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More Signs of Donne

Signs, voiceprints, echoes. . . . Donne persists, turning up sometimes as bidden guest in direct address or as a character in a fiction, sometimes as line or phrase in poem or prose. Whether as quotation or provocation, as iconic figure signifying soul stress or more carnal matters, Donne remains an ongoing presence in the literary imagination. We hope to highlight such sightings and soundings—like those discussed in the following essays—in future volumes of *John Donne Journal.*

[Editor]

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Tracking the Voiceprint of Donne

Judith Scherer Herz

Three hundred and fifty years after Donne found himself riding westward on Good Friday, 1613, Paul Muldoon was on a similar journey. His poem, "Good Friday, 1971, Driving Westward," is one of his earliest, published in his first volume, *New Weather* (1973). Muldoon has often acknowledged Donne's importance for him, and indeed he has remained an ongoing presence and provocation (the most recent sighting in June 2006 was "Sillyhow Stride," a full two and a half pages in the *Times Literary Supplement* and now in the new collection *Horse Latitudes*). Without the title, Muldoon's Good Friday poem might not at first reading suggest either that occasion or that paternity. But the title drives the reading (Anne Ferry's subtle meditations on how titles

work offer a helpful lens here[1]), and as it does one not only reads as if through a palimpsest but encounters a wholly new voice claiming its place and its sound yet still located within the Donne imaginary. Forty-two lines, like its predecessor, it moves towards by moving away, circling not around the crucifixion but around a death that may or may not have happened, which he and his companion (the girl "I gave a lift to . . . out of love") may or may not have caused, a secularizing in some sense of the Donne response ("the spectacle of too much weight for me"). Although he does not hold up, examine, and parse his words and figures here as Donne does ("let man's soul be a sphere," or the many turns on "spectacle," "seeing," "beholding"), Muldoon imagines with a similar bodily specificity:

> . . . . Letterkenny had just then laid
> Open its heart and we passed as new blood
> Back into the grey flesh of Donegal.
> The sky went out of its way for the hills
> And life was changing down for the sharp bends
>
> Where the road had put its thin brown arm round
> A hill. . . .[2]

The model is there and the challenge for the 19-year-old poet, who does not seem particularly tormented by Donne's worry that God will not "thinke mee worth thine anger,"[3] is to imitate without imitation, without even repeating, certainly not by being Donne, but still to write a Good Friday poem with something of that same surprise to be driving in *that* direction *that* day.

But if he did not imitate, Muldoon did swallow Donne whole. The most spectacular example, 35 years later, was "Sillyhow Stride," an elegy for Warren Zevon, the noir rock Orpheus of drugs and death, played not on an oaten flute, but on "a Fender through a Marshall rig / that was so massively overdriven / I couldn't hear the phone ring, didn't hear that

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[1] *The Title to the Poem* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

[2] *Poems: 1968–1998* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), p. 19.

[3] "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward," in *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), p. 368. All citations of Donne's poems, except for the Holy Sonnets, are to this edition.

excitable boy."[4] Indeed, if any poem is imitated here it is *Lycidas*, at least in its grief for a death too soon, not from shipwreck but from mesothelioma, to say nothing of too many drugs and too much drink, for promise not fully realized, and *sotto voce* for the self, not where Milton set it, when we two drove our flocks a field, but when we went

> . . . barreling down the autobahn
>
> through West Hollywood
> in your little black Corvette . . .
> . . . our eyes set not on the noted weed
>
> but the noted *sea*weed of Nobu Matusisha.
> (p. 97)

But so many of the words of the poem are Donne's, half lines, whole lines ("Two graves must hide, Warren, thine and mine corse" [p. 95] or "I long to talk to some old lover's / ghost about the night you tipped the scales / for the Everly Brothers" [p. 96]). Donne himself enters as a figure for Zevon when on Grammy night, you were "as incongruous / there as John Donne at the junior prom" (p. 95), this riffing on Zevon's "he took little Suzie to the Junior Prom," from "Excitable Boy," the song, along with "Werewolves of London," that made his reputation; both of these echo throughout Muldoon's poem along with echoes from their own collaboration in 2001 on "My Ride's Here." It is a dense pastiche, continuing a poetics that he began in 1994 in "Yarrow" (a considerably longer long poem) in its mingling of persons and places and other poets' words filtered through his own (in "Yarrow" it's an Irish/English confluence), and in its three sections of three line stanzas, although there is no sestina sub-structure here as there is in "Yarrow."

What's added in "Sillyhow Stride" is the music; the poem has a beat (Muldoon is also a musician, playing guitar and percussion as well as writing the lyrics for his Princeton rock/pop group, Racket), and it is Donne who provides that beat. He's the left hand of the stride piano, his words set the rhythm, they offer a deep structure, while Muldoon with the right hand makes melodic improvisations against those Donne chords. Muldoon and Zevon merge to become Donne avatars with

[4] *Horse Latitudes* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), p. 102.

Muldoon both chronicler and actor of this incarnation. And he has his own separate grief, for the poem contains another elegy; this one for his sister, at whose hospital bed he kneels, adjusting the "sillyhow" of her oxygen mask ("sillyhow" is a dialect word meaning "caul") and he

> . . . couldn't think that she had sunk so low
> she might not make the anniversary
>
> of our mother's death from that same cancer, this same quick,
> quick, slow
> conversion of manna to gall.
>
> (p. 99)

As Donne's words move through this new medium, they unspool old meanings and new, but also remain intact as a challenge to the pityings and self pityings which they evoke, ironize, and comment on and this is largely because, sorrows aside, Donne's words handle so well. What Muldoon responds to is their excitability, their odd leaps and joinings, their potential to be excavated from within, situated on the brink of a pun (Donne's air and angels, Muldoon's barm and Barmecides: referring to "those line managers who couldn't manage a line of coke / all those Barmecides offering beakers of barm"), a poetry where catachresis is the norm, and since his subject is excess personified, the Donne words fit:

> I want you to tell me if grief brought to numbers, cannot be so
> fierce
> pace Donne's sales pitch,
> for he tames, that fetters it in verse,
>
> throwing up a last ditch
> against the mounted sorrows, for I have more Warren, I have
> more,
> more as an even flame two hearts did touch
>
> (p. 104)

It's a poem that cannot be summarized, nor even epitomized; the cast is too full—from Zevon's father to Brian Jones, to child soldiers in the Ivory Coast, to the twin towers, to parascending in LA, to that final line of flight where "the turkey-buzzards [are] waiting for you to eclipse and cloud them with a wink / as they hold out their wings and of the sun his

working vigor borrow" (p. 106). In a poem that might be called a musical offering, it is Donne who is being offered. Here, Warren, take these words; they are you.

Sometimes Muldoon does write a twenty-first-century Donne poem. One, written after he had participated in a project pairing a scientist with a poet, is something Donne might have come up with had he thought about MRIs instead of the new astronomy:

> Once I looked into your eyes
> and the only tissue I saw through
> was the tissue of lies
> behind everything you do.
> Once I looked into your heart
> and imagined I could trace
> the history of the art
> of deception in your face.
> Now there's something more than a chance
> of making molecules dance.
> I'm somewhat gratified to find
> that by laser-enhanced
> magnetic resonance,
> if nothing else, I may read your mind.[5]

It's neat, it's wry and funny, it's Donne (particularly the Donne of poems like "The Message": "Yet send me back my heart and eyes / That I may know and see thy lyes"). It's even a sonnet, though not holy, but it is "Sillyhow Stride" that is really the keeper of the flame.

Holy sonnets do keep getting written, however, and Muldoon certainly has meditated on Donne's even if he has not written any that speak directly to that sequence. In a recent anthology in which poets discuss "overlooked poems," Muldoon, writing on "Show me dear Christ," explains how he had somehow missed this poem "despite the fact that I've been reading John Donne in a way that I might once have

[5]Lolly O'Brien, "A Poem in the Science Lab," *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, 10 September 2003, <http://www.princeton.edu/~paw/archive_new/PAW03-04/01-0910/features3.html>.

described as 'religiously.'"[6] The others, like "Batter my heart" or "Spit in my face," had left him reeling with the result that he "wasn't physically fit to" read this one. But he has written sonnets and those that make up the poem, "Horse Latitudes," have their deep back story in Donne's *Devotions*, as they meditate on the sick body of the beloved and on history both personal and from the deep past to the present vexed moment, from the Battle of the Boyne to Basra:

> Proud-fleshed Carlotta. Hypersarcoma.
> For now our highest ambition
> was simply to bear the light of the day
> we had once been planning to seize.[7]

There are, however, more direct engagements with Donne's Holy Sonnets, as I have discovered in this stage two of the tracking of Donne's voiceprint;[8] and the contemporary poet who has encountered and responded to them most directly is the American poet, Mark Jarman, in his 2000 book, *Unholy Sonnets*, continuing the Donnean exploration he had begun in his 1997 *Questions for Ecclesiastes*, which also contains a sequence entitled "Unholy Sonnets." Jarman's "Soften the blow, imagined God, and give / Me one good reason for this punishment" obviously writes to Donne's "Batter my heart three person'd God," and it too has a striking central figure, not of siege, usurpation, and holy rape, but of a grinning ironmonger as a stand-in for the speaker (wasn't that the occupation of Donne's father?), who in his attempt to twist a bar sinks to his knees, thinking *he* was stronger.[9] Jarman's is a more willing submission, partly, I think, because his belief feels less vexed than Donne's; not that doubts and questions don't recur, but he doesn't seem to take any special pleasure in them. His investigations turn outward to the pain and suffering of others; unlike Donne, he makes no claims about his unique sinfulness. There is little sense that *his* sins abound above all others', above "all those numberless infinities of souls" who will respond

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[6]"Paul Muldoon on 'Show me Dear Christ,'" in *Dark Horses: Poets on Overlooked Poem*, ed. Joy Katz and Kevin Prufer (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), pp. 46–47.

[7]"Horse Latitudes: Beijing," in *Horse Latitudes*, p. 3.

[8]Stage one was "Under the Sign of Donne," *Criticism* 43.1 (2001): 29-58.

[9]*Unholy Sonnets* (Ashland, OR: Storyline Press, 2000), p. 23.

to that last trumpet call, or that God will mercifully overlook him at the last: "That thou remember them, some clayme as debt, / I think it mercy, if thou wilt forgett."[10] Indeed, what may be Jarman's direct response to these lines comes in a poem that wonders how we can say "this is the moment, this is all we have" as it moves to acknowledging the "joy of loving only for a lifetime." In a language that beautifully blends Donne and George Herbert, he concludes by revising Donne's hope that God will forget him:

> . . . . Death
> Will smoke us out like bees, but we'll forget
> That we were going to see the end of joy.
> Our souls will keep like honey after death.
> We'll forget that we were going to forget.[11]

For Jarman, however, the operative pronoun is *we*: it is a shared faith as we hope, as he claims in another poem, "that God knows each of us and cares / About the things we speak of in our prayers" (*Unholy*, p. 22; not a great rhyme!), even though terrible things do keep happening and no one, sometimes not even God, seems to be paying much attention. But except for the occasional line Jarman is rarely inside Donne's language, neither engaging it nor engaging Donne's engagement with it. Indeed, the voice I hear is much more like George Herbert's, conversational and quiet, fine figures on offer but not exploded as Donne's are, a known world evoked with quiet wonder. Jarman's poems are explicitly placed in time and space; his God is in the details as in the sonnet that recalls "two young Americans drunk on the Umbrian hills. . . . Wanting this forever." "Who needed God?" they asked and "watched our Godless perfect darkness breed / enormous softly burning stars." But why then does he repeat the question: "who needs God?"—

> Because I'm older and I think God stirs
> In details that keep bringing back that time,

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[10]"Holy Sonnet 5," in *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne, Volume 7, Part 1: The Holy Sonnets*, ed. Gary A. Stringer et al. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 23.

[11]*Questions for Ecclesiastes* (Ashland, OR: Storyline Press, 1997), p. 55.

> Details that are just as vivid now—
> Our bodies, bread, a sharp Umbrian wine.
> (*Questions*, p. 63)

It is something like, to my inner ear at least, that amazing moment in Herbert's "The Flower," when recovering from sickness, he can "once more smell the dew and rain, / And relish versing."[12] God is taste and touch as Herbert knew in "Love (III)" ("So I did sit and eat") and as Jarman also seems to understand.

Although there are instances of an embodied poetics in Jarman's sonnets, one that is invested in corporeality, two contemporary poets who are particularly close to Donne in this regard are the English poet Michael Symmons Roberts and the American Carl Phillips. Roberts's 2004 volume, *Corpus*, not only explicitly addresses Donne but sometimes seems to be rewriting Donne's *Anniversaries,* both *The Anatomy of the World* and *The Progres of the soul.* One might describe the book's structure as in part a liturgical sequence built on the principle of Herbert's *The Temple*, but it is more nearly a body, for *Corpus* is a book as articulated, examined body, or in Donne's language "the body is the book." The first 12 titles, for example ("Pelt," "Ascension Day," "Food for Risen Bodies I," "Corpse," "Corporeality," "Attempts on Your Life," "Post Mortem," "Food for Risen Bodies II," "The Box," "Carnivorous I," "Food for Risen Bodies III," "The Hands," "Jairus"), all illustrate this as they play out variations on life/living, death/dying:

> I found the world's pelt
> Nailed to the picture-rail
> Of a box-room in a cheap hotel
> ("Pelt")[13]

> Sex and death are in the air
> This May morning. . . .
> ("Ascension Day," p. 2)

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[12]"The Flower," in *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), p. 166. All citations of Herbert's poems are to this edition.

[13]*Corpus* (London: Cape Poetry, 2004), p. 1.

This is my body, me, splayed
On the road's crown like a shot bird.
("Corpse," p. 4)

And food, always food:

Generations back, a hoard of peaches,
Apricots and plums was laid down
For the day of resurrection;
("Food for Risen Bodies III," p. 14)

So, God takes your child by the hand
and pulls her from her deathbed.
He says: Feed her, she is ravenous.
("Jairus," p. 17)

The links, affiliations, revisions, and resonances between Donne and Roberts are multiple, and they are not just about the body as Christian mystery, but also about the body in bed. Sometimes, as in the poem directly addressed to Donne that writes back to Elegy VIII ("formerly known as" XIX), it is the mistress's body as new found land now literalized to an America where there are "ranches ringed with barbed wire." It is a poem that asks that the land remember itself *as* living body: "let your lips, / and hers, claim back with whispers / the co-ordinates of bodies" ("To John Donne," p. 39). Or my favorite, a wonderful play on body, desire, and language:

Skin is border country
Ever exiled from each other,
we come here to meet
we use a common tongue
. . . . . .
since the word skin shares a root
—through Breton, Irish, Welsh—with scale
and since in certain lights your back's
pale honey flashes silver,
since you swim so well, so fast
forgive me if at night my hands
feel for vestigial fins and gills,
my fingers turn to hooks.
("What Divides Us," p. 41)

From "The Good Morrow's" greeting "to our waking souls" to "Elegy on Mistress Boulstred's" "harmless fish [in their] monastique silence," Donne's words and longings swim through these lines, even as Roberts writes entirely in his own here and now.

So does Carl Phillips, two of whose poetry collections, *From the Devotions* (1998) and *Riding Westward* (2006), seem directly to allude to Donne in their title poems. Although "Riding Westward" is not a Good Friday poem (the west is the American range), the poem has something of the doubleness of seeing and being that Donne stages in his. Phillips describes it as "a sort of comic self portrait. . . . I liked the idea of juxtaposing a comedic cowboy poem with the lofty metaphysical title. Only later did I think it would work for the title of the book, since the Donne poem concerns the inability to repent . . . to entirely give up the bad behavior the self admits to."[14] However, *From the Devotions*, often allusively and indirectly (the settings are by no means Donne's), picks up Donne's meditative mode and something of his language; the poems examine not so much his own flesh as his lover's. In one of the poems in that collection but not in the "From the Devotions" sequence, one hears the familiar bells:

> Sunday. The bells, as expected. I cannot
> help it if I rise, if finding the room too
> Fraught with light—all of it, the white
> walls, the rinsed notion (always almost
> inside the just out of reach) of God, your
> body gleaming in sleep. . . .[15]

"I think of writing," Phillips said in an interview, "as prayer. And sex is also prayer."[16] What concerns him most in his poetry, he explained in that interview, is "a kind of restiveness of the spirit and of the body that

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[14]Kate Asche, "Transgression and Transcript: Talking Poetry with Carl Phillips," Correspondence Interview with Carl Phillips, October 2005, *Greenbelt Review* [University of California at Davis online journal], no. 4 (Spring 2006), < http://greenbelt.ucdavis.edu/issues/Spring06/Phillips.htm>.

[15]"Alba: Innocence," in *Quiver of Arrows: Selected Poems 1986–2006* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), p. 51.

[16]Charles H. Rowell, "An Interview with Carl Phillips (1994)," *Callaloo* 21.1 (1998): 214.

does not seem to leave us in this life. It's why the metaphysical poets are so important to me—Donne especially" (p. 210). One hears this as well in the eight sonnet sequence in *From the Devotions*, "The Blue Castrato," poems that nod to Donne's Holy Sonnets: "What little of the world I call / (though everything is his, my Lord's, / in the end) my own."[17] The title poem of the volume ends on a note that is pure Donne, two and a half lines that stand as a precise epitome of Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*:

> . . . . What you understood
> of the flesh: how always first we are .
> struck down. *Then we rise; are astounded.*
> (p. 74)

However, the connection to Donne is not just thematic; it is in the lines and language as well. James Longenbach gets at this precisely in his observation that "the tension between the baroque syntax and brief line feels simultaneously like the action of the mind and the rhythm of the body."[18] He might have been speaking of Donne.

If Phillips's poems restage the Donnean erotic as gay desire, something women poets have done since Katherine Philips, Kate Bingham's 2006 *Quicksand Beach*, offers the unusual example of a woman poet who has taken on Donne's mocking, desiring voice and stance, as she addresses *her* man in bed.

> . . . . But love endures—
> the mirror in the wardrobe door reflects
> your face in mine and mine in yours,
> . . . . . .
> At night I wake from dreaming of divorce,
> My arms and legs in sweat, tangles with yours.[19]

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[17]"viii. To His Heirs," in *From the Devotions* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1998), p. 30.

[18]Quoted from *The Boston Review* on the back cover of *Quiver of Arrows*.

[19]"Divorce," in *Quicksand Beach* (Bridgend, Wales: Seren, Poetry Wales Press, 2006), p. 32.

The ors/orce slant rhyme, which moves through the 19 lines of this villanelle, neatly speaks both divorce and union (a "Woman's (in)Constancy" but without the ventriloquizing). One also hears Donne's playful sexual provocation in another Bingham poem, "Monogamy":

> . . . but what's monogamy
> without temptation, faith without love?
> Therefore for love we should sacrifice one
> thing alone; Monogamy; maintain a state
> Of mutual jealousy; outlast our bed.
> (p. 27)

These examples can be many times multiplied. I've recently begun another trail through the poems of Michael Longley, who often comes at Donne's poems aslant, echoing and rethinking them but not directly invoking them, as in "Epithalamium":

> With dawn upon its way,
> Punctually and as a rule,
> The small hours widening into day,
> Our room its vestibule
> Before it fills all houses full.[20]

And in a recent *New Yorker*, there was a Brenda Hillman poem, "Phone Booth," that has "things in its words" the way Donne's do, illustrating the William Carlos Williams observation that there are "no ideas but in things."[21] "There should be more nouns," Hillman's poem begins, "for objects put to sleep against their will." The phone booth here is specifically identified as a reliquary, the poem itself a kind of valediction; indeed at one point it recalls Donne's "A Valediction of My Name in a Window":

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[20] *Selected Poems* (London: Cape Poetry, 1998), p. 2.

[21] "Paterson," *Poems*, 1927, in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, vol. 1: 1909-1939, ed. Christopher MacGowan and A. W. Litz (New York: New Directions, 1986), p. 264. The line recurs in "A Sort of Song," *The Wedge*, 1944, in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, vol. 2: 1939-1962, ed. Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1988), p. 55.

While we gathered our actions/wits
For magic and pain
The destiny twins
Some of us scratched pale glyphs
Onto the glass while talking.[22]

It remains an interesting question: what is it about Donne that he so persists, that he turns up even at the junior prom? Why does Donne matter to poets in ways that his contemporaries don't? I referred to Muldoon and *Lycidas* at the start, but the deep echo there is pastoral elegy with a Miltonic inflection; it is not an engagement with Milton. Geoffrey Hill's recent *Scenes from Comus* really confirms this point despite its subject. One does not hear Milton in that text; the poems there make up an essay on the masque rather than a remasquing ("a conversation with J. Milton" and himself), as Hill meditates "personality as a masque," "sexual love [as] instinctively alchemical"[23] (more Donne than Milton, that). Perhaps A. M. Klein's "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" offers a counter example, but that engagement is under the sign of its impossibility, a latter day Milton, for Klein is "an editorial writer bereaved with Bartlett."[24] The mid-twentieth-century American poet Ronald Johnson offers another instance: Milton, or in this case, *Paradise Lost*, becomes something to empty out, to sift and then to reclaim as one's own, the white spaces, the silences as much as the words, now reconfigured, re-placed. *RadiOs* (radiant, radiating skeleton, the poem's bones, its sounding box) is the fascinating result, the *Ur*-text, along with Tom Phillips's *A Humament*,[25] for several such liftings (Jan Bervin's *Nets* which "net" new poems out of Shakespeare's son*nets* is a good recent example).[26] Johnson moved the words about and found, as Guy

[22]"Phone Booth," *New Yorker*, 5 March 2007, p. 70.

[23]*Scenes from Comus* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), pp. 12, 3, 8.

[24]*Selected Poems of A. M. Klein*, ed. Zailig Pollock, Seymour Mayne, and Usher Caplan (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 99.

[25]*A Humament: A Treated Victorian Novel* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980). Phillips painted over, under, around the words and pages of the 1892 novel *A Human Document* by W. H. Mallock. It is really to be looked at more than read. Phillips is a painter, a writer, and a translator; he did an illustrated translation of Dante's *Inferno*.

[26]*Nets* (Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2004).

Davenport put it, his own poem there. But, as Davenport notes, "the poem we are reading is still Milton's."[27] It is not, as with the Donne remakings, a breathing through that language into one's own entirely modern idiom (probably the last poets to do that with Milton were the Romantics and, to a degree, the Victorians). Of course, Muldoon also sifts Donne, but it's Donne with wasabi, "as the blood labors / to beget Matsuhisa-san's seared toro" (p. 97).

Donne does seem to matter to contemporary poets, but I wonder if there are reasons beyond the usual responses to the question of why this is so: that is, provocative and continuously surprising language, those words that handle so well, colloquial accessibility even for the arcane, the rhythm and sound of good talk (a remark in a review of a Paul Simon concert certainly would apply to Donne: "By packing his verses full of words, he emphasizes the rhythms of spoken English. He needs a rhythm section that can keep up with his mouth"[28]); also excess, self regard, intellectual seriousness that turns on a dime to a wink if not a sneer, vexed belief, sex, death. Maybe those offer reason sufficient, but I'm still looking for more.

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[27]"An Afterword," in *RadiOs* (Berkeley, CA: Sand Dollar, 1977); the book was reissued in 2005 by Flood Editions.

[28]Kelefa Sanneh, "Folkie Still Audacious after All These Years," *New York Times*, 23 October 2006, p. E1.