

How to write this book Shannon Brennan

Jill Magi *Threads*
Future Poem Books: New York, 2007

In a letter to Cecilia Vicuna, published in *How2's* "Letters to Poets: Conversations about Poetics, Politics and Community," Jill Magi writes, "A question: how much of your writing comes from sitting still? How to find silences, how to write across empty space?" (Magi *Letters* 3). It is a responsible question: one that suggests the distance that separates writer from receiver, word from meaning, silence (stillness) from the vibration of speech; it is a question that we hear (or, as the poet herself makes clear, do not always *hear*) weaving throughout Magi's newest text, *Threads* (Future Poem Books; New York, 2007).

The sound of an owl or the wind. Kirjutama mulle uks kiri. Write me a letter. Try these sounds. Uks avati. The door was opened. You have a father. We read. Try. Say it. I have a book. How to write this book.
(Magi 14)

Integrating secondhand memories, glimpses of experience, translated poems, untranslatable lists, letters, mimeographed maps and torn manuscripts, Magi creates in *Threads* a narrative that cannot bring itself to narrate. The word implies mastery (the Latin *gnarus*, meaning "knowing, skilled"), and Jill Magi is a declared journeyman: "I now say "ma olen opilane" fluently which is "I am a student" though no one asks" (137). Her resistance to authority is not merely humble, but also—I shall repeat the term—responsible. Phrases like "How to write this book" announce a recognition of the careful

treatment demanded by both word (“Between “you” and “are” her tongue struggles” (3)), and story (“Believing there is something to find out. A view called history. Or to enter” (44)), and they imbue in the reader a sense of the difficulty and the urgency of right-telling. One often hesitates, therefore, as one pages through this book: halted by the poetry’s tentative code-switching (“On the island I felt closer to fluency midagi (but) she mistook my Estonian for Finnish”(35)), its emphasis upon linguistic error (“mispronunciations tumble out of necessity” (57)), its evaluation of its own silence (“each day falls off into unspeech.” (38)), and its eventual disappearance, replaced by images of handwritten pages in eeki keel (the language of Estonia), the reader discovers a space, not only for evaluation of the book’s language, but for evaluation of its subject.

“I had an image,” Magi writes to Cecilia Vicuna, “that I was connected to the sound of my father’s home language by just a thread. A delicate sense of the relationship, not forgetting, though I think he tried very hard to forget what he had seen as a child and the words that accompanied those experiences of war and separation” (*Letters* 2). In *Threads*, this “delicate sense of the relationship” between the speaker and her father’s language, culture and country leads her to return to Estonia, from whence her father, Tarmu Magi, had escaped in 1944, during Soviet occupation. The daughter’s return is the *situation* of Magi’s text, and, as one first approaches the volume, it seems that this return (a discovery of origins) is also the book’s subject:

Needing more time to arrive, I sit on a bench between ferry terminal and city gate, imagining that my father’s history is visible on my face. An uncertain expression. Perhaps sadness or certain Estonian features such as hair color or the eyes, though in any other context, I do not believe in this. (9)

Magi is not, however, a poet who can abide fixed notions, like those of origin and nationality. In *Threads*, broad statements regarding Estonian enthusiasm for wrestling run up against a Chinese anthropologist's "sullen face as she reports on the forgotten folk dances or perhaps their refusal to demonstrate a remembering" (36); the speaker's "Estonian" features become lost in a tangled exploration of her possible Jewish, Swedish, "gypsy," and Estonian blood. Traits of ethnicity and characteristics of culture become confounded when seen as a part of a heritage of forgetting. Magi gracefully reveals this idea in a passage that investigates the relationship between war, history and identity: "A successful bomb devastates the city's idea of itself. Now a footbridge, commemorating" (30). Does a memorial to the obliteration of identity reinstitute identity? Is the idea of a national culture just such a memorial?

Jill Magi does not ask this question; rather, she linguistically inhabits it. She struggles to speak a language that is her father's, but not yet hers; she sows English sentences into the pages of an Estonian novel; she attempts to bring song to the silent page through the inclusion of a piece of sheet music and translated verse. The words of *Threads* draw the eye, the ear, and the mind to the disjuncture between the culture in which they are found, and the culture they commemorate. We see this disjunction embodied on the page, represented by torn pages and torn books. This would fit quite neatly, were it not for the fact that our poet has sown the pages back together.

It is not a tidy stitch that Magi makes, and this accounts for its confounding beauty. We find, when we have finished, that it is not only difficult to say what we have read: it is difficult to say anything at all, so significant has the word, as treated by Jill Magi, become. It is at this moment that one is well advised to return to the text: "As the method

of sewing restricts the movement of the sections, rounding is sometimes difficult but will be achieved by perseverance” (107).