

## Alice in Paris

Hi. I'm having a slight out of the body experience but I'm hoping I'll come back in cause actually this is the greatest thing - to be here, and to honor Alice, which is the best thing of all, you know, so I'll just start with applauding her. [EM & room applauds.] And I have to say just in typical poet fashion, I've written my piece fast as hell and more than anything I think what I really have done is like stroked a lot of the sheep, i.e. I quoted wildly from her poems. I just feel like I've just had a month-long affair with this book, and I've loved this book for the time since it's come out and never just did a front-to-back reading of it, and it's been so intense and so beautiful and so, I already had a great experience, and I'm hoping I can glean some of that for you guys and share it.

I thought about composing a bunch of questions and inviting Alice to come up and ask me them and then I could perform being the specialist on Alice's work. Like to divulge a keynote, or just a note. And like every good idea I've had in the specific months I've spent reading this book it got limp rather than exciting while the performance of reading *Grave of Light* rowed on. I thought of asking how many people in this room had read all of *Grave of Light*. When I got this book in 2006 it lived with me in my apartment and I even travelled with it for a while. Every instance of opening it made me want all of it all the time. Meaning that it felt like the best Alice book which is to say it felt full of surprises things I'd never read and things I'd read too but there was something about the precise dosing of it that seemed special to me immediately and it still does. It's

everything Alice and it's sort of seaweedy. The cover (ta-da!) is a collage of hers with a serious child Alice gazing out...

...that is you right?

*Yes, and it was shot in Oakland!*

Amazing! Whoa, we should be like blowing this up or something, right? And sort of blondish looking right? And when you were a child you were called Libby right?

*Yes I fought to be called Alice.*

She fought to be called Alice. This is totally so that the deepest part of Alice ordered me to be made was begun by Alice. It's incredible.

The cover is a collage of hers with a serious child Alice gazing out through the teeth of a fan. And the fact that it is a collage and Alice makes collages and this book is wrapped in a collage makes perfect sense cause it really is entirely collage and I think of all her work is a collage and the notion and particularly the perfect practice of a selected particularly this selected demonstrates and enacts that particularly modernist practice. And Alice has elevated the term practice to the highest widest function which is a writing that is always there like a solution that your living is happening within this very ocean of art. I thought if I read all the book not just dipping in and loving it for years then I would be alone with a few people in the room a handful of Berrigans perhaps and Alice herself in knowing

something but now there's only Alice and probably somebody else in the room has read the whole book too I did finish it a few days ago in Paris now what.

When I should have begun writing I turned to my B book which was a bio of Sam Wagstaff before and after Mapplethorpe. I kept thinking what's wrong with me that rather than putting down a word about Alice now I'm finishing the other book too. Like the OCD took over. Luckily a passage in the Wagstaff book stopped me and it was a passage about pointing. As a beginning one might compare the art of photography to the act of pointing. And certainly people have said that about other poets the Jimmy Schuyler point and snap but this is something different. The book was saying about Atget, the photographer, that he seemingly saw a purpose for his work that had nothing to do with creating art, but rather a moral purpose. So hinge to that "as a way of beginning one might compare... the art of Alice Notley to the art of pointing" but so additionally I believe that Notley, I don't want to call her Notley, *Alice*, comparing Alice's art to the art of pointing and additionally I believe that (fellow soldier) Notley in her complete dedication to making art, to putting all sorts of things together has been doing this morally. I know it's such a dangerous, loaded word, but I mean it truly and even that this is an experiential teaching book the very best kind that never lands but as it knows more gives more and is simultaneously the art of making and the art of teaching itself and that is a big piece of what her purpose is in all these years of composing this writing body. And I think she's giving birth to herself to a knowing woman and a knowing girl. I even think in the best most deliberate way she's actually even here to help us. I love Alice & I want to thank her now. (Thank you). I'll start mostly at the end of the book. The other

night - a few weeks back when I travelled to Brooklyn carrying *this* on a occasion of mourning and one of my most wild and adorable and charismatic one-time students, a guy named Wiley Birkhofer, who I'd also like to dedicate this note to because he loved Alice's work and last week devastatingly he threw himself off the Manhattan Bridge. I'm the ghoulish sort. I want to know why. There was a rumor that he had a history of mental illness or that he had had his knee stung by a bee and it got infected and he was on crutches at the end which was short a couple of days but he had already begun his adult life of teaching in New York and he had just been home. He was a boy from California and Alice is such a woman, a girl and surely this *Grave of Light* is a western book as it grows huger and huger and when I arrived at the loft in Bushwick where all of Wiley's friends were meeting to light candles and stand up sobbing and saying things one of my other former students the poet Allyson Patty was there with her boyfriend equally brilliantly named Mike Lala and when they saw me carrying Alice the assumption was I would be reading from her which I churned around with a little bit but I didn't but then Mike reached for the book and he showed me this and it was ahead of me he was getting ahead of me in the book and I had a little moment of loss thanks Mike like I was being slammed with a spoiler as you are now but if there really is no end to the book or this note or this day we'll be swimming in this ocean forever because a grave of light is forever right. Mike underlined this: (It's from Alma)

And then suddenly I pick up the wrong book and Robert Mapplethorpe is dying. What am I doing. Is everyone dying all the time.

So this is Alice:

I am not dead but will die in this world and my death is my soul, who is crying. As none of us has ever counted. Do you know what your existence was--that is a discredited kind of question. [no capitals here.] if everything i know is from my body. where i am [stop capitalizing 'I' Eileen] and my soul is. was i alive [it's so much work to keep making the I's stay down to stop the machine] only to be aware of that fact. was i alive only to love and be hurt by that. was i alive. was i alive to be told over and over by people, not just men that i "had so much going for me." was i alive to give the men a justification for their obscene machinations [here the machine keeps struggling to conform the more communal in words not in lives i down] pervasive throughout the details of my own life even into my body and causing the crying of my soul. so you might say this is to go too far, but it is not. we have all been invaded, we the dead women, and that is why we are together in negative space.

which is a photograph. a photograph about Alice and her work. a collage. a tear. I can go anywhere from here.

she says at the beginning of this book that she had taken as unconscious models Frank O'Hara's collected poems and William Carlos Williams's selected. I thought more like O'Hara's selected but you know that's me. That's what I'm thinking about because it was the first time I consciously thought about a book that didn't run discrete poems throughout but tracked the poems one under each you think for a moment that the publisher is saving paper but we are thinking as poets here entering and being and dying and loving in this collection and the effect of the streaming format is a neverendingness a cinematic experience of one poem flowing out of the next and also a violence I think. I often think in editing a poem (especially in a book like this where you're taking hunks of

many different poems) when one removes things and jumps that one is also creating wounds that the progression the new progression works because the poems are bleeding no just metaphorically but their bodies are open to one another so it is one work here bleeding light.

I thought of the secret birth place of time in the world the cave that Jacob used as the initiatory place to share blood with the new leader in Lost. I wonder if Alice watched Lost, I already know the answer, which is no, so this is my shit. And I'm committed to not bringing extraneous things into this moral reading of Grave of Light or sometimes I thought Game of Thrones just to amuse myself or cunt of light, that's the best. I don't know if the word cunt exists anyplace in here pussy does but pussy being the hallway to the womb it's also a grave of light there correct? It's a contradictory moral place that mostly spins. So Mike was pointing, Alice is pointing I believe and over time the pointing and even the knowing is different.

Let's go way back to the beginning.

One other thing that's weird about the beginning of the book is that if you watch the way the book goes and it starts off with these very poem-like looking things, which are small and they only fill part of the page and by the time you move through the book and they get wider and huger and they flood the page so you really might start to think of the more kind of classic poetry-look of a poem on the page as all pointing, that what we used to call lineation, each word that we pick and choose, especially as it sits in the absence of

the page, is with all the removal and all the presence just like one pointing at a word after another.

I'm drunk (martini  
& piece of toast) I think  
Our traffic signal's remarkable  
in the air. 2 wires & two streets  
Cross exactly there.

And on the very next page:

I dreamed you brought home a baby  
Solid girl, could already walk  
In blue corduroy overalls  
Nice & strange, baby to keep close  
I hadn't thought of it before  
She & I waited for you out by the door  
Of building, went in  
Got you from painting  
Blue & white watercolor swatches  
We got on a bus, city bus  
One row of seats lining it & poles  
It went through the California desert  
Blue bright desert day

I think a man is giving birth there, that's my guess. It's sort of a perfect little poem moving from dream where we are always in Alice Notley dream is the sea and a remembering inside the dream "I hadn't thought of it before" making another time code

already in what looks like a very simple poem (this is collage) and “she and I waited for you out by the door” another time, enduring it, making the time inside of the poem be real (“it’s got time”) and then space (“Door of building, went *in!*”) so that the “time” of the poem has an additional architecture, a *there*. And then “We got on a bus, city bus” so that now within the *there*, we’re “transporting” and that place is real: One row of seats lining it & poles. So now there’s *there there* in the *there* and I don’t know about you but I’m reveling in this leafy complexity, this seaweed, and this is early Notley, early Alice, and now the everything: and *It* went through the California desert/Blue bright desert day so everything the poem was became vehicle travelling through desert and brightness and blue. A permanent state of transition which is the soul of her oeuvre and this book, and the genius of it too is that it is easy. It is easy like photography has taught us to look at photographs, and film film so that we are the most sophisticated audience and writing but also photography and film have taught us to read Alice who I’ve already declared modernist but it’s such postmodernist shit too in its supreme confidence that every metonymic moment in this tiny poem from dream to remembering to waiting to architecture travelling and finally a disquisition upon or in Ur places because this whole book I think begins and ends in the desert where Alice was born. I have no idea where Alice is born but eternity is blue and this is a perfect poem because it never stops and incidentally whether it’s coincidence or regionality dovetail both Alice and Rae Amantrout both from southern California say blue strangely, have you noticed they said it with full Els, it blows up and it takes space, it holds water like a cactus. Poetry saves this desert. Ask Alice.

Incidentally I'm in room 604 in a hotel in Paris now in my underwear writing in bed.  
Frances writes me that Alice is in Oakland or California now, it's really going to happen.  
And nothing has made me write like that. Holy shit. I didn't want to call Alice in Paris.  
That felt like well obviously it's like dating your therapist or something like that. We  
have to stay apart. One of us is the bride. We don't know who. Until now. Hi Alice.

I just saw her last night. Jocelyn suggested I'd get some ideas from Alice reading. Not  
much. Motley rhymes with Notley. Is light mottled or motley. I thought a motley horse.  
That feels right. I thought she ends each poem with a cinch. She only slightly tightens the  
last word or the last few words so that all you get is silence. A completely comfortable  
silence. For her. And we watch her in the room. And gain permission from that quiet. In  
her cinching Alice is a master. In it. And there is both writing and performance in it.

I think of shit next. The word 'shit' in her poems. Her shit is sandy.

But getting to that I pass this:

Not the completion of myself, but myself!  
through the whole long universe.

So Alice's, that line, for some reason, "through the whole, long universe," seems to me  
like a particularly Alice Notely line, the sound of it, and I have to say it's those fucking  
Ls. Because every poet who writes in a regional or even a, or maybe it's a lisp, I don't  
know, it may be that you and Rae have the same lisp, but I think each of us have these

particular body sounds and we write in them and also when we perform we sing in them. So every time I've heard Alice say this line, or a line, "through the whole, long universe," she puts all that, that, L space into it, and it winds up being kind of like the Billy Holiday line of the Alice oeuvre.

So can't not use that. Or this:

Our moving cars through the rain  
I'm grabbing the road  
trees can turn fish or rock  
underwater (or city like toad)  
our compacted gyre, common load  
setting out to win a face  
child was is me, and me, and no one  
spangled with charm apparently flesh  
you in me with me mean mind clear and fleshed

Couldn't pass that one because both the thought that we always never know if we're awake or dream in Alice's poetry, seems they're one state. But also the sound the fucking sound in these early poems which I must leave is that they are so Shakespearean which is to say utterly cinched.... Like within and without.

And England too is always in the poems at least here in the beginning back in the roots of, dare I say, Notley

England's so old that layers of death

pervade beautifully the beautiful countryside.

Last Sunday I walked barefoot through the cemetery,  
came home and wrote”...And the dead the golden  
warm & shady earth/I’m comfortable with/...Sights  
& insights endless as the dead...” Intimacy with  
all, spreading, Your Dailiness.

So early on there’s this coronation of debris, of literature, of family.

But where is the shit. Probably in New York...

Meanwhile, already in this early work, I’m watching the scale change, the expanse  
coming on in Songs for the Unborn Second Baby:

Pregnant

not the repast of news or psychological

through arithmetical

(stars, filth)

I mean early on I think this book, this poem makes an argument for the landscapeness of  
poetry by its establishment of shelves nooks moments in meaning and placement.

And passing back through (I'm going forward) January in Alice Ordered Me to be Made

child you are is the source of all  
honestly bliss at dusk in Chicago  
is face you've ever been

and almost before

dusky the child air you are  
handsome you're head to toe

it's like this celebration of art, like human potential life workshop collage for one always  
frankly, willing to fall on her own babyhood....

I go backwards to find the place where I underlined shit:

was how my desk was  
Desk?

Shit it was an orange crate

And it's so important how she uses swearing, and the fact that shit is a swear, yes, and  
it's vulgar, yes. I said earlier that her shit was sandy and I meant it's sandy like shit in cat  
litter boxes where there's all this stuff stuck to the shit, because that's the way shit sits in  
a poem, it doesn't sit there like other words. I mean it deliberately didn't flow like other  
words even capitalizing on her own youth or femininity, because it's very different when  
a woman uses the word shit, I mean these are the gender differences in poetry, when a  
woman uses the word shit and when a man uses the shit, you get a whole different bang  
for your buck, and as a woman saying shit you say it differently and just like Alice has

these Ls you all know what it sounds like when she goes “shit” it has a whole different, we’re talking about the percussive qualities of words, and even the space around the word in which the poet bounces the word like a basketball, knowing exactly the impact it’s got. Shit it was an orange crate. It becomes punctuation and brakes the poem very wise and always self-conscious and allows her in the next breath to say, using what’s really a bad poetic word, but it works, allows her in the next breath to say, ‘dazzling 3 oclock light’ such is her collage.

Around The Prophet we’re finally getting into the 80s now the phenomenon occurs of Alice as internet. Cause it didn’t exist yet. Poems were somewhat more analog then as was intimacy and visiting in houses and ringing a bell. People would be gossiping and telling each other their dreams and this one system of flowing would occur in Alice’s poems and here I think of something I wonder if she talks about when she went to Iowa, she studied fiction not poetry is that true (she says yes) and I think fiction is her poetry’s secret weapon because around here, I mean around the time of the prophet, there began to be this surge in her work an enormity and at this point in time it felt like enormity of life and time and friendship and neighborhood and we didn’t have the internet yet so a big poem could float information that might be about me or you or a secret I told you and part of the glue of readings and our society then was wondering who Alice was talking about on her internet her gigantic stay at home Scorpio flow her public secrecy...the poems started to have this wide magnetic force...again at the time very analog...

there’s a very sad line in here and I’ll play it for my friend Wiley:

It is possible that/people who/Die young have a vocation for doing just that.

I mean by calling a poem The Prophet she slid under the wire a lot of gossip and a lot of wisdom.

or

There is no place in America for heterosexual poets with children

Whiney!

It's possible it's unfair that I dub Alice so collage so I can freely tear:

Remembrance

is the most fragrant, love is  
the most dark pink, courage  
is grey-green growing wild

This is definitely my idea of a vacation just standing here saluting my friend...

By Waltzing Matilda we're at the pith of Philip Whalen Alice and what I mean by that in a way is the big lo-o-o-ng poem and I was in Alice's workshop in 1975, talk about pointing, she would put a piece of art on the table and go, "write about that" and we'd be like "what?" and then we were stuck in the room with Alice, having to write like crazy people. And she introduced us all to long Philip Whalen poems and the distinctive thing

I'm thinking about is just that they were so piece-y, that there was a block of prose and there was a little drawing and then there was a stretch of poetry and they all looked different, and *Waltzing Matilda* was the book where for me the book, the poems, started to look most - you know you had *Dear Somebody*, then they used the *Dear Abbey* kind of format, and they, they just kept switching shapes. So we're at the pith of Philip Whalen *Alice*. But also the very matter of fact living has begun to glow with an unearthly light in the work itself. The knowing is in every single moment. *Waltzing Matilda* in its own honesty even with the formality of advice column and the fund raising technology of postcards...there was somebody in the Midwest who was paying poets \$100 or \$500 to write poems on *five hundred post cards*, so every time you walk... huh? [audience member: *it was me*] motherfucker! So for months we were all walking into your apartment writing madly on the postcards to raise money and then it never... I'm trying to say that that even though the work that she was writing at this time felt like the other work, there was this different glow...there was a yahweh feeling, like the thing you really can't name so I feel...I both want to say that I can't quote from this book, but then I will because the living and the writing were really the same thing and we don't live that way twice.

All my life,  
since I was ten,  
I've been waiting  
to be in  
this hell here  
with you;  
all I've ever  
wanted, and  
still do.

The book revels in forms of address:

Dear Fuckface,

For me something big happens in Margaret & Dusty and I hope you aren't offended by this way of putting it but I think a new artifice arises in what I think of as Alice's second time and her secret weapon (the fictionalizing of poetry) surges forward I feel like in Margaret & Dusty there's a new narrative surge with words virtually clinging to them.

And what I mean truly is that I felt like if the poem is a ball, and I often think of poetry as being on a round shape, it's like the ball was turning really quickly and the words were going around it and there was there was this tiny tear that was almost palpable you know, so that the excitement of the poem is that it was fucked up and you can rely on it. There was just a tiny micro-abstraction but it was really real and it was really there.

Take on a  
smoky look on rock wall or tie of spider silk  
It's all a look? Which bright with orange  
The first thirty pages are a little wet.  
I'll never get in any human interest again  
because I'm no longer a dolphin.  
It's so lovely out I'm nostalgic for  
Indiana & the Inn there. Some-  
where in room where face-dancing I had to  
say something stupid in order to live,  
like...I can't think right now  
of anything stupid to say.

By the mid eighties Alice can do anything. Evidence being The Ten Best Issues of Comic Books. That was the title of a poem.

1. X-Men #141 & 142.

You know and there's nine more.

In general the feeling of these poems:

life the new stranger embraced  
until dawn and familial and  
the new mirror ages

It's just not fighting it. Strangely relaxed.

By At Night the States I feel like she's reflecting on her own practice I believe:

But/in like a dream the floor is no/longer discursive...

These explain those in their everyday lushness holding on to the present. That was the glow.

So I'm not even slightly ashamed of my own relationship to Grave of Light  
my tiny plan just to read it

The thing about at night the states is she keeps ending it.

I guess we got home.

Her perfect vagueness: What's done is/perfection.

My/French is the shape of this/book/that means I.

I just think *read it again*.

And beautifully she ends that poem with Montana. Illinois./Escondido to walk on by.

It's so ended explicitly it's like a country song, just walk on by.

Parts of a Wedding simply has more holes. It's drifty. There's a quickening of *this*.

You know I just wrote all over your book so this morning I'm just typing.

So much happens in the parts of a wedding. She's establishing a real political I. And by that I mean something monumental is occurring over something dead which is a new kind of politics.

We the lovers & the eyes

All over, inside her

when the wedding

is over, & the park "lies cold &

lifeless"

I don't want to force a point here:

This sort of obsession

is a political correction

She's funny.

I feel like she's giving any old answer in a broken anthem

and in this great poem Beginning with a stain, for me, Arlette was born

it's like this whole geology like the ocean receding and there's all these mountain ranges  
it feels like this wounded powerful book is constructed to show us how her poems got  
born.

And the quotes, cause the quotes begin here I believe, the quotes around all the beautiful  
things in the poem I'm talking about Beginning with a stain, what they're doing is they're  
both framing and jettisoning at once, and it's how we throw precious things into a grave,  
piles and piles of them and without narrative now but just piling.

In Homer's Art she makes the brilliant point that no woman is like Helen, no matter what  
the male poets say or like Andromache or Penelope, only men are like them in the sense  
that they invented them they are pieces of male mind.

And coincidentally having married and lost two men and even having lost a brother she now seems most entitled and equipped to critique men as a class and to examine politics and war as male inventions, and even to some extent, what men do to themselves.

white phosphorus is a substance a burning chemical and as a poem it's Alice at her most my new favorite word, haptic. It's a bumpy bumpy story it has texture here the quotes almost like ironic brakes, the poem qualifying itself as the sad violence of the telling moves ahead it makes a solution, but of the texture:

“can't he come back” “fifteen years later” “can't he come back” “years after he'd left”  
“Vietnam”

“We were talking, talking, in green & blue air”

And that takes us to the crux where we are this weekend's moniker, Arlette

which I've barely touched and I knew everybody would touch up a storm on Arlette, and so I just use one line.

“A mother” “& child” “were both on fire, continuously”

So, I mean, maybe this is a really shitty talk.

Which could be nice. But now I'm afraid I've run out of gas.

Is it Paris or Oakland that is to blame. This is mostly by now long enough but I don't want to be cavalier of what I may as well call Notley's late style or simply the last 100 pages of this book.

Obviously Myles is to blame. My great excitement here even as my energy wains is that I know this later writing less. In something called Close to me and Closer I stumble around excitedly thinking Aha! it's an act of possession. And then I think no she's establishing a Theocracy. And then it's pure abstraction:

When you become...a dot, listening to, the one thought, that's "everything."

It's like it's like a book functioning as a group... in a way it sort of reminds me of this thing that happened in the art world at a certain point in time when every individual artist started to look like a group show, you know, where suddenly here's the photographs, here's the furniture, you know, here's the recording.

So *this* is the most morphing work, throwing out a welter of possibilities. I love this moment, so tender and weird.

...Do what's ob-  
vious Aren't we  
aliens Our shapes

suggest not Our star-shaped  
hands Our shell-like ears  
And flower genitals  
But we are aliens  
fretting to belong here  
Inventing words & frets  
Inventing folksongs In-  
venting rich & poor And  
the song of that  
Sing back Sing

I do a hapless thing for a moment and wonder if there's one thing morphing through all  
the work you know the way you might look at Sol Lewitt and say isn't it secretly all  
autobiography not minimalism is there an Alice shape now...and also she's grappling  
with that...

What I say to you—I almost, transfer a shape.

It's something bagged—as if it were covered by—a long dark sweatshirt cloth—all  
bagged up.

...it might be dead you...or sort of, you not born yet...

someone who doesn't know you, thinks about you.

...Or that is...shape, you know, the idea of there being shapes.

...we don't exactly have shapes here—we go too fast in mind for them.

I'm plucking things wildly here, but perhaps you've read this. It's pure dictation now, possession abstraction & I do believe she's formulating a whole long time...

I know imagining her own present and future ages.

here she goes:

It stands up—the bagged body now. It walks on...stubs, inside the bag, you can't see. But. What can it do like this? Any body bag does what? How can it...change? What's inside it?

I do, I do think Alice is establishing a little religion here. Language like the golem except of course she would contradict that here. Or parse it:

In eternity There is no story

So you might move on as I did to Mysteries of Small Houses and read that she is returning to an earlier style, familiar stuff but she's singing the blues it's a digital streaming of that time

Rocks look the same I'll never be you

I'm going to cheat right to the end

I remember when Alice came to San Diego & we brought her to a tattoo parlor  
where she got an owl on her back and she read from In the Pines

Boughs where the poems dark/ eyes hang

By Songs and Stories of the Ghouls, creepy and magical

The young woman is dressed in a skirt of folded wings upon her sarcophagus our  
knowledge of the religion is lacunar but it is possible that one worshipped nothing except  
for untrue but powerful images and symbols perhaps 'worship' means 'use' as it should.

And I think Alice is using worship now. The ghoulishness of this project is affirmed by  
any style and there is no way forward but your empire's way.

And I feel, this is me, and I feel we are in Alice's Bible:

She's pulling power away from his torso, leaving.

Is that a picture? You were so barren you couldn't hear the beauty in the scratches when  
twigs dragged against the panes on the other side of the old records.

And I love that this book ends with ghosts ghouls as it should.

It's wavering and assertive, contradictory ghouls whispering to you:

I leaned down over

I don't care about, I care about

you

I leaned down over the

world in portrayal

of carefulness, answering

something you couldn't say.

Walking or fallen and you

were supposed

to give therapy to me—

men leaning down

brushing with painted feathers

to the left of chance your operatic.

broken

book.