

*IDEAL SUGGESTIONS: ESSAYS IN DIVINATORY  
POETICS*

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*Selah Saterstrom*

REVIEWED BY JACOB PAUL

GRAPHITE AND GLITTER: FOUR NOTES

Frontmatter:

*These are essays in divinatory poetics in so much as they attempt a divinatory poetics. By employing various divinatory generators (instructions, methods, and trances), I attempt to enter the flux and sing out loud some of the animated strands of potential I see inside an illuminated intricacy, by which I mean my life, a life, or the life of others (xxiv).*

Thus, mostly, ends Selah Saterstrom's 24-page introduction to the six essays that comprise *Ideal Suggestions*, winner of Essay Press's first open book contest, judged by Kristen Prevallet. But it would be a mistake to somehow discount the introduction as being other than a seventh essay simply because it paginates in roman numerals. For that matter, it makes sense to count the acknowledgments as an eighth essay, especially since, on a macroscale, the introduction and acknowledgments do for the book what the individual introduction and notes sections that bookend the central six essays do for their individual pieces. By and large, the introductions (to the essays) use direct, accessible, declaratory prose to both explicate the divinatory generators at work in the essays' lyric centers and to create an opening for the lyric center to perform itself. The notes, while ostensibly doing what the endnotes of scholarly essays might, in fact perform a more important role — they debrief; they more than debrief: at their best they offer a postcoital direct engagement and vulnerability that simply wouldn't work without the lyric centers.

A bazillion years ago (yes, that's a technical term for 1993), I took my first creative writing class at SUNY Buffalo with Raymond Fe-

derman, who was quite willing to describe himself as the father of American experimental fiction. In keeping with much of that era's creative writing pedagogy, Federman readily filled class time with long personal anecdotes. Once, one of these anecdotes was about the *New York Times'* review of one his first two novels, either *Double or Nothing* (Swallow Press, 1971) or *Take It or Leave It* (Fiction Collective, 1976). The *Times'* review was very positive. It also, apparently, said very little about the book. So one of Federman's peers wrote a letter to the *Times* complaining. The original reviewer responded, complaining about how, among other things, this was the first positive review the paper had ever published that received formal complaints, which, in turn, led to more letters, more rejoinders, a whole big thing. The thing is that, philosophically speaking, (some/certain/many) postmodern, formally experimental texts are committed to attacking and deconstructing transparent prose, supposedly direct and unaffected communication, *ordinary language*, the kind of writing I'm doing in this paragraph. These particular postmodern texts, including Federman's novels, take as precept that transparent communication is an illusion, a dangerous one, and perform its deconstruction (performatively), even as, for example, in the case of Federman's novels, they revel in the opportunities that transparent, declarative, naive, innocent, simple prose offers for yarn-spinning, myth-making, improvisational whopper-telling, and bold self-aggrandizement.

Saterstrom's *Ideal Suggestions*, while certainly heir to some of the aesthetic and philosophic traditions promulgated by the movement that birthed the Fiction Collective (and its successor FC2) isn't that. However, the lyric centers of Saterstrom's essays pose similar problems to Federman's novels in that to review them with an analytic jackhammer is to precisely miss their point, that point being a rejection of a particular kind of hierarchical certainty, a certainty that when wielded in language grants the certainty that rationalizes an oppressor's (or oppressive system's) violence. Whereas the postmodernity of the Nouveau Roman and its American counterpart relies on yet another certainty, that of being sure language cannot actually communicate, is a vehicle for play and deconstruction alone, Saterstrom's project looks past a rote performance of uncertainty to attempt to offer new ways, more ways, of knowing, and thus can countenance declarative writing where that writing works, and

cannot where it cannot.

Saterstrom's essays are efforts in divination, divination that reworks the reader's encounter with the more ordinary language found bookending those centers, but, I would argue, without diminishing those introductions and notes and acknowledgments. In keeping with that structure, I've composed the review that follows in the fashion that I have. But, as my good editors at *Seneca Review* have pointed out, without Saterstrom's text before you, it would be hard to correlate my review to the text. Hence, this introduction.

Four Notes:

1.

*Moore suggests that rather than bringing an analytical jackhammer to a parabolic text/event that we instead respond in kind.*

Who am I to negate this plea? To claim that my analytic is other than jackhammer? To ignore this claim and then mollify under the guise that a review, a favorable review, even a smart, analytic favorable review, a review that fills in the ellipses every parabolic generates, is in fact in the writer's best interest, in the (potential) readers' best interests? Who am I to claim that I know best? That I best know what the text is? (There's another question in the underlayment, one about the purpose and efficacy of reviews, a question that I don't wish to address because I do wish to be in service of Selah Saterstrom's *Ideal Suggestions: Essay in Divinatory Poetics*).

*To me, this means participating (reading and writing) from within the membranous precincts between our multiple bodies in the larger rhizomic field of resonances, where much is sounding and is also unsounded.*

One might ask that Saterstrom just say "the unconscious," that she acknowledge Freud. One might claim that the soma(tic) as poetics generator is all Freudian, that not acknowledging as much is willful obfuscation. One might, but not me. Isn't, after all, the purpose of the lyric — if I may (rather sloppily) equate the lyric with the parabolic — to re-unexplain the inexplicable in danger of reduction? And Saterstrom's opacity is neither arbitrary nor inelegant, if

it even is opacity one encounters when one lowers oneself out of her essays' introductions into their lyric centers before being gasping back above the surface by the rungs of her endnotes.

*This is the site from which I want to consider narrative. It is what I mean when I say "divinatory poetics" (xvii – xviii).*

2.

*In hindsight, I see that I was, in these pages, already writing about this loss, before I knew such loss was even possible (ccl).*

Experimentation is a form of play. Sure, play in the sense of loosening the action of a hinge, but also just plain old play. We resist play, I think, because we think it an inappropriate response to serious things, things like, for example, the stacked suicides of a great-grandfather, grandfather, and stepfather (none of which are the loss mentioned in the above line, which I extracted from the acknowledgments). We condemn play as an affront to gravitas or patronize it as infantilism, an inability to rise to the occasion.

But gravitas like earnest, conventional, confessional, conforming writing always claims to *know*, to *know best*, to *be right*. Experimentation, by definition, expects failure; play always risks, players know this, and in this way they (experiments, play, players) refuse *to do for you*, they refuse to predigest, to make of one's experience a disposable commodity, to tell you again what you already knew, and to reassure you that you knew it, and that it was all there was to know.

Perhaps this is why Saterstrom evokes Edmond Jabes, who, in *The Book of Questions*, attempts to summon the God who could speak the word with which one might create the world after the Holocaust — summoning conducted by the disembodied voices of Jabes's invented rabbis; Jabes, who leaves us ultimately with the summoning, or maybe just the attempt to summon, or only the need, the urgency of the desire for voice. And that is enough.

*Can a piece of writing be haunted? Haunted like an abandoned opera house or a doll baby or a lonely highway (113)?*

Between the easy prose of their bookending notes and introductions, Saterstrom's essays feel not so much haunted but like the act of being haunted — less like the abandoned opera house, and more like the excitement one feels walking its creaking boards. Maybe this is what it feels like to be haunted by the future, to unknowingly write about a loss that has not yet happened.

*I would also be remiss not to mention, as part of my engagement with divi-natory poetics, the influence of Barthes's punctum — the heartrending, scapring detail that establishes direct contact (xx).*

Jabes and Barthes, the punctum and the invocation: In *Ideal Sug-gestions*, an invocation on whose surface punctum's percolate and dissipate.

*Furthermore, I do not know that this essay space (attempt) will hold his voice for long. It did not hold Trevor's, or the voices of others for very long. But I also do not anticipate feeling alone when these present voices slip into a more complete pitch (112).*

3.

*What was it the attractive Hegel scholar said at two in the morning in the antique light of a dive bar called Barricuda's, where you had been most of the night alone and drinking? Your beloveds were once strangers. That is what he said.*

*Their arrival seemed accidental and contingent.*

*Now your life is unimaginable without them (38).*

*We want to see how different lights can be broadcast through reflective par-ticles: We want to read and write (23).*

*The line emits frequency. Vibrational waves that appear, in some dimen-sions, as humming chevron patterns. The frequency's edge, feathered through by ten thousand horizontal glass eyes en-gridding. There is only frequency. And the patter it creates. A dust mote footnoting the invisible. Here is what a fetal heartbeat looks like on a monitor in a county hospital*

in 1986 (56).

*The radicalizing effect of immediacy deforms mouths, our mouths deformed writing describing the effect radicalizing the writing describing our mouths and so we move (closer) (45).*

4.

Graphite and glitter, lines and funnels. Traces overlaid on top of traces. I am humble before Saterstrom's multiple engagements with Henry C. Wood's *Ideal Suggestion*, her physical copy annotated by both her grandfather and great grandfather, and then overlaid by her attempts at essaying it, the stories with which she's replaced it, the divinatory experiments based on its exercises used to generate other essays, and her book itself, also a reengagement. "This book does not give a fiddle about the organizing categories of past, present, and future" (222). As a palimpsest, it haunts, but as lyric it opens, its tenors and vehicles her great grandfather in Spiderland where "He would load the old pick-up with kids, pour another whiskey, and drive like a maniac through the groves and the spiders, large and furred, would rain down screaming children" (150). Saterstrom's book is brave without bothering to pose as such. Its essays, for me, more punctures than punctums, openings through which the summoning may emanate.

*In those earths there was vegetation, humidity, and what we want when we want each other most: nakedness (62).*

In the end, my recurrent meditation is on Saterstrom's lyric's insistence that nakedness be something other than yet another form of preparation, just as prayer is only prayer because it doesn't assure any one answer or outcome.

*The ruling desire of the Lover is prayer, therefore let us pray without ceasing (229).*

A Confession:

In my childhood, I was the kind of ostracized, nerdy kid who, in or-

der to ingratiate himself to those kids he (I) imagined held superior social stations, was willing to pick on those kids he (I) imagined more deserving of ostracism than him (me) (deserving based on his [my] clunky understanding of his [my] ostracizers' social pecking order). Sometimes, the residue of that legacy (of which I am deeply ashamed) manifests as a knee-jerk propensity to be mean toward things that I don't understand. It's a toxic impulse, shitty not only for moral reasons, but because it's so frequently wrong about what I might find real value in on deeper consideration. The meanness is a snap response to things that are too difficult for me to easily understand, and, more shamefully, most usually toward things I associate with a kind of goth femininity.

Frankly, that was my initial response to Saterstrom's collection. I had a hard time retaining what I'd read of the lyric centers, I scoffed at the material on actual divination and rootwork (how woo-woo, I thought, how precious); I questioned the inclusion of the narrative introductions and notes (shouldn't it stand alone, I thought); this isn't my *thing*, it's not *my kind of experimentation*, I smugly told myself.

But, thankfully, I'd agreed to review the book. I had to finish it. By the time I'd finished I could tell that the problem lay with me, not the work. I reread. Rereading began to open the book for me. As it opened, I felt appropriately wowed, humbled, and castigated. Saterstrom's attempts at divination are an urgent alchemy, their public performance a difficult and generous sharing. The thing they perform? In my limited view, the thing is an attempt to make out of what is what might be divine, that it might offer what Saterstrom says her mother believed everyone who requested a reading sought:

— *what everyone wanted to know, more or less, was the same thing: they are not bad people, and they are worthy of being loved (x).*