

# OMNIDAWN

A brief interview with Claire Marie Stancek (six questions)

*(conducted by Rusty Morrison)*

February, 2020

***RUSTY MORRISON: It is such a thrill to be publishing *wyrd] bird*, your second book with *Omnidawn*, your third published collection of poems. Could you speak to the process of bringing together this cornucopia of voices, which range from subjects of deep-study & literary engagement; to heart-rending pain (both personal and global), and speak to the process of (what I see as) ‘allowing the poems to speak’ to you in their multi-phonics, so as to teach you how to bring this manuscript to its final form for us, so that we might hear all the instruments present in it? Whatever candor you could offer us would be much appreciated. Whatever specifics of your process you’d share with us, and where in the text we might find that process exemplified—I’d be very grateful if you’d articulate here.***

CLAIRE MARIE STANCEK: I love how you put it—“allowing the poems to speak”—because that touches the heart of this book in so many different ways.

I wrote *wyrd] bird* at a time of acute personal suffering, which was amplified psychically and emotionally by larger crises going on in the world. I had moved to another country to save a relationship that eventually ended anyway, was in the long process of ending, and then someone very close to me suddenly died. I was unable to sleep, I was hearing locutions, I was seeing things that I interpreted as visions, I was extremely paranoid. And I was keeping this notebook. I think that writing this book saved my life. It was all I could do.

During this time, I rediscovered a library that felt like a blessed space because, many years ago, my mother had attended the college that housed it, and so being there I felt connected to her, across the years. I had some feeling that I would be protected there. The library was of a style which is rather unusual in larger libraries, in that its holdings were not separate from the reading spaces, but were

shelved alongside long heavy tables where people could sit and read and write. The day I found this library was one of those brilliantly sunny, extremely cold days in winter, where the snow seems like a light source in itself, and every breath is a bright aching in your nose and throat. I came in from outside, dazzled by the sun, and practically bumped into a shelf of books. I started browsing titles. I found a huge, hard-backed art book that collected the illuminated visions of Hildegard of Bingen. I had never heard of Hildegard before. But I was completely entranced. The library also had her major work of visionary theology, *Scivias*, as well as her letters and other writings. My reading about Hildegard started to preoccupy my notebook writing, to filter into the dream journals and poem fragments, and to structure them. Hildegard became the gravitational force around which my writing coalesced.

I think when you're keeping a notebook, you're "allowing the poems to speak" as you say, and allowing the world to speak through you, keeping yourself open to chance encounters, coincidences. I was particularly raw and receptive at this time and I think Hildegard resonated so profoundly because she experienced things like what I was experiencing, but instead of being unmade by them, she made art. Her context was very different, of course. But that was part of what was generative for me. How can a medieval Christian mystic speak to us now—in the context of Trump's America, with unimaginable violence happening in and to so many communities, in a state of environmental emergency—how do we understand visions, whether artistic visioning, or the visions that one might witness when experiencing a manic episode or mental breakdown, at a time when the capacity for visionary experience seems impossible and yet all the more necessary?

There's a wonderful moment in *Jacob's Room* when Virginia Woolf describes the British Museum as an "enormous mind." She imagines all of the writers housed there, "cheek by jowl" to one another. I think that the notebook is the broken, fragmentary analogue to this fantasy. Impressions, random moments, bits of overheard speech, quotations from reading, dreams, questions, all come together, cheek by jowl, in a crowd. They are not coherent yet they cohere.

Although what became *nyrd] bird* is very different from that scrappy notebook, it was important to me to honor the book's process in its final form. So *nyrd] bird* begins, "I slept with my book open, woke into strange thoughts pen in hand." It includes photos I took on my cellphone, like the one of two dead birds outside the library, which appears early on in the text. Some of the prose fragments describe dreams, and many of the poems actually enact dreams by reordering fragments from elsewhere in the book, as though the book itself were dreaming. For example, the poem that begins

“listen again: indescribable beyond. in doubt. trumpet,” returns to or anticipates language from the prose sections before and after.

“Listen again,” Hildegard writes in a letter to another mystic. This injunction is one of the cruxes of *nyrd] bird*. She describes the body as a “fragile vessel” through which the spirit passes, which is a very Christian notion. But it’s also a poetic notion, and one that’s connected to your line about “allowing the poems to speak.” This book is an exercise in listening again, in holding disparate moments together as a fragile vessel.

***RM: I'd like to ask you to speak to the powerful, provocative uses of form in this work, and I'd like to ask how the forms of the work evolved. You have shown us, in OIL SPELL, how you've used form in ways so very aligned to Adorno's position: "the unresolved antagonisms of reality reappear in art in the guise of immanent problems of artistic form." How is this text the next step in your process, your dynamic relationship to form? And, if it's appropriate to your process, could you speak to how the process of working through these forms has challenged you and changed you as a writer, and in what ways.***

CMS: *nyrd] bird* has a hybrid form that moves between fragmentary essay engaging with Hildegard of Bingen’s visionary writings and artwork, dream journal, poetry, grainy cellphone photos. This hybridity provided the medium by which I could engage with the subject matter—grief, climate catastrophe, political upheaval—and it also becomes an expression of this subject matter: shard-like, echoic, unmoored. So I feel that there is an important correspondence between the form and the subject matter of *nyrd] bird*.

One of the refrains in *nyrd] bird*, one of its motivating questions, is “What would it mean to write an utterly embodied book?” *nyrd] bird* is inseparable from embodied experience. And I think that’s one of its points of departure from *Oil Spell*, which is a little more cerebral. I think of *nyrd] bird* as being more intimate, if not confessional. Its experimentation is one that is constantly and consciously rooted in experience.

Of course, as Raymond Williams and others have pointed out, the word “experiment” is cognate with “experience.” Williams writes that experience is “the fullest, most open, most active kind of consciousness, and it includes feeling as well as thought.” It’s this conjunction between experiment and experience that *nyrd] bird* embodies.

It was exciting but also scary to take this step in my writing. Opening myself to being more vulnerable was a challenge that stretched me aesthetically as well as emotionally.

Vulnerability is also central to the poetics of this book, which thematize the raw susceptibility of reading, how the encounter with another being, another text, another voice, can profoundly shake, change, reconstitute the subject. So that's another layer to your question about form: the form of *nyrd] bird* is a fluid one, a notebook form, a dream form, a form of fragments and uncertainties and questions and shadows and reverberations, permeable, transient.

***RM: I'd also like to ask if there are seeds here, in any poems' subject matters &/or forms, to what will become your next manuscript (which I hope you will give Omnidawn!)?***

CMS: I'm working on projects in three genres right now—a book of essays, a novel, and a poetry manuscript—which all emerged from *nyrd] bird*, though in different ways. The hybridity of *nyrd] bird* led me to feel excited by writing in many genres, and after finishing grad school I felt incomplete if I wasn't working on essays. The essays so far are about rhyme and the everyday, and as in *nyrd] bird*, are formally fragmentary (for now). The novel is a Y/A book about two cats who are trying to learn how to read, while along the way they process a past trauma, and learn about the neighborhood where they live, which is experiencing gentrification. And the poetry manuscript is a book of love poems whose speaker is a machine or robot or mechanism.

***RM: Would you tell the readers of this interview a bit more about yourself? Anything about you that is not in the bio printed in the book. Please feel free to offer anything that strikes you to say; anything you tell us will be a gift. Thanks for whatever you are open to offering. I'd love to hear anything that might come serendipitously to your mind.***

CMS: It feels relevant to *nyrd] bird*—a book in many ways about reading and receptivity—that I also write in academic genres. I recently completed a dissertation in English literature at UC Berkeley on nineteenth-century British and American poetry called *Lyric Ear: Romantic Poetics of Listening*. And there are plenty of resonances between my scholarly work and poetic writing. My dissertation, like my poetry, takes an ecopoetic approach to discordant sound and the unlikely communities noise can create. In my dissertation, I write about something I call the lyric ear, or the speaking ear, which I define against the centuries-long focus on “lyric voice.” I'm interested in how nineteenth-century writers develop poetics of listening that open up authorship, agency and individuality into unknown collaboration, receptive action, and multiplicity. By focusing on how lyric constructs the ear, rather

than the voice, I argue that poetry expands participation to include bodies, objects, and surroundings that share physical space, rather than simply those who have the agency or the privilege to speak. *nyrd] bird* is also engaged in similar questions and concerns, in unknowable collectivities of listeners, in speaking ears, and embodied poetics.

***RM: I know you can't list them all! But on first thought, on impulse, can you answer:***

***--Who are a couple, a few, of the authors, artists, thinkers, workers (in any mediums) with whom you feel a kinship?***

***--Who/What comes to mind, just at this moment: who are you reading, listening to, looking at, watching, visiting currently?***

***--(You could explain or say something about some of them, if you'd like, which makes this more alive for our readers.)***

CMS: I'm currently reading *Flush* by Virginia Woolf, which is a biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning written from the perspective of her dog; *The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui, a graphic memoir about intergenerational trauma and a family's experience immigrating to the United States from Vietnam; a scholarly book called *The Claude Glass* by Arnaud Maillet, which is about the eponymous convex black mirrors which were faddish to carry in one's pocket in the nineteenth century, in order to reflect and frame picturesque landscapes, and make them look like paintings by Claude Lorrain; and a popular nonfiction book about rats called *More Cunning than Man*, in which I learned that rats like to bite the faces of babies because they smell like milk.

Within the last few months, I also read or re-read *Little Labors* by Rivka Galchen, *Eileen* by Ottessa Moshfegh, *Jazz* by Toni Morrison, *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston, *Corregidora* by Gay Jones, *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko, *Adam Bede* by George Eliot, *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens, and *Positions of the Sun* by Lyn Hejinian.

***RM: You brought a spectacular image & a number of ideas to the work of cover design. We always ask our writers to engage with the designer, offering thoughts and images as appropriate. But this artwork is especially provocative! Could you speak your relationship to that work, &/or anything more that you'd be willing to share about this process of design work?***

CMS: I am very excited by the cover art! It's by Hildegard of Bingen, from her *Scivias*, and is called "The Zeal or Jealousy of God." First let me provide an image description: this artwork features a prominent face which is positioned off-center and is androgynous, severe, and a deep red color. The

face has three white wings with blue edging bursting out of it in three different directions—two spreading horizontally across the page, and one reaching down. The face and wings are enclosed by a red, blue, and teal frame, and one of the wings reaches across and over the frame, exceeding it. There are also several sweeping trains emerging from the head, which look a bit like flowing brick walls, or maybe cogs or gears, or maybe notched rulers or building tools. The background is shimmering gold leaf, and the manuscript page around the image reveals the text on the other side of the paper, seeping through in shadowy relief, almost like a palimpsest, or ghostly backwards writing.

It was important for me to have a piece of art by Hildegard for the cover of *nyrd] bird* because she is the book's inspiring and guiding force. I like to imagine that the cover depicts a wyrd or weird three-winged bird. In the book, I write about Hildegard's Antiphon for Divine Wisdom, in which she writes that wisdom has three wings. The third wing "flies all about," which I read as exceeding or offsetting balance. The third wing, we see in this image, bursts out of the frame, whether the frame of the page or of logic or reason or binary thinking or acceptability.

I love seeing the materiality of the page in the shadowy letters that seep through softly, in reverse. To me, this is a visual representation of the way in which voices in this book mingle with one another, blend, reach backward and forward through time. We encounter the materiality of the page, its fleshiness, its substance. In the book I include an image of one of Hildegard's visions, which I snapped on my cellphone. It was important to me to include the cellphone image, rather than a clean, perfectly reproduced version, because I wanted to retain the curve of the page of the book, which slightly distorts the image, as well as the fragments of text on the opposite page, which bear a fragmentary, marginal relationship to the main text, as these shadowy letters do to the image of the winged face.

The title of the image, "The Zeal or Jealousy of God," is also significant. The word "zeal" comes from the Indo-European root "ia" which means "to be roused, to seek; inquiring." It's connected to the zetetic in logic, defining the unknown with more unknown. And it's cognate with the word "jealousy," which is why the two words are apposite here in the title. This seeking impulse is central to *nyrd] bird*, which moves by unknowing in unknowing and to unknowing.