

Lauren Miles: How did you get started with writing poetry? Tell me about the people/institutions/etc. that supported you.

cris cheek: I have thought for some while that my interest began at bedtime through hearing my dad read what were called nonsense poems to me in the voice of Noel Coward. An amazing act of ventriloquism to burnish a respirator's class. I'm not sure whether he sought to lull me to sleep or excite me and entertain me with recitations of *The Jabberwocky* and *The Jumblies*, *The Owl and the Pussycat* that kind of thing. I don't think I'm making it up. I have memories. But how young I was when those memories began to be imprinted, and to thicken and confirm themselves into some kind of personal legend I cannot adequately say. Very young. We all do build something like our own book of experiential legends. Events we choose to remember and embellish, perhaps over-decorate. I mean even were it possible to over-decorate, given that taking things away has its own ornate procedures. In any case that sense of a sense among "senses," sense within sense, sense beyond sense seems coterminous with learning to read and a kind of late nursery scenario, sort of 2-3 years old. By listening intently I learned to love and loved the sound of language play as much as I loved play with meaning, compound terms, portmanteau words and the idea of *beyonsense* (although I did not know that term at that time) – that came a couple of years later, not – a couple of years ago more like it. A sense that sense lay as much in sound as any other component of language. That how something was uttered was crucial to how it became understood. My first poem to appear in print was about when I was 8, for the school magazine and rhyming humanimal rural idyll.

Later I enjoyed the sound of Chaucer's vernacular in high school, the sound of compounds in Gerard Manley Hopkins, the romantic flights of adolescent noncompliance in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*. By then time I was interested in printing and design and I had a great art teacher, the Welsh artist Kyffin Williams. He told me after a while that I had no gift for figurative painting and that he'd show me how to do letterpress printing in a shift from graphic to typographic. I was about 14 and put to work printing the school calendar, but then wrote my own completely idiotic articles of revolution, printed those, distributed copies and barricaded myself in the school hall having declared a people's republic. Something very wrong with almost everything about that teenage idiocy. I heard Ted Hughes read from his first book of poetry at that school in his black leather jacket and his whole brooding presence made an impression on me, whatever I might think about his poetry and his behavior and machismo now. It was the rock star poet vibe and it crossed over with a tousle-fingered Jagger reading Shelley from the stage in Hyde Park after the death of Brian Jones, releasing exhausted white butterflies from a cardboard box. I was fourteen and in the crowd, wearing school uniform that day having bunked off from I know not what. Maybe a mixture of excitement and disgust inspired my misguided declaration of the republic. I will never be able to disentangle the chain of memory sufficiently to say.

So, my dad and school are the first parts of an answer to your question. How patriarchal of its time. I left school a month after turning 17 and became what I guess would be called an auto-didact, lurking around bookshelves reading like a tangential crab among the European poets I found there . . . de Nerval, Rimbaud, Ted Joans, Hans Arp, George Trakl and more out-of-fashion names such as Louis Macniece. Lots of dead mostly white often mainland european guys. Aside from Sylvia Plath there seemed to be little else. Maybe HD, just maybe some Christina Rossetti. But white and

European still. Bookshops indulged me in extended periods of browsing though, and I was reading a lot of poetry as objects of translation. Second part of an answer, bookshops.

In the bookshop I sometimes picked up fliers for events and one of these led me to a Modern British Poetry Conference put on at the Polytechnic of Central London by Chris Brookman and Eric Mottram where I got to hear Basil Bunting read on a double bill with Hugh MacDiarmid. I was nineteen. The room was full of poets, some of whom I still know now and it changed my life. This was not *mainstream* poetry and I realized that the notional edges of a territory known as poetry were what I had a hunger for. A hunger that persists. I wanted to read poets who were not absorbed into a dominant literary establishment, poets not overly-engaged with professionalization. I wanted outsider-ish artists, even if that desire was driven by a tinge of romance and even if outside was an illusion in the end. That summer I drove north from London to Yorkshire and took part in a weeklong residential workshop at which the guest reader was Bill Griffiths. Bill was an exceptional poet and an extraordinary person, serious *old english* scholar, hells angel, anarchist, auteur publisher, translator, and he made his intense commitment to a life of poetry fully and generously available to me. I was out-of-my-depth but thought I had found a niche I was prepared to die in. Well that's a tad melodramatic but the sense of a crack or even a ditch holds truth and I fell in, traveled back to London sat alongside Griff, wondering what I might say to a real poet. Sat in silence a lot I doubtless said some stupid things, yet when we got off the bus in London Bill invited me to a weekly gathering of poets in Earls Court and the following week I ran along. It was Writers Forum. Third answer, the generosity of individual poets. Fourth answer Writers Forum and its presiding convener Bob Cobbing. He would take a lot of explaining and remains a guiding spirit, a brilliant lifelong limit case for many of the ideas and practices and politics of poetry that remain of great interest to me. A diy politics of production, a polyphonic sense of voices, poetry and music, poetry and dance.

LM: What other creative artists have inspired the style of your work?

cc: That's a good question Lauren and it does change from time to time as my own interests and work change. I find different artists inspirational for different reasons, and there have been shifts in what excited me in different places. Moving from the UK poetry scene to a very different context here in the US has dramatically modified everything I read and have read, listen to or have listened to, looked at, watched, discussed, rejected and loved as party to whatever I have been making over the last 15 years. *Inspires* is a tricky term. Sometimes a piece can be inspired by something you despise. True it is mostly used in a positive sense, but not always so.

The artists that I go back to who most interest me yet are those of interest in terms of their mix of elements I identify as performing compositional and thematic functions as and tensions among *melody, rhythm and noise*. Jimi Hendrix, Henri Michaux. Rene Char. Bernard Heidsieck and Lily Greenham would be an older set who have been with me a while. In sound composition, Daphne Oram, Eliane Radigue, Morton Feldman. I think about the sound art I make being in some kind of conversation with my friend Philip Jeck a lot.

But what I think is true to say is that several artists are important to me exactly because they did not have an obvious coherence to their work. There is some tangible signature, but for each album or book or project they were trying to do something different. I have learned in different ways

from Muriel Rukeyser, Brion Gysin, Miles Davis and David Bowie for the ability to reinvent one's work and or take on sequential challenges in multiple phases.

I read the following contemporaries as influences and think about their work a lot, Caroline Bergvall, Lisa Robertson, Dawn Lundy Martin, Erin Moure and Carla Harryman. I listen to poets such as LaTasha Diggs, Harmony Holiday, Samuel Ace, Julie Patton, Saul Williams and Douglas Kearney.

LM: What are you reading currently?

cc: I read my students to talk with them about it, because often they indicate and intersect with where the field of poetry is going. I read you, and Laura Dudones, Aislyn Gilbert, Ava Hoffman, Isaac Pickell, Kinsey Madison, Freda Epum, and Paul Vogel. I read poems by students who I am specifically mentoring and or chairing repeatedly. I read affect theory, assemblage theory, new materialism and the environmental humanities. I have an ongoing interest in thinking about what performance is and what collaboration means.

Tough to find time to read things that I'm not either teaching or considering teaching and what I teach is not necessarily what I like so much as what I think might prove of interest—use to students. Mostly writers of color, documentary writers and poets of diverse gender orientations in no particular order such as Jonah Mixon-Webster, Edwin Torres, Erica Hunt, Kamau Brathwaite, Tyrone Williams, Claudia Rankine, Harryette Mullen, Tonya Foster and I read as much as I can by poets in the UK, more recently Laurel Uziell, Nat Raha, Sean Bonney, Verity Spot, Iris Colomb, Peter Manson, Ulli Freer, Maggie O'Sullivan, Randolph Healey, Denise Riley, Allen Fisher and Trevor Joyce. I hate these kinds of lists because they immediately become like and anthology and too many very exciting people get left out.

LM: For potential students: how would describe your teaching style?

cc: Improvisatory pedagogy, or improvagogy – even improvadoggy. I'm concerned with encouraging and supporting students who have energy and curiosity to become lifer practitioners in their own right. I want to help them recognize and realize what they want to do and then help them to do it. I try to respond to their stimuli. I seek to work alongside them, and ask pertinent sometimes challenging questions to help them. Some people like that sense of openness. Some people most definitely do not. I try not to be dogmatic and I am disappointed if I spot any strain of dogma in myself, although I would certainly fully acknowledge that I am permanently marked by where I have come from and where I find myself. I am often disappointed. The classroom is a poor model of a republic as I conceive a republic to be.

LM: What is the no. 1 thing you want Miami Creative Writing students to take with them or have learned by the time they graduate?

cc: This question suggests I have or I can make a list, and I'm unsure if I can. I certainly don't think in terms of priority lists. That poetry is serious fun and you might surprise yourself if you try – to surprise yourself.

LM: And my favorite question: what is your least favorite book that you have read and how has it influenced your creative work (or perhaps your approach to teaching)

cc: I can't answer that for poetry. Even things I don't like I can learn from. And we change from one day to the next. Something I might struggle with a find nothing in or an utter bore today I might become fascinated by another day. How long have we got? I could say that I only tend to read what I am interested in reading and that I read hoping to be drawn in and taught something about reading and if I'm not then I don't blame the author, because another day I might be in just the right mood. And I've never found it difficult to stop reading something that I am not in the slightest bit interested in. I just stop. Put it down. If it's intriguing to you there will be another time, perhaps. A different kind of day.

TS Eliot's *Four Quartets*. It represents much that I don't like about poets and poetry. It's portentous and stupid right out of the trap. An infatuated buy-in to conservative little England. And now I'm getting interested in it, so compelled by the disgust rising like bile inside me when I read its excavated masculinist clunky rhymes. He "do" the traditions in all the police voices.