

Joan Retallack

MEMNOIR



THE POST-APOLLO PRESS





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**Joan Retallack**

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## BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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My thanks to the editors of these publications.

*for Tom Raworth*



# MEMNOIR

Mem: What's our relation to the past?

Noir: Same as to the future.

Mem: Then what's our relation to the future?

Noir: You don't want to know.

Mem: In other words the jig is up.

Noir: In other words the jig is up.



## CURIOSITY AND THE CLAIM TO HAPPINESS

Studies have shown that the brain prefers unpredictable pleasures.

### PRESENT TENSE

it's said that it happens even in nature e.g. during the childhood the mother might have (had) a taste for film noir and take(n) the child along

my machine is hooked up to my machin things inaccessible to the precise methods of e.g. a Brazilian bookmobile being hijacked in a dark underground garage fiction is precisely what they now call non-fiction too get a bit too personal i.e. Eurydice my dark darling don't worry I can bear your not looking at me she cri(ed) out i.e. hoping it (was) true

(now) (here) together in the mix of the modern metropolis Rio Vienna Paris Tokyo Moscow Hong Kong Lagos New York Bombay London Mumbai he and she both feel close to the idealized neuron in the book

some of the diffuse sensations of early childhood may still surprise us as we consider their names e.g. joy frustration shame anxiety love rage fear anger wonder curiosity disgust surprise longing humor pride self-respect fear but not terror fear but not horror

the mother however might not like surprises e.g. wanting to know for how many generations a Negro in the bloodlines can produce a *throwback* the word is memory the child recalls this use of memory does not know what to say for a very long time: The soul is inwardness, as soon as and insofar as it is no longer outwardness; it is *memoria*, insofar as it does not lose itself in *curiositas*.

otherwise one could ask at any moment e.g. in what story does an uninvited goddess walk in and roll a golden ball down the hall or why not enjoy the story of lovers in the same vein from different centuries but in the same story from different worlds but in the same story I write down my dreams this is probably not one of them i.e. for a very long time the child want(ed) more than she could say to not want more than she could say i.e. impossible according to any simple formula for mirroring formulas



if e.g. but for the accidental clause the swerve of curiosity  
on the monkey bars the flash-bulb memory the wall of fire  
outside the window and or something as vague as living in  
time i.e. for a time near what seem to be near things swept  
into the stream of self-translation in the coincidental flow  
of events near disregarded syllables suddenly audible vol up  
sudden outburst of song sudden Ha it's too funny how  
funny it is to feel sometimes and not others how to  
remotely sense a sweet violence in the brevity i.e. the spilt  
second glance

without yards of shimmering adjectives  
description: is description possible can a sunrise  
be described by yards of shimmering adjectives

While the curate was saying this, the lass in boy's clothing stood as if spell-bound, looking first at one and then at another, without moving her lips or saying a word, like a rustic villager who is suddenly shown some curious thing that he has never seen before...she gave a deep sigh and broke her silence at last...Doing her best to restrain her tears, she began the story of her life, in a calm, clear voice.

without the carefully constructed container  
story: is story possible: can a life even a portion  
of a life be contained in a story: would songs  
be better to repair the brain

when if it's curiosity that draws attention to curiosity even  
the other animals like us even in nature if for only the  
space of time e.g. at the watering hole e.g. during those  
times when it's too wide or too narrow for ambiguity the  
range of genres might now include humor and but or  
horror even (then) there

this voltage through the body is brought on by the senses  
senses strictly speaking in logic nothing is accidental the  
world divides us into seekers after facts seekers after gold  
dig up much earth and find little

or less than a port royal stain it's super being natural not wishing to symbolize the wish to return to feel as much at home in e.g. a fortunate sentence as in i.e. an unfortunate century

some may see at this point which is not an Archimedean point the necessity to invent a game in which all vowels are serially replaced with x mxgxcxllly txrxnxng prxmxtxrx txrrxr xntx pxltxblx pxst-pxst xrxny xtc.

or that it is not an idle game after all to forgive that they  
or we in the slit second of a single pulse to reveal the tear  
the tears in all the pages in all their ambiguity paging  
through x number of photo albums knowing and not  
knowing all that is is not there with only a few clues to  
go by e.g. fake cheetah fur fake cowboy hat small dog  
straining at leash small notebook or any other kind of book  
that can be open and closed at the same time

i.e. all this and more with the ontological thickness of a  
scratch and win sheet

look see the red blue yellow green space at the watering  
hole hear the animals slurp see the animals roll in the mud  
witness the archeological trace of some thing less visible  
than a zoological park the mother the father stiff in Sunday  
best the insistent curiosity of the child the timing the  
timing is all that is off

it is that that is the problem with the timing that it is  
always off while it can not be off at all

## PRESENT TENSE: CHOICE

e.g. so to not choose the wrong thing to choose nothing  
nothing and all given the diversity of forms that even a  
soap film or any other minimal surface can at this time at  
or on this point that is not e.g. an Archimedean point

or to consider the mother i.e. Archimedeia on point to  
point out to all how to punch out the holes according to  
the instructions that could have (been) the point to  
begin with

or e.g. any point that can be made into a world view i.e. a wild idea the wild idea one has just (had) as a hummingbird flies by just as one thinks that's a fine deluxe model bumble bee engine with mechanical wings beating the sky into a wild idea a hot majestic interlude containing improbable beauty profanity violence graphic photos of murder victims all this and more before the clouds part and the sun turns into a coffee mug or a doughnut



and but though over the years mathematicians have been able to prove that every noninteresting closed curve is spanned by at least one smooth minimal surface or surface reflecting the twisting of the sun into someone's bird's eye view or the limits of any horizon always being a point of view just like the one unflooding here

and then the first question on the examination turns out to be i.e. drymouth #2 pencil poised: What license does the program of curiosity as the motor of progress of the sciences give itself and or us? not to say them

and then the child may or may not find that to find one's position on the graph using xy coordinates one must reconfigure the geometry of attention in order to comb the snakes from her hair

#### PRESENT TENSE: STILL

they would go often to the movies hot majestic interludes containing profanity violence & graphic photos of murder victims in black and white interlard(ed) with bitter irony of if

in this the context of the extreme sport of everyday life it is necessary to put this in the context of e.g. the extreme sport of everyday life

or the most extreme object of medical curiosity that one could hope to hit upon here i.e. the e.g. clarification of the connections between the way the body moves and feels the way the mind thinks and feels if one dares to seek these bonds in the brain of a living animal

or to zoom in on the scene in the darkened room on the screen the shadow of the murderous aunt is moving across the screen along the far wall of the screen one can tell it is the murderous aunt from the feather in the hat and the dagger in the hand of the silhouette of the shadow on the wall

or the scene in the neighborhood playground the boy falling back the boy falling back and back after being (shot) about to take another bite of his Mars Bar or any other chocolate treat with a paper or plastic wrapper in the country where many fear(ed) God & AIDS & Elephants & Castles & Car Windows & pop goes the weasel on the way home from school

is it too trivial to ask is this a scale too trivial to ask about to ask if it is more tragic or more poignant that the child had hoped to finish i.e. e.g. the candy bar before he (was) (shot) can the tragic be poignant and vice versa and verso and recto and the pant cuff gets caught in the spokes and e.g. the anonymous rider falls off the bike and the optics of the horizon is questioned on the spot by the Mennonite Italian who feels his father watch(ed) too many Sinatra movies and puts too much ham in his omelets

catastrophe theorists say that if we backtrack along the previous path there will be no catastrophe this time i.e. not this time

## PRESENT TENSED

coming out of the movie theater the world the world is  
bright too bright gnostic present tense tense everything  
happening at once the world is full of its own mute history  
the fatality of reflection the fatality of nature and culture  
the fatality of the German sciences of Kultur the fatality  
of i.e. mute history remaining mute the fatality of of the  
preposition reaching out to its object even as it e.g. it  
slips away

the preceding is much too or not sentimental enough  
to accommodate the experience of the child is fatally  
wounded i.e. the house is a mess the streets are littered  
with trash the lawns are littered with trash the grass is  
dying shrubs are pruned to look like gum drops grass is  
mown to look like Astroturf replaces the grass up the stairs  
of the stoop onto the porch into the house the noise is  
incessant the grass is broken the broken glass is littered  
with people I have a confession to make I have not  
answered my mail my telephone my email my calling my  
God my country my conscience my desire to

i.e. what a pleasure to dissolve into the spot on the graph  
where the logic of what people are supposed to know  
don't want to know don't know enough to have any  
opinion on the outcome of another beer belly bakeoff  
intersects with the logic of what people are not supposed  
to know before or after the crime scene has been cleared  
washed down scoured repaired reconstructed renovated  
restored rejuvenated retrofitted revenged resettled  
unrecalled

also no not also there is memory as in trying to get to the  
fire the way to the big light the photon points the way to  
itself

## PRESENT TENSES

start with a yellow pad a yellow #2 pencil a summer song  
an orange rabbit a rare breeze a yellow song a summer  
rabbit a zebra finch etc. bring books next time what is it  
that you're expecting these circular semantics to say to  
run in circles the word exceedingly is interesting here in  
these circular ruins this offset press offset print this  
sagittal section this dorsal fin this anterior view widening  
circumference this widening cross-reference will this  
inference make anyone eligible for parole

do you want to say something about that do you want to  
say something about that that makes you look smart in  
your smart outfit e.g. your Nehru jacket your horny glasses  
your upper crust Englicks your queer subaltern view that  
is as good as words words words make me a rose



i.e. ergo to stop fooling around in the middle you must locate three coordinates from which only employees allowed beyond this point when unexpectedly a wind might come up and might go unexpectedly away but not before bringing certain things and taking certain things away

e.g. quiet little engine beating a pulse across the sky pick up your #2 pencil write on your yellow pad getting to the bottom of pot luck there are limits limits to everything but to refrain from forced propositions is still brave

another example of the way in which a form might not reflect a purported fact or facts I drop(ped) the tendency to begin sentences with I long ago she claims anything that beautiful has got to be evil failure to find an Archimedean point defined again with nothing larger than a phonebook found in the debris

this is a method unavailable to the more discursive humanities gee whiz pop gimme a break the book is called *Toward Civilization in America* the story goes that we in America get the fuck out of my space motherfucker can all divide a square into two other squares intuitively given the average city block we don't have to look or sound like the neighborhood or the country we (grew) up in the people we (grew) up with for more than one generation or so we say i.e. this is no Goldbach's conjecture this is no Goldberg variation this is no gold bug this is the story of the good life the end

they call(ed) it a brutal dehumanizing crime once again a true and tragic story the movie version will be rated for language sexual situations decapitations &/or less consequential amputations cruelty to animals the memories of former surroundings are the scenes of the most heinous crimes

i.e. ok this is the vocabulary in which you will be locked up for the next ten years there is no good behavior clause the study of memory tells us that a person is a place after all

## PRESENT TENSE

e.g. one thing I try not to understand she says is how gravitation works or from where the force of attraction comes or the smile the smile in which the body makes this present felt through one logic or another throughout one universe or another foot swings out off curb she looks back exploding into darkest view as letters move across the line

i.e. she too look(ed) back i.e. there is no past that point By these fearsome places by this huge void these vast and silent realms I beg that you unravel the fates of my Eurydice too quickly run. to say persist and what can happen will to live by that to hardly know the she the story tells the consolation in knowing e.g. that early mathematicians (were) more interest(ed) in example than proof

screens loaded with blanks bruise blue skies rash sunset  
eyes elide gun and index finger she smartly slam(med) the  
car door in black and white her high heels click(ed) across  
the concrete floor in the underground garage bomb and  
rose burst into bloom how to tell the story now without  
telling lies you can't you can only leave it alone or  
complicate it beyond belief

now during one of those periods when life seems superficially friendly the more you know the less indigenous aquiline twilight of the sort that divides movieland from any e.g. or i.e. that might follow from this point on

e.g. to love a visceral dichotomy as much as the mountains we walk and describe as we walk and talk while they are e.g. roasting grasshoppers and wild boars with tusks removed on another continent that doesn't come to mind They called Eurydice. She was new among the shades and came with steps halting from her wound. this love of definition leads one to insert any definition here to see it all and couch it otherwise

i.e. all this is just to slide more easily off the hook to avert the eyes from or toward the grainy screen to grab e.g. a yellow pad a yellow #2 pencil a blue summer song an orange rabbit a rare breeze a yellow song a monarch on a thistle a summer rabbit a fresh breeze etc. bring all the books for the course next time what is it that you're expecting in these circular semantics these circular ruins this offset sagittal section this widening circumference this widening cross-reference this crowding of inferences will anything make her e.g. eligible for parole

it's simply that any body can make its presence felt  
instantaneously throughout one universe or another e.g.  
(his) foot swings out off curb as (he) looks back (she) looks  
back as the realization occurs once the doors are closed  
and the lights go down scenes like these can contain  
anything at all and more the joys of hopeless love sudden  
death violent car chases ambiguous sexual situations  
glimpses of strewn entrails war-torn villages ritual rape

among the things I live by she says i.e. along with some-  
thing a woman once (said) in a London cab i.e. don't look  
back she (said) i.e. they (were) strangers together sharing  
a cab i.e. they kiss(ed) their woman's eyes if you don't  
know what you want you'll just be used s/he says in the  
made-for-tv-movie no more alarming than relatively  
tasteful vampire assaults



why refuse entertaining irony dry wry humor display  
of imaginative aerodynamics emotional hydraulics fractal  
intellectual acrobatics surprising and illuminating  
implications drawn over line drawing of mock-up of  
monumental prepositional frieze

let's exorcise the crime in the coincidence by turning the  
coincidence into a fact (fact) the fact into a symbol (tran-  
scendent fact) the symbol into a moral tale (transcendent  
symbol) the moral tale into a conjecture in which every  
whole number is factored into imaginary numbers thus  
avoiding the problem of primes (transcendent moral tale)  
or countless other crimes

i.e. the box contained but the squirming matrix of habitual value-laden self-perpetuating practice (aka can-o-worms) all but invisible until something dramatic but goes awry is in fact but the continuous present of and or of either or experience of e.g. history

she (said) this (was) her favorite line in the movie before it (was) cut to fast food to the quick not to worry warming trend continues not alarming warning contains only mild profanity S&M candy galore and/or difficult subject matter for children under thirteen

the unnoticed actual condition of the life the erasure of  
coincidence the prevention of the crime the irruption of  
the coincidence the complete service for eight the  
matching sheets and towels the rise of the participles the  
unpredicted fall of the prepositions the fully rationalized  
forms of alien life the gummy bear erasure the formal  
containment of popcorn and coke the sweeping of the  
aisles between the shows the vague warnings the trapped  
children the brutal surgery the savage war scenes the  
sexual assaults the startling profanity the unexpected  
violence the graphic photos of murder victims the violent  
car crashes the sudden onset of the disease the wounds of  
race and class the excruciating paper cuts

is there any way to staunch the flood toward the smarmy margins I once want(ed) to demonstrate this to be the case but my margins (were) much too wide to contain the proof herein is a thought that enters the space left vacant the figure crossing the vacant lot the ungendered silhouette intersecting a collector's fact e.g a South American beetle that glows with so much light you can read by it in the dark

at any moment another question may arise like an iris blooming into bloom or the obscene opera buffa this seems in fact to be

the music swells i.e. the music is swollen with the  
sweetness of virtual pain ritual pain the ritual can hardly  
contain the virtual pain one thing is for sure one thing is  
for certain one aka is standing in for another while the  
culprit just (sped) over the horizon spewing technicolor  
exhaust

we now know nothing that is not tonic or dominant or chronic or acute or diachronic or diacritical or synchronic or diametric or or all or neither except in all the implications of all the cultural references e.g. in the movie version there may be sexually suggestive parents an alcoholic uncle a child trapped in a well laboratory induced schizophrenia in cute animals incessant gun violence burning crosses unusual sexual preferences adult language vomiting along with many respectable binaries good evil male female nature culture ert inert rapture capture

just finish the damn story and be done with it stop according to some acceptable convention of stopping

how will one ever get any rest on this restless dangerous earth far beyond the bounds of deeply held convictions or questions of making sense

the movie version of this question could contain e.g. nudity kidnapping rape gay bashing racial epithets incest ancient grudges vicious murders macabre sexual incidents sexual situations sexual scenes scenes depicting masturbation gruesome surgery disturbing wartime situations terrorist bombings conspiracy theories psychosis paranoia world ruin

the consolations of philosophy are relevant here

## PRESENT TENSE

i.e. how to get here by means of a swerve out of the grammar how it (was) is it that some thing hot dog happens from Old Norse *happ* meaning luck of the draw the arrow from one point to the next bring some one or another to e.g. the point of song i.e. cross-dressed logics fill the screen on which is playing not a metaphysical movie but hailed as

they stand in line for tickets and watch(ed) it's vertical phase fall into and out of ruin this symbolic logic is the abstract(ed) multivariable calculus of a story that perpetuates itself only by means of Kummer's unique factorization or Sophie Germain's primes or Brownian motion or Cantor dust



## PRESENT TENSE

see that shadow on the wall that's you childhood initiates  
the child into senses hungers proclivities expectations  
exhaustions anxieties terrors horrors humors the  
experience of experiencing all that's pointed out and  
then the noisy silent rushes telescoping in and out i.e.  
stops and starts ruptures and surprises surprise surprise  
guess what's inside

this time the instructions read pull out your prize fold and  
tear your prize here carefully tear out the red and blue  
striped part of your prize place it between your thumb and  
index finger gently pinch together to force the prize to  
bend let go flick it into a cup flick it to make decisions  
who can flick it farther you or your friend take it outside  
flick it and watch your prize as it flies out of your hand  
into the air





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Note: All “contains” warnings are or are not from *The Washington Post* movie listings.

# Joan Retallack

# MEMNOIR

Joan Retallack's marvelous *Memnoir* is so much more than what one can say about it. The unforgettable words she offers look back on 'one of those periods when life seems superficially friendly' or is this the 'hot majestic interlude' of a film version of the same?

—John Ashbery

Reconfiguring the geometry of attention, Retallack's *Memnoir* opens to a present in which: "coming out of the movie theater the world is bright gnostic present tense tensile everything happening at once..."

—Leslie Scalapino

Joan Retallack has almost single handedly convinced us that the avant garde is still the avant garde. Her own work is always distinctive for its unpredictable pleasures. In *Memnoir* she turns our attention to the unpredictable patterns of memory. A stunning poem.

—Juliana Spahr

