and bring him whatever he wanted, and he just blew up. I was like twenty-nine and pretty androgynous-looking, and I think he thought I was a cute young boy when we were introduced, so he said, Great! Hi, babe. It was that kind of interview—where you walk into the room and you're instantly hired. Most of the jobs of my life are like that, even UCSD. A lot of wanting, and then blam. I spent something like five hours a day, seven days a week with him for about half a year.

INTERVIEWER
Did he talk?

MYLES
He would lie on his bed and read, and I would sit in my chair and read. Every day I arrived with the papers and his pills, and I would leave him his night dose before I left. At the beginning, I think he was on Thorazine, and they changed the drugs a number of times while I was with him. Most days I would come in with a hangover, and he'd be like, What'd you do last night, babe? And I would tell him about my adventures of being a young queer.

INTERVIEWER
Would he give advice?

MYLES
A little bit every now and then. Oh, get rid of her. Dump her. Stuff like that.

INTERVIEWER
And did you talk about poetry?
We talked about who we liked. The floor was covered with books, people just sent him books. He read some of them, not most. His room really introduced me to what it looks like when you send your book to somebody. I'd pick things up and say, Do you like this? Do you like that? Often, he'd say, I think he's hot, he's a nice guy, she's lovely.

In 1980, in her apartment on East Third Street, New York.

Did he ever read your poetry?

He did. He actually said a certain poem I showed him was a masterpiece. I don't think he was kidding. You don't get that every day.
INTERVIEWER
Do you think of him as an influence on your poetry?

MYLES
Huge. The first poem of his I read was when I was going to Queens College. It was "Poem," the one that begins, "How about an oak leaf/ if you had to be a leaf?" That poem still feels like a miracle. In all of them, it's like his sensibility is bursting through the description all the time, so there was an air of magic or surreality, like things were about to change. He is an adept at this surprise surreality, like that poem where suddenly it's "What the Dentist Saw" and you're inexplicably looking down a red throat. His work is dangerous the way fairy tales are.

INTERVIEWER
I want to return to the question of fiction and nonfiction. Have you had to deal with fallout from using real people and experiences in your fiction?

MYLES
Absolutely. It's not so different from the way people first responded to cameras, like they were afraid it was stealing their souls. And it is. Art hurts your animal eyes. Your family feels like you are stealing their souls if you write about them. Most artists like to be written about in a certain way. When somebody's in love with you, they think it's amazing you've written them a poem, and when they don't love you anymore, they hate those poems. They wish those poems would go away.

INTERVIEWER
Does your family read your work? Are they proud? Are they scandalized?

MYLES
It's changing right now. People are retiring and they have more time. My sister's partner has been really generous. I think people's partners in general often express the emotional reality of the situation first. My family kept my work at arm's length. Working-class people are a little uncomfortable with you thinking you're special. Just the fact of publishing, having a career, means you must think you're special. It's a violation of the code of being a
cog in the wheel. Not that my family truly thinks of themselves that way. We were brought up to feel that we were geniuses, but the world didn’t see us that way and everyone’s a little grumpy about it. I’m one of them. My writing even deliberately hugs anonymity and grossness so I won’t be punished for thinking I’m special. It’s humble, conceited work. I have mostly dated middle-class or upper-middle-class women, and I would watch their parents excitedly talking to my girlfriends about their accomplishments. Then they’d ask about what I was doing, and I always became nervous because I thought I was being tested. But that’s really what they do—examine the goods lovingly. But I felt like a criminal for a long time. Part of an artist’s social skills is the ability to comfortably talk about yourself. In a more working-class social situation, that is verboten. You’d be mocked for talking about yourself. You may talk about your body, your weight, the weather, work, but to talk about what you’re doing is to pass a sort of judgment on everybody else. So I think it’s the code of my family to be secretly proud of me but to never talk to me about my work. I have a little box in my storage unit called “The Mother Lode” because when my mother went from the house I grew up in into a senior center, she said, Well, you probably want these—and she meant all my books.

INTERVIEWER
You frequently use your own proper name in your work. In Cool for You, for example—“I gained the attention of the room. Eileen Myles. Everyone watching my body, I felt.” Why does your name appear within your writing and not just on the title page?

MYLES
It’s like a boundary against annihilation. When I arrived in New York, I was just glad to be in the phone book. But to use your own name in your writing always felt like a dare, with a lot of feeling underneath it, a lot of need and bravado. In Chelsea Girls, there’s a story where she is—and I find it very easy to talk about the Eileen Myles character in the third person—where she is raped. She’s sitting on a boat at Cape Cod, and she writes her name in the sand with her foot. And then erasing it, it’s like the precarity—such a stylish word—but the precarity of the name and the self is so real.

Remember the movie Monster and how amazing it was that Charlize Theron, such a beautiful woman, would make herself so ugly, playing a sex
worker, playing a violent woman? But a huge number of women in the world live that way. She’s a monster? I don’t pretend to live there, but I’ve tasted enough to know that the primary fact of one’s name is quite precious. It’s the writer’s body. I suppose I do feel like a monster in some way. All my friends are monsters, Dodie and Kevin and Bob. Dennis Cooper? Monster. The New Narrative writers all use their own names. And I have turned my own name into a fake name that inhabits my fictions.

INTERVIEWER
You mention the New Narrative moment. The Language poets led an avant-garde attack on narrative forms, arguing that the politics of a work of literature reside in its form and not in its content—that narrative, no matter what it was narrating, was always in some sense bourgeois. And they insisted that the speaker in a poem or work of literature was a fiction that should be undone. What is your relation to Language writing or avant-garde poetry?

MYLES
I think the world I landed in poetically in the seventies was the avant-garde. Everything coming out of St. Mark’s regarded itself under that banner and opposed itself to more academic stuff, or what stood as the mainstream of American poetry. Nobody at St. Mark’s would have read, say, Louise Glück or Mark Strand. They were regarded as the other team. I think there was a feeling that we were inherently more political, that the work felt more political. Language writing came out of this same St. Mark’s scene. Charles Bernstein and Peter Seaton were both in Bernadette Mayer’s workshop. Everyone read Clark Coolidge, John Wieners, Lorine Niedecker. And everyone was in the same magazines for a while. But when the little L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E pamphlets appeared in New York, that was when it seemed like the critical discourse had become almost more important than the work, and definitely the Language poets on the West Coast were clocking you over the head with what they believe mattered. You got the sense that suddenly there were rules. It’s tricky though, because we all came up together. We make many of the same moves in our work. It’s all types of appropriation and what people now call formal constraints and erasures. Maybe the innovation for Language poetry was that often it was simply that, and I probably should admit that I just like a friendlier avant-garde. Writing that’s more of a mess and has more
of a relationship to bodies—that's what we were living and dying in, and many of us weren't bored with that yet.

INTERVIEWER
Do you think there's a tension between a working-class identity and the avant-garde's suspicion of personal experience? If you feel the tension, how do you respond to it?

MYLES
It just makes me go further. Not Me is a book that is personal and dissolves the personal at the same time. I don't think there's any conflict, certainly not a class conflict. Rae Armantrout and Ron Silliman are both working class. And we're all sort of in the same caboose now. And friends, of course. When they were younger, they were sort of cops about it—it being their poetics. Rae is brusque, Ron was ... dogmatic. But Language poetry is itself a class. And recently there's been a way of talking that makes Language poetry or conceptual poetry be like this pancake that covers all of the avant-garde, and that's not true.

INTERVIEWER
Do you have a sense of why you're drawn to a short line in your poetry?

MYLES
Speed. And often I carry little notebooks, so that's just what fits. They're also comic-strip balloons but going vertically, not horizontally.

INTERVIEWER
I think Robert Creeley said somewhere that he was devastated when he heard William Carlos Williams read because he had developed a poetics based on the idea that those line breaks were moments of hesitation—that you are supposed to read the breaks—and Williams just ran right through them. Do you think of the line, of the text on the page, as a score for performance?

MYLES
No, they're a score for attention. They tell you how to read when you're reading on the page, though they also guide me when I read out loud.
INTERVIEWER

A score for attention?

MYLES

Just take this much in and keep moving. I don’t want to shovel poetry into people like it’s information. I want it to be perceptual, like a dot. I feel like if it’s only that much, who wouldn’t read it?

INTERVIEWER

Do you tend to read your poems the same way each time? Do you feel like there’s a right way for you to read them?

MYLES

I hear them a certain way. The most exciting thing is to read a poem out loud for the first time. There’s a whole kind of inside thing bursting out, and I’m always dying to hear it. I do hear it in my head, but I never read it out loud to myself until I’m in front of people.

INTERVIEWER

You never read a poem out loud when you’re writing it?

MYLES

No. That seems obscene to me.

INTERVIEWER

Obscene how?

MYLES

I don’t want to hear the sound of my own voice. It’s the sound of something in me, but it’s not my voice. It isn’t a literal voice—at all. But there is a murmuring. I have some very... I don’t know if sentimental is the word, but I have some thoughts about what poetry is and how old it is and what it means and what it could be. I feel like it’s this old thing mumbling inside of me. When I first started to write, in my twenties, I did associate poetry with being fucked up, and poetry definitely managed something for me—the dissonance between the world just as we’re being invited to enter it and that
whole world inside of you and what to do with that gap. I had a mentally ill grandmother who I had, and have, a deep attachment to. She kind of mumbled and had a weird little West Ireland accent, and when I started to write I'd swear it was her. I felt this *grrrr*, like something inside of me that was not me. It's very weird—I feel like I'm working for Eileen or something, like I have this job being her performer, learning this argot of hers, finding it. But I think it's older than me and it's older than my grandmother.

INTERVIEWER
I just assumed that all poets read aloud in the process of composition. I'm intrigued by this idea that there would be something sacrilegious about reading it to yourself before you read it to a community.

MYLES
What is so great—I'll even say holy—about reading a poem for the first time in front of people is that you're sharing what you felt in the moment of composition, when you were *allowing* something. When I'm writing the poem, I feel like I have to close my eyes. I don't mean literally, but you invite a kind of blindness and that's the birth of the poem. Writing is all performance. Something's passing through. When people talk about formal constraints that's just technology, that's fashion. I like fashion, but you keep adjusting those things to let the other thing happen. The performance is us writing what's using us, remarking upon it.

INTERVIEWER
Do you think of yourself as a performer in a way that's distinct from other poets?

MYLES
I'm intrigued by all kinds of vocal performance. I worship singers. I always wanted to be one. When I first came around, I could not figure out how to get work published, and what was available to me was open mics. To me that's the first level of publication. You write the poem. You edit the poem. You type it up or you print it out. You show up publicly. You read the poem out loud. And then after that, it goes into some magazine, and then after that, it goes into a book. But I think reading is the most live, the most accurate, the truest version of the poem.
INTERVIEWER

So if you had it your way, you would always want your live performance of the text to accompany the book. Maybe have the book come with a recording?

MYLES

That would be great. I went to a studio in London and recorded *Inferno* for three days. It was the most fun I ever had. The recording engineer was a really good guy, and smart. I was reading to him. And he had a sense of humor, and he'd laugh at certain things. It was very intimate. Like he would say, Could you do that line again? Or I'd say, Let me read that one again, finding a place where we would agree that this was the right way to do it.

I've been experimenting with performance since the eighties. I memorized for a while, but I was stiff. After that I started to improvise, because in fact I did speak with my hands, I actually did move my body in a purposeful way, so I did a whole series of improvised performances—talking, basically. When somebody would ask me to come do a reading, I would decide for this group to talk about *this* thing, *that* story. And it was very satisfying because I would look at people, and I would feel the room in this way. That's what led me to run for president in 1992, actually—my sense of the energies of a room as political energies, campaigning as performance. It was an amazing political education to feel the sentiment of the room. Having done all that, when I came back to only reading, I realized that there was no reason not to move my body when I read a text. I mean, I wrote it. It's me. And if you've ever watched people play jazz there's a lot of twitching and lips pursing and strange movement. It's about getting the sound out. I became more aware of how music is composed of silence and pauses, and I know what the poem sounds like in my head, so I started trying to be more loyal to that. Like if I hear a three-count, I stop there and take that long piece of silence. That's really important to me. Now I have all that to think about if someone describes me as a performer rather than fearing that there's a little dis in there, like, Hey, you're a *spoken-word poet*.

INTERVIEWER

It implies you're not as good on the page? That you require a supplement?

MYLES

Or that you need to wow them with your message.
INTERVIEWER

You have a Boston accent…

MYLES

In my writing more than my life. There’s just no true working-class vernacular in my life. My parents were the children of immigrants. My dad had two different kinds of Irish accent. My mother wanted us to speak good English because her first language was Polish. But the kids next door, who were lower class than us, spoke like Huck Finn. I wanted that. Part of it was my longing then to be real, like in books or in comic books. And when I briefly went to graduate school, people were talking about black English. I thought, Isn’t there some white equivalent? There is, but there isn’t. White people are too afraid to be trash. I was told the other day that I have the accent considered most racist to black listeners. That’s working class.

INTERVIEWER

How has a conception of the vernacular—the speech, rhythm, and accent of the spoken—mattered to you as a writer?

MYLES

The vernacular is the place where everything meets. It’s a gathering of people. Think of *Sons and Lovers* when Paul Morel goes to the pay window at the coal-mining office and talks in his local vernacular even though he’s an educated guy. I lived in Provincetown with a girlfriend, and we owned a house and workers would come over. And then I’d step into my Massachusetts accent to get the guys to not fuck us over. I think that’s avant-garde—the meeting of need and language. Take the Happenings in the sixties, which were the beginning of postmodernism—what they were mainly interested in was the interface. How do we put film and bodies and poetry together? Now we’re in a world where everything’s sampled. Is there any place where the recording doesn’t meet the live event? What used to be new art is now life. We’re reeling around in this giant performance. When I wrote theater, I would think of each play as a Christmas tree, and the moments, the scenes in the play, were like ornaments. You can’t see it, but the tree’s there, and we’re putting on the ornaments, we’re putting the tinsel on, layers and
layers, and moving with a confidence that there’s a place. And you compose fearlessly because there is a tree, there is a place. I feel like the vernacular is that.

Which reminds me, the poet I have been most excited about lately is Fred Moten. He is piling vernaculars on and singing. Even the academic vernacular. He is so smart. I liked all five of the books we had as finalists for the

National Book Awards. Even Louise Glück’s book. I had never read a book of hers. Beautiful trembling lines, and I loved the prose. But she doesn’t know how to end a poem. That’s what really marks the difference between the mainstream and the avant-garde. It’s a different sense of the whole. If you’re in danger you have to know how to get out.
INTERVIEWER
You’ve often referred—both in your writing and in interviews—to the career of the poet, to your career. I’m wondering how this fits into the discussion of class.

MYLES
There’s a fundamental problem in working-class families. It’s like you revere art, you believe in reading, you believe in books, but you don’t understand their production. That’s the disconnect. Those are the keys you can’t have. And that’s the nonlineage that cuts people from other classes out of the art life. Art looks like a lottery from out there.

INTERVIEWER
So what’s at stake for you in insisting on writing as a career?

MYLES
I have made myself homeless. I have cut myself off from anything I knew prior to living in New York. I did this to myself, so I know exactly how it happened. Yet in the poetry world, people need to act like they don’t know how this happened. Like a je ne sais quoi, but it’s them. There’s a faux vernacular, as though the ambition must be hidden at all times, to be more, I don’t know, attractive? It’s the loafer posture, the veneer of I don’t really need this. People loved to talk about how Frank O’Hara didn’t really care about getting published. That doesn’t jibe with my experience.

INTERVIEWER
Many poets—O’Hara, Ashbery—claim not to work very hard. Like O’Hara’s quip about knowing a poem is done when the phone rings.

MYLES
It’s like we’re not doing business, we’re golfing. And there might be a little gender in there, too. When I was in Ireland I met a man who was Beckett’s favorite director. He talked about Beckett and how he wasn’t ambitious at all and how he had no idea how to get his manuscripts to publishers. But he had these ladies who he would have sex with who worshipped him, and they would type up his manuscripts and bring them around for him.
INTERVIEWER
We could go back to Milton’s daughters, right? Taking dictation.

MYLES
There’s a whole female industry engaged in materially supporting the illusion that the artist doesn’t work directly on his legacy, his immediate success. He’s just a beautiful stoner boy or an intellectual. All thought. No wife? I like turning that illusion inside out. And making the work be literally about the field and the failures and even the practice. I wrote about these things in *Inferno* because Dante did. We should let the writing world and its ways of distributing awards be part of fiction. We should expose the very cultural apparatus that is affecting the reception of the book you’re reading. What’s dirty is that we’re not supposed to talk about how it has sex and reproduces.

INTERVIEWER
You’re both a maverick and very social. You’ve been involved in various “scenes”—St. Mark’s, parts of the art world, performance groups like Sister Spit—without being assimilated into any of them.

MYLES
People render categories like modes of dismissal. If someone considers themself a Language poet or a conceptual poet, they generally will introduce me as a New York School poet. It’s a way of othering, but it’s also a way of building something, monumentalizing their own efforts. Voilà! This edifice. Where’s Marjorie Perloff to break the bottle on it? It’s the opposite of vernacular. In fact I have just discovered that *vernacular* comes from *verna*, meaning “slave,” a native—a *born* slave.

INTERVIEWER
Are there any categories—whether pertaining to sexuality or class or style—that *don’t* rub you the wrong way?

MYLES
I’ve been called a folk poet. I think that’s kind of cool.
INTERVIEWER
I don't know what that means.

MYLES
I don't either. Well, if there are folk singers, what does that mean? Does it mean folks hear you? Or does it mean that you're covering old songs? I don't mind being called a New York School writer, it just isn't necessarily true.

INTERVIEWER
Well, the New York School has always been a fiction, right? It's not like Barbara Guest's writing and John Ashbery's writing are obviously part of a single school.

MYLES
Same with Language poetry. Rae Armantrout and Charles Bernstein—not so much resemblance. Is Harryette Mullen a Language writer? But these poets agree to see themselves in conversation together. They form a cloud.

INTERVIEWER
On the topic of insider-outsider, here I am interviewing you for *The Paris Review*, which has an experimental history but is also in many ways a mainstream publication. Are you at all afraid of being canonized?

MYLES
I'm not, actually. Everything will ruin you, why not this. But if you do your work, somebody else will celebrate you, too. And we are having an interesting conversation. I'm talking my head off. This is a good experience. It could only bring good. When I took the job at UC somebody came up to me at a reading and said, How does it feel to have sold out? I'm like, What did I sign up for? A life of poverty?

INTERVIEWER
Do you reject work because you feel like you've done it before? Do you kill a poem or piece of prose because you feel it's too familiar?
I never kill a style. I like the idea of writing a poem I could have written thirty years ago. I’m the factory. My writing fears manifest more on the order of my inability to stop being Eileen Myles. I guess I don’t worry about my poems so much. I worry about me. It’s really creepy to be addicted to yourself or the performance of yourself. Like looking at your phone too much.

INTERVIEWER

I think of how the topic of fame comes up in your early work. Sometimes it seems like a joke but sometimes it seems quite serious—I always knew I’d be famous, I’m fated to do this work. And of course you are famous, but it’s not as though you can’t go shopping without being recognized. Didn’t Ashbery say something about famous poets not being like famous human beings?

MYLES

There’s nothing more ambitious than a young poet. You feel omnipotent. You’re on the upswing of bipolar. And that enrages older poets—which, to a certain sensibility, only makes you want to be more vapid and fame obsessed and glib. No one can tell you what the limits are. As it should be. No one’s got the keys to the kingdom.

A piece that’s missing in our talk about the avant-garde is gayness, campiness, queerness. Somebody like Arthur Russell was where avant-garde and discos and Buddhism met. Nightclubs. That was in the air when I was young. What do you do with someone like Ariana Reines right now? Claudia Rankine is famous. She’s political and she’s glamorous. I think it’s more interesting to think about how poets could have ever been so drab, why they would have made the choice to be poor, to be obscure, to not want fame. I guess it was a form of resistance, but lots of us were feeling the other thing. We weren’t leaving America, we were making another one. I hope we still are.

INTERVIEWER

To what degree does a literary posterity ever enter your consciousness? I mean that old kind of poetic fame, that dream of immortality?
What do I care? I’ll be dead. I really care much more about the present, having this life that I want and being able to write the things I want to write and see them well published and not feeling obstructed, ambition-wise. I have a poem that contains the line “Fame is merely advanced sentiment.” It’s sort of like this extra feeling you’re putting forward. And what do you call that extra feeling? We don’t know where this is going to go. Like when you’re in a vehicle or on a train and you see fragments of vistas—a sign, a little town—and for some reason you remember that little town all your life. I feel like the repetition of fame is like that. It doesn’t have a place, but it has an amount of space that you want to know more about and you’d like it to be there. It’s not quite posterity—it’s like building a periscope, needing to see more, wanting to write already from that vista.

INTERVIEWER

On the topic of seeing more, when did art criticism—if you think of your prose about art as criticism—start for you? How does it relate to your other kinds of writing?

Growing up, I was supposed to go to art school, but I went to college to prove that I was, I guess, intelligent. I stopped drawing at that point, so when I first came to New York, I would look at art, but I was a little sad and resentful. I mainly looked at photography in the seventies. I was friends with Peter Schjeldahl, though, who took me to galleries and pushed me toward being an art writer. But it was Rene Ricard who actually talked me into it. He did a performance at the Guggenheim in 1981 and insisted I review it for Art in America. I was deeply insecure—I didn’t know if I could write art reviews. I wasn’t the greatest prose writer at that time. Art writing, working with editors, is how I learned to write prose. That’s the fact.

Then once I got sober, I looked at art and just got high. The pleasure overrode any resentment I had that I wasn’t a visual artist. And part of that pleasure was to write. For ten years all I did was go to the Poetry Project, and after being the director, I turned toward the art world and performance. I wrote plays and all these other things. Not Me is about that, about being alive in this completely new space.
INTERVIEWER
Do you think that change—getting sober—shows up in the way you write?

MYLES
Getting sober rescued my writing, because at the end of my drinking my writing had gone to shit. It had not been a problem for a while, but then suddenly it was really a problem. My mind sucked. I was becoming foggy and full of shit.

INTERVIEWER
Were you killing yourself?

MYLES
Absolutely. I would drink until I fell down. Or I would quit smoking—as if that were the problem. The bars would close and I would go running up First Avenue, jogging, full of energy, and then I would stumble and hit my head. I hit my head a lot. I would wake up and have black eyes. I was big for head injuries, which is how my dad died.

INTERVIEWER
And was it just like you decided one day...

MYLES
My best friend, Tom, who was also a drug addict and a junkie—he had very little patience for my always going on the wagon. Having seen a parent die of alcoholism, I knew what was waiting for me. Tom had no respect for that. But then he came back after visiting his family one summer, and he had stopped drinking. We always talked about our alcoholic dads, but it turned out his had actually gotten sober, and mine had died. He urged me to join him in this new thing. I preferred to die, thank you. We really talked that way then. I remember David Rattray and I were invited to read at the Ear Inn in April, but we both independently told the person we thought we'd probably be dead by then.

INTERVIEWER
Were you afraid that if you stopped drinking, you wouldn't make work?
Myles, in 2012. "I never kill a style. I like the idea of writing a poem I could have written thirty years ago. I'm the factory."

**MYLES**

I decided that even if I couldn't be a poet, I was going to stay sober. Which was kind of huge—that was the only identity I had. I was a dyke too, but... Immediately upon making that deal, I began to write better poems. It was like reorganizing my mind in some new way. I found this new condition to write in. It was both more and less. Everything became an incitement to do other kinds of writing. Can I write for the *Village Voice*? Can I be a performance artist? For me, the eighties, when I was in my thirties, was just tooling around and doing all these different things.
INTERVIEWER

What did you take from punk and other kinds of music?

MYLES

Those people were clearly part of my aesthetic family, and I felt like if they didn’t have to apologize, I didn’t have to. There’s an energy you get from music and popular culture, and it always felt closer to me than “fine art” did. I grew up in the era of low art, really great television—the fifties and sixties were amazing.

INTERVIEWER

What kind of TV did you find amazing?

MYLES

*Dobie Gillis*, Ernie Kovacs, Ed Sullivan. Everybody watched TV together, everybody was watching the same shows in the same way that everybody got *Rubber Soul* at Christmas, the way everybody got *Revolver*. Performance art in the eighties was just vaudeville by people who had grown up watching TV. TV was great as long as nobody knew what it was, because it was people coming right out of vaudeville, straight out of radio, and onto television. People would always come out to talk at the beginning of a TV show. There was always a monologue before these shows. *Dobie Gillis* sat on a rock and talked about girls. One stepped out of TV and performed or wrote a poem.

INTERVIEWER

So you’ve never conceived of poetry as antagonistic to mass culture in some way?

MYLES

No. Since it was what I was going to do, I had to make it out of things that were plausible for me. The plan was not to fail. To succeed meant translating the culture I already had or liked into what I was now doing.

INTERVIEWER

You’ve mentioned that Frank O’Hara’s manifesto “Personism” is very influential for you. Can you say why?
Because of the pause! Because of that pause in the piece where he's describing writing a poem and suddenly—I mean, I describe it as "the pause" but I've looked at it, and he doesn't actually pause, he just says, "I realized" that instead of writing a poem he could just call the person. What a transitional moment in the history of poetry, to be writing and to realize that now we have a technology that's in the world and doesn't have anything to do with poems and writing—and then suddenly it does. Suddenly the poem is the phone call. I think poetry was never the same. The poem is not in letter time, it's in telephone time. I think every kind of technology changes the entire structure of the culture, and that's why literary is such a cloying term. We're making books, but I think the metaphor for the book is not the book, it's all these other things. You may not use social media, but it's using you. You're writing in tweets, like it or not. To me, the notion of literary is what's academic now—to be literary is to write archaically. It's archaic to insist the book be a book and even to behave as if there is a realm that is "literary" that refers only to letters.

But O'Hara and the phone was the beginning. He's putting it out there in "Personism" so you'll read his poems differently.

INTERVIEWER
There are a lot of cell phones in your recent poems. And you're active on social media.

MYLES
I never wanted to be a poet. I wanted to be a spaceman. So this is it. My wildest fantasy of being a poet exists in social media because I feel like you are walking down the street in your connected notebook. It's sort of like when you realize the poem is no longer a whole, it's just stabs at trying to notate a vivid, fleeting experience, so maybe a line comes to you—and it's really hard to figure out what's poetry and what's a tweet at this time—but the line comes and you literally can show the thing that you saw, or not. I mean, they can't be in the sensorium with you, but you make the joke, Here's the thing I saw and here's the line that came to me and I'm sending this out to seven thousand people right now and I'm gleeful that I'm not alone in this particular way.
INTERVIEWER

Every few days there's some important New York artist who says the city's dead and that everybody should go to Detroit or wherever. Do you feel that way, too?

MYLES

I figured you and I would talk about New York somehow. There's a way in which, if you lived here for a lot of your adult life, you're sort of screwed for living anywhere else, because it's like having a computer—you're used to it and to all your information being in one place. I may not go see any art, but all the art I want to see is here. I may not want to be with anybody, but anybody I want to be with is right out there, there are so many people who are here, and if not, well, if I wait a month, they'll come.

People who came to New York from Middle America in the thirties and forties were making a big move from a rural culture to an urban culture—to here, where they could have sex with a lot of people and drink themselves to death and make art. There was a chemistry they had to figure out in order to become something or somebody no one had ever heard of. I feel like it's a different equation now, but it's the same relative truth.