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Journey for the Self

The idea of the self is a complex notion believed to encapsulate the essence of one's being, what would remain if we were to strip the outer layers, physical and emotional. The self, partially rooted in the subconscious, is a level of our consciousness unknown to us, but it contains our deepest desires and secrets. The complexity of self becomes clear in three poetic works by Alice Notley: *The Descent of Alette*, *Mysteries of Small Houses*, and *Disobedience*. Notley, a woman finding herself surrounded by men associated with the New York School of poetry, wants to extricate herself from the system and the men populating it in order to discover her own poetic form, a form that constructs a new notion of gender. Notley's undertaking of this endeavor is no easy feat and one she would come to dedicate her life to after the passing of her first husband, the poet Ted Berrigan. The number of forces that come into play and the duration of the investigation speak for the difficulty of the task. In order to accurately and truthfully investigate, Notley steps back, narrates and investigates different aspects of her life, including her childhood, in order to uncover the problem and correctly orchestrate a movement in order to achieve poetic and individual liberation.

Notley's endeavor for poetic liberty occurs within the vehicle of lyric poetry. Lyric poetry gives the writer a way to access the subconscious self as writing lyric poetry foregrounds an examination of the unconscious. Notley's texts themselves are fragmented and multiple, like the self, and require different readings of the poetry. The linear becomes interrupted by the lyric and creates a dramatization of a constant, multiplying self. The effect is a first-person "I" that does not cohere. Not only does Notley employ the lyric, but also the epic, a traditionally

male form (as they all are), and utilizes Dantean tactics in her writing. The oppression Notley suffers is the result of her being a female poet in a male-dominated profession, but her searching for freedom within poetry becomes a broader, collective search for the self bound in the act of writing. Writing is liberating and thought-provoking. Through writing, Notley revisits her childhood and processes certain events from the past through her adult eyes. The autobiographical qualities of the works also have the effect of creating a sort of narrative for her readers. Notley bears her oppression at the hands of the men in power, not only in poetry but in every aspect of life. The question, then, becomes an issue of gender and how to go before gender constructions, which maintain a rift not only within the self but society as well. Notley will never be able to do so, but the journey and the striving towards that goal is what interests her. Notley's use of autobiographical narrative and lyric bring her to a self prior to the division of the self that unifies the sense of fragmentation characteristic of lyric poetry, but what repeatedly resurfaces is an "I" that is not unified, it is fragmented and multiple: Notley's voice jumps between narrative and lyric, the linear and non-linear and feeds into a notion of the self that is fundamentally singular and multiple.

The difficulty in defining the self lies in the difficulty in defining lyric poetry itself. Since its origins, lyric has notoriously resisted definition. The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* describes lyric as having shifted its meaning "from adjective to noun, from a quality in poetry to a category that can seem to include nearly all verse...an idea of poetry characterized by a lost collective experience," (Greene 826). Romantic definitions define the "I" heard through lyric writing as a voice that only comes into existence through the poem and the act of writing. Wordsworth describes the lyric as a voice permeating from deep within; it is founded in

some sort of absence within the writer that generates longing, an excess of desire, that stimulates imagination, metaphor and meaning. This overflow of emotion reveals itself through an epiphany recollected in tranquility and is characteristic of the lyric voice (Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800). The intensity of the emotion felt from deep within exposes the self in its raw form and overtakes the conscious "I." Through the lyric, the poet must become "the centre which holds the whole lyric work of art together" (Hegel qtd Greene 831). It is a type of poetry expressing personal feelings in a concentrated and harmoniously arranged form in which the poet's voice extends through the lyric "I." The poet him/herself is the unifying piece within the lyric poem, a bridge granting the subconscious voice access to the exterior world. Its being of a subconscious nature makes it completely foreign while still being representative of the self and ego from which it emanates. Just as the writing "I" in autobiography is a metaphor for the speaking self, the lyric "I" is a metaphor for the writing self. Speaking operates on the levels of conscious thought, creating narrative in the writing of it. Lyric, on the other hand, uses writing as a way to speak for the lyric "I," as it cannot be expressed through the conscious act of speaking. It is through writing that the poet gains access to this level of their self and allows that self to dominate their writing.

Alice Notley, through her three poetic works, combines both lyric and autobiographical voice in order to go to the very depths of her self in an effort to go back in time, before notions of gender and social constructs came into existence, to discover her own poetic form, free from the influence of male poets. Julia Bloch, in *Alice Notley's Descent: Modernist Genealogies and Gendered Literary Inheritance*, examines Notley's position in relation to the New York School of poets and how her poetry, specifically within *The Descent of Alette*, may serve as a quest for

women's literary possibilities outside of a patriarchal literary inheritance. Notley's stance is one of rejection, she does not want to identify with the New York School or any literary movement because, for Notley, they are male products. Notley does not encourage other women to join a literary movement because, since they are male forms, women are doomed for exclusion. She concludes that literary forms are male forms and creates her own discourse to break from this tradition, discrediting these forms and those behind their creation.

Bloch mentions Notley's "Doctor Williams' Heiresses," an experimental historiography in which Notley attempts to confront the ambiguity of the position that women writing after modernism find themselves. She traces the history of poetry through generations of poets, beginning with Edgar Allan Poe, referencing poets along the way such as Walt Whitman and Ezra Pound, and pointing out that women have no place within the poetic lineage: "These females could not understand how they came to be born—they saw no one among their parents & brothers who resembled them physically, for the goddesses their fathers mated with were evaporative" (Notley, "Dr. Williams," 1). Writing this history gave Notley the opportunity to reconfigure gender as she desires. Establishing a "family tree" of American poets, Notley points out the simplicity in unraveling and reconstructing it. She changes the script by giving males a dual identity: "Now [Frank] O'Hara & [Philip] Whalen were males that were male-female" (Notley, "Doctor Williams," 1), corresponding to another of Notley's beliefs, the necessity in the duality of self.

Notley's critique is not towards gender, as she maintains the necessity of it, but towards those who manipulated it into a system of segregation, assigning merit based on sex. Especially characteristic of *The Descent of Alette*, Notley believes in finding both male and female

counterparts within a person, which she sees as a central aspect of being a poet. Previously believing poetry was a male form, she realizes “men who are poets have to be in touch with their girl selves in order to be good poets, and I’m beginning to think it’s my responsibility as a woman poet to be in touch with my male aspects in order to work properly,” (Notley qtd. Bloch 139). Notley’s efforts to go before conceptualizations about gender existed are not an attempt to refute it in its entirety, but an attempt to renovate its identity. Gender is not something to be prioritized or valued by, even if it is an essential part of one’s makeup. Based on Notley’s belief, if male and female selves are inherent within a person, and, if this is true, does gender really even exist? Using lyric poetry, Notley attempts to go before social constructions to explore the relationship between gender, selfhood and self-identity in order to achieve a reclamation of the self from those who manipulated and distorted the balance of power since the beginning, bringing her to a life-altering discovery, one she pledges herself to at the conclusion of her trilogy.

An Idealized Experience

Alette, the protagonist of the epic, *Descent of Alette*, is an idealized figure for Notley and an aspiration for achieving this total rejection of patriarchal structures. Alette awakens in a subway, a symbol for her subconscious, but it is a place dominated by the Tyrant, an imposing male figure that possesses anything and everything. Alette must face the Tyrant while descending deeper into the cave system of her unconscious mind and recover her memory and self in order to achieve complete liberation, unify her self, and defeat the Tyrant. Notley does not identify with Alette. She is a collective voice. But, since lyric writing entails a distancing

through the speaking and writing voice, it is fair to assume Notley uses Alette to explore her self, which she executes by creating an objective distance from Alette to explore the possibilities and consequences of her endeavor. Alette's origins have a connection to the subject matter of her descent: trapped in an underground dream world, she must travel through her psyche in order to reveal a broader truth that is relevant to everyone in a way that "presents the city as a subterranean, labyrinth space mirrored by an expansive use of form in which long poem sequences explore a feminist response to epic" (Skoulding 96). Going back to her beginnings, to a time before the division of her self, would allow Alette to reconceptualize gender and achieve her own independent liberty. Notley's epic has often been compared to that of Dante's *Inferno* but with notable differences demonstrating woman's ability to break tradition. By going down physically and rejecting the above-ground power structures, Alette questions the authority of those in power in the search for her self.

The oppressor in the story, the Tyrant, represents the patriarchal grip on society and its inhabitants. Alette's subconscious journey takes place through a series of episodes in subways and caves, creating a disjointed dream-world mirrored in Notley's unusual use of quotation marks in her poetry. She awakens to her subconscious on a subway and she senses the depravity of the souls captive within the subway and what it represented almost immediately: "Despair & outrage' / 'became mine too' 'Sorrow' 'became mine-' 'To ride a' 'mechanical' / 'contrivance' 'in the darkness' 'To be steeped in' 'the authority' // 'of' 'another's mind' 'the tyrant's mind,'" (Notley, *Descent*, 4). No one is free from his influence and Alette feels the corruption of this world totally submerged in masculine force, but, due to the Tyrant's lack of physicality and origin, she does not fully realize the magnitude of its persuasion – even her own

speech becomes alienated from her. Because of the Tyrant's possession, Alette is unable to formulate coherent speech as her words are not her own: "[they] 'impart a tentative quality to the language as though, having at her disposal only the linguistic relics of a patriarchal hegemony, the language Alette uses is entirely provisional,'" (Skoulding 91); it is not coincidental, or surprising, that fragmentation originated from the masculine tradition. The Tyrant's power, similar to the power of the above-ground structures, is entirely pervasive. He has no singular form, yet he is associated with order and possesses the means necessary to maintain control among his passengers and of the caves.

As Alette descends deeper and deeper into the caves, her quest becomes clear and she comes to realize the gravity of what she must do. The caves, composed of women's bodies, are the moment in which Alette begins to enter her subconscious: "'I asked him' 'what eye I' 'had passed through' 'in the air' 'Why / yours,' 'he said' 'Where are' 'my companions?' 'You are' 'your // companions—'" (Notley, *Descent*, 47). The walls of the cave transform Alette's voice into a collective voice, representing those women whose bodies and souls are trapped within the Tyrant's world. Alette begins to sense herself as both multiple and singular: "'I saw that' 'my hands' outlines' 'were several' '& seemed blurred' / 'Likewise' 'my arms & legs—' 'I looked plural' "But my eyes are' / 'unified,' I said,' "'my vision single,' 'my mind single'" (Notley, *Descent*, 47). Although she incorporates other bodies into hers, she must maintain a singular perspective, for the quest is hers and hers alone.

Before Alette can reclaim herself, however, she must recover the First Mother. In doing so, Alette will be able to save her self as well. Upon finding the headless First Mother, Alette learns what happened to the world to bring it to such degradation: "'But the sexes came to be'

‘in pleasure,’...‘Then something happened’ ‘to the male—’ ‘perhaps because he’ / ‘didn’t give birth’ ‘He lost his’ ‘connection’ ‘to the beginning’ // ‘of the world,’...‘Became a fetishist’ ‘A thinker’ ‘A war-maker’ ‘& ruler’ / ‘Made me dance naked alone’ ‘before all men—’”(Notley, *Descent*, 91). The males lost touch with their female counterparts, driving them to violence and a thirst for power, causing them to take control of the First Mother and reduce her to a mere spectacle for their entertainment. Alette must first restore the First Mother to her proper form before she can restore her own, but the way in which it must be done is of the utmost importance to Notley’s entire purpose of writing and self-discovery. Alette finds a piece of the Tyrant’s heart in the caves and uses his blood to re-attach the First Mother’s head to her body. Using the blood as a type of sealant to connect the First Mother’s head back on her body, restores the First Mother. The blood, however, serves another purpose in the First Mother’s restoration – it acts as a type of healing serum. Smearing blood on the blade of the axe transforms the weapon into a white scarf the First Mother uses to tie around her wound, completely purifying her to her original state. This act of healing speaks to Notley’s belief in finding and embracing one’s male or female counterpart. The Tyrant, being he who lost his connection, is the First Mother’s male counterpart and although he be evil and controlling, he is necessary to her restoration.

Alette’s discovery of her truth lies in her sex. Notley wants to go back to a time before conceptions about gender separated the male and female self, which she does by transforming Alette into a sexless creature through her own renunciation of her gender, voiding her of her identity. Alette jumps at the opportunity to abandon her genitalia and allows it be absorbed into the fleshy walls of the cave, but upon doing so, not only she, but the man who joins her in

the act, immediately enter a frenzied panic: “‘I couldn’t think’ ‘at all’ ‘Was formless’ ‘was in chaos’ ‘The man / cried,’ ‘‘I’ve become lost,’ ‘And I too’ ‘shrieked out to him’ ‘somehow,’ / ‘that my mind was becoming lost,’ ‘unfocused’” (Notley, *Descent*, 57). Only when their sexes are reattached do they return to themselves and feel safe again. This initial transformation has the effect of declaring the importance of one’s sex. Although Notley believes the corruption in the world to be the product of man, hating herself for being an oppressed female and hating man for being the perpetrator achieves nothing. Reuniting with her sex gives Alette a deeper appreciation for it and emphasizes that sex is definitive of identity, but this revelation is not the end of Alette’s quest, but merely the beginning. Notley emphasizes that her objective is not achieving equality through a rejection of sex and gender, but through a reinvention of it. Her second, and final, rebirth situates gender in a harmonized union, with a balance of the sexes.

Her second resurrection is a true resurrection in the sense of the word, as she actually dies within the black lake. Death is transformative, opening the voice of the soul to the exterior world; as a result, Alette is able to transform into her real owl. “‘You must enter’ ‘it too’ ‘before you go back’ // ‘to the tyrant’s world’ ‘You must enter that world’” “‘How can I / do that?’” “‘You will die’ ‘a little death now—, ’” (Notley, *Descent*, 107). Her death is a little one because it anticipates a rebirth, leaving her old self behind and opening her conscious to a renewal of self. In order to achieve this end, Alette’s death rids her of her body, leaving her self unrestricted by her physicality: “‘It is the // other’ ‘being,’ ‘free of the body’s’ ‘time, its heaviness,’ / ‘the body’s slowness compared to mind— ’” (Notley, *Descent*, 107). Leaving her body allows her to enter the other world, a dream-like world, where she is devoured by an owl in the black lake and then becomes unified with him, her owl self.

The theme of owls, prevalent throughout the epic, and its allusions to wisdom, guidance and sight, allude to Alette's revelation of her self. The owls mentioned so far, especially at the beginning of the epic, are associated with male figures, most notably her father, who comes to guide her to real transformation, and her brother. Alette's rebirth replaces her "dead" body parts with the new, owl ones: ""Some of your // body parts—' 'your *death* body parts—' 'parts of your insubstantial / body—' 'have been' 'replaced' 'The owl replaced them' 'They will stay / functional' 'within your so-called' 'real body'" (Notley, *Descent*, 109). The owl considers Alette's genitalia and secondary sex characteristics as "insubstantial" as they are a hindrance to her and withhold her from achieving this reclamation of self and gender. With her new body parts, she also discovers her male counterpart, her subconscious self. The maleness of Alette's owl counterpart, aside from the association with father figures, exists in the transformation of her sex organs into a more neutral state: ""Your sex is now bone" "My sex?" "Your vagina is // white bone' '& your eyes,' 'your eyes,' 'are now like' 'an owl's eyes'...'You are now equipped' / 'to experience' 'what you need'" (Notley, *Descent*, 109). She has not completely lost her vagina, like before, but is transformed in a way in which it will offer her protection from the Tyrant. The neutrality of it is actually an equality. The self is rooted in one's sex as it is their identity, but the de-feminization of her transformation opens her self to her male half, showing its prevalence in her self. Her femininity is still her dominate trait, but leaving her body, a prison for the self, allows her true identity to take over. Equipped with the facets of her true self, her owl eyes, her bone vagina, her beak and her wings prepare her for the inevitable confrontation with the Tyrant. Fighting the Tyrant with a reduced self would be an inevitable loss but her owl self provides her with the wisdom and sight necessary to give her an even footing against him.

Equipped with her new tools of defense and in control of her entire self, Alette encounters a newfound confidence and sense of security. The wisdom she obtains on account of her owl essence allows her to detect the Tyrant's lies, also pointing out that his power and influence is not in fact reality, but his assertion of its legitimacy: "'I am reality,' he said' 'No you aren't,' / 'I said fiercely,' 'but I wasn't sure' ' 'Were you with me' 'when I died?' ...'Yes,' he said, ' 'yes, I was' ' / 'in a slightly stiff,' 'slightly false' 'intonation' 'He was lying'" (Notley, *Descent*, 124). Only when Alette recovers her name and her memory is her transformation complete and she realizes the true object of her quest. She comes upon a river flowing with the Tyrant's blood, and sees a small black piece of cloth in the river. Upon retrieving it and swallowing it, she immediately experiences "'a black dawning,' 'a sky turning' 'from obsidian' / to sickly' 'bluish light' 'Why was my memory,' 'my memory,' / 'floating in your' 'heartblood?'" (Notley, *Descent*, 136). This revelation that she had lost herself in the Tyrant's blood leads her to the source of his power. The river of blood directs her to the source of the river, a bush, his tree of life. The river indicates that the Tyrant is wounded. Alette reclaimed a piece of his heart and is growing stronger, diminishing his power and influence. In order to defeat the Tyrant, Alette must uproot the bush, but it is an unfathomable task for her: "'I understood' 'what to do now' '& searched myself' // 'for a cruelty' '& temporary' 'heartlessness' 'I didn't know of' / 'in myself:' 'my owl self' 'had to do this' 'But I thought' 'my / woman's body' 'had factually' 'to do this'" (Notley, *Descent*, 143). Alette feels that *only* her woman self should destroy the Tyrant, as it would signify the end of patriarchal oppression and a reclaiming of her individual self, as well as the collective free will but this fraction of her self is not enough. Alette's journey into her subconscious to find her self, her real owl, had been a descent in the body of the Tyrant. By

using her female hands to uproot the bush she regains control over her conscious self, but by completing the deed with her talons, she completely regains control of her entire self.

The Tyrant's death may seem anti-climactic, but that is the objective. From the start, the Tyrant is presented as this omnipresent, formidable, uncontrollable force that owns and controls anything and everything. Alette's journey, however, reveals the Tyrant's authority to all be a façade. By creating the dream-world of the caves and subways in his image, he is able to impose his dictatorship upon its subjects and he managed to extend it to such a degree that his grip came to be a manifestation of his literal body, enclosing those within himself. There is no denying that the Tyrant has real power, but it is a power of manipulation and mind-control founded upon false premises. Alette's quest, unbeknownst to her, is to evolve into her full self, embracing her male counterpart. Notley deconstructs a number of binaries regarding gender through the imagery of the epic, speaking to both the relevance and irrelevance of their existence. Separation between the sexes ought to be maintained only in the sense of respecting and appreciating one's own gender. The Tyrant's objective is to prevent this union by objectifying the women within his dream-world, especially evident in the case of the First Mother, and maintaining separation of self through the oppression of his complete possession. Although Alette succeeds in identifying her owl self, she abandons her consciousness, her memory and her body, in doing so because to go to that place of one's deepest origin is too painful, causing her to relinquish it to the Tyrant. The recovery of her name and the subsequent union of her conscious and subconscious is the culmination of her transformation, allowing her to see, wisely through her owl eyes, how to defeat the Tyrant in his entirety.

I Through the Owl Eye

While Notley claims *The Descent of Alette* is not autobiographical, *Mysteries of Small Houses* is. Although different in subject matter, the authorial intent is the same for both – the uncovering of the self, those deepest parts of the psyche. Notley goes back throughout the different phases of her life, attempting to capture her true voice through methods of meditation and automatic writing, avoiding conscious levels of thinking in order to capture her real, child voice. *Mysteries of Small Houses* contains the narration of Notley's life story through a lyric medium, but it also shows the beginnings of her need for self-discovery due to a society that imposed certain expectations upon her according to her gender. Her poems, relevant to both life writing and a journey for self-realization, create an overlap of the autobiographic and lyric voice, disrupting the storyline amongst the utter confusion that is her lyric voice. In the opening poem from the collection, "Would Want to Be in My Wildlife," Notley writes of her childhood, at six years old, when she was learning to write while also coming to understand the world around her: "I don't have to sound young but I couldn't say 'oil well' right / erase all that it's not right. You have to erase whatever it is and erase before / that and before that to be perfect" (Notley, *Mysteries*, 1). The poem is fragmented, with run-on sentences and incomplete lines. At the beginning, the poem has no coherency, alluding to her age and developing writing skills, but as it progresses her writing and language improve, signaling her growing and maturing. The poetic voice shows uncertainty and fear for the future as she picks up on the ways of society and urges herself to retain her individuality: "it doesn't matter what happens here what matters is not to lose judiciousness...one thing seeing and being's the one there this is though each one's it and though each one's different both at least from the beginning

socialization's what makes us the same in the made-up way," (Notley, *Mysteries*, 1).

Judiciousness gives one the ability to choose and formulate opinions, while socialization erases the effects of judiciousness – through socialization, one learns how to behave and act in society according to its customs ("what makes us the same in the made-up way"). The ending of the poem is characterized by an attitude of rebellion, which Notley continues throughout the rest of her story.

In "The Obnoxious Truth," Notley comes to terms with what it means to be female. A man in a high school theater tells her younger self she is not good enough to be a writer and tells her she ought to be a musician. While Notley feels disheartened towards the man's commentary, it makes her look elsewhere for acceptance: "I'm trying to think / about what a life is not triumphant sex / I want to go away where I can't do some things as well as others do – / I want my abilities to be clear" (Notley, *Mysteries*, 15). Notley's desires are for clarity and recognition; she knows where her talents lay, in her writing, and she wants that to be obvious and accepted. Through this unidentified male character, Notley enhances her argument that writing is an inherently male tradition. According to him, Notley would not make a good writer due to her "femaleness" and wants to categorize her based on her sex. Notley sets the poem inside a little high school theater and the location is very specific, pinpointing a specific memory from Notley's adolescence, but the ambiguity of the male figure allows Notley to make the setting a generalized one, demonstrating the repetitive nature of this type of dialogue. By creating this unspecified, ambiguous male figure Notley makes it possible for her to state her true intentions through writing; the principal theme of both *Descent of Alette* and *Disobedience* is her desire to revert to a time before there was a triumphant sex – when equality was more

than just a concept: taking her to “this desert with nothing between me and it never trembles / such clarity obviates the heart,” (Notley, *Mysteries*, 15). The desert represents this nothingness Notley hopes to find on an existential plane. The clarity of the desert gives Notley the opportunity to question life and the implications of expectations based on sex felt in a highly gendered society: “Can you be how you want despite others...I’m right that I won’t change / I may seem insufferable to you, I want to live in true thoughts” (Notley, *Mysteries*, 15). Notley ends the poem, completing her performance on stage, with the closing lines alluding to her femininity in the images of her “gold lamé shoes” and her hair. The emphasis from the exterior world resides in her looks and nothing of her mind and its contents. Notley uses the desert as a means of escape during her performance, a place that hardens her resolve and attitude of rebellion, directing her towards her disobedience.

Notley’s belief in maintaining both a male and female self in order to write poetry truthfully to her self is evident in the character of her late husband, Ted, and his influence in her life. Notley and Berrigan, both being writers, had their private and professional lives intertwined and spent almost all of their time together, whether it be reading and critiquing each other’s work or whether it be the regularities of a married couple. In “The Trouble with You Girls,” Ted condemns her writing style, sexualizing her, belittling her and making assumptions about her rationality but, unlike past male figures attempting to categorize her, she makes no commentary on Ted’s criticisms. She believes Ted to be her male counterpart because he was unlike other men, mostly: “Men were a problem – I / see that better / in the future, but you, sometimes you were ‘men’ / usually not,” (Notley, *Mysteries*, 45). Common to many relationships, Notley invested so much of herself and energy into Ted that she assigned

half of her self, her male self, to Ted, and when Ted died, so did that self. Even after death, she still carries Ted's memory in her self: "He's deep in me and I talk to him more, cede him / a privilege for his awesome death, a position of / authority in my / imagination" (Notley 52). Their closeness and his influence in her poetry caused his self to become part of her own and, with his death, she feels as if she lost a major part of her self. This emptiness, however, soon became replaced by grief.

Two poems that comment on each other, "I—Towards a Definition," and "II—The Person That You Were Will Be Replaced," show the effects of grief upon Notley and her selfhood. Not only did she lose part of herself when she lost Ted, but grief continues to hack away at the pieces of herself, eventually reducing her to a child. She describes her fight against grief as a war, a relentless beating in which there was no defeat nor victory but a turn back in time: "Oh yes this is who I always am / beginning child literal I," (Notley, *Mysteries*, 77). Grief's power and ability to reduce a grown woman back into a child makes grief a physical, visible presence. It cannot be ignored and it is not a figment of one's imagination: "Grief's not a social convention / Grief is visible, substantial, I've literally seen it," (Notley, *Mysteries*, 77). The power behind the closing lines of this poem allude to the magnitude of the experience Notley underwent.

In "II—The Person That You Were Will Be Replaced," Notley continues with her description of grief's possession and its hold on its victims. Grief changes the future self of a person: "In grief the person that you were is replaced by grief / not the person you originally were but the one you'd become," (Notley, *Mysteries*, 78). Notley believes grief to be a disruptor of destiny, but, in reality, it supports it. The grief and depression Notley suffers bring her to find

her true self and opens her eyes to the reality that her male self was not founded in Ted. In *Women, the New York School and Other True Abstractions*, Maggie Nelson describes Notley's voice, although full of grief, as still having an essence of hope: "the pain is mitigated, or at least accompanied, by the hope that there's something unfathomable or eternal about voice, that voice is in fact some kind of immortal essence...the way that... 'soul,' collaborates with physiology and culture to create the actual rhythm and sound of an individual's speech," (Nelson 150). In Wordsworthian terms, Notley comes to realize that death opened up the voice of her self through this overflow of overbearingly painful emotion, and allowed that voice to take shape through a conscious medium. Before the grief filled the emptiness inside her, she carried Ted's death within her, following him in grief without him actually being there, unable to accept that he had actually died, but "If the other who dies is partly me, / and that me dies and another grows, the medium it grows in / is grief...[grief] gets far into your body Eats it changes it," (Notley, *Mysteries*, 78 & 79). The grief, although unbearable at times, removes Ted's possession of her self and allows her to recognize her male self still exists independently of an actual, physical male counterpart.

In allowing Notley to separate her identity from Ted's, grief also allows her to see herself more clearly, as she explains in "Becoming Egyptian," in which the memory of grief serves as a turning point for her. Notley foreshadows her writings in *Disobedience* noting, "I'm beginning to want to write an epic poem. / or a very thick poem since time's thick for me" (Notley, *Mysteries*, 84), in which she will endeavor to descend deep inside of her self to find that missing component of her self. She mentions Queen T'iy, one of the most influential women of ancient Egypt, but refutes her status: "she's just a closed mouth / she's not beautiful,

the fragment is beautiful *she's / not*, this piece of statue is she isn't a queen she's a piece of / fucking rock / the Egyptians are stupidly, specifically, sociological, like I / seem," (Notley, *Mysteries*, 84). This society, seemingly progressive in the sphere of women's rights, Notley turns on its face and condemns it as merely a construct, disguised to appear equal. By titling herself as becoming Egyptian, Notley inserts herself into a time and place within which she would have access to legal equality, but still maintains that this partial equality is not enough. She intends to go beyond the accomplishments of Queen T'iy and become the powerful woman, in the full sense of the word, within a contemporary society in which this is virtually impossible.

Although she declares Queen T'iy's persona as nothing more than a statue, a figurehead, through her inclusion she creates undertones of female power that she assigns to herself: "This book will change. It has to... I'm now the mystery of this book. / Thus will cease to speak so much of myself. / As details, as pieces. Can't find myself in them there...A self is much bigger than that because death has / entered it, and reenters it / making a largeness of it, empty of plot" (Notley, *Mysteries*, 84 & 85). Ted's death, and the harshness of the grief she suffered, hardened her, but gave her the means necessary to undertake the quest required of her. By ceasing to speak of herself in terms of details and pieces, she accepts her call to action – if she is to speak of herself, it will be her whole self.

The poem, "Owls," as well as the subsequent three, mark the point in Notley's life story where she begins her transformation from grief-stricken widow, to independent, unbound woman by enjoining her "real owl," the part of the self that is separate from her consciousness, to the lyric "I." In the *Descent of Alette*, Notley develops a strong symbolic relationship between

owls and father figures, wisdom and guidance, a theme that makes itself apparent in *Mysteries*. She has a dream where her father appears to her in owl form, advising her on how to write her poems. This is a story about her, but she does not even know her role in it; she is the mystery. While writing her life story, she is also searching for herself, which she deems as “not for [her] real I but for [her] real owl” (Notley, *Mysteries*, 105). Alette finds her real owl on her journey, and Notley intends to do the same. It is wise and will guide her in the right direction, just as her dream father/owl did for her. In “Alette,” Notley’s writing style, the quoted, fragmented speech and oddly spaced lines, is identical to that in *The Descent of Alette*, indicating her closeness to achieving her goal and finding her “real owl.” Notley shares how she hated to end *Descent of Alette* because it fed her spirit, ““and I hate for it’ ‘to be dead in me’...‘All I care about’ is living it’ ‘I want it’ ‘alive again’” (Notley, *Mysteries*, 110). Writing the *Descent of Alette* was a therapeutic process for her after Ted’s death as Alette symbolized the woman she wanted to become and, rather than allowing Alette to die in her, she continued on ““down the corridor’ ‘into more’ / ‘darkness...’” (Notley, *Mysteries*, 110 & 111). The darkness indicates the parts of her self she doesn’t know – her real owl – and it is in this darkness where she achieves her owl transformation: ““and feel feathers grow’ ‘from my skin’s pores’...‘Now I can fly for I’...‘I is not a’ ‘museum, my loves live’” (Notley, *Mysteries*, 111). Her “I,” her self, is active and alive. It is not something to be looked at and assessed as a remnant of the past. Notley’s owl self gives her the ultimate level of freedom: ““I become the owl’ ‘again to leave’ ‘the underworld’ ‘of my life and’...‘eye I fly away’ ‘the owl flies’ ‘the owl flies,’” (Notley, *Mysteries*, 111). Notley both identifies with and separates herself from the owl identity, as it is part of her while still being

separate. It is a level of her being she was strangers with until now; in this instance, the owl is her lyric “I.”

Isolation, Rejection, and Reinvention

Disobedience, Notley’s most radical break from tradition, continues exploring the self, while also trying to process that self within the exterior world. Her disobedience stems from a need to see – in order for her to write the truth, she must first be able to see it: “Not believing, then, became the crux of *Disobedience*...Not believing and telling the truth as it comes up” (Notley, Poetics). The story takes place after Notley’s move to Paris, but, similar to *The Descent of Alette* in the metro represented as a fantasy world composed of a series of caves where she encounters a male, detective-like figure, Hardwood, who is her guide throughout the caves, in the exploration of her self. The structure of *Disobedience* is non-linear and fragmented, requiring a more in-depth reading, leading to the realization that the poems in the collection are, at the same time, related to each other and not. The collection appears disorganized and random but has the effect of contributing to Notley’s act of disobedience and enjoining the readers in the movement as, it requires them to read in a way disobedient to the normal standard of reading. The text is fragmented and multiple, like the self, and requires one to read it in a number of ways. *Disobedience* contains similar characteristics and themes with both *The Descent of Alette* and *Mysteries of Small Houses* that the two do not share with each other, making *Disobedience* the culminating moment in which Notley achieves recognition of her self.

Disobedience’s disobedience runs deeper than meets the eye. Beginning with the cave systems and going underground, Notley rejects the power structures in play both literally and

metaphorically, as these institutions' jurisdiction does not extend to the subterranean, but by also removing herself from their jurisdiction, she becomes liberated mentally from their influences. Her isolation is not only a poetic isolation, but an authorial one: "I think I conceive of myself as disobeying my readership a lot. I began the new work in fact denying their existence; it seemed to me I needed most at this point to work on my own existence so I couldn't afford to cater to them if they got in the way of my finding out things" (Notley, *Poetics*). Her disobedience not only has the effect of rejecting the patriarchal tradition, but also the effect of dissenting towards her readership. She writes for her and her finding out of things, encouraging the reader to make their own interpretation of her writing and come to their own conclusions while doing so. Her "finding out things" is her rejection of, literally, everything to rethink about her self, her life, and her purpose. By descending, she is also dissenting: "'descent'/'dissent' implies a spatial movement in relation to above-ground structures and it also asserts a social structure that can be disobeyed" (Skoulding 92-93). Alette's dissent is directed against the Tyrant, while Notley's, directed towards the social order, the patriarchy, is more developed and large scale. She is clear of her vision and purpose, although unsure of what she will encounter along the way.

In terms of structure and form, Notley's disobedience produces an unorganized jumble of poems within each poem, separated by random line divisions and seemingly unrelated content. The voice of *Disobedience* is Notley's most successful attempt at coming to understand her self. Although united with her subconscious voice, her owl, it is still a mass of internalized emotion that, upon achieving release, becomes chaotic and near impossible to decipher. As the poem progresses Notley's voice achieves more and more continuity with the voice of her

repressed self, mixing conscious and subconscious voice, that enables her to see the reality of the world without the veil of the patriarchy: “*Disobedience* didn’t exactly set out to be disobedient...But it got more and more pissed off as it confronted the political from an international vantage, dealt with being a woman in France, with turning fifty and being a poet and thus seemingly despised or at least ignored” (Notley, *Poetics*). Notley’s exploration of everything leads her to her disobedience towards it all and instilled in her the desire and need to be recognized and heard, both within herself and the external world.

Moving to Paris to distance herself from the poetics and society of America, Notley leaves behind everything but her self, with this distance providing her an opportunity to investigate and explore, unbothered. Upon confronting her self, however, she realizes the complexity of it: “this room full of the self full / of others and mirrors...total reflectiveness, / the litup soul/self I have been / from time to time I can’t remember” (Notley, *Disobedience*, 5). The title of this poem, “What’s Suppressed,” indicates Notley makes some headway in discovering these foreign parts of her self, but upon confronting it, there is an overriding sense of confusion, confusion towards the multiplicity of self and her familiarization with her self although it is foreign. This suggests that this room of mirrors provides her with an awakening towards her self. The mirrors allow her to really see her self for the first time and she sees that her self is not all foreign to her; there was a time when she knew her self, perhaps, but that self had been suppressed from her, until now. Upon seeing her self, the task now becomes how to unify these two parts of self coherently, making sense of her new identity.

The world is a product of forced unification. Through these methods of assimilation – imperialism, socialization, technology, etc. – mankind, instead of unifying within to their

individual selves, conforms to the outside world and forces of oppression, forgoing their self and individuality in the process: “I am unified exactly / the human world is unified in a different way... / accidentally, by technology and aggression,” (Notley, *Disobedience*, 14). Notley, although an opponent of this type of integration, recognizes her own role in the process through her emigration to France. This unification and the progression towards a more mediatized, interconnected world only continues the loss of self, creating a loss of memory that she encounters in the caves: “Down in the caves another time, down a musée-like cavern...this is supposed to be the tour of our loss / but we’ve forgotten, now, what animals looked like / can’t see our loss” (Notley, *Disobedience*, 15). This series of exhibits takes Notley on a backwards progression through time, representing the loss of the natural self – the loss of judiciousness alluded to in *Mysteries*. This judiciousness, the ability to choose and rationalize, stimulates individuality and non-conformity, but, this judiciousness no longer exists. The inability to remember what animals looked like has connections to both humans and actual animals. The animal linked to humanity alludes to the animal within, the self free from influence and “this gruesome unification” (Notley, *Disobedience*, 14). Animals, in the true sense of the word, refer to a time before, when judiciousness and the natural world were a reality.

Notley maintains a type of subconscious, internal dialogue throughout the book with Hardwood, directing her disobedience towards him as he holds a collective representation of the patriarchy. In “Particle Doll,” Notley begins to see herself as a doll, “Darkdoll,” who is the product of the imposition of external forces: “The bitterest part of being a doll / is how to tell you / I hate how you make me this doll—/ sitting propped up at dinner party or poetry panel” (Notley, *Disobedience*, 63), but Notley’s defiance in being made a doll comes from Hardwood’s

lack of seeing, or inability to do so. Her transition into Darkdoll is one made out of assumptions and not actuality: “If you fuck with my brain change my particles, chemicals / you’ll perceive a different me / as far as you’re / concerned, but you’ve never / really perceived *me* anyway” (Notley, *Disobedience*, 63). The blatant ignoring of her self and her individuality is what enrages Notley. She is an individual with individualized desires, thoughts and needs. Creating her into a doll makes her a passive, complacent figure that is easily manipulated. Her name of “Darkdoll,” however, makes her atypical, suggesting a type of danger and mystery to be reckoned with.

The poem “An impeccable sexism I mean an elegant idea or procedure that haunts the stars” contains more of Notley’s recognition of the patriarchal systems in place. The patriarchy attempts to create this “elegant idea or procedure” but, in reality, it is a well-disguised, sexualized hegemony. A sexism not liable to sin because it is created at the hands of those above the influence of the law and morality. This sexism applies to the entirety of society: “Our Civ: a photo which when viewed upsidedown —/ the way we’ve usually viewed it—depicts flesh / abstractly, lovely. Rightsideup it’s obviously / just a woman giving a rock star a blowjob” (Notley, *Disobedience*, 83). Man distorted the view of reality into something favorable for their sex depicting a non-gendered idea of beauty, but, upon closer inspection, it is actually a system of oppression assigning women’s value on their physicality, rather than their intellectuality.

Notley extends this image of society by mentioning other women made into dolls, specifically actresses. In “Do you want to be excellent an a actress no not that either,” Notley sees famous women in the caves such as Anne Francis and Marilyn Monroe, women who accepted and embraced the idealized version of a woman they were made into. These actresses act in a way which promulgates the patriarchy, not their own merit: “Hardwill says: ‘When we /

are working actors, we are participating / in society, at that moment, / so are non-transcendent. This is good” (Notley, *Disobedience*, 199). These actors are merely puppets, dolls, with no deeper purpose or significance other than their role in the simulation. This society appears void of emotion, but Notley deems it as “a huge / cohesive / emotion” (Notley, *Disobedience*, 201), but “The Emotion,” the society, is actually just the desire and wish for control by the patriarchy, an emotion fueled by self-interests and a desperation for power. In “Have I been here before something is unfamiliar,” Notley comes face to face with her disobedience and attempts to reconcile the rift between conscious and unconscious. Notley learns that her disobedience does not come from patronizing the patriarchy, but in her own act of writing. Within the poem, Notley wrestles with the layers of her self, which she comes to discuss directly, through which her writing can be interpreted as an attempt to recognize and work out these different levels of consciousness: “There’s conscious and un-/conscious or these conscious / semi-conscious (self- / hypnotized)” (Notley, *Disobedience*, 224) and “To make it all / more conscious I have flooded it with / my voice without / trying hard to make my voice sound like a poem, / A voice is more uniting than... / it’s all we’ve got to do with” (Notley, *Disobedience*, 225). Notley’s only tool in uncovering this layer of self is her voice, but, even still, this voice is not her conscious voice. It correlates more to the “semi-conscious (self-hypnotized)” voice Notley finds within her self.

The semi-conscious voice allows her to traverse the breach between consciousness, but she is still unsure of exactly what to do when she gets there. She recognizes the significance of the voice, but its exact function is still unclear. In “The lines fall away sometimes,” Notley comes to a deeper understanding of her self and of her experience and its relevance to the grand

scheme of things. Meeting her second husband, she becomes confused by her identity and relation to him and considers her future life with him: “If the relations between the sexes / are changing, awake, these houses are not. / We change into another kind of / Same As Each Other: / The world wants that...I’m / not the same as you, in spite of the fact that I’m purely / related to everyone” (Notley, *Disobedience*, 242). She understands the figure she would be made into if she were to marry again, and realizes the domestic sphere is unchanging even if society’s mindset is. Notley’s quest takes on an attitude of persistence: despite the resistance and oppression dealt towards her, she realizes that, like Alette, her experience can be a guide for women, and men, coming after her. Notley’s isolation provides her solace in her endeavor, “My dreams are deepening, lengthening, battering / me; I have also walked / the most luxuriant of lawns // and searched for dropped valuables / in the grass— nothing there except bliss // the others left and didn’t leave a thing” (Notley, *Disobedience*, 243). The lawns, beautiful and pleasant, a place for contemplative reflection, allude to Notley’s thinking. She is unbothered by the patriarchy due to her ability to extricate herself from The Emotion and is able to search and investigate her dreams freely, but finds nothing there. It is a place open for innovation and self-discovery, similar to the deserts of *Mysteries*. The lack of people allows Notley to think and discover on her own, free from interruption, but realizing that others were there before her gives her journey an attitude of rescue. The others left and didn’t leave a thing, meaning they have abandoned their sense of self and individuality and completely relinquished it to the patriarchy. Notley must go beyond these lush lawns, a fertile breeding ground for thought, and go deeper into her self to not only rescue her self, but those of the souls lost before her time: “From before / evolution I find / us, despite it (Notley, *Disobedience*, 63).

As the book progresses, Notley's disobedience becomes more direct and aggressive. The discovery of her creation in "Don't think that thought it will poison this moment," Notley recognizes, fully, that she is, literally, man-made. She, again, asserts that she must travel backwards before her creation to be alone, but her isolation only extends so far: "How alone can I be. / Someone climbs their own stairs / in the middle of my transparency. / In the middle of me" (Notley, *Disobedience*, 256). Her realization that she can never fully be alone connects her with Alette's descent in more ways than her "collective identity." Notley enters into the heart of her cave system, a woman's room, and sees that the walls of the room are constructed through layers of burials of actual heads with some windows. The burial of the heads gives the room an aspect of imprisonment and oppression, but the windows, her means of escape from this room, are actually dioramas of men "who / come to life and begin to struggle over us...Some / of the men support our freedom, some don't: / whatever they support, it seems to be *their* fight" (Notley, *Disobedience*, 254). Notley's collective experience, therefore, becomes compromised by man's imposition of their own will upon her. She concludes that her life, as a poet, was never hers, "it belongs to the guy on the panel / of fellow experts" (Notley, *Disobedience*, 254) who dictate the standards of not only poetry, but all methods of form and being.

In "The usual and the most tenuous of goodbyes," Notley does not abandon her journey, but condemns herself to a life of ongoing investigation of the self. Her goodbye is an unsavory one, but is one in which she must abandon her self and adopt other modes of investigation: "I still auditioning for a man, a figure of / the Will though he isn't Hardwood. / We're all in toilet stalls peeing, because / that's what you do before you try out / for the part,

get rid of yourself // I'm / auditioning for leaving my poem. / Auditioning for stupid recognition. Aren't I always?" (Notley, *Disobedience*, 281). Her normal line of inquiry no longer works and she must adopt a different tactic, either out of desperation or necessity, and she feels frustrated towards the state of her gender: "They call your work 'engaging' when / (A) you're a woman / and / (B) it doesn't conform to prescribed / models of pomposity or obfuscation / rather, 'talks.' // 'Engaging is an asshole word, / not quite as obnoxious a cliché as 'ground-breaking'" (Notley, *Disobedience*, 283). But Notley will continue to push back in order to break the tradition of poetic form and achieve recognition of her individualized self and writing, as well as paving a pathway of recognition for those to come.

Gender is not the problem, it is the societal expectations that accompany gender: "...we're told we behave in accordance with / our bodies, our so-called genes. Well, we're not / trapped by our 'makeup' / we're trapped by Your supposed naming and mastery of it. / You then make us wear Your makeup" (Notley, *Disobedience*, 283-284). She comes into contact with a "famous musician/songwriter...wearing both a dress and pants" the idealized form for Notley, a "dream team" (Notley, *Disobedience*, 284). She does not advocate a renunciation of gender but, rather, an embracing of both within one self. A hybridized notion of gender exists within every individual, but the Tyrant, the patriarchy, insists upon separation and creating opposition in order to maintain his control over the collective. Notley's disobedience is her ability to recover this counterpart of her self and unite the two. She ends her collection with "I've found a peaceful circular ride / in an amusement park at night / I could ride it forever" (Notley, *Disobedience*, 284). The grand conclusion of this entire endeavor is the infiniteness of her self. She may never come to know her true self, but whether that refers to the patriarchal systems in

power or the complexity and impossibility at fully discovering the self is unclear. Unable to instigate a collective reclamation of self, like Alette, Notley also realizes she may never come to know her full self and that she will spend forever on the circular ride of discovery with each rotation uncovering a layer of self previously shielded by the influence of the patriarchy. She returns to the above-ground, but her ride provides her the isolation and concentration necessary to continue searching and fighting even in the eye of the storm.

A Path for a Better Tomorrow

The impossibility of a reincarnation of self does not lay in the forces of oppression that previously maintained this separation, but the infiniteness of the self. The lengths and complications Notley goes to in order to find and unify her subconscious self into her conscious being illustrates the necessity of doing so. Not only would this unification enjoin her with her male counterpart, it would also enjoin her autobiographical voice with her lyric one. Each work presents a different facet of the self. Alette is a collective self but embodies that which Notley wants to achieve on her own: the reclamation of self. In *Mysteries*, the voice presented is an autobiographical one, while maintaining its lyricism, in which Notley goes back in time through her memory in order to know herself from her beginnings. On the other hand, the voice in *Disobedience*, Notley's present self, is the most radical, lyrical form of self Notley comes to personify. Characterized by repressed anger and rebellion, Notley completely isolates herself from the external world, physically and mentally, and goes within her psyche to come to know

her self from its deepest origins. Despite her efforts, however, she does not come to fully know her self – it is an impossible feat.

Notley's three separate works represent three different attempts, or a process of trial-and-error, in coming to know her self, but, although these attempts do not come to fruition, they are not futile. Alette, although not autobiographically related to Notley, is an idealized version of self with an idealized ending. By designing *The Descent of Alette* in a way she sees the feminist journey as fulfilled, she creates a guide for herself in doing the same. She did not create Alette to serve as a literary representation of herself on her own feminist journey, but as a figure with a collective journey, whose reclamation of self will not only guide Notley but the rest of humanity, men and women alike. Alette's disobedience inspires Notley's own. Alette had to maintain a distancing from her collectivity, just as Notley must do towards her readership in order to maintain focus. Alette achieves her unification through the impossible – dying to the physical to free the self of its restraints to restore her self, suggesting that, perhaps, death is the ultimate liberator. Not only does death provide a rebirth for Alette, but for Notley as well: when Ted died, the part of her rooted in him died too. This death instigated a refocusing of self in Notley, allowing her to see that her self was not founded in Ted, but it was still lost within her.

The journey for the self, however, is a never-ending cycle in which a person penetrates deeper into their matter upon each turn, but they can never fully break through. The ending of *Disobedience* on a "peaceful circular ride / in an amusement park at night," (Notley, *Disobedience*, 284) that she could ride forever demonstrates that although Notley successfully reclaimed her self, she will forever be a stranger unto her self. This journey she is on, although

appearing to be a descent, is, in reality, a circular repetition that upon each revisiting she learns something new of herself that she previously didn't notice. Notley achieved her reclamation of self, as she successfully usurped the influence of patriarchal oppression upon her, but she did not reclaim it in totality.

What Notley discovers, instead, is that the self is singular and multiple at the same time. Notley's journey and descent is collective as much as it is personal. Notley becomes the guide for those coming after her – she becomes the idealized version that Alette was for her and comes to understand the significance of one's sex, setting an example for younger generations. Losing one's sex is a traumatizing experience, equivalent to losing one's identity. Notley learns to embrace gender in its purest form, a way that makes both male and female selves equal. The double-identity of the self contributes to its duality and collectivity through both the male and female nature, intensifying its complexity. The difference in the quests of Notley and Alette, however, is Notley's inability to fully come to know her self.

The effect of Notley's "failure," for lack of a better word, turns the ending onto the reader, inviting them to undertake their own journey for self-reclamation. Notley's three works are the map for the quest as each reading and interpretation is unique to each reader. Notley's disobedience has the effect of questioning her own authorial authority, suggesting that she wants her reader to adopt the same attitude of disobedience to reclaim their judiciousness, the self unknown to them, their counterpart, whether it be male or female. The notion of self goes beyond the individual, it cannot be contained within a singular identity, it is too infinite, multiple and complex to be confined in anything. The complexity of the self appears through the lyric "I," a method of accessing the subconscious voice, which brings it to the level of

consciousness. Coming into contact with the stranger that is our self is an eye-opening revelation, allowing one to see before the imposition of socialization and its expectations, that teaches its subject to embrace and appreciate gender and sex, as we contain both and to reject one half is to reject the self, making us the perpetrators we fight so aggressively to usurp.

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