

THE SRPR INTERVIEW: KATY DIDDEN

Joanne Diaz: First, let me thank you for this opportunity to read your new work. These are certainly some of the most striking poems that SRPR has ever published, and I am eager to learn more about how you created them.

These are not your first erasures; nor are they your first engagements with Iceland. I'm thinking of your gorgeous poem "Peace Tower," from your first book, *The Glacier's Wake*. In that book, your persona poems animate the seemingly still, ancient glaciers so that we are able to see—and feel—what might live inside them, and ourselves.

You also have a deeply held interest in ekphrasis. In "Peace Tower," also from *The Glacier's Wake*, the poetic speaker describes the effects of Yoko Ono's light sculpture. Here you focus on the fragility of light, and thus on art, by showing how easily the mist can erase it:

At times the beam is wide, at times
it thins, at times it seems to stutter

over light-erasing mist, as if light
were a held luck we shine up to the dark,

in the winter, under whistling stars.

Can you say more about these multiple interests—in the land, in the artistic process, and in erasure, not just as a procedure, but as a phenomenon?

Katy Didden: I've been trying to remember when Iceland began to loom so large in my imagination. The real story is that I was taking geology classes in college at the same moment that I was taking my first poetry workshops, and those two subjects have always felt compatible. I like thinking that Earth vibrates as a note among the spheres (twenty octaves below middle E!), that language is a record of collisions, that syntax is revolution and extension, is sublimation and destruction, that words, like rocks, endure: poems as matter, sound as forge, form as friction.

I took a class about plate tectonics and volcanoes called "Ring of Fire", which is when I learned that there are places in Iceland where

you can actually see tectonic plates drifting apart—one of the only places on Earth where this is possible. I've wanted to go there since, although I've also been reluctant to go. It has felt important to spend a long time imagining what it will be like before seeing it for myself. Meanwhile, everyone I know seems to want to visit Iceland, or else they already have. So many artists and writers and musicians have been there—Yoko Ono, as you mentioned, but also Richard Serra, and writers like Paul Muldoon and Matthea Harvey. Eileen Myles has a book of essays titled *The Importance of Being Iceland*, where she writes about her multiple visits to Iceland and what it has meant to her. One of my favorite books is Louis MacNeice and W. H. Auden's collaborative book *Letters from Iceland*, which chronicles the several months they spent there together (in fact, one of the source texts in this set of erasures comes from that book). British textile designer William Morris also spent significant time there, and kept journals of his visits. I just heard an NPR profile on Sam Amidon, who recorded his last album, *Lily-O*, at a studio in Iceland. Maybe these artists are drawn there because there is a wealth of creativity in the country—I'm thinking all the way back to the Icelandic sagas here, and also of more contemporary artists and writers who are from Iceland: Björk, Sigur Rós, Halldór Laxness, Louisa Matthíasdóttir (one of John Ashbery's favorite painters), and a new writer / artist I learned about recently: a. rawlings (check out *Echolology* on Penn Sound). These lists are woefully incomplete! Even so, they are already long, so you get the idea.

I think Americans romanticize Iceland—I know I do—and I'm very curious about that. Lately it's become a trend in branding food-stuffs: you can buy bottled water from Iceland, or yogurt from Iceland in the grocery store (I just finished erasing a label from Siggí's® yogurt, for example). Also, *Game of Thrones* is filmed in Iceland (winter is coming! and zombies and gorgeous monks and magic anarchists). I'm fascinated by the fascination, and the poems are trying to explore why Iceland has this effect on me and on many other people. Is it the landscape, the culture, the myths, or the moment?

Erasing the yogurt label doesn't seem very serious, but overall I'm aiming to increase my awareness, and the more I learn about the place, the more I understand its complexities. On the one hand, I'm exploring what it means for people to live with the dangers of eruptions and earthquakes and harsh farming conditions all the time, and

whether all of this loss, or the threat of loss, relates to the fact that there is such a strong history of poetry and general creativity in Iceland. I'm working with that geolo-elegiac spirit. But I am also reading texts and interviewing people who speak about the problems in Iceland, which resemble problems around the world to some extent: fears of difference, economic inequality, lack of jobs, issues with sustainability. I don't want to shy away from these realities for the sake of my ignorant romantic vision; I want to pay attention.

I have worked on other erasures—in all cases, like this current project, they were collaborations with visual artists. I worked with my cousin, erasing texts about land in New York, from passages about the Algonquin tribe, to Whitman on the early Dutch presence in Brooklyn, to articles advocating for establishing tent cities on vacant land. These erasures are meant to be a kind of soundtrack to my cousin's films, and are also meant to reveal forgotten or violent histories in the settling of land and claiming of territory. I also collaborated with two artists who were fellows at Princeton with me on an erasure project: Jason Treuting of So Percussion, and graphic designer Danielle Aubert. We each performed erasures—musical, literary, and visual—around John Cage and Lou Harrison's piece "Double Music." I erased an interview with Lou Harrison into a script for four voices: an interviewer, an artist, a musician, and a writer. I erased the same text four different times, which was super intense!

The fact that I collaborated with different artists was organic to each of these projects, but I believe the collaborative impulse is inherent to the form itself. So many erasure projects are collaborative: I am thinking of Matthea Harvey, who erased *A Portrait of Charles Lamb* by Lord David Cecil and collaborated with artist Amy Jean Porter to create *Of Lamb*, or Christian Hawkey and Uljana Wolf's *Sonne from Ort*, erasures of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and their German translations by Rainer Maria Rilke.

I can think of many reasons why erasure lends itself to collaboration. First, because it is already a different kind of authorship, one that incorporates a source text, so there is not as much investment on the singular voice. I really like what Joshua Beckman has to say about this idea when Andrew David King interviews him, Matthew Rohrer, and Anthony McCann about their collaborative erasing of texts by Romantic poets: "there are many individual and communal intuitions

at play here, things multiply echo and respond over the time of the endeavor. The act of reading creates a certain sort of page and the act of erasing another and the act of retyping another. The acts of talking and sharing another. The act of publishing another" (I highly recommend King's blog series, and this interview in particular).¹ Again, this layering of "intuitions," is the kind of palimpsest I'm trying to play into with the lava, with its own organic layering.

I'd also like to say that process of erasure creates large spatial gaps in texts, giving a fragmentary structure that invites illustration (think Tom Phillips's *A Humument*, or Mary Ruefle's collages over some of the pages in *Melody*). If you retain the erased spaces, the shape of the poem is no longer governed by sound, so it can be read more like a painting or a sculpture. Erasures are often decidedly nonlinear lyrics, which leaves more room for interruption, I think, and indicates an openness to external ideas and to dialogue.

JD: Every time I read a new sequence of erasure poems, I marvel at how each poet conceives of his or her project differently. In *A Little White Shadow*, Mary Ruefle uses Wite-Out to erase an anonymously written booklet from the last century; in *Nets*, Jen Bervin erases Shakespeare's *Sonnets* with a gray scale ink so that the reader can still see the ghost of the original text in Bervin's work; and in Tom Phillips's *A Humument*, we see an artist / poet creating a colorful, dynamic work of art on top of white page and black ink. In your erasures, you're doing something I've never seen before. Could you say a bit about how you approached your erasure?

KD: I know, erasure practitioners love rules! That is part of the phenomenon. As far as I can tell, each poet approaches his or her erasures consistently: some allow themselves to find words vertically down the page, like Tom Phillips, some even cut out words in a book to reveal words on the next page, like Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes*. As for me, I erase horizontally, using words in the order they appear in the original paragraph. One thing that is slightly more unusual in my approach is that I erase down to the letters within words, instead of

¹ Andrew David King, "Effaced Ballads: An Interview with Matthew Rohrer, Anthony McCann, and Joshua Beckman on Erasing the Romantics," Kenyon Review Blog (November 30, 2012), kenyonreview.org.