

San Diego, California

February 2, 2005

Jennifer,

Well it's been more than a month since you wrote your letter. I hope you haven't felt like a jerk or anything since I've taken this long to respond. It just was quiet tonight and finally I know exactly what I want to write back so it feels like it's been worth the waiting. God you asked me many good questions and it would probably be a bad idea to try to respond to them all. I loathe the bit of dialogue you opened your letter with. What's horrible is that it's not so new. I'm thinking of the young guy making asides to the camera – what he really thinks. I'm thinking of George Burns on the Burns and Allen Show and George turning to the camera, taking his cigar out of his mouth and saying something smart. George knew. That was the general bias of the show. George did the knowing. And Gracie was. People will tell us that George and Gracie were one of the great show business loves and I don't doubt that, but Gracie was a spectacle and we never for a moment knew what was going on "inside" her. That's what asides are all about. Divulging. Men are always divulging in a private powerful way and women are divulging in a silly out of control way and we watch them. They're like children, no? Unedited and delightful. Or "not my type." Right or wrong, but not the guiding force. There to be judged. I also loved the dumpy guy who came into your classroom, unprepared, quoting a bit and blowing them away. It reminds me of a gay man I talked with at an artist colony who just hated how straight

men could be gross, out of shape, unshaven and treated like hot sex objects. This gay man was infuriated by the entitled piggishness of straight men. If you owned the world then of course you could sit there with your guy gaze determining that some girl was fat or a slob because a straight guy sees himself as the boss, and you know the procession of girls or opportunities or products are there for his delectation. He doesn't have to see himself. I mean the guy's probably fucking old as well, and he wouldn't have any truck with an aging woman either, never mind a fat one. So on top of it all you have that to look forward to, too Jennifer. If it's bad to be female now, just wait till you get old! Sorry I like to throw my age around like a corpse or a skeleton. I've been sliding through yet another breakup lately (with a girl, surprise surprise) and I really wished I could not shave and have another layer of disheveled protection to announce my sorrow and freedom through. I mean I'd like to go through my breakup like an abject man, not an abject female. Somewhere a divorced guy is being cooked for and I don't know what. Actually I don't want to be him, I want the beard, just the fucking beard, please because then I could have more hair on my head, less skin. I imagine my feelings would be less exposed. I mean a woman can grow the hair on her legs and I do. At school I was standing outside in the sun at the end of last spring's quarter and I was talking to a male academic, a kind of gnarly difficult guy but he was being generous and offering to hook me up with a curator in Mexico who would possibly show my work. Then he looked down and I had shorts on. And there were my legs covered with hair. It was like I had shit on them. He truly pulled away from me and in moments was looking back with scorn and I knew then that he

wouldn't be sending me the email address he had been offering. Because I am such a fucking freak. How would he look good, then. You know how men like to help men. Helping a man is like helping yourself, but helping a woman is something else. Maybe my worldview is perverted. How bad can it be? Pretty bad. Really bad. Worse than you ever imagined. But somehow I also think it's pretty good and here's why.

We are thrown radically upon ourselves. Do I have any interest in knowing who that shuffling poet who came to your class was? None whatsoever because I could put in a multitude of names that would utterly fill the bill. Do I need to know what his unprepared self had to say when he talked off the cuff about shit? No because I could write that dialogue easily enough too. We know what men have to say. Uncurated genius taking a little space and sharing the goods. Yawn. It's just another version of having a gut and not taking a bath and thinking you're hot. Your students sound pretty dumb. They don't deserve you. I think you have to care less about teaching and wowing them and spend more time going to the movies, and reading and writing and hanging out with your friends. Give less! It's hard for young teachers to do this, but especially for young female teachers. I really think students should be treated with more scorn and made to work more. You shouldn't read too much of their work because it's bad for you. They should be reading a lot and you should be writing a lot. I'd be curious to see your manuscript *Holiday*. I like the title. When I was in Europe a hundred million years ago I remember people asking if we (my friend I was traveling with, Anne, who I went

to college with) were "on holiday." It sounded so much better than vacation. It reminds me of the far side of the sixties, the bossa nova side which was very la dolce vita, just stylish and Euro and hot in a light peachy kind of ebullience, like really actually cool. Not hot but sexy. That's Holiday to me, the thick old school magazine – what was it about, fashion or travel? Whatever, it's gone. And Madonna's early great hit. I would love to read your book. We have no business writing letters without this basic exchange. Who's publishing it, how many pages, what's going on? I love Bridghe Mullins. Did you stay in touch? When Bridghe taught your class I think she told me she was going to order my book for her class and that the class was huge, 100 or so – maybe you were not in that huge class, but a smaller one. I think at the time I was feeling bitter about always being fucking broke, or maybe just broke that day and I said oh great so I'll make like a nickel on each book i.e. \$5. I don't know why I was such a grouch in response to her generous proposal. It was really sweet of her and I loved the picture of so many people reading my book but all I could think of was that like everything, it would bring me no money, nothing would.

I'm thinking about "a life of independence" – the difficult notion of being a free, unaffiliated poet in "a free market economy" -- that nonetheless you pay a price as we do for everything -- because so many times in my life in New York as a poet I wasn't able to see how wonderful things were because all I wanted was some help, I wanted to win, I wished someone would give me a big fucking grant or something. Being poor for a long time makes you feel small. I think

my poems never got small. Oddly poetry seems to expand in relation to poverty – or at least it does for a very long time. That's probably why I'm urging you to be less nice to your students and try less hard. Because you need your time, they don't. But when you have it, it's like being young, know that you have it. Don't let fear get you down. Fear of the future, fear of poverty. Of your work not being important enough or read enough. It might be an injustice to present Barbara Guest as the New York school poet that got away. I think there isn't a woman I know who isn't familiar with how easily replaceable Barbara was in the eyes of whatever next young male editor was assembling some New York School book. Why not put in Bernadette or Anne, he thought. Should it be Alice, Bernadette or Eileen. Alice, because of Ted! (This will just piss Alice off but Jerry Rothenberg, I've been told, actually said this. He had to include one woman in his Poets of the Millennium book to "represent" the East Village and he actually spouted that line of thought. I love Jerry, but Jesus!)

Female history is always destabilized by whatever guy is now watching the line of women parading by. It's maddening but those guys will never change. We have to think differently. We have to teach Barbara Guest differently. Don't teach her with them. Teach her with Amiri Baraka or Allen Ginsberg. Just don't even let the guys have her. I think females have to write new fictions to hold their truths. If someone introduced me as someone who didn't get her fair shake I'd feel terrible. And then some entitled guy stands up and he's gotten 97 awards and whom is the room going to listen to. We have to set each other up better all the time and the terms of the world are always

inadequate to women's true accomplishments. If she's received no awards then we have to give her one. An accurate and beautiful description could be enough if we weren't also compelled to say what's not there. Because your capacity to see value and state it in the present is adequate award for Barbara Guest and Eileen Myles. Your students are being set up too if they are told that a poet has been unfairly treated. They are like in debt before they've heard a word of her work. Then they have to save her. And they won't. Why do they have to fix it. It's like a threat. A guy stands up and he has nothing to give and of course they like him. He makes them feel comfortable and anything they can glean from him is a gift. He makes them feel good. He leaves them in the actual room. We just try too damn hard all the time and I think it's got to stop. I'm for female laziness and excess, female age and female hair and female fat. I actually like being kind of skinny because it feels good. Menopause threatens to put fat where it never was but if I didn't have to have a baby I don't have to get fat because I didn't have one. There are many wonderful ways to say no.

Thank you for reading my work. I really mean it. It's a wonderful feeling -- that your work continues on when you leave it alone. It makes me feel very rich to hear that it's had its effect on you. I love holes. I've never been a continuous thinker -- or I mean that I am very distracted and that's why I write poetry. Where am I when I'm not here. How do I track the move from thought to thought, vine to vine as I'm swinging through the woods of my life? Holes seem generous. An empty way of saying there are other places to be, there have been other times and there will be still others to replace them. I like the

anonymity of history. Your heart is broken today but later it will be filled with excitement or peace. There's something very romantic about loss. Hope's neighbor. I think the boat full of holes is as you say. The boat is not real, the lake is not real. So what if it fills up with water which is probably light. Shot through with innocence, something else.

I think just when I'm a man, I'm a girl. The feminine line means that above all women mustn't be contemptuous of themselves. Just when the last thing that's going on is one's purported femininity, it erupts like a big bow. We're just so many things. I distrust my own jargon, my abandoning of the feminine for the female. I guess I was preferring sex over gender, but later thinking how arrogant to pretend not to be feminine. For anyone really. Why is the feminine the thing to hate? Something men, or mothers made to control girls. Surely it can free us too, then in some homeopathic way. I often forget words, that's why I like holes. All this quiet diving through the dictionary and a bird comes up.

I hated the Andy Goldsworthy movie with a passion. For among other reasons the treatment of his wife. The kids fared better, getting their heads ruffled etc. Being shot in a way that was proud whereas the wife was only a functionary of his and their needs. Ugh. But the movie was narcissistic in the worst way. The script was pretentious and foul. Making his every intervention on nature plodding and over-stated. The writer should have been shot. They undid Goldsworthy's work, but so does his beautiful life in his beautiful studio, that lonely and pathetic man. The beautiful furniture and desks in his studio and his

contempt for his wife, a living person, everywhere. What a great man, an artist. Enough of him.

Men have been entirely generous to me. Books and ideas and unending influences. Most of the men who had the most profound influences on me are already gone. We are supposed to learn from each other. That's what we're doing here. I have tried to learn from women more in recent years. Because I always have younger girlfriends (and I learn from them) and because I teach and spend a lot of time with people, mostly women younger than me, I've started consciously trying to spend more time now with women my age and older. I'm struggling to learn from the academy, a funny place to learn. The academy performed an economic rescue on me a couple of years ago and though I'm very grateful, I'm still trying to figure out if it's a good thing. I have three books almost done and I'll know more once that's happened. Soon I hope. A book is like a leash.

I hope I've helped you out in writing tonight. You have really helped me. I had dinner with another poet tonight (Rae) and when she described her writing life I so distinctly saw the room she was writing in, the notebook she wrote in. I think talking among women about being poets and writing poetry is about as good as it gets. Writing about it tonight. Send me your book.

Truly,  
Eileen