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Conducted over email in April 2008.

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Interview with Dawn Raffel

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- 1 Dawn Raffel was born in Wisconsin and graduated from Brown University. She has published three books: *In the Year of Long Division*, a collection of short fiction (Knopf, 1994), *Carrying the Body*, a novel (Scribner, 2002) and *Further Adventures in the Restless Universe*, a collection of stories (Dzanc Books, 2010). She was the guest of Marc Chénétier and the *Observatoire de littérature américaine* at the Université Paris 7-Denis Diderot in March 2007.

Monica Manolescu: At the opening of the conference on contemporary American fiction organized at Paris 7 in March 2007 you gave a memorable reading of the beginning of the novel, a trance-like recitation of the first pages. Does the written text naturally become a performance in your mind or in your mouth? Are your texts meant to be read aloud? Do you often perform your work in front of audiences?

Dawn Raffel: I revise my work by reading it aloud. The composition generally moves forward only a few sentences at a time, and not until I am satisfied acoustically. I'm trying to achieve an emotional effect as much as a logical one, which makes cadence and musicality extremely important to me. For *Adventures*, I deliberately moved away from the Byzantine structures of *Carrying the Body*, stripping the text way down, but the pulse remains critical. I give readings fairly often in New York—I feel my work is best received when heard.

MM: What is your philosophy of writing? And what is your practice of writing? Do you spend a lot of time rewriting? When do you decide the book is ready?

DR: I'm not sure I'd call it a philosophy but I think much "realistic" writing offers a window onto a reality that is only about an inch deep; my view is that reality is much deeper and weirder than anything we can comprehend logically, through linear narration and clear character motivation. My intention is to evoke and suggest and to honor mystery rather than to explain. I believe we experience our lives on a great many levels and understand a great deal more than we acknowledge.

In terms of practice, I like to begin with an image that is charged for me in complex ways and then begin writing as a way of exploring it. Often I'll have a few fragments

of what I think are different stories that all turn out to be part of the same piece. And two discrete stories (“Sweet” and “A Bedtime Tale” became, with some revision, chapters of *Carrying the Body*. “A Bedtime Tale” was originally titled “Is Anybody Listening?” and was published in *Conjunctions* years before I began the novel). I write slowly and revise incessantly; for a six-page story, there’s a hundred-page pile. At a certain point, it’s time to let go, before you revise the life out of something. I think that’s intuitive.

MM: Is inspiration something that matters to you as a writer? Do you feel the irresistible urge to start writing or a sudden impulse to change a sentence or to move on to another sentence?

DR: Sometimes I’m inspired and other times I have to trick myself into starting by saying, “Today I will write just 12 sentences”. Of course, if you have twelve decent consecutive sentences, you have voice, pulse, stance, dramatic tension, a sense of what’s at stake—a story or chapter well under way. Although I don’t write traditional plots, something must be at stake—philosophically, intellectually, emotionally—not only for the characters but also for me.

MM: I would like to ask you about your regional interest in the Midwest. You were born in Wisconsin and there certainly is a Midwestern background in *In the Year of Long Division*. In *Carrying the Body* there is absolutely no geographical reference (as far as I could tell), but when I mentioned this to Marc Chénétier, he replied: “Even so, the setting is clearly the Midwest”. Perhaps he is right, what do you think?

DR: He’s right—in my mind, it is the Midwest. I have written a few stories set in New York but for the most part when I write, I return to the place where I was raised.

MM: There is a stifling atmosphere of immobility dominating most of your texts, an atmosphere that I could only define as “provincial”, reminding one of Joyce and Chekhov. Where does this immobility come from?

DR: I think some of the claustrophobia was my own, and my family’s. The Emerald City of my childhood was Chicago, invisible across the Great Lake. To me it represented glamour and culture. Both of my parents were raised there; my father’s parents were forced to move during the Depression in the 1930s and my mother moved when she married, but never quite lost that longing for the big city.

MM: I am sure you have already been told that your fiction is not easy to read. How does this unreadability influence your relationship to your readers and to your work in progress?

DR: I wish I could relieve readers of the anxiety of having to interpret “correctly”. Often, we are taught that there is one right way to read a text or perhaps a few acceptable alternative interpretations. My mother was an artist and docent, and I remember people asking her to explain Picasso: Is this supposed to be a bird, a woman—what exactly is it? She would tell them to stop worrying about that and experience the composition, the form—to feel something.

MM: Do you consider yourself to be part of a group of writers or to belong to a certain type of literature? Do literary labels mean anything to you?

DR: I’d just as soon skip labels. I understand the impulse but with literature as with psychology, they are invariably reductive.

MM: What are your literary masters? What did Gordon Lish teach you and in what ways does his teaching still affect you, guide you or inspire you?

DR: The writer I most admire is Tolstoy, a master I cannot imagine trying to imitate. I stand in awe of the ferocity of his intellect, his unwillingness to compromise, his eye, his ear, his heart, his insistence on putting himself at risk.

In terms of influence, I would cite most strongly the playwrights Edward Albee and Harold Pinter; when I started writing, I was immensely taken with their rhythms, pauses, ambiguities, rebuke to tradition. Also Coover, Robinson, Paley, Barthelme, Barth; all of whom animated me to invent, discard, challenge. Flannery O'Connor—that gorgeous desolation!

Gordon Lish was my teacher and my editor at Knopf. I would say he gave me permission to take myself seriously. He taught his students to be sentence makers, to pay acute attention to composition, to put our pencils in the right place (i.e. write what matters—write as if this might be the last thing you ever write). And he taught us to trust the reader. While studying with Gordon Lish, who encouraged his students to be always in flight from the center, I was editing the fiction at Redbook, a woman's magazine that had a circulation, at the time, of 5 million. I've described the experience as similar to being caught in a force field; it required me to question every assumption about writing.

Lish advocated that a writer take his or her “defect” or problem and make it a strength or signature. One challenge I have faced as a working mother is a lack of time, and I have tried to make use of that—the sense in my work that the contents are under pressure, that there is constant interruption, that it's the middle of the night, that four things are happening at once... all that comes out of my life.

MM: I have to say I find your mention of Tolstoy quite unexpected! What about Tolstoy's deep religiousness? Actually, when I think of it, in *Carrying the Body* the plot is based on an archetypal fall-redemption scenario. Could this be linked to Tolstoy in any way? Or rather with the Bible?

DR: Tolstoy's religion isn't mine and I personally find the dogma of his latter works unpalatable. That said, I have a deep respect for the struggle by which he came to those beliefs, by his willingness to put himself at risk for them, and by his intent. It is worth noting that he railed against the abuses of the Russian Orthodox Church, including its complicity with a patently unjust legal system, at his own peril, and that he had a profound affect on the thinking of Mahatma Gandhi. I believe that in spite of—or because of—his flaws and his struggles, Tolstoy was a source of profound good in the world.

Carrying the Body can't be linked to Tolstoy. But it does have religious underpinnings, from the opening quote from Genesis to the last line. “Love” appears nowhere in the text except as the final word.

MM: It is obvious that you have a fondness for brevity. Did you originally conceive the first sections in *Carrying the Body* as disconnected pieces or did you have, from the start, the outline of a novel in mind? What is, according to you, the difference between a novel and a short story?

DD: Midwesterners, to make a sweeping generalization, tend to be reserved rather than expansive. The first chapter of *Carrying the Body* was written as a short story and titled “We Have Come Here For You”. I later changed the title to “The Train Had Been

Late” and it was published in a journal called *Epoch*. The story really bothered me, though; I felt that I had left it and its characters in a place that was at odds with my own worldview and I knew I wasn’t done. I spent about a year searching for a “way in” to a novel and played with various structures such as devoting a chapter to each room of the house, devoting each chapter to a different fairy tale, etc. All of it felt overly schematic and ultimately boring. Finally, I decided to just let the short story stand as a beginning and see where the composition led me. I described it as the diving off a cliff method of starting a novel because it is pretty intense. About halfway through, I became certain of the last line, although I had no idea how I would get there.

A story, as opposed to a novel, can be just a moment, but when I put together a collection I do strive for a kind of narrative fluidity; I want to see a refraction between the pieces.

MM: Your work resists intertextual analysis, I know it quite well because I have attempted such an approach. I felt like inventing a new term, “intuitionist intertextuality”. How do you deal with literary influence? Is it carefully buried in your work? Or is there no intentional camouflage?

DR: I like the phrase “intuitionist intertextuality”. There is no deliberate camouflage. I read and read and listen and listen, and then I write, but there is very little overt discourse with other writers. A few exceptions—in the story “In the Year of Long Division”, the mother says, “I should have been an old Chelsea dog”, which was sort of a cheeky response to Eliot’s, “I should have been a pair of ragged claws...” and in “No Place on Earth”, I wrote “The girl is the mother of the child” because I think it is as true as “The child is the father of the man”—what I meant is that we mother our children out of our own experience of childhood. And that business with the gun that never fires in “Our Heaven” is of course a response to Chekhov; every manner of catastrophe occurs except for the one I asked you to anticipate.

MM: I have read an interview with Deb Olin Unferth, a writer published by NOON, the annual literary review whose editor is Diane Williams, in which a certain number of your texts have appeared. She says at a certain point that Kim Chinquee, another writer published by NOON, referred to the two of them being “NOON sisters”. Do you think that the NOON writers (Diane Williams, Gary Lutz, Christine Schutt) make up some kind of brotherhood? (I find it amusing that someone called Dawn should publish in NOON).

DR: I have respect and affection for many of the writers in NOON and for its editor, Diane Williams; if we are a family, however, we are a rather far-flung one. Names are interesting, aren’t they? I am most decidedly not a morning person, and I was born just past midnight. My mother was being optimistic. You might be further amused to learn that my sister is named Cherie, which no one in the Midwest could pronounce in the 1960s.

MM: Have you ever taught creative writing? As a former fiction editor of *Redbook* you have read other people’s work extensively.

DR: It’s easier to judge than to teach. I teach only very occasionally, most recently at the Summer Literary Seminars in St. Petersburg, Russia. As a teacher I try to motivate my students, offer suggestions, a few bits of technique and additional readings...and to exercise restraint. The temptation is always there to encourage your students to write according to your own aesthetic; the hard thing is to listen/read deeply enough to understand what is unique to each student and to help him or her mine it.

MM: Were you ever tempted by poetry? Or is the distinction between poetry and fiction insignificant? There is an undeniable lyrical impetus in your work: "She stood at the window, too well touched, untouched, a rib, a rib, thwarted hoarder of increase, a bearer of ill-got fruit, of breath" (*Carrying the Body*, 16). Lyricism flows through your prose naturally, you are a prose poet, right?

DR: I started in journalism school (not surprisingly, I hated it) and then earned a degree in semiotics. I have no formal education in poetry and have never written it. When I was learning to write, I studied musical tempos. I also like to listen to languages other than my own, so I can more readily hear the sound of language apart from meaning. And the journalism training had an effect; I spent hours writing down verbatim what people said and became acutely aware of how illogical it was and how rarely a conversation tracked. Often in my work, you'll see one character responding to a question that wasn't asked (which is what I'm doing now); there's also a deliberate asymmetry where one character speaks twice, with an implicit pause between quotes, rather than the convention where the characters speak in turn.

MM: Does Oriental poetry have an influence on your style? I am thinking above all of the title of a chapter in your novel: "A Particular Flower with Astringent Qualities, Often Used in Winter Bouquets", which made me think of haikus and Chinese poetry.

DR: I read a lot of Chinese and Japanese poetry at one point, so you are probably not imagining it.

MM: *Carrying the Body* seems to be a new type of gothic novel. Would you like to comment on that remark and on your interest in gothic fiction? Another genre that seems to me to apply both to your novel and to your collection of short stories is the musical nocturne, combining tranquility, despondency and lyricism. What attracts you in the realm of Night (and Dawn)?

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DR: I've never paid much attention to gothic fiction, although I am an admirer of Flannery O'Connor. I am extremely interested in myths and fairy tales. Night attracts me because it is so rich with possibility and so suffused with the unknowable. Where I grew up, the night sky was a spectacular source of wonderment, especially when the temperature dropped far below zero and the winter constellations were brilliant. I would wait for the school bus in the morning before the sun rose and I could still see the planets and the stars. Then the sun would rise and I would be... in an algebra class in the Midwest.

There are also a lot of images of drowning in both of my story collections. In part, that's because my mother had all kinds of stories about children who drowned—some, I suspect, apocryphal; the gist was often that someone didn't listen to her mother and went out on the lake and drowned. On another level, drowning evokes things submerged.

MM: The title *Carrying the Body* invites a meditation on the notion of "weight" and all its possible meanings, the weight of tradition, of the cultural heritage, of genes and the DNA of the ancestors living on in our own bodies and selves. I was wondering in what ways the book also talks about the weight of language, of words, of verbal creation.

DR: I intended the former, as well as the way we carry our physical bodies through the word, but the latter is valid too. The original title of the novel, the entire time I was writing, was *Bedtime*, because it is also about our dream life and about a different

—intersubjective—way of marking the passage of time. The new title came to me after the entire work was complete—as often happens for me with stories as well.

MM: “We murder to dissect”, but do you mind taking a sentence from one of your texts and explaining how you wrote it?

“In stations where the lighting was dusty and northern, falling through a high, stained glass—always a bench, an old stuck clock, walleylike, always an indeterminate voice, remote, cracked: a.m., p.m., naming the cities that nobody went to; always a paper, local and disabused of news; stubs, ash, mites, a sprinkle of if-it-rains or if-it-sleets or if-it-snows or if-it-hails old salt, in churches, all denominations, better empty, dark loft, dark nave, in airless buses, qualmishly praying for a window, one clean sink, in castoff crates with room enough for outsize limbs, damp, always damp, even deep in the shadow of somebody’s dwelling, overhung and luminous, this is where they lay themselves, he and she, to rest”.

DR: I wrote this a long time ago and I remember revising it aloud many times. I felt the text needed a long, acoustically complex sentence at that point as a counterweight to the sparse—almost absurd—dialogue. The narrative voice is meant to suggest that these characters have a tremendously rich and vibrant inner life and a sense of wonderment that can’t find its expression in their own language.

MM: Could you tell us a few words about the third book you have just finished, *Further Adventures in the Restless Universe*? In what ways is it different from your previous texts?

DR: *Further Adventures in the Restless Universe* is a response to the death of my parents, both of whom died suddenly. Not all of the stories are about my family but they are about what we do with loss—in some cases not of people but of our self-concept. When I was a child, my father read to me from *The Restless Universe*, a book in translation by the Nobel Laureate Max Born; it was a sort of layman’s guide to quantum physics. “The restless universe” seemed to me like a metaphor for my family and for my father in particular, a man who worked in the family furniture business but yearned for something larger. There’s a strong element in this book of the problems of language and translation, with the understanding that language itself is a poor translation of experience. The title of the final story, “Beyond all blessing and song, praise and consolation” is an English translation of a line from an ancient prayer written in Aramaic, the Mourner’s Kaddish, which praises God in the face of death.

- 3 *Further Adventures in the Restless Universe* was published by Dzanc Books in March 2010 (<http://www.dzancbooks.org>).

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