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PRODIGAL SON
(MIDWAY ALONG
THE PATHWAY)

M. D. Snediker

My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer by Jack Spicer. Edited by Peter Gizzi and Kevin Killian. Wesleyan Poetry Series. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008. Pp. 508, 10 illustrations. \$35.00 cloth.

For you I would build a whole
new universe around myself.

This isn't shit it is poetry.

Shit

Enters into it only as an
image. . . .

(“Love Poems”)

In 1975, Black Sparrow Press published *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, edited by Spicer's longtime friend and fellow poet, Robin Blaser. The Black Sparrow Spicer, as an object, communicates a certain version of Spicer that is as necessary as it is incomplete. The cover illustration depicts the tarot deck's Four of Cups—a pensive-seeming man under a tree, with three chalices in front of him, and a fourth chalice ostensibly being offered by a hand reaching out from a cloud. Are we to imagine Spicer as the pensive man in his cups, or is Spicer the hand extending a fourth chalice (in which the pensive man qua reader shows little evident interest)? Of course there are many ways to interpret any tarot. In the context of literary history, Spicer has existed—despite the efforts of Black Sparrow Press and coterminous critical attempts at resuscitation—as the neglected chalice, the unaccepted and/or unacceptable gift.

Spicer's unacceptability, his staked position outside of poetic convention or establishment, is duly noted by Spicer's admirers. His poetry, however, is not simply that

of a rabble-rouser, despite Spicer's deep interest *in* the imbrication of rabble and arousal. Poetry, like a slipknot, only rarely understands who or what within it, at any given moment, is central. Indeed, the aggressive, sometimes bullying, playfulness of Spicer's poetics—eccentricity that in part explains his exclusion from a poetry world beyond that of Berkeley, California—has in past decades actually cozened Spicer's adoption by L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, from Buffalo to San Francisco. To be sure, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry and its perceived aspirations toward aberrance have become a convention unto itself. The latter's claiming of Spicer as arch-enabler, like the Black Sparrow edition, gives a necessary but incomplete impression of Spicer's importance to contemporary poetics.

Peter Gizzi and Kevin Killian's new edition of the collected poetry of Spicer includes all of the serial poetic sequences to be found in the earlier volume, as well as his earlier nonserial poems, an extended version of Spicer's brilliant and hilarious "Unvert Manifesto" (1956), and previously unpublished poems from both Spicer's early and later productive years. Gizzi and Killian's edition offers a more adequate and less affectively distorting account of Spicer's amazing two decades of output. This new edition is elegant and polished in all the ways the Black Sparrow importantly and justifiably is not. *My*

Vocabulary Did This to Me does not displace Blaser's 1975 edition, so much as honors it as crucial part of the ever-growing Spicer archive—ever-growing, thanks to the efforts of Gizzi, Killian, Michael Davidson, John Emil Vincent, and others. To say that the new edition is grand—looks grand, feels expensive in all the ways in which the Black Sparrow perhaps utopically does not—is not to say that Spicer *has arrived*. He was already here, but never so lucidly. Gizzi and Killian's decisions are laudable, particularly their inclusion of Spicer's earliest poetry, which hitherto was available only in a separate volume.¹ Each of Spicer's serial sequences was originally published in the form of a limited-run, illustrated book; these books, produced by White Rabbit Press (principally operated by Spicer's friend, Graham Mackintosh), are works of art. Illustration (most often by Spicer's friends or cohorts) and text twine into each other in the manner of William Blake's illuminations. Gizzi and Killian are therefore to be commended for reproducing at the outset of each of Spicer's individual books the original cover illustration of said work. Eventually, ideally, we will have a facsimile of these works. Until then, we have this incredible new edition. Spicer's poems have never looked so new. And the surprise of rereading Spicer in this edition is great.

In 1949, a twenty-four-year-old Spicer insisted that "[w]e must

become singers, become entertainers. . . . There is more of Orpheus in Sophie Tucker than in R. P. Blackmur.²² Bracketing the quasi-Rimbaudian bravura of so precocious a pronouncement—precocity being advantageous for those who die so young as Rimbaud or Spicer (who died at forty)—this dictum, notwithstanding its surfacing throughout Spicer criticism, suffers in its transparency so often being taken for granted. More simply, Spicer's accounts of his own poetics too often are understood as nonproblematically sincere, even as Spicer's poetry admonishes us against so straightforward a sincerity. The foregoing dictum's usual gloss suggests that there is more of Sophie Tucker in Spicer than there is of R. P. Blackmur, given Spicer's supposed apostasy of the academy in favor of a poetry along the lines of Tucker's burlesque and vaudeville; although Blackmur only clumsily represents the academy, *per se*, and more persuasively invokes a rigorous thoughtfulness not dissimilar from Spicer's own. Spicer's poetry often speaks truculently against its own thoughtfulness, just as it speaks against the givenness of aforementioned sincerity. Further, the gloss presumes Spicer's attachment to Orpheus as obvious. Obvious, yes, if we equate Spicer's career-long fascination with Orpheus as self-explanatory. Less obvious, if we honor Spicer's Orphic ambivalences. We shall return to the matter of Orpheus, who

seems for Spicer less paradigm of poetic charisma than natal mythology of poetic failure. We shall return, likewise, to these ostensibly estranged narratives of failure and charisma.

Spicer's reputation, far more than that of other poets, has been adumbrated by his own pronunciamientos, in part because Spicer seems to have found irresistible his peculiarly teetering soapbox. At the same time, the foreclosures attendant to holding Spicer to his own words can be redressed only in more scrupulous a relation to his provocation rather than recapitulation of it. I think, for instance, that there is *a lot* of Orpheus in R. P. Blackmur; further, that Blackmur and Spicer have far more in common than literary history and literary criticism would otherwise suggest. Beyond the biographical dovetail of Blackmur and Spicer both dying in 1965 (Tucker, for the record, died in 1966), Blackmur and Spicer equally engaged in an ongoing study of what Blackmur denominated *language as gesture*. Not only language as gesture, but poet as gesture: Spicer, photographically, has been preserved as a series of gestures variously resonant with his poetic production—Spicer, hunched, Quasimodo of the Berkeley Renaissance;³ Spicer, blurred into a Francis Bacon of need, ruthlessly inseparable from ambitions bent toward abdication of need; gesture of obliquity, as though the sylph in a mirror, limit of a camera's capture.

Spicer as gesture: love child of limp wrist and the middle finger. Flipping the bird, again and again and again. As Spicer writes in his anti-Whitmanian “Song for Bird and Myself” (1957) (in which the Bird on one level refers to Charlie “Bird” Parker),

But the poem isn't over.
It keeps going
Long after everybody
Has settled down comfortably
into laughter.
The bastards
On the other side of the paper
Keep laughing.

LISTEN.

STOP LAUGHING.

THE POEM ISN'T OVER. Butterflies.

(70)

Spicer's poem, more accurately, is both anti-Whitmanian *and* Whitmanian. Whitman, campily characterizing himself as “me imper-turbe” (191), as often strikes the pose of perturbation:

Aware now, that amid all
the blab whose echoes
recoil upon me, I have
not once had the least
idea who or what I am,
But that before all my insolent
poems the real ME still
stands untouched, untold,
altogether unreached,
Withdrawn far, mocking
me with mock-congratu-
latory signs and bows,

With peals of distant ironical
laughter at every word
I have written or shall
write,
Striking me with insults till
I fall helpless upon the
sand.⁴

Spicer's “THE POEM ISN'T OVER” as accurately describes the constitutive unfinishability of Whitman's own *Leaves of Grass*, a book revised under the same name seven times, across four decades.⁵ Only the coercions of chronology and adjudication would indicate each revision as an improvement upon those preceding. More interesting in relation to Spicer is the notion that *Leaves of Grass*, divorced from the diachronic, coexists with other versions of itself. Such is an underlying motive in Spicer's turn to serial poems, and no less, his experimental poetic attempts at both proliferating and sustaining simultaneously multiple versions of persons. Whitman's contribution to American poetry too often is vitiated in terms of his ancestral function as bardic gay avatar, as though Crane and Spicer learned how to write gay poems thanks to Whitman's earlier gay poems. Whitman's testing of nondiachronic multiplicity is not unrelated to questions of queer poetic form; but the influence on Spicer of Whitman's *formal* assays of genre can't be underestimated—neither subordinated nor separated from either's queer poetics.

But back to perturbation. “Have you ever wrestled with a bird / you

idiotic reader?" (71). Spicer's poetry asks on many registers to be dismissed: as irritant, as irascibility. In the case of "Song for Bird and Myself," the poem presumes it has been dismissed before it necessarily has been, or stages dismissability's incontrovertability as grounds for the poem's short temper. It is wise, here, to think of Donald Winnicott, for whom aggression is the infant's experiment in testing the limits of another's love. *How long will it take for you to leave me*, as thunder that precedes the lightning of *Don't Leave Me*.

Spicer's poems are both exercises and experiments in gesture. As Blackmur writes, "[W]hen the language of words most succeeds it becomes gesture in its words. . . ."⁶ All the more so in Spicer's poetry, in which the *form* of poetry cleaves to poetic language, conventionally understood. Spicer's poems, at their most flinty and confoundingly beautiful, are gestures. Not only in the sense of gesturing toward, but gesturing for their own sake. The poem as vehicle for some other demonstration. If Whitman, gesturally, conceives a poetics of cruising, Spicer extends a Benjaminian topos of cruising-in-ruin. Signals are overdetermined, or undetected altogether. Proustian choreographies of implicit seduction cede to demands, rejections, and regrets stitched with their own sense of inevitability. The anger of Spicer's poetry is striking, not only as directed at particular persons or

situations, but more so when launched against the predicament of poetry, as such:

—A human love object is untrue.

Screw you.

—A divine love object is unfair

Define the air

It walks in.

Imagine this as lyric poetry.

(307)

Spicer's anger—as both abstraction and particularity—is directed at form, at voice, at the hypothesis of content. This is to say that Spicer's anger keenly surfaces in the ravaged snags of form, voice, content. Or to cite Blackmur citing *Othello*, "I understand a fury in your words / But not the words."⁷

Blackmur published *Language as Gesture* in 1954, as Spicer very much was reaching poetic boil. Spicer's poems came fast, just as Blackmur was hammering away at a corresponding set of poetic problematics. Blackmur's attachments to Hart Crane and Emily Dickinson chime with Spicer's attachments to Crane and Dickinson. In the case of Crane, Spicer might find a template of flaming inebriation burning itself out. In the case of Dickinson, Spicer might see in her extravagant variants a model for Spicer's variant-like

serial poems (intimated in Spicer's brilliant review of Dickinson's *variorum* edition). The poets that *Language as Gesture* eclectically explores are the poets to whom Spicer likewise attaches (as, for instance, in Spicer's early poem for Hart Crane, "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Landscape" [2000]).⁸ *Language as Gesture*, aware of Spicer or not, uncannily offers a succinct engraving of Spicer's own onerous, brilliant adventures in the perviousness of person and form. The following, from Blackmur, citing Yeats's "Crazy Jane":

I had wild Jack for a lover;
 Though like a road
 That men pass over
 My body makes no moan
 But sings on:
 All things remain in God.⁹

Or as Spicer would say, Poet, be like God (30). *I had wild Jack for a lover*. Yeats's stanza approaches the spatiality that informs Spicer's own scrupulous investigation of poetic form. Is poetry like a road, or like a room? How to distinguish the song from the moan? These questions are at the heart of Spicer's poetry, even as Spicer already resonates with Yeats: two poets, distracted and consumed by the possibility of love channeled across the long distance of mortality. Which likewise describes the lyric experiments of Dickinson and Crane: the distance between life and death, which, poetically speaking, Blackmur articulates in his brilliant

if curmudgeonly essay on Crane. Two gay alcoholic poets who die before their careers could adequately explain themselves. The teetering soapbox: *let me say what I can while I am able*.

The vicissitudes of the soapbox are further complicated by Spicer's eventual attachment to tropes of vocal displacement. For instance, Spicer insists in his eleventh-hour Vancouver lectures that the poet is a radio, receiving the transmissions of Martians.¹⁰ The insistence of a Martian language sustained through if not redeemed by poetry smacks of the facetious. *This is nonsense, and I'm doing my best to transliterate nonsense*—a return to Spicer's earlier animation of Dada and Kurt Schwitters's *Mertz*: the latter of which indubitably proposes a false etymology of the Martian, as though the poet's obligation were to salvage what for others was dejecta and jetsam. Nonfacetiously, Spicer's fidelity to Martian language registers as flippant and simultaneously perhaps resists its own flippancy (dares *us* to take it seriously). Sometimes, I am inclined to think of Spicer's insistence on this particular sci-fi *Ars Poetica* not only as flirtation with its own blitheness, but covert means of keeping safe the sensitive stakes of the project under hand. One could turn here to Derridean theories of translation, although translating Spicer's project into the Derridean invariably leaves out too much of Spicer's own innovations: just as

good-intentioned but similarly scalped attempts in previous decades have left too much of Spicer's poetry on the floor for the sake of resuscitating Spicer as proto-Blanchot, proto-Derrida, proto-Lacan. Translation, for Spicer, arises as an amorous ordeal, the imagined crux of attempting less to understand than to formulate what arises from beyond. Martians, for Spicer, are a limit case. How to honor not only what is light-years away, but what is both light-years away and barely taken seriously?

That Spicer dares his readers to take and not take the Martians seriously is compounded by the fact that Spicer insists on poetic practice-as-Martian dictation for the sake of reneging his own writerly self-significance. We have here a version of Cocteau's Orpheus awaiting a radio signal—Samuel Delaney meets T. S. Eliot's poetic impersonality.¹¹ Such self-abdication is complicated not only by the inimitability of Spicer's presence in these poems—affectively, intellectually, corpulently, erotically, etc.—but likewise by the inimitability of Spicer's mythology of self-abdication. Impersonality-as-transmittability doesn't oppose personality so much as become personality unto itself. An analog would be the famous "transmissions" and impersonations of Ruth Draper. I have never *heard* Ruth Draper's voice, *per se*, but I've heard her voices. Most indelible for me is Draper's monologue,

"The Italian Lesson" (1925), in which a silver-tongued, silver-spooned woman of means "translates" the first lines of Dante's *Inferno*.

Oh what wonderful lines! Aren't they marvelous? Now let's see, "nel mezzo," let me see, "nel mezzo" just means "in the middle," doesn't it? "In the middle." And "del camin" means, um, "of the road." "In the middle of the road." That's not very poetical, is it, in English. Now well we can take certain liberties, don't translators always, I mean take certain liberties in order to maintain the beauty of it and the meaning at the same time. For example, we could say instead of saying "in the middle" we could say "midway," and instead of saying "of the road," we could say "along the pathway." Don't you think that sounds better?¹²

Draper's dilettante is a lovable nut, and loving her is different from loving Draper doing the nut. What matters, in this context, is the way in which Draper was famous for being *other people*, and that the funniness of her monologues arises as much from the enactment of verisimilitude as from absurdity itself. Draper channels someone channeling Dante erroneously, and this meticulous

enactment of meticulous and extravagant erroneousness (“Don’t you think that sounds better?”) illuminates one aspect of Spicer’s own project—to return to earlier terms, the necessary collision of charisma and failure, or failure, lovingly rendered, as its own charismatic allure. As Spicer writes, in his own “loose” translation of the *Inferno*,

Dante would have blamed
 Beatrice
 If she turned up alive in a
 local bordello
 Or Newton gravity
 If apples fell upward
 What I mean is words
 Turn mysteriously against
 those who use them
 Hello says the apple
 Both of us were object.

(“Sheep Trails Are Fateful
 to Strangers,” 257)¹³

Or as Spicer wrote years earlier, in “Imaginary Elegies” (1960),

It is as if we conjure the dead
 and they speak only
 Through our damned trumpets,
 through our damned medium:
 “I am little Eva, a Negro princess
 from sunny heaven.”
 The voice sounds blond and tall.
 “I am Aunt Minnie. Love is
 sweet as moonlight here
 in heaven.”

The voice sounds blond and tall.

“I’m Barnacle Bill. I sank with the Titanic. I rose in salty heaven.”

The voice sounds blond, sounds tall, sounds blond and tall.

(27)

As with Ruth Draper, I gravitate toward a version of Spicer who slips away, even as that slippage is signature,¹⁴ and inseparable from the sense that one is close enough to smell his breath. Poetry as intimacy of effluvium. Each ventriloquization in the preceding lines only nominally removes us from Spicer. The very terms of the channelings characterize Spicer far more than they do Eve, Minnie, or Bill. And each conjuring, like a tall glass of water, sounds blond. Spicer, especially in the glory days of Berkeley, was in his own fashion a tall blond. But is Spicer losing himself to his own voice, or losing himself in the voices of others; or some combination of the two? Vocal dissipation grounds itself in the voice of some hunkier tall blond man (we’re talking blond, after all, not blonde), both effecting self-loss and somehow conducting an austere conduit to an object of hypothetical desire: “blond and tall” as distillation of amorous object, reduction of person to the statistical (not even, as they say,

the *vital* statistics), if only because the tall blond man is accessible only on the level of voice. And barely: as Spicer writes, "The sun that shines so brightly on your lips has made you forget how to cast a shadow. We have been looking for you on the insides of mirrors. You might have given us great joy. No, you are too tall for love" (53). The pathos of anyone nearly being anyone else circulates throughout Spicer's poems as both the occasion and stymieing of poetic (which, apropos Spicer, is to say erotic) hopefulness:

Eurydice could be anyone. Is
I suppose
Anyone.
That makes the poem harder.

(60)

Harder as more difficult, as more durable, as more erect, as more unbearable. One can't have one without the others. The voice of a tall blond that arises, perhaps unexpectedly, is any tall blond, and no tall blond, and in the vexed spirit of Spicer's multitudes—both apposite with and against Whitman's multitudes—it is this that makes lasting poetry, which sustains what otherwise feels (for Spicer, for the poems, for the reader) dangerously fugacious.

Here we come to one of Spicer's most disarming and thoroughgoing poetic enterprises: that poetry's capacity for imagining (erotically

or otherwise) is nonequivalent to imagining, as such. Spicer's poetry doesn't afford a consoling proxy for what beyond poetry is unavailable (e.g., a tall blond), but recapitulates a calligraphy of empirical unavailability, staging the latter as the fate of both poet (curt, cranky) and poet's putative fantasy. That Spicer so demonstratively circumscribes the flourishing utilities of his medium countermands modernism's *Make it New*; and, contrarily, asserts poetry as far less availing than it might be. Such an enterprise, in the end, is what makes Spicer's poetics so counter-intuitively availing, full of flourish. That Spicer's poetry restricts rather than realizes (or perhaps realizes restriction) importantly complicates Spicer's biographically chronicled interest in magic: for instance, Spicer's abiding interest in the tarot,¹⁵ or—as wonderfully collected in this new volume—Spicer's "Poetry as Magic" (1957) workshop questionnaires. Contra apocrypha, Spicer is at best an ambivalent believer in magic and, at his most movingly stern, a *deponent* of magic. The first instance in Spicer's poems of magic's equivocally charged unavailability appears in "Some Notes on Whitman for Allen Joyce" (1980):

He was reaching for a
world I can still remember.
Sweet and painful. It is a
world without magic and
without god. His ocean is

different from my ocean,
his moon is different from
my moon, his love (oh, God
the loss) is different from
my love. (55)

Magic emerges as that which is needed in the postlapsarian, because the fallen world, having proved insufficient, needs something like smoke and mirrors, the variously disingenuous or merciful inventiveness of hocus-pocus. Spicer's sense of magic's compensatoriness—a compensation imminently jeopardized by its being recognized *as* magic—argues against the default of letting poetry accomplish more than persons denuded of poetry might accomplish. If we have fallen from Whitman's world, which *didn't need magic*, then it seems an act of honesty for Spicer to imagine a poetry that lacks both Whitman's ebullience and the magic that could fake the former in ebullience's absence. Spicer, in this sense, is a realist, and often it is from this realism that his crankiness seeps. Spicer in some fundamental way doesn't believe in poetry and that, again, makes his poetry all the more transforming. The bluntness of poetry delimiting its own shortcomings, grouchily effervescing at its own self-imposed limits, circuits throughout Spicer's career. (The apogee of this disclaiming of magic is Spicer's serial poem, *Billy the Kid* [1958].) If poetry can't make the world more beautiful (it cannot),

then what? If poetry cannot, even in the manner of Cavafy's que dissatisfactions, acquit its own erotic pursuits, then what *can* poetry do? This is a question that Spicer's work poses again and again.

There *is no magic in poetry. Poetry cannot produce a world that doesn't already exist.* What would seem deadening in other hands is Spicer's contrarian alchemy. He traffics in magic without subscribing to it, as borne out in Spicer's agnostic and often self-contradictory poems for and about Orpheus. The self-administered penuries of poetic possibility produce an economy of scarcity no less dazzling. Spicer dazzles in the attenuation of radius—even as the serial poem, as imagined by Spicer, irresolutely both repairs the attenuation and further extends it (how to extend attenuation? a uniquely Spicerian question). What one does within the attenuation is itself an important question, raised in his poem, "A Book of Music" (1958), in which the poem's last image asserts itself as both materiality and the impossibility, within poetry, of that materiality on which poetic trope depends:

Coming at an end, the lovers
Are exhausted like two swimmers. Where
Did it end? There is no
telling. No love is
Like an ocean with the dizzy
procession of the waves'
boundaries

From which two can emerge
 exhausted, nor long goodbye
 Like death.
 Coming at an end. Rather, I
 would say, like a length
 Of coiled rope.
 Which does not disguise in
 the final twists of its lengths
 Its endings.
 But, you will say, we loved
 And some parts of us loved
 And the rest of us will
 remain
 Two persons. Yes,
 Poetry ends like a rope.

(178)

There is much to say about such a poem. First, that Spicer can write as gorgeous an aubade as any other writer. Less hedged: that Spicer is one of our greatest poets. The poem is not a lover, nor is it two lovers, it is two lovers “coming at an end,” the prepositional specificity (“coming at an end,” versus “coming to an end”) opening the ending before the poem barely commences.

Is the coming a good thing (the exhaustion that follows ejaculation) or a bad thing (the exhaustion that follows amorous dissolution)? The poem doesn't begin, so much as *begin to end*, as though “Coming at an end” implicates us in the poem's own undoing, in an iteration already aware of its half-life. Again, prepositional specificity (“Where / Did it end?” versus “how,” “why,” “when. . .”)

turns toward (and against) both the amorous and the poetic, even as the question withdraws into itself: *there is no telling*, as refusal to answer as much as inability to answer. The frustration of the question continues in the negative constative, which specifies both that there is no love like an ocean and that the experience or fact of “no love” is itself oceanic. What is our subject? Coming or going? And where? As the poem corrects, retracts, recapitulates its attempt to understand a possible eluding of understanding, we realize that from the outset we have been on the brink of ending.

The eventual analogical preference for “a length / Of coiled rope” over the “dizzy procession of the waves' boundaries” intimates that no love is graspable or utile. Or, depending on how one reads, “No love is. . .”, that the absence of amorousness is graspable, potentially useful. The two formulations are related but nonequivalent. We are offered something that is graspable only in the logic of the poem, a rope painted by Magritte. This is to say that materiality arises as the pathos of its own nonsustainability to the extent that it was conjured at all. To put rope in the poem is to doom the rope to life on the other side of the looking-glass. The poem's retreat and advance recall Marianne Moore's trickily magical disappearances, as analyzed by John Emil Vincent.¹⁶ Spicer “takes” disappearance further (or elsewhere) in

“giving” the poem’s final lines to an unspecified “you.” Like Mozart’s requiem, one needs to listen carefully for where Mozart’s line cedes, in death, to another hand. Or perhaps more like Poe’s game in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) (from which this uncoiling sea-poem surely learns): one is told that Poe’s voice stops and Pym’s begins, and we are asked less to believe in the fiction of vocal shift than to consider why such a shift would matter.

The poem coils, uncoils, and as with many Spicer poems, recoils against the vulnerability of its own open voices. Just two poems later, in *A Book of Music* (1958) (a book of poems titled after the poem in question), Spicer announces that “Dante blew his nose / And his nose came off in his hand.” *A Book of Music* most recoils from the sensitivities of “A Book of Music” in its last lines:

The bartender is not the
 United States
 Or the intellectual
 Or the bartender
 He is every bastard that does
 not cry
 When he reads this poem.

(181)

I confess to being one of those bastards who does not cry when I read this poem. The story of the bartender flinches, for me, in relation to Spicer’s own relation to booze,

but the poem does not make me cry. “A Book of Music,” however, nearly does. Which is to say that as bastard, I’m the bartender, lining up Spicer’s shots. Which is to say, contra Spicer’s gothically infamous last words, “my vocabulary did this to me,” that I’m doing this to him. We’re all doing “this” to “him,” being hoodwinked, cozened, and coerced into a poetics that is sometimes brutal, sometimes angry, sometimes rueful, as we are interpellated into these positions as much as the poems self-interpellate. Brutal and rueful, the possibility—following Whitman’s revisions and Dickinson’s variants—of coexisting as both at the same time. Contra Spicer’s sense of a break in his poetry between the single lyric and the serial venture, the awful generosity of this coexistence appears even in the first poem of the collection, “Berkeley in Time of Plague” (1957):

Plague took us and the land
 from under us,
 Rose like a boil, enclosing us
 within.
 We waited and the blue skies
 writhed awhile
 Becoming black with death.

Plague took us and the chairs
 from under us,
 Stepped cautiously while entering the room
 (We were discussing Yeats); it
 paused awhile
 Then smiled and made us die.

Plague took us, laughed and
 reportioned us,
 Swelled us to dizzy, unaccus-
 tomed size.
 We died prodigiously; it hurt
 awhile
 But left a certain quiet in our
 eyes.

(5)

The poem's title suggests not only a time of plague, but that time itself arrives as the poem's plague, which the poem's Berkeley weathers (that Spicer imagined himself as part of a Berkeley Renaissance already suggests the capacious weirdness, for Spicer, of aberrant temporalities). The poem's three quatrains do not follow from each other chronologically, *per se*. One might speculate that each quatrain produces the poetic predicament from a different vantage, or that each quatrain revises those preceding. Each quatrain begins with "Plague took us," as though this unspecified calamity were the catalyst or theorem from which the experiment or proof were tested. Chronology would rule out, for one, the movement between second and third stanzas. The end of the second, "Then smiled and made us die," echoes in the third stanza's "We died prodigiously." The capacity to die several times within a given poem would indeed suggest prodigiousness, and it behooves us to think of prodigious dying in the context of Spicer's searing work.

This poem speaks of prodigious dying. We might well consider Spicer, beyond most poets of the ilk, as a poet of prodigious dying. His poetry is prodigious in the fact of its exuberantly ambivalent accumulation. And his poetry is that of the prodigal, the one who leaves, the one who errs, the one who returns. The parable of the prodigal strips the gild from the myth of Orpheus. The prodigal son is Orpheus without instrument, or to transpose Spicer's prodigality onto that of Elizabeth Bishop, an Orpheus in pig-shit¹⁷—predicament of which suggests more than the Orphic, the particular unbearable-ities of Spicer's commitments and retreats. Beyond which, even as we might imagine this new Spicer volume as a poet's belated return, we might likewise consider the extent to which Spicer is a poet who leaves. His poems sometimes leave me with a punch in the gut, sometimes with the sense of left-to-be-desired (in all the idiom's underthought registers). But that this poetic leaves—aubade without fillip—speaks likewise to the difficulty of approaching Spicer. As elsewhere I have discussed, this is a poetics no less attached to Eurydice's aversion as it is to Orphic ambition. This poetic leave-taking (*I dare you*), breaks its own heart, and signals what in Spicer is unmatchable. I dare you to look, not to look. *I dare you to search me out.*

—Queen's University

NOTES

1. Said volume being Jack Spicer's *One Night Stand & Other Poems*, ed. Donald Allen (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1980). The exclusion of these poems from the 1975 Black Sparrow edition intends to honor Spicer's own renunciation of these "single," lyric poems in favor of his later production of serial poems. Spicer's renunciation appears in his poem, "For Robin," in his 1957 book, *Admonitions*, reprinted in the volume under review (155–68, quotation on 163). (All subsequent references to Spicer's poetry cited parenthetically in the text are to this volume.) This renunciation has been the subject of much critical discussion. Daniel Katz imagines that Spicer's own declaration and concomitant serial practice is "rightly seen" as "turning points in Spicer's poetics." Again, one of the virtues of Gizzi and Killian's edition is its complication of this "turning point," implicitly arguing for a coherence across a poetic career that from the outset was internally at odds with itself. The turning point, while on some level formally or biographically significant, oversimplifies Spicer's poetic trajectory (Katz, "Jack Spicer's *After Lorca*: Translation as Decomposition," *Textual Practice* 18, no. 1 [2004]: 83–103, quotations on 84). For a different problematization of Spicer's renunciation, see my reading of Spicer alongside Leo Bersani (*Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008], 126–67).
2. Jack Spicer, "The Poet and Poetry—A Symposium" (1949), in *One Night Stand and Other Poems*, with a preface by Robert Duncan, ed. Donald Allen (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1980), 90–92, quotation on 92.
3. For an account of Spicer's relation to Berkeley and San Francisco, see Lewis Ellingham and Kevin Killian's excellent *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the Berkeley Renaissance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).
4. Walt Whitman, *Walt Whitman's Blue Book: The 1860–61 "Leaves of Grass" Containing His Manuscript Additions and Revisions*, ed. Arthur Golden (New York: New York Public Library, 1968), 197.
5. Cf. Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in "Leaves of Grass"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).
6. R. P. Blackmur, *Language as Gesture: Essays in Poetry* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1954), 3.
7. *Ibid.*, 4.
8. The version reprinted in the book under review is taken from the Jack Spicer Papers MSS 2004/209, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
9. Blackmur, *Language as Gesture*, 21.
10. The lectures, available in neither this volume nor the Black Sparrow edition, are gathered in *The House That Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer*, ed. Peter Gizzi (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 2.
11. From Jack Spicer, "Baseball Predictions, April 1, 1964," in *Language* (1965), which is reprinted in the book under review (375–81):

Finally the messages penetrate
There is a corpse of an image—
they penetrate
The corpse of a radio. Cocteau
used a car radio on account of
NO SPEED LIMIT. In any case
the messages penetrate the
radio and render it (and the
radio) ultimately useless.

Prayer
Is exactly that
The kneeling radio down to the
tomb of some saint
Uselessness sung and danced
(the radio dead but alive it can
connect things

Into sound. Their prayer
Its only connection.

(376)

Spicer's delight in baseball throws a spanner in the presumed cathexes of gay poets. I don't like baseball, but I, I think, like Spicer, am engrossed by the idea of a diamond around which players play, for stakes at once enormous and magnificently nugatory. The honoring of a game's rules as point of departure for watching what happens in the diamond's limbo suggests a version of Frost's apocryphal tennis net. But different, if only because Frost's tennis imagines one-on-one, whereas Spicer's baseball, in the manner of Charles Fourier, welcomes not only a collectivity adherent to shared rules (and likewise wishing sneakily to break them), but an audience for those adherences and disjuncts, the baseball stadium as Greek theater. Home plate, for Spicer and Marianne Moore alike (two poets whose love of "the game" throws a curveball into any vocabulary of poetic meticulousness), suggests for Moore more than Spicer a glee in contingency. In Spicer, on the other hand, home plate suggests a glee in the inexorable (cf. Euripides) rendered both vernacular and mutably audience friendly. The gorgeousness of men in tight white pants, compelled to occupy geometry, itself might further complicate our sense of Spicer's notion of poem-as-inhabitability, of the homer.

12. Ruth Draper, *Ruth Draper and Her Company of Characters: Selected Monologues*, 2 vols., 4 CDs (Seattle, WA: Acme Content Company, 2000), available at <http://ssl.adhost.com/drapermonologues/store.html>.
13. From Jack Spicer, "Four Poems for Ramparts," in *Book of Magazine Verse* (1965), which is reprinted in the volume under review ("Four Poems," 411–13; *Book of Magazine Verse*, 403–26):

... Dante
Was the first writer of science-
fiction. Beatrice
Shimmering in infinite space.

(411)

14. From Jack Spicer, "Chapter III/What the Dead Letters Said" (in the book *The Heads of the Town Up to the Aether* [1962], reprinted in the volume under review [249–313]):

"Dear X,
I love you more than anyone
could ever do.
signed
Y"

... "... Yes, Virginia, there is a
postoffice."
... "... I'm going to go home
and eat rose-petals."

... "... It has all been anticipa-
ted, there isn't any more for
you to do."

"Dearest Y,"

(282)

As with Draper, we find in Spicer both the channel and the channeler, reduction of communication to variables (contingency of radio signal), the absurdity of transcription rendered exculpable in the factitiousness of *this is someone else altogether*.

15. See Jack Spicer, Robin Blaser, and John Granger, "A Plan for a Book on Tarot," *boundary 2* 6, no. 1 (1977): 24–29.
16. John Emil Vincent, *Queer Lyrics: Difficulty and Closure in American Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), esp. 89–120.
17. From the first stanza of Elizabeth Bishop's poem "The Prodigal" (in *Elizabeth Bishop: The Complete Poems, 1927–1979* [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980], 71):

The brown enormous odor he
lived by

was too close, with its breathing
and thick hair,
for him to judge. The floor was
rotten: the sty
was plastered halfway up with
glass-smooth dung.
Light-lashed, self-righteous,
above moving snouts,
The pigs' eyes followed him, a
cheerful stare—
even to the sow that always ate
her young—
till, sickening, he leaned to
scratch her head.
But sometimes mornings after
drinking bouts
(he hid the pints behind a two-
by-four),
the sunrise glazed the barnyard
mud with red;
And then he thought he almost
might endure
his exile yet another year or
more.