

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

October 17, 2005

Dear Brenda,

Your letter is so generous and full, I've wondered how I can adequately respond. It's been an interesting text for me to read several times over. And, first, I want to thank you for it—for your engagement in it with some of my projects. Your own poetic texts have this richness as well, and more! Much to puzzle about amidst arresting darts (Zeno's arrows again?) of what I take to be intensely purposeful clarity. I've loved their presence in the minimalist format of the October Primary Writing. The selection there begins almost immediately with a wonderful statement of the nature-culture agon we don't necessarily always recognize as such (agonistic): "You see a beautiful sight / Caused by erosion" I wonder if you're assuming something of the ancient prophetic role of the poet in this work—Eco Quarry Bellwether—since the role of bellwether is to both lead the flock and augur the future. Is your use of capital letters to begin every line a statement of wanting to reinscribe or acknowledge certain kinds of poetic traditions as well?

You ended with a series of questions and, as you can see, I'd like to really begin with some of my own about you, but I'll try also to comply with some answers: You asked about my childhood. It was urban and chaotic with eccentric parents in NYC—Chelsea in Manhattan and then an immigrant, working class neighborhood in the Bronx with continued ties to Manhattan since my father lived in The Cornish

Arms, a residential hotel on 23rd St. But it wasn't all city. There were summer vacations in a (then) sparsely populated part of the Maine Coast and my teen years were in the semi-tropical beauty of the Carolina low country surrounding the pre-civil rights meanness of "the south's most civilized city," Charleston S.C.—a beautiful place built by slave labor. My academic training and subsequent interests have been in poetics and philosophy (of language, ethics, science). I'd say that every bit of this experience has affected everything I've done. (It's been conducive to a certain kind of practice-based research and thought experiment and an interest in qualities of attention). A not very interesting truism, I'm afraid. What about your growing up? Where, when, how? Actually, I'd rather that the other things you asked come up in our epistolary conversation as it proceeds.

I like your idea/project of making "animate connections." It does happen in your poetry! This may or may not relate to my interest in invention, but "animate connections" are at the heart of what I take to be *poesis*—a continual revitalization of language/attention through forms of composing, forms of reading that bring together the sensual and the rational.

So, in reply to your question, I value invention because it must start with noticing a need (probably more so than a desire) and is inextricably linked to a questioning, experimental attitude. I see no part of our world that we are not affecting. A noticing, questioning, inventing of constructive ways of being a non-destructive part of our world is essential—to my mind—to combat conservative smugness

and the destructiveness that comes out of a greed for “MY security, MY nostalgia, MY preferred stability.” Living in mutual acknowledgment and respect of others is not a simple I-Thou Ah Ha!—as one can see all too well in the Middle East. It requires the invention of new ways of being together, new forms of life, as Wittgenstein puts it, new language games.

I suppose I’m saying that it takes inventiveness to maintain what you so nicely call “a flexible, adaptive manoeuvrability that sustains and is in kinship with an [“our”?] environment.”

In fact, we *are* animals, aren’t we?, and like all other species we seem only to rise to the ethical when we contravene those parts of our own nature that are impulsive, on the brink of fear and anger, and drive us toward self-defense and self-interest alone. It is in our nature to be cruel and to kill. A civil society is an amazing, fragile construction built with the help of those other parts of our nature—the capacity to bond with others, to empathize and to love. All these varying capacities make it tough to get along. I have a new puppy right now so I’m experiencing this everyday—in her; in me.

Yours in continuing conversation,

Joan