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It Takes a Thief: An Interview with Camille Guthrie

*This interview began with my review of Camille Guthrie's book *The Master Thief* (CR 47:2, 2001). Guthrie sent me a letter of appreciation after the review appeared, filling in some details, noting some allusions I missed. Over the next year or so, we formalized a loose correspondence into an interview-style conversation. One of the advantages of an e-mail interview is that the respondent has time to reflect, time to polish her responses, time to revise in the face of new questions and new ideas. Guthrie spent that time in spades, distilling her responses down to their bare elements, not wanting one word to be extraneous. Everything is measured, perhaps even to the point of self-censorship. Not that she doesn't say what she thinks: she just doesn't let the interview say everything she thinks. "Thus, I have put down my thoughts / I may have deceived myself," she says in *The Master Thief*, but below Guthrie is careful not to deceive—this interview is filled with the names of those people and things that have influenced her, that she has "stolen" from. All poets are thieves; but not every poet has the generous audacity to admit it.*

*Guthrie's first book *The Master Thief* appeared from Subpress in 2000. Recent poems from her just-completed manuscript "In Captivity" (based in part on the late-medieval Unicorn Tapestries housed in The Cloisters in Manhattan) have been published in *The Gig*, *Bird Dog*, *The Poetry Project Newsletter*, *The Poker*, *Arsenal* (in translation), and *Chicago Review*; an e-chapbook is available from *Beard of Bees Press* at beardofbees.com. She teaches literature at a private high school in Manhattan and lives in Brooklyn.*

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Freud believed that the unconscious has no time—and hence is, among other things, historically deep. Is the unconscious a source for a kind of timelessness (of thought, of idea, of theme) that gets eloquently "captured" by poetic form and procedure? I ask this because symbols seem to lurk in your poetry. I am thinking especially of the animals—which one could say evince a "deep time"—that populate your poems.

I must say I love the idea of “deep time.” My anxiety is that if I say yes, the unconscious is a kind of timelessness, I’m straying into possibly corny territory. It’s bad enough I keep talking about unicorns. We have a joke in my house that I secretly want to be a Dungeons & Dragons poet; my brother-in-law told me how many points unicorns are worth, but I can’t remember now. I passed a book store chain the other day and saw in the window something like *The Complete Unicorn Calendar*, and I thought, O God what am I doing? The unicorn is more of an empty symbol in my poems: a projection of desires and fears.

I do believe in the unconscious as an essential element of poetry-making. In terms of poetic form, the unconscious ends up determining what I write about if I don’t try to control everything. Your use of the word “lurk” to describe the activity of symbols makes a lot of sense to me; letting the unconscious in to the work is dangerous, sometimes threatening. I do get pleasure out of that risk, the pleasure of resolving a very difficult problem. Freud’s work is very fruitful and relevant—I love the case histories, especially. Writers who have thought deeply about Freud, like H.D. or Woolf, have attracted me enormously. I’m grateful that you suggested this reading of symbols, as symbols are so out of fashion. I took many of the symbols from the tapestries and put them into the poems, but I prefer if their meanings remained open.

And what are animals doing in your poems about the Unicorn Tapestries in In Captivity (other than the obvious fact that they are depicted in the tapestries)?

I wanted to include all sorts of figures from the actual narrative of the tapestries. And they are also daemons I guess. When I started teaching high school, a colleague introduced me to Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* series, which I read like I was twelve again. In it the characters have animal daemons, which can change species until their owners hit puberty. They are representations of the soul, of consciousness I suppose. None of these connections occurred to me, though, until I finished the poems.

In real life, I’m allergic to all animals, so maybe they’re pets at a distance.

Were you drawn towards the Unicorn Tapestries because they represent the sense of characters being trapped in a narrative? And if so, why? Is that “trap” appealing to you as a subject and form for your poetry?

Many writers have been drawn to the tapestries: I’m just another victim. Rilke wrote about “The Lady and the Unicorn” tapestries in the Cluny Museum in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, which became the ghost text behind my first chapter: “Have I said it before? I am learning to see. Yes, I am beginning. It’s still going badly. But I intend to make the most of my time.” It was difficult to write about such a canonical piece of art, something so utterly beautiful, kind of ridiculously gorgeous. And there was the problem of the Christian reading of the hunt. Since I’m not a religious person, that wasn’t a seductive story to follow. I tried not to worry too much about being faithful to their story. I wanted the beauty of the tapestries to be present in the language but didn’t want to be persuaded by it entirely—the poem is after all a piece with death in it. I kept thinking of that line from Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*: “One doesn’t want to be seduced by the sheer wonder of it all, whereby everything is transformed by beauty.” The trick was not to describe the tapestries but to enact my reactions to their themes without getting too tangled up in all that beauty.

I could have used any artwork or story I was drawn to, I just needed some infinitely compelling hook. But there must be better reasons. When I first went to see the tapestries at the Cloisters about six years ago, I was getting married and I was adjusting to living in New York City—a kind of unreal and intense time. The over-familiarity of the tapestries appealed to me as a subject; they are on a museum shop bag—an easy subject for projection. Their vast amount of facts, their cosmology of plants and animals attracted me too, as well as the fact that they are an *overlay* (Lucy Lippard’s term) of pagan and Christian imagery. I wanted the poems to be an *overlay* of my observations of the tapestries and of my experiences of the city at that heady time. In *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, Angus Fletcher argues that allegories only *seem* to be closed systems and that the one-to-one correspondence is far more open, ambiguous and ironic. So I hoped to leave an imprint of the allegory of the hunt in the poems. Metonymic links between the plot of the tapestries and anything else that came my way became a way of moving between

the real and the allegorical; I looked for coincidences and resemblances, like a group of beautifully dressed people in the street stood in for costumed hunters. While the poems are pretty lyrical, the tapestries offered a composition to write through; it's a relief from having to "express oneself." I'm not sure why this work of art, these tapestries; maybe it's an idealistic residue from my 70s childhood: rainbow stickers and plastic horses. As Rilke suggests, maybe it's about learning to look.

The idea of captivity—the trap—does preoccupy me, it's true. I often teach Emily Dickinson's poem #384: "Captivity is Consciousness / So's Liberty." The final tapestry, "The Unicorn in Captivity," gave me the book title: it's the famous image of the unicorn sitting down among *milles fleurs* chained to a dripping pomegranate tree (it's not blood). Since I don't believe in unicorns, fairies, or angels, the unicorn provided a blank figure: for a beloved, for a quarry, for poetic form, for the imagination. Fletcher writes that allegory says one thing and means another; the plot is a sequence of difficult labors to get to a visionary moment. So I chose to labor through poetic forms and through narrative. To paraphrase Fletcher again, writing a sestina is somewhat like a battle; each term contends for its own meaning, its own cosmos. Yet the obsessive subject can never be quite fixed into a machine of words. Milton's little poem "Fix here ye overdated spheres / That wing the restless foot of time", written on the back of an envelope the year after he wrote "Lycidas," became an ironic refrain for the poems, as I don't believe the thing can be actually fixed in words—it runs off in the end.

The trap may be a metaphor for writing; I've never thought about the characters in the way you suggest as being "trapped in a narrative." The trap has to do with wanting to capture a subject larger than myself in words; wanting to wiggle myself out of a cage of thoughts; wanting to pin down a thing and then let it go. I'm curious about the meaning that spills out when the thing is let loose.

Working on poems in a conceptual series is my preferred kind of captivity. When I started the poems, I was watching Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle* films; in them, he portrays himself as an Apprentice (among other personas) undergoing self-imposed physical and psychological ordeals, which I assume he sees as necessary for transformation and vision. Writing about another text or object and in po-

etic form often serves as a self-inflicted restraint in my work; forms are surely a kind of capture, scrupulous and absorbing rituals. Then it's satisfying to wreck them somehow, to make them imperfect. It's risky to play with allegory—it's unfashionable because of its eye-rolling legacy—but I like that risk.

What draws you to writing about visual art?

Looking at images is another way of reading, clearly. I think I'm drawn to write about visual art because it's a way to have a conversation with another artist's work—it's about being a fan. Louise Bourgeois's work has been another preoccupation of mine since I saw a retrospective of hers at The Brooklyn Museum, and I wrote a series of poems about her life and work. It's another way to write about themes I'm drawn to—memory, desire, revenge, for instance—while somewhat eluding the pull of the “self” in poetry. Bourgeois says about her sculptural forms:

The subject of pain is the business I am in. To give meaning and shape to frustration and suffering. What happens to my body has to be given a formal abstract shape. So, you might say, pain is the ransom of formalism.

One of her *Spiders* appears in the new poems, as do Blake's engravings and Cindy Sherman's photos. It's useful to include a lot of things to look at in one's poems. Visual art is just another form of source material, sometimes more direct than language is. One can have an encounter with blue, right? Bourgeois convinced me of what I later found in Josef Albers's *Interaction of Color*: “What counts here—first and last—is not so-called knowledge of so-called facts, but vision—seeing.” I wanted the poems to record my encounters with those works, not to be descriptions, as anyone can see the tapestries.

The Master Thief and your new work In Captivity (in which you mention the New York Public Library) explore in many ways the relationship of an author to her source material. And in both books you favor allusion over citation, and practice out-right “thievery” rather than a more familiar academic “borrowing.” Do you have a kind-of “poetics” of using source material that you put into practice?

My poems are often about being a reader. I write thinking about another writer or artist's work, out of admiration and compulsion, and also fear, maybe—the usual fear about being original, of not being good enough. When I write I want to be engaged with that other text: “My Boyfriend” is a date with Rabelais, for example. Unless it's for a chance operation, I don't write poems just to use a source. Thievery leaves a resonance in the poem, outside of itself and its original context; that's my ideal effect. There's also something naughty about stealing. I don't want the poems to be only a picture of my subjectivity, so thievery undermines that inclination. I'm not particular; sources in the unicorn poems are from Catullus, Led Zeppelin, traditional ballads, and articles about astronomy from *The New York Times*. Who wants to be constrained by one lexicon? It's better to muck about. I prefer *stealing* to *borrowing* because things shouldn't be too sacred.

If the poems are read as responses to the sources, that's generous and wonderful; I'm grateful for any reading honestly. But I hope they aren't read as academic arguments. I don't write to say: this is what one should think about *a* or *b*. This question makes me think of what Susan Howe said about her poetry and its sources in an interview with Ed Foster in *Talisman* (reprinted in *The Birthmark*): that her intention is “to meet the work with writing—you know, to meet in time, not just from place to place but from writer to writer, mind to mind, friend to friend, from words to words.” She also says in that interview that her work is about “starting free and being captured and breaking free again and being captured again.”

I consciously try not to articulate a poetics because it feels premature, but I can describe my practice. It involves accretion by reading, note-taking, drawing, ruminating and revising. I make a lot of random vocabulary lists, select words for the poems, then go through my notes to look for contingencies, metonymies, magnetism. If sources come into the poems, some are nudges, some are smudged, some drawn then erased. How poets sit down and write a poem at one sitting, a good poem or a great poem, baffles me and fills me with envy. When I was at the writing program at Brown, Ashbery came to read and a student asked him how he wrote a certain poem: he said he wrote the lines following the shape of the plastic grass—one long, then one short line—that comes with take-out sushi. That's a nice dinner.

What poetic forms do you find most fruitful? Why?

Recently, sestinas. When I'm stuck I read through my *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* to look for a structure to hang ideas on. It's not necessary to perform them perfectly; I'm not a nineteenth-century gentleman; I don't write in meter. Working in form is another way to be an apprentice. There are many slightly tousled forms in *In Captivity*. I need some resistance, some architecture, then the unconscious does the rest of the work; it's all a useful way to begin. But I don't advocate poetic forms as an answer to "how to write." It's just one approach to ordering one's content. It's my own problem, which I wrote about in "My Psychomachia," a tribute sestina in response to Fletcher's *Allegory*. After I wrote that poem, I began a whole series of sestinas as responses to favorite books. My suspicion is that forms allow me some control I want over my content, a control that eludes me in life: a kind of poetic bossiness I guess. Barbara Guest writes in *Forces of Imagination* that "The structure of a poem should create an embrasure inside of which language is seated in watchful docility, like the unicorn." Yet we know that language can bite too.

In your poetry one finds many words like "bite," "fear," "pain," "kill," "suffering"; you also mentioned to me in conversation the "imaginative real" and the creation of the other worlds through poetry. Where does language fit into these parallel universes? You seem interested in language as a kind of antidote to the utopian or the "counterfeit city."

I like the idea of parallel universes; my dad follows modern astronomy, and we often talk about string theory or M theory. It's a lovely image, millions of universes layered in space almost touching, but I can't really accept that there's transcendent reality. I wish I could, it would be such a relief. Those painful words are reminders of the real, and the tapestries are about a ritualized killing. Their beauty can be beguiling. I don't know if poetic language is an antidote to false idealism, mediocrity, or deceit. It can be, as in Blake's work. (The "counterfeit city" in my poems is the seductive, often cruel, capitalism of New York City.) I do subscribe to the idea that language is an order of reality in itself. But poetic language can't be entirely separated from or parallel to its other uses; it can also be deceptive and dangerous,

right? I remember Ann Lauterbach discussing her work, explaining that a word arrives “as is”: a bit worn, chipped and marked by all of its history, maybe even shattered. Even the imagination in all its freedom never actually abandons the real. If poetic language can be an antidote to lies, then that’s a kind of wishful thinking I’d like to practice; ideally, it creates a new clarity of perception, even if it’s only beginning to describe how dull or muddled our visions are.

What effect do you seek with your fantastic epithets like “Pudding Mouth,” “Small Talk,” and “Pot Licker”?

Whim and disguise. Rabelais uses remarkably hilarious proper names all the time in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. I stole some names from a group of cooks he lists—translated marvelously by Burton Raffel: Sour Sauce, Salt Master, Roast Anything, Spatula Face, Piled-up Crepes, Twisted Bacon, Life-Saving Bacon, Free Fritters, Berry Masher, Wonder Tongue, Pudding Stuffer, Swaggerer Braggerer, Cake Nose, Feather Prick, Gut Wheezer, Crumbly, “plus Robert, who invented *Robert sauce*.” Others are invented when needed. Characters pop up in the poems, lighthearted stand-ins for the real thing: friends and adversaries.

*You mentioned in your letter responding to my review of *The Master Thief* that the subjects of that book (and of your poetry in general?) “girlhood, female labor, narrative,” are viewed as “done.” Could you expand on this charge?*

You can’t help being pulled into your obsessive subjects. I remember Rosmarie Waldrop explaining (I’m paraphrasing) that in her early work she didn’t want to write about her mother; she chose her forms, but the content inevitably determined itself. At times I’ve felt that my interest in girlhood has been received with some skepticism—only from male poets. I think it’s seen as “precious” or something, or as a kind of feminism that is tired. But you only have to read the news to see that questions about female labor are relevant topics like in a recent article about modern slavery in *The New York Times*. Female labor is more than a metaphor for writing. While I do write in the realm of the imagination, I want the real too, but if I want to have a practical effect in the world, I wouldn’t only write a poem.

Of course I had to address the commerce of the unicorn's horn: another extravagant metaphor for European exploration and conquest. Any great work of art gets turned into currency for a museum, or for the culture as a whole. I keep bringing up my inspirations, I know, but I thought a lot about the artist Ann Hamilton's work with animal products: wool, fur, felt, horns, etc. She calls them "animal money." The nice irony is that the horn's miraculous powers were, of course, a fantasy.

I don't think of myself as a "woman poet" writing about only "women's issues"—how limiting and unimaginative. Out in the world, beyond the poem, these things do matter. I admire how Alice Notley writes about the "poetry masons" in *Disobedience* who I assume are the poetry establishment. And she also says:

No I want real and dreamed to be fused into the real
Rip off this shroud of division of my poem from my life

And narrative? The contemporary poets who interest me are not narrative, but for some reason I'm compelled to write books with a loose, gap-filled narrative. Yet I can't help believe that many of us are driven by stories; I am at least. (Dickens has helped me through many winter months.) I love the great tradition of narrative poems, my students do too, so no, I don't think narrative can ever be over.

Do you believe in a fallen world, in Original Sin?

That's a difficult question. Yes, I do believe in a fallen world, maybe even in the existence of evil, though I don't believe in Original Sin in a religious sense. The Fall is a compelling and perfect metaphor though. I'm conflicted because it seems very clear that the world is in a fallen state, but I'm skeptical of believing in a previous state of innocence and perfection. Maybe this is a question of tone, then. In the tapestries, the unicorn is resurrected into an another Eden; that's a narrative I sidestepped by creating a pop-culture version of the false resurrection of a dead rock star. Resurrection is just too hopeful. Of course I'm drawn to the idea that words were once closer to the things they represented, like Emerson's famous quote that "Language is fossil poetry," and that poetry is a way to renew that connective tissue.

Maybe that's one reason why Darwin, the man who made the human world fall again, carried around *Paradise Lost*: he needed those words and their ambiguities for what he had to say.

What is the purpose of experiment in poetry? Do you see experiment trapped in convention in American poetry?

That's hard to say. Experiment is ultimately about perception for me. Clarity is a word that comes to mind. Then there's curiosity, the necessity for the new and for protean forms. Experiment ideally contends against complacency, sentimentality, unimaginative forms, dead imagery, false consciousness. I don't see myself as a critic, and don't know if I've read widely enough to know if experiment is trapped in convention. One of my poet-friends was just saying that she can never keep up either; she was always trying to read enough Stevens. Well, there are trends; funny, ironic poetry seems prevalent now, and lots of puns. A reaction against uncomplicated sincerity maybe. But I do find the conventions in experimental work easier to swallow than those in mainstream work.

When a poem tells me what poetry *should* and *should not* be, I get uneasy and resistant. The possibility of the poem collapses for me when that finger wags. I look to be surprised when I read. Right now there's a lot of great work by younger poets that doesn't fit easily into a category, and I follow those poets with enthusiasm. Oppen always provides a good answer: "I think that if we follow very scrupulously things as we find them, we are drawn beyond old concepts and, perhaps, beyond the possibilities of concepts."

Has teaching poetry affected how you approach writing poetry? How? Negatively? Positively? Both? How are poems themselves pedagogical?

Yes, teaching has affected me profoundly as a poet, especially since I've been working at a high school. Negatively? In terms of time and energy for writing, yes; and I wish I had more time to keep up with readings and what's going on in poetry. Positively? In many ways. Luckily my department encourages me teach a lot of poetry. I'm kind of a nerd, so I overdo things: I wrote a poetry handbook, in which the students learn all about meter, sound devices, figures of speech, and

kinds of poems. Even though I'm pretty educated, and I took a lot of poetry classes and workshops, I never knew much about prosody until I began teaching British literature. Not that I want to be a formalist or a light-bearer of tradition, but now I can't imagine teaching poetry without these tools. After five years of teaching *Hamlet*, I hope I understand more about metaphor. Anyway, there are many teenagers in Manhattan who know how to dissect an ode. Now when I write I'm much more conscious of what I'm doing: how I edit for sound or rhythm, and where I'm coming from because I'm beholden to the daily medicine of rigorous close reading.

One drawback is that I read the same books over and over. I've decided to do something about the texts that distract me too much; I'm working on a series of "tribute" poems for *Wuthering Heights* and the Harold Jenkins's *Hamlet*.

Poems are inevitably pedagogical if they're good—they tell us something about our perception of reality. But if they are dogmatic, they can feel dated. It's always curious to see which poems students like and dislike; my tenth graders love *Paradise Lost* because of Satan. "The mind is its own place" is a wild pedagogy, even if Milton had other intentions. They prefer riddle-like poems in which they have to pull the meaning out of the words, like H.D.'s "pearl-of-great-price": they don't like to be told what to think. I also prefer my poems with a strong dose of ambivalence.

Why do you tend to work in book-length poems? What does it afford you over and above singular poems that are perhaps thematically related?

Probably novel-envy. My husband is writing a novel, and his book takes on its own life in my head; we're very involved in each other's work, so I offer him my ideas, and vice versa. It's extremely satisfying, especially when some suggestion turns up. The idea of dwelling in a created world attracts me deeply, so I've tried to do that in the book-length poems.

I've always been a compulsive reader; usually I read novels outside of work and study. The book-length form feels right to me; like a favorite sweater, it just fits. When I started writing seriously in college, Stein's *Tender Buttons* and Susan Howe's *Singularities* influenced

and astonished me, having read pretty traditional poetry up to then. I had a wonderful professor, who introduced me to the other tradition of poetry in the twentieth century. The book form was perfect for *The Master Thief* since it's somewhat of a fairy tale of girlhood, and it was again right for *In Captivity*, since one poem didn't seem to be enough for seven tapestries. From those examples, I was interested in longer structures.

Book-length forms allow me to *do* something with language I can't do in a smaller space. Honestly the short poem unnerves me. How can you wrap things up so quickly? When it's done right, it's magic. Often when I read mainstream lyric poems, I think at the end, "And you stopped there?" The popular style of poetry, the epiphany school, can lack ambition, things get tied up with a bow. The longer form also lets me consider a subject from many angles, writing by association and layering.

The tribute poems you mention you're working on are about works and authors from the "old world," so to speak. Do you find more of your "self" and your inspirations outside of the contemporary world? Is it more difficult to "steal" from the present?

You make me think of that Modern Lovers song: "And I still love the old world." Inspiration comes pretty randomly to me, so it's hard to determine whether I'm drawn more to old or to contemporary authors. Right now I'm working on poems inspired by information about sunspots from *National Geographic*, facts about ancient historic battles, and Japanese advertisements in English.

The point of the tribute poems is not to focus on the self; there's something compelling about dwelling in another's language, and thus, their world. The other night I heard the "Laughtears" interview with John Cage in which he discusses how he wrote the *Finnegans Wake* mesostics. I love that kind of total engagement with another author's work. I guess I don't see the texts I've chosen as "old world"; I can hear Catullus only in translation! It is necessary to steal from the present, to acknowledge the different surfaces of the modern world, especially when you want to respond to urgent events in politics. Your final question takes me back to the beginning of our talk when you asked about timelessness. It's vital to find someone you can hear. You

told me you have that kind of relationship with Melville; I had it with Sebald recently. It's that feeling of "Where have you been? I've been waiting for your words."

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