

Five Poets of the Nineties

An Introduction by Anders Lundberg and Jesper Olsson

Cracks in the Consensual Hallucination: Swedish Poetry at the Turn of the Millennium

What is the poetry of the 1990s? Rarely has the zeitgeist of poetry been as invisible as now, wrote a critic in a major Swedish newspaper in 1998. It was a valid question, since the poetry in Sweden at that time—at least compared with the by then prevalent ideas of poetry from earlier decades—seemed heterogeneous and in lack of a dominating poetics. But the question also discloses a logic that seems to regulate the conditions of poetry in a minor language such as Swedish. The possibility of different coexisting poetry-cultures is limited. It is more accurate to talk about a continual movement between opposition and normalization (usually identified with the succession of new generations and decades), a movement that has tended to be a very clear-cut and easily discernible process. Of course, changes take place, but for each separate period a hallucination of consensus is established. Everyone—publishers, poets, critics, readers—seems to be very much in agreement about what poetry is, can, and should be. This is due to the fact that the poetical infrastructure is highly restricted. On the

whole, one could say that it consists of one or two big publishing houses and a handful of papers and magazines. That all the poets introduced here are published by the same publisher (Bonniers) is, then, not a sign of bias on our part but a symptom of this hegemony in Swedish poetry culture. Other stages (small presses, magazines, e-zines, and the like) are rare and are not really considered an effective alternative. And in contrast with the United States, for example, poets rarely hold any positions at universities—the first and so far only university-based creative writing program in Sweden was established just a few years ago. All of this, of course, has to do with tradition and leads to a situation where you have to join the only poetry game in town or perish. No alternative routes are open. And in general, everybody, poets as well as critics, seems to be satisfied with this condition. Now and then, stirrings take place, but with a few exceptions, everyone's idea of poetry seems to gravitate around one specific center. This doesn't mean that no interesting poetry is published. And poetry does still play a prominent role at the cultural sections of the daily papers—actually, almost all new poetry is reviewed! But innovative or challenging forms (and typically all kinds of Web-based poetry and poetics) are sparse, or even nonexistent.

Causes and effects are not the issue here, but it's no surprise that among Swedish critics as well as poets the conceptions of poetry since romanticism have mostly been grounded in a tradition of *lyric* poetry. The supposed characteristics of an expressive lyrical *I* (sometimes posing as a *we*), such as intimacy, voice, and personal tone, are highly valorized. Intimacy, identification, and recognition are the favorite tropes or figureheads of reading and writing poetry. Consequently, everything that implies distance, play, or even humor is regarded as somewhat suspicious. Form must be subordinated to content and thematics and has to be harmoniously in sync with this subject or *I* that is the poem's ultimate reference. Musicality and well-crafted, coherent metaphors is good; dissonance, noise, and formal awkwardness is bad. To put it crudely. The best example of this is perhaps the fate of Swedish concrete poetry in the 1960s. It was intensely discussed for a couple of years but in the end had to be put aside as an anomaly or at best as an interesting but unproductive dead end.

Another important aspect of this poetics is the intimate link between the lyricist line and the extremely influential tradition of nature poetry in Sweden. Swedish postromantic poetry has almost always had an eye for the beautiful landscapes of the countryside. And just as nature is a kind of imagined reservoir of authenticity in contemporary society, and a threatened area as well, poetry is considered a last resort for true personal feelings and

thought, a holy place not to be stained by anything that smacks of artifice. It is worth considering, in this context, that even the most formally radical poet in early Swedish modernism, Gunnar Björling, had no trouble mediating between this solid tradition and his own disruptive poetics. Dada in nature. Why not?

The history of Swedish literary modernism has been written before, but a few remarks are worth making here, as it most certainly has an impact on poetry today. The first modernist displacements of poetic discourse actually took place in the Swedish-speaking parts of Finland. In the poetry of Edith Södergran in the mid 1910s, influences of German expressionism were perceptible, and some ten years later, both futurism and dada infiltrated the poetics of such poets and writers as Björling and Henry Parland. With the Swedish translation of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in the early 1930s, and with the orientation toward French postsymbolist poetry and surrealism in such writers as Gunnar Ekelöf and Artur Lundkvist, the ground was laid for a modernist breakthrough in the years of the Second World War. Contemporaneous with a literature that dealt explicitly with the political situation, a massive introduction of modernist poetry and prose emerged. Translations proliferated and varying writing practices related to early French and Anglo-American modernism were integrated into the works of such Swedish writers as Erik Lindegren and Karl Vennberg. Even though some poetry was accused of being incomprehensible (and actually caused a debate on the hermetic poetic language of modernism), a certain form of high modernism turned into literary doxa during this period.

When a new generation was formed in the early 1950s, a backlash took place: The only way to transgress the supposed radicality of an earlier generation was through restoration. This being a kind of textbook cliché, it is necessary to point out some exceptions. In certain underground circles, the introduction of modernism was intensified. The French connection was expanded to include such names as the Marquis de Sade, Comte de Lautréamont, Antonin Artaud, and Henri Michaux. The first readings and translations of Gertrude Stein's poetry appeared. And not until now was the relationship to futurism and dada more extensively elaborated. Worth mentioning, too, is the manifesto of concrete poetry, "Hipy Papy Bthuthdth Thuthda Bthuthdy" (1954) (the title from A. A. Milne's books about Winnie the Pooh), by the poet-artist Öyvind Fahlström, and the writings of the Estonian-Swedish poet-critic Ilmar Laaban. The contemporary reception of their work was, however, nonexistent. Its effects weren't to become visible until the next decade.

Despite this integration of modernist writing practices into Swedish poetry, radical linguistic experiments were rare. With the exception of Gunnar Ekelöf's debut *sent på jorden* (Late on earth) from 1932 (and some of his later nonsensical verse) and the extremely disruptive syntax and elliptical poetry of Björling in some of his collections from the late 1930s and onward, the explorations of the twilight zones of language were yet to come. In the beginning of the 1960s, an opposition against the symbolist and romantic brands of modernism was formed. This opposition took two different, but not completely unrelated, directions. To reduce them to their designations: *new simplicity* and *concretism*. Poets from both camps wanted to open up poetry to linguistic forms and practices that had been neglected by earlier poetry. While the new simplicity explored the forms of everyday language and natural speech, concrete poets such as Bengt Emil Johnson, Jarl Hammarberg, and Åke Hodell turned their interest toward radical artifice. Later in the 1960s, when the political engagement became imperative, aesthetic radicality had to be subdued. This was the choice of popular realism that put its mark on the poetry of the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s—with some brilliant exceptions, such as Lars Norén and Erik Beckman.

If discussions of form were anathema during the 1970s, they became the talk of the town in the 1980s. The need for poetological reflections was urgent. And through the work of some young critics and scholars, an intellectualization of poetry and criticism occurred. Poststructuralism, deconstruction, and hermeneutics coalesced and formed a new frontier, but it was a rather specific version of this mix that was established. If the formally innovative poetry of the early 1960s had something in common with the politicizing of poetry in the late 1960s and the 1970s, it was the interest in what one might call a *minor* literature. The investigations of the liminal zones of writing (in concrete poetry and text-sound compositions, for example), as well as the ideas of a "democratization" of poetry from a class perspective. Both indicated a certain displacement of a romantic and high modernist canon. The theoretically informed discussions of form in the 1980s tended, however, first and foremost, to reestablish such a canon. It was very much a continuation of romanticism through other means. Not surprisingly, Friedrich Hölderlin, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Paul Celan became a center of gravity for poets as well as critics. And, not surprisingly, there was a renewed interest in a select group of early Swedish modernists, such as Ekelöf and Björling, who lent themselves to the reading models in vogue.

This development proved extremely productive for poetry as well as for criticism and not the least for the interchange between them. Many

cogent poets entered the stage in these years, such as Stig Larsson, Katarina Frostenson, Ann Jäderlund, and Ulf Eriksson. But today, it seems as if it was the opening of the field of theoretical reflections that was the most important legacy of the 1980s and the restricted canon that was promulgated, although it proved to be fruitful at a certain moment, soon became a kind of straitjacket. And it is in this vacuum, in the paralyzing shadow of a select group of poets from Pindar to Celan, that the poetry of the 1990s has developed, and it is here one can find the roots to the low voice and the unobtrusiveness that has characterized much of Swedish poetry from these years.

Stig Larsson (b. 1955) made his literary debut with the novel *Autisterna* (The autists) in 1979. By then he had already founded the magazine *Kris*, which was to become the most influential theoretical venue for a new generation of writers and critics. Larsson's first collection of poetry, *Minuterna före blicken* (The minutes before the gaze) was published two years later, and since then he has published another fifteen books of poetry. Besides poetry he has written novels, plays, and screenplays, and has also directed two films. Even though his position is controversial, to say the least, he is no doubt one of the most influential Swedish poets since the 1960s. As the *enfant terrible* of contemporary Swedish literature, he has, through his writings and through innumerable provoking moves in mass media, annoyed fellow writers and critics as well as the public. Larsson's writing is characterized by an extreme sensitivity for styles or manners of writing, and is marked by a continuous effort to avoid getting stuck in a recognizable form. As soon as a style is discernible or possible to identify, it must be erased, and the writing must find new paths. Another decisive and related trait has been the figure of mania that is explicitly staged in the poem "Mania" from 1987, a poem that ends, "It seems as if I'm writing down everything that comes into my mind. Am I? Help!" The poem discloses a conception of writing as a flow of words or linguistic matter, beyond the control of the writing subject. The result is a double movement, combining a manic, overstrung, expansive, and exorbitant writing, incessantly transgressing the norms of what is appropriate and suitable for poetry, with a relentless probing into the style and the mode of writing. The ostentatious, verbose, and awkward babbling exposes an acute sensitivity to the valors and tones of spoken language. But while this may appear as a natural speech, it is everything but natural. Maybe it is more accurately designated as a "hyper-speech," as an artificial elaboration of the idiosyncrasies and oddities manifesting "the strangeness of the ordinary." What is at stake is an expansion of poetry toward its

other. It is a poetry at war with the smooth surface, one that dares (or even seeks) failure and doesn't try to cover up the errors and delusions occurring in the process of writing. In this sense, it can be described as an antipoetics. As a consequence, Larsson's pursuit to escape the refinement of poetry has, through the 1990s, led him to venture writing "bad" (a project explicitly focused in the poem "Distress or a deaf," from *Natta de mina* [Tuck one's own to the night], translated here). As a logical consequence of this project, Larsson, in 1995, declared that he had stopped writing poetry. Since then, he has published four books of "poetry" concerned primarily with biographical material and displaying an explicit intention of writing the authentic—the truth—as opposed to fiction. This is, of course, not to be confused with a naïve and unreflected truth telling. If anything, Larsson's poetry went even further into a labyrinthine performative reflection, a "hyper-reflection" on the workings of the text, staged as preemptive and strategic manipulations of the reader's reactions and expectations. The text becomes a laminar flow of digressions and metareflections, of voices and textual levels, making it fraudulent to decide one fundamental level or voice.

Ann Jäderlund (b. 1955) published her first book of poetry, *Vimpelstaden* (The streamer city), in 1985 and has since published another five collections of poetry as well as a children's book. In her debut, Jäderlund quoted a passage from Wittgenstein, and this has been evoked as well as disavowed by critics ever since. But there are reasons to acknowledge this reference. In relation to the Wittgensteinian poetics in late twentieth-century American poetry, which Marjorie Perloff has discussed in her *Wittgenstein's Ladder* (1996), one can propose that Jäderlund, in her elaborated play with grammar and syntax, uses a similar strategy of estrangement to displace some of the foundations of the lyrical tradition sketched above. Not the least in her first book, one can perceive a subtle and perhaps "Wittgensteinian" critique of the supposed alliance between linguistic meaning, subjective inwardness, and lyrical expressiveness. When Jäderlund's second collection of poetry, *Som en gång varit äng* (As once was a meadow), came out in 1988, it caused an intense and in part virulent debate. The starting point was an accusation of incomprehensibility, which led to a divide between more conservative male critics and a younger generation informed by postmodernist theory. Her poetry was considered by some of the latter as an example of "écriture feminine." Even if this debate proved to be productive for young women poets, it also led to some reductive and stabilizing interpretations of Jäderlund's poetry. *Som en gång varit äng* showed emphatically how she was engaged in a critical scrutiny of a Swedish tradition of romantic lyric

poetry, especially the conventions and mechanisms of nature poetry and love poetry. By using a small vocabulary of poetically and erotically charged words, where shifters and fillers are almost completely abandoned, and by substituting syntactical and grammatical patterns for rhythmic and sonorous constellations, her poetry stages an ironic pastiche of the expressive subject as well as the animated landscape of the nature lyric. The poems show almost no traces of localizing markers, of signatures and dates. Inwardness and emotions are replaced by a flat economy of words, where established patterns of meaning begin to move and float in different directions. Through cuttings and patchings-together of words, visually acute and artifactual neologisms are formed (see, for example, the translated poems from *Snart går jag i sommaren ut* [Soon in the summer I walk out] from 1990). Jäderlund's treatment of language as sensual matter, her tasting of words and their sound and sense, does often echo nursery rhymes and the child's play with words as well as the permutations of concrete poetry. In her later poetry, she has intensified, even more, the exploration of rhythmic figures and the possibilities of working with reduced verbal material, which is obvious in her sixth and latest collection, *Kalender röd* (Calendar red) (2000).

If Stig Larsson and Ann Jäderlund have become established as major figures of the contemporary scene in Sweden, Jörgen Gassilewski (b. 1961) is still considered by some critics as a kind of poetry prankster. Since his debut with *Du* (You) in 1987, he has proven to be a far more heterogeneous poet than the others presented here. His first collections bore traces of John Ashbery's *The Tennis Court Oath* and exhibited an active use and disfiguration of established modernist poetical forms. But in the same way as Stig Larsson has engaged in an exploration of hyper-speech, Gassilewski has, during the second half of the 1990s, moved toward similar, but much more strict and artificial, investigations of everyday language. In his later poetry, his background as a conceptual artist has become more visible, and he is also one of a few poets today who has explicitly acknowledged the legacy of the concrete poetry of the 1960s. This is shown in his pleasurable play with sound similarities and permutational techniques. In his poems, he subtly works with disturbances and noise on different levels of the text and produces dislocations and abrupt changes of perspective. Shifts in scale and in focus, as well as borderline clashes between different contexts or motifs, can also be put forward as important devices in his poems. Even though the poem translated here, from the collection *portarnas bilder* (The images of the gates) (1999), is a kind of strained artificial tailing of the workings of

a “natural speech,” he often elaborates a more radical parataxis, and the visual arrangement is always an integral aspect of his poetry. The materialistic stance in his work does, however, go far beyond a mere formalistic approach and is informed by an acute awareness of temporality, mortality, and bodily decay.

“Poetry comes rather from the hand than from the mouth. A way of breathing offers a way of writing, a syntax—that is cultivated into a personal language-forming: a form . . . Through the labor of the hand appears this new body of text, that is thrown back to me from the sheet of paper like an unknown other.” Thus writes Helena Eriksson (b. 1962) in the introduction to an anthology of poetry of the 1990s, published in 1998. Eriksson’s first book of poetry, *En byggnad åt mig* (A building for me) (1990), as well as the second one published two years later, was marked by a visionary or orphic stance that could be traced back to a postromantic tradition from Arthur Rimbaud and surrealism. This modernist current had a strong renaissance in the Danish poetry of the 1980s, which most certainly attracted Eriksson at that time. From the mid-1990s, however, her poetry has made a decisive turn toward more reductive and minimalist forms, a reduction of the romantic lyrical imagery, that first and foremost has been staged as a turning away from the symbol and the metaphor, no doubt informed by her readings and translations of contemporary French poetry, above all Anne-Marie Albiach. This reduction has since then been driven further and further until all that is left of the imagery is some fragments of archetypal and mythic figures and attributes, Gothic and exotic kitsch and knick-knack, which creates ironic edges when combined with the harsh and austere forms. Eriksson’s method seems to be based on the cut, on graphic, rhythmic, and syntactical caesuras. Her poems discard musicality in a traditional sense and disclose a distrust of every form of poetic beauty. The linguistic cuts in her texts create edges or joints, awkward and idiosyncratic encounters between minimalistic parts and more talkative passages. Her poems often appear as silhouettes and set pieces, where the significance of the white spaces, the cutouts, the voids, or the blanks is insistent and carries a crucial charge. Instead of narrative forms or metaphors, her texts are open compositions organized through graphic constellations and acoustic figures, where the word’s position on the page is as important as its semantic coordination. A consistent theme in her work is related to the threat against the vulnerable body, an imminent violence. One could characterize Eriksson’s poetry as an austere and fierce sensualism.

The first book of Lars Mikael Raattamaa (b. 1964), *Ur krakars gäld*

(From the debt of the wretched), was hardly noticed by the critics when it appeared in 1989. Last year, when he published his fourth collection of poetry, *Helgonlegenderna: väv* (The legends of saints: Texture), it was the most critically acclaimed book of poetry that year. If his early poetry showed marks of a certain modernist melancholy, his two latest books exhibit an acute receptivity and openness toward all kinds of texts and technologies that regulate the machinery of contemporary society—a tendency that is continued in the poems published recently in the magazine *Ord&Bild*. Last year, Raattamaa presented a short poetics statement in the largest daily paper in Sweden, *Dagens Nyheter*, where he dismissed the idea of poetry as a dialogue and instead proposed the idea of *poeisis* as an investigation into what cannot be contained in the dialogue's work of reducing alterity and oddity. Instead, poetry can drift toward social, cultural, and linguistic noise, and thereby evoke the strangeness of the ordinary. The poetry of Raattamaa is also aware of the political implications of poetical forms and juxtaposes the flow of modern information society with patterns transposed from traditional forms of verse. Different materializing linguistic operations and sampling are used in pursuit of a writing that can respond to and serve as a critique of today's culture. As a professional architect, his interest in urban spaces has also informed his writing. The geopolitical borderlines, centers, and peripheries of today are inscribed and "exscribed" in his texts. Names and dates are accumulated, and the city and the suburban ghettos of Stockholm, as well as the conflicts in the Balkans and in the Middle East, are constantly invoked. These markings do, however, transgress every mimetic procedure and produce alternative poetical geographies constituting lines of flight, de-territorializations of hierarchies and center-periphery relations that are taken for granted and reproduced by the images and stories of corporate mass media. But Raattamaa's poetry is also interfoliated with a manifold of different modes, pitches, and textures clearly displayed in the poem translated here, "The Children That Float," where matter-of-fact observations are torqued and mixed with sublime exclamations, mockery, and bathos. In *Helgonlegenderna: väv*, meditative reflections, narratives, and suggestive, rhyming lullaby-like poems produce counterpoints or relief effects in a political body of poetry.

The selection of poetry presented here can be considered, then, as both representative and unrepresentative of Swedish contemporary poetry. *Representative*, since all five poets are considered today by most critics and readers in general as important, even though controversial for some. *Unrepresentative*, since they all seem to distance themselves in different

ways from the central lyrical tradition evoked in the beginning of our introduction and which still holds a firm grip on most poetry published today. Maybe *distance* is the wrong word. One could say, rather, that they have established an active and problematizing relationship to this tradition. Through a variety of techniques and modes of writing, they all reflect on its logic, its constitutive elements and structures, and try to de- and rework these modes and techniques from the vantage point of the present. The lyrical I, as well as the forms of narration, perception, expression, and representation, is scrutinized and recast in five different ways by these five very different poets. These are not the only poets in Sweden responding to these concerns. At least two other interesting poets deserve to be mentioned. Camilla Hammarström, who started out in the early 1980s with a poetry influenced by Stein and who has explored both the visual aspects of writing as well as the poetic potentials of everyday speech; and Ulf Karl Olov Nilsson, who, more insistently than any other poet in Sweden today, has invested in a parasitical practice of poetry, where sampling, collage, and translation serve as the driving forces of innovation.

A common denominator for all of these poets is an interest in the complex materiality of poetic language and culture and a calling into question of the dogma that certain ways of writing are "natural" or "authentic." By exploring the physicality of the word as well as its traces of social use and history, their poetry dissolves this dogma and opens up new possibilities to think the relationship between language and the world. Poetry has always been characterized by materializing operations transgressing the necessary conditions for informational exchange. But it is nevertheless important to remember Wittgenstein's dictum, that poetry, even though it is written in the language of information, does not partake in the language-game of information. The domain for poetical enactment cannot primarily be the poem's subject matter. Rather, it seems as if the only way for poetry to act, to create an agency that reaches outside of poetry and interacts with culture and society without leaving poetry altogether, is to work on and with poetry's material means—perhaps in the same way that contemporary visual art has multiplied its material means. And in a culture where the global media tend to "naturalize" and recuperate every linguistic and aesthetic representation, and where new (digital) technologies repress their own technicity in fantasies of immediacy, there seems to be a place for a poetic materialism.

In the last years there have been several debates or attempts to discuss the situation of Swedish poetry in this media culture of today. One recurrent theme has been the marginalization of poetry. Although this is obvi-

ously a return of the apocalyptic figure of “crisis,” which is an immanent movement of thought in the writing of contemporary history, it may also indicate a change in the infrastructure of Swedish poetry sketched above. Given the globalization and transformations of media at large, it is difficult to see why the infrastructure of poetry should remain intact. There are also signs of such a change worth considering. One can mention the growing interest in public poetry readings in Sweden during the last ten years. If this started on the fringes, in the forms of poetry slam, spoken word, and other related phenomena, it has by now infiltrated the “major” scene. One can also note that some small presses and poetry magazines exploring and introducing other forms of writing have appeared (for example, *Lejd*, *OEI*). And even though lamentations can be heard, these are changes that might not be so bad.

Stig Larsson

Distress or a deaf

from *Natta de mina*, 1997

Writing bad poetry
Many people do. So many people do.

I am humiliated,
but *don't I exaggerate now?* —

or, yes — I *feel humiliated*

just by the fact
that it is —
yeah, that this is
poetry. This is poetry. This is poetry.

Did Virgil write bad poetry *as well?* —

The answer: All great poets
would probably have done it
some time: written *poetry this bad*. All the major poets,
including
Famous writers such as
Ovid,
Lucan — persons or more accurately SHADOWS

in that circle of poets
that Dante describes —
it was in *the shape of a circle* he is describing them, wasn't it? The shape of
a wheel?

The answer (*but who is giving me this answer?*) that I AM NOT
ALONE;

I AM NOT ALONE, I AM NOT ALONE . . .

Ovid was *too* experienced,
Horace
too juvenile. And what
about Joseph Conrad? I am not alone: the shadows are watching me —
and isn't
it so
that they *smile* at me? That the

Conrad

that described Mr. Jacobus' daughter, the

Schmidt

that described Mr. Jacobi's daughter — *both of them will smile* . . . But to be
honest there are so many
Conrad and Schmidt,

maybe the reader doesn't know to whom I refer — and
on the other hand I can't be that much more explicit without the
poem becoming *so bad that it*
will be, I mean what I say, unreadable . . . Schmidt —
yeah, that

was even the name of a Swedish tennis player in the early sixties;
I remember how I took the bus
to Mariehemman, in the sunshine dazzling white suburb east of Umeå,
to some friends of my parents, Tore and Ulla-Britt, to
watch a Davis Cup match with Uffe —
that was his name — Uffe Schmidt, *I believe our TV was broken*
or whatever happened? Did they show the match on channel 2
and our family didn't have channel 2? — yeah, there's a WHOLE LOT OF
STUFF
you just don't remember.

That THESE SHADOWS seemed to smile —
 especially since one of them,
 the — not blind, where did they get that from? — deaf Homer. He was
 deaf. Yes, *he*
 was deaf . . . And that now the deaf Homer by the end of the *Iliad*,
 just because he feels like it, just because his self-confidence
 is so great, writes something down that he himself
 perceives as bad: something like Abre Se Ken
 Habe Si. — *I myself don't know any Greek. In a fancied Homeric Greek*
I imagine "Abre Se Ken Habe Si . . ."
 Not being alone writing
 this bad poetry.

Me writing this poem about A Funny News Item: the findings
 a scientist in Tokyo, Hideo Nishioka, was to have published. *The last*
page of Expressen approximately five years ago. — That's right! It says 1990
up in the
left corner. You can also catch a glimpse of some temperature information
on the ripped out half of the last page: in Sweden
the coldest 20 degrees below and the warmest 5 degrees. Then it must
have been in the winter, I would guess December '90, the week before
Christmas . . . yes
I imagine how I, having looked up from Expressen,
peered out through a window: there was actually some Christmas spirit.
In the apartment building across the street you could see two and — as
I leaned forward,
below me to the right — yet another three illuminated stars. — In three
adjacent
windows. It was by then I recalled not remembering the exact numbers,
had once again looked down at the news item in Expressen: That's right!
 Nishiokas statistical inquiry showed among other things
 that
 female Japanese students on average used
 12 1/2 meters of toilet paper a day, more than three times the males,
 what does the parenthesis say? — 3 1/2 meters . . . This that I am
 writing right
 now, that I know is bad — and that I, irrespective of how I
 elaborate it, never will get right — makes me
 feel that I am not alone: NOT ALONE
 writing this bad poetry.

One could of course imagine
that this feeling was REASSURING *but this*

feeling is not reassuring: almost . . . the opposite . . .

It feels terrible that this
will also apply to . . . Yes, one has to be able to imagine this — Homer,
even he
may nod off, don't they say that even *the sun* has spots?

— Really. Is that so?

That doesn't feel reassuring does *it*? Nope.

Is it

thus because perfection

then

is not (YES, BECAUSE THE ONLY THING THAT CAN SAVE YOU
IS OF COURSE PERFECTION) —

it thus depends upon the fact that one
then understands

that

perfection is not, yes but what *is* it teh? — human,

that it

is not human,

perfection is not human — o-oo-oo, o oooh

(Translated from Swedish by Anders Lundberg and Jesper Olsson)

Ann Jäderlund

From "Nature"*

from Som en gång varit äng, 1988

The moon shines
It is large over the meadow
When the beams are large
It is large over the meadow
Down there

All is large
It is not the moon
Let it be

The strong meadow shines the meadow strong
Where the poppy shines the poppy grows not
In springholes leaves are always falling silent
Where the seed is growing the poppy shines lonesome

The meadow is moist and plays that the meadow is moist
The blade is blank and plays that the blade is blank
The mouth is beautiful and plays that the mouth is beautiful

(Cupid's Bow)

•

The wood creates its source
The meadow creates its breast
The beam creates its heart
The heart creates its lake

It is a moon but its name is wax
It is a garden but its name is moon
It is the strong beams
But then it is my sex

The blade is moist and plays that the blade is moist
The meadow is blank and plays that the meadow is blank
The breast is sweet and plays that the breast is sweet

(Grafting)

•

The meadow is warm then the poppy gets warm by the meadow
The seed is strong then the poppy gets warm by the seed
The moon is moist then the poppy gets warm by the moon

As it is separated from the blade this blank blade
As it is separated from the meadow this blank meadow
As it is separated from the poppy this red poppy

(Cupid)

(Translated from Swedish by Anders Lundberg and Jesper Olsson)

*In "Nature," Jäderlund uses the homonyms *blad* and *blank* (here translated as "blade" and "blank") to play with different meanings. In Swedish, *blad* can signify "leaf," "sheet of paper," and "blade" (as in the blade of a knife), and the word *blank* ("blank") can mean "empty" as well as "shiny" or "glossy." —Translators

from Snart går jag i sommaren ut, 1990

From within the throat a white and beautiful swan grows out with its dead head. And below the trunk silken limbs stick out. Or the blank mother-of-pearl blades. She has a strong and insistent tile-mouth. Which opens up over the speckled neck. A coarse Gentleman puts his coarse gentlemans-stalk in her mouth. *It is a creek so sweet its stream is like the gulps of emerald.* She is a simple swan-rose. With tile-red ginger-big mother-leafs. Oh these mother-leafs. That get inside the silver-vessels under *the soft tile.*

In every flower lives another flower. A gentle scenting mourning jewelry. Incomprehensibly mild in the dark gold. In every flower one can still discern the pattern laid down. Pair-wings with capillary-fine god-vessels. Children's eyes in the fine texture. Where the sunset glow sinks its cloak of rose. Icicles cross the stalks. The high sticky stalks. Under the foreskin of the heart. All is meaningless. Fanfares sound in the tired breast-texture. Slowly clinking like finger-glass. *It is a rose so beauteous its leafs are like the fanfare.*

from *Kalender röd*, 2000

Kiss My Mouth

Kiss my mouth and let the rounded
Soft and scarlet circular shape
Slide into the eye and touch me
Circle scarlet high-mouth shape
Oh I close and close my eyes
Circle-scarlet darkness mouth
Ice-cold scarlet touch me rounded
Opening smooth and loosened mouth
Let it slide oh eye and rounded
Tongue and smooth and loosened scarlet
Rounded opening loosened scarlet

Purple Piece

Mouth is closing warm on lolly
Sweet and scarlet sticky coating
Ardent sugar syrup scarlet
Tongue is sucking sweetened coating
Sucking thinking lying close
Dimple-softened sweetened coating
Scarlet favorite-scarlet syrup
Mouth it wants to vanish coating

(Translated from Swedish by Anders Lundberg and Jesper Olsson)

Jörgen Gassilewski

to Catullus

from *portarnas bilder*, 1999

*With pumice dry just polish'd fine
To whom present this book of mine?*

I fall through. And I'm gone. The sincere that we say. The foundation is coldness. Such a proximity requires a low temperature. To you I say what I

think since I don't respect you. I know that you can't pass it on, follow it up, draw consequences from it. You are unable. Like a rock in a water. An Egyptian sepulchral chamber. Nothing is ever going to happen. There are no limits for what I can say to you. This lack of limitation would have driven me insane, if I'd had the ability to become insane. . . . I regret this inability. That's why I love to talk about money. It's as if we cared about each other. We do. When they don't arrive. When we have said the sixteenth and the money isn't in the account by then. I feel that I get angry with you! Then! I feel that I hate you! Hate! It's great! I feel that I *have* a relation to you. I *here*. You *there*. You *with* money. I *without*. You with *my* money. It sounds unsympathetic. What do they know, who would call it that, about life? . . . The other is without resistance. Like water. The hand in the water. The invisible hairs of the hand curved. Nothing more. Why call these effusions anything? Like relieving oneself. Splash against water, porcelain. I can say "You are a *crocophant*"; "I think of you when I masturbate, never daddy, nono, only *you*," or "today I stuck a toothbrush in the *putty*, it was new and eccentric," or "I love you, Ola." I can say this to you. . . .

I forget everything. Forget. You have said something. I forget it. Why?

I must respect you. You shall be a receiver. Think for yourself. React. Unexpected. Provoke. If I only was sure that what I'm saying and feeling became something else when it entered you. I'm not. You are just like another I. As a Roman master confessing to his slave — without reflecting upon this person being present in the room.

And I know you feel the same about me. I *know* it.

Let's talk about something else. Not shadow-boxing. Something pleasant. Something that *is* pleasant.

Whatever. Everything that happens here. Go. Go. Less lonely without you. Without the remainder of who I am. In you. Mouth-diarrhea. Lack of posture. Indifference.

Today I got poo-poo on my fingers when I wiped myself. It has never happened before. Usually I stick my finger up my ass. *After* having wiped myself. And smelling it. The deeper I insert it the more it smells of blood. When I was a kid I thought I got into the blood itself with that ass-finger.

Love. That's what it's about. And even if we don't always agree. No, we don't. That's what's important. If one is thinking of good things. Are you thinking of good things? I'm thinking of good things. Then we're together. I'm thinking of swimming. What are you thinking of? No, don't

tell. You're thinking of . . . bal. No, sorry, what am I saying. Balls that kittens play with. Why? Now we're together in it: swimming and . . . balls . . . No, don't step out of it now! Why are you stepping out? Now we're in!

I can tell you about my vision. First it was black. With some hills. One couldn't see a thing. Only feel. It was lumpy. It was hot. It was in the rectum. I was sucked upwards. It was so beautiful. I was cooled off. By waves. Currents all around me. Everywhere. Passing through me. Shivers. By summons. It was as if someone said it to me. "By summons." To move upwards. Where? I didn't know. I really didn't know. Then I came to a more peaceful part. Like a sheltered bay. It was spelled j-o-y. The part. It was spelled j-o-y. Strange. But so it was. It was in the large intestine. And then . . . the singing started in me again. It was like from the head. From the head and backwards. It was immense. Immense . . . insignificant. And . . . EVERYTHING! I was inside the small intestine. What I SAW!! Sparkling . . . no . . . pillar . . . no . . . It was like *DEATH METAL!!!* MORE than Death Metal!!! *DEADER!!!* And then I saw you. You were ill. Very ill. One had pitied you. You knew what was coming. You were thinking about it. That it was . . . would be . . . And you yourself . . . ? But you were **STRONG!** **TERRIBLY** strong. That you **WERE** what you **WERE!!** But you were free. Dead while you were alive. *You were resting in it. As it was.*

Thought of suicide. Not *me*. More like someone else thinking while I was asleep, or rather was resting. I walked away with me and was on my way of doing things. In any case it was always a picture. And there you were. Waving me closer with the finger then with the whole hand. And I was on my way. Your head cracked open and there was a child. Also waving. Was on my way. It was always something practical that got in the way. Sometimes I feel like I'm about to lose language. In the best appears an edge of bad, of the most terrifying. And when I see. In the ripples of the sea millions of razors are prepared. And make themselves invisible. In one single crest of a wave. Then it cracks in the words. Then anything can be anything. Good no longer good. Bad no longer bad. And in the explosion that isn't anything else than a pitiful peep, it sounds: "scchvuuiiip" or "krrscchvuuiip." And in a way it is good maybe. Or what do you think?

Turns red . . . behind the eyelids. Can't reach . . . never . . . the tap. It was a water tap there. Now just now. Just before I, yes . . . caught my breath. Now, when we were talking. It pulled. Ax . . . Axblow! Red behind the eyelids. Always this time of the day. You asked me something. That

made me sad. And at the same time glad. And now. I can breathe out. It's so wonderful! To breathe out! Just OUT!! . . . And then I calmed down . . . so it was . . . it *was* so. You reach a point. You have to decide yourself: Tear yourself away from what you know. Or to let the emotions choke you like the plastic bag over a child. Sounds sick . . . But after that point, when you head-buttl! . . . *meet* yourself as drowned in tears: / THERE! *You* HERE! When you have changed place with yourself and have seen how much you weep . . . When you have been sitting on the spot — on a ringside seat — and seen how much you weep. Weep and weep. But where does it *lead*? You ask yourself this: Where does this LEAD? And nobody can answer . . .

It has to do with posture. Posture. Something that one already *must have* met. Somewhere else. Something that one already must have tackled the right way without knowing.

If / have this posture? I don't know . . . If this has happened to *me*? I don't know . . .

When I see that red behind the eyelids. I know it's coming. It's not really from me that the red comes. The sun in the eyes. White in the eyes. And flutter in the eyes. And as on a screen behind the white: red. White in the air. If one can call it air, what I see. If it is the after-image of pain that creates a visual perception. But here it's a question of a premonition. A heralding, maybe an *annunciation*. Maybe you can call it: An *annunciation*! In any case the white is nothing. One shouldn't talk about it. One *can't* talk about it. But the red. That's to be inside something. That most of all. Inside something else. Something else that is not oneself. But that might be. *Death. Blindness. Or joy.* You never know. In there you never know anything . . . *Floating* . . . irresponsibly . . .

It's red. Maybe it's triggered by sun. Maybe we don't always pick each other up there. But know that we exist. The white is mine. I don't want to talk about that.

How could we help each other? You there. Me here. Two deformed bodies. I elbowed my way to new places for nourishment. That's what we are, sucklings. If you were in the way, *well* . . .

All these FANTASIES! All these IMAGINATIONS! Stop pretending! Compassion disgusts me. All these Friday afternoon things that are brought fourth. There are only Friday afternoon things. If you have one column for "reality" and one for "illusions" then the accounts always balance.

For a lot of people brutality is an awakening. Things or people. Things or people. "What!? Am I HERE now!? *Close* to death. But still . . .

ALIVE! LIFE! . . . and there's one more, one more . . . and one more . . . other . . . PEOPLE! . . . I have never . . . never . . . before . . ." The exact measure of one's loneliness, the exact measure of one's mortality — is a joy, a pure unadulterated joy, a *crystalline* joy. *Know. This.* Like *this*. It *is* . . . Suddenly you feel that you're a node, a plummet, a center. Self. Then everybody else thinks that you're a monster. A repulsive formlessness. Soon dead. Just as good. A ball of pain. But inside: a small clock.

What do you think I can offer you? Why not eat the words. Before they have appeared. Just stupid punches at shadows. Shadows of shadows. What has been. Brutality. Joy. Far far back. Here's just the now. Granite. Why punch at granite with wounded bandaged hands? Eat "you." Eat "we." Eat "Love." Yes, eat "Love." Above all "Love." Then what remains? A fine silence. A very very fine silence: Listen! Maybe a body-temperature. A body odor. Maybe a weather. Yes maybe a weather. White, like now. Sun, like now. White sun, like now. I . . .

Why do you come here? If you don't want to meet my body? My body extended in space. As it is now. That's what I can offer you. Odor. Sound. Breathing. Decomposing tissue. We. We. Today when I was walking . . . Today when I was *crawling* towards the window . . . to slant the blinds . . . bumped into . . . bruised . . . part of the elbow . . . the arm in such a strange angle . . . I looked at it . . . laughed . . . looked up toward the blind's lever . . . a large airspace . . . a *gigantic* airspace . . . laughed . . . laughed again . . . *could have been* a great laugh. Felt inside me: GREAT LAUGH. Yes, so it was . . .

(Translated from Swedish by Anders Lundberg and Jesper Olsson)

Helena Eriksson

from **Skäran,* 2001**

a cavity where it radiated the outmeasured
declined It is then sharp
and inhabits shadows it's concealed

•

Thinking as a whole shaded
Ache at the wing's joint

Heat It is
cut-out her wing-shade like something from her

Hot cities of the sand, the connections
between these cities
Her hands

in my hot shadow

The clothes, the pearls
the brittle buckles

●

and sounds thrown
around in the room or in the drum, between walls
in one single drum plays across the whole wall
the drum is now a
rule

stop up it's corroding beneath the wing Did they

There the body drifts with its eye
the shoulder blade the sickle wing

•

the back lays bare where the eye grows

where it is then written

the voice still moves, and
the hand
 It rubs or cuts

there now cutting
the hand off the arm what's been written apart
is conjoined

(Translated from Swedish by Anders Lundberg and Jesper Olsson)

*In Swedish the word *sickle* (*skära*) carries a lot of different meanings and can even be used in different word classes. As a noun it can signify “sickle” as well as “crescent”; as a verb, it can mean “cut,” “carve,” “intersect,” “cross,” “cleave,” “clash,” “curdle,” “incise”; and as an adjective, it can refer to the color pink. Eriksson plays with this richness and ambiguity throughout her poem—a play that is impossible to sustain in translation. — Translators

Lars Mikael Raattamaa

The Children That Float

from *Helgonlegenderna: väv*, 2000

The children that float
in Lake Mälaren in springtime
have often lain there since last fall
Wedged between a couple of rocks or
inserted into a rotten tree trunk
they can be discerned in the light of algae
At Mälarhöjden Beach one can sometimes see small fish
and bleaks swim in cavities
At sunrise in a crease
a may fly or a tadpole may be hatched

Their whole lives
they have dreamt themselves here and there

Revetment children they are called
They do not shed their skin but
do often trade extremities with
each other

One can hear them
call in the night
Everybody Hi!
Loud, so that the windows rattle
and when fumes of benzene sweep through floor after floor
and when the walls are being sketched
chewed?
when the hungry houses chew children that
love houses
and the moon
— what, the moon?

But now it is time for new songs
a word on the page, a name:
Beograd, Tiramisù, Tatraplan like names of animals; and other
rational adjectives
In a basement in Örnberg
open contests for A-kids
are held again, as is customary
in the spirit of amateurism
And those who nevertheless float,
yes, what shall we call them?

A blue Volvo
enters the turning area
Hesitantly at first
But soon it turns and drives away quickly
It tows an empty trailer

Light-money by night

Help them to forget
Help them
to repress the stone-dances
They're not invited voluntarily

Help them
to sink deep down into the

liver

There

only there

can they be purified

into the proper nutritional value

that the light demands

(But put on your shoes and

let's walk out on that cliff and watch

the little ocean where cities

rise in the morning

after good night's play

Are you hungry? There is fruit

There is food and drink

You want some?

And soon there is a wet city in front of

your red knees)

Up by the tunnel-ravine the car

stops and turns out the lights, if you

sneak up by the window you can

see a small girl

sleeping beneath a leopard-striped blanket

Now, the surface of Lake Mälaren sizzles in the docks of Hägersten

the rocks, the wooden sun, the burst-light

The night is killed as usual and

the children that float will be

picked up by the morning police and be

tucked softly into the oblivion of fathers

Buses drive up to the tower blocks;

it creaks in a boat;

one who runs

blue and red

passes on

the wooden jetty, along the rocks

The yellowbirds

The brownbirds and the blackbirds

The catbirds, the aspenbirds and the swedenbirds

and the birds that turned on the light

wander and grumble

mumble and tremble
Suncold waters washes us with
beach-muck and weed

But those that neither float
nor sink
they have nothing to forget
Orbitally inclined and light
and lucky they glide within themselves
Come sit down here on
the cliff next to me
and we start the counting: one; two; three;
four; five; six
(It isn't more difficult than that)
seven-wins; eight-wins
(You try)

niney; tenny
Unload the goods you brought all
the way out here on the point
Pile up prime numbers and wonderful
infinitudes on the edge of the cliff where
you sit right now
(And then quietly to yourself, don't
let anything interrupt the numerical river
of truth) Out on Lake Mälaren the boat tows
a barge with sand, not too long ago
log rafts were floating here, now
commercial traffic is not so common
You are still counting, right?

(A dog runs and barks
in the woods, you want it?
The blue and the red are running, up hill
and down dale, in the strangely
sandy woods Past the green wooden shed
around the little bay
and out on the next point You want the shed?
You want oceans? There are oceans
There are lakes and there are cities
You want them?
You want a car? There are cars

You can get them when you run
 You want woods? There are woods
 You want roads? There are roads
 You want a home? There are homes
 You want love? There is love)
 Now? Are you counting now?
 Don't let me interrupt (The light is
 already warm)

(Translated from Swedish by Anders Lundberg and Jesper Olsson)

Jörgen Gassilewski

Close-reading of non-existing texts is a political act

Close-reading of non-existing texts is a political act. Close-reading is in itself a political act. Non-existing texts are in themselves a political act. A political act is not in itself a political act. Existing texts are not in themselves political. When I use an existing text it ceases to exist. I am close-reading it. I am close-reading it until it ceases to exist. I am close-reading it until it is no longer a close-reading. Then it is a non-existing text. I transfer it to me. Then it is my text. But there is no close-reading. It is not a political act. I must keep it outside myself and simultaneously make it unfamiliar. I must remove the tone of the other text. I must remove the I of the other text. I must mount the tone in the other text. I must mount the I in the other text. I panic. What I assert is rhetoric and lacks substance. What I assert is rhetoric and lacks substance. Everything is rhetoric. Everything lacks substance. I assert. If the text lacks pronouns it must be filled with pronouns. If the text lacks referentiality it must be filled with referentiality. If the text lacks historicity it must be filled with historicity. If the text lacks intertextuality it must be filled with intertextuality. If the text lacks time and locality it must be filled with time and locality. If the text lacks narrativity it must be filled with narrativity. The text is now pronominal/referential/historicizing/intertextual/temporal/spatial/narrative. It takes place. It is an act. But not a political act. It has a language. I think of the distance as the crow flies between Smygehuk (the point farthest south in Sweden) and Treriksröset (the point farthest north in Sweden), or between Treriksröset and Smygehuk. I think of August Strindberg. I think of Ingmar Bergman. I think of Gunnar Ekelöf. I think of Thomas Tranströmer.

I think of Edith Södergran. I think of Karin Boye. I think of Ann Jäderlund. I think of Katarina Frostenson. I think. And in that I think these texts receive a materiality. To me. So much naturalism. So much bourgeois drama. So much expressionist drama. So much modernism. So much postmodernism. Nothing of this means anything. And through the fact that it does not mean anything the texts receive their political character. 1930s. In the magazine *Spectrum* there is a fusion between psychoanalysis, architectural functionalism (the Swedish Welfare State), and cultural radicalism. Modernism, proletarian novel authors. In the political association of cultural radicals *Clarté* the social realists prevail before the war. Form is bourgeois. 1960s. (During the 1950s, the concrete poetry of Öyvind Fahlström circulated in copies and transcripts.) 1963 and 1964 the concrete poets Bengt Emil Johnsson and Jarl Hammarberg make their debut. And side by side new-simple poetry with a lot of wettex-cloths and kitchen tables. Everyday life and words. By the end of the 1960s student revolt, Vietnam War and a closing of the ranks. Political realism. Form is bourgeois. 1980s. Deconstruction and romanticism. Stig Larsson brings us to a place where perversion, euphoria, and I-lessness meet. Where perversion, rhetoric, and euphoria meet. Where I-lessness, perversion, and rhetoric meet. Ann Jäderlund brings us to a place where romanticism, language games, and surfeit meet. Where meter, language-games, and romanticism meet. Where surfeit, meter, and language games meet. Form is a-political. 1990s (the Welfare State is liquidated). Helena Eriksson brings us to a place where caesura, geometry, and idiosyncrasy meet. Where blackness, geometry, and idiosyncrasy meet. Where idiosyncrasy, blackness, and caesura meet. Lars Mikael Raattamaa brings us to a place where periphery, materiality, and literality meet. Where materiality, literality, and expressivity meet. Where expressivity, materiality, and periphery meet. Form is political. (The blackmailing strategy — not seldom initiated by the generation of critics born in the 1940s, who started their careers in the light of the *concrete* and *new-simple* poetry of the early 1960s — that has aimed at imposing upon a poetry, whose social and political implications so to speak come from within the language in the form of caesuras, literalities, idiomatic slidings, confrontations, etc. [and that lacks the politically correct syntax and the natural “speech” the reader of Swedish poetry is used to associate with any domestic poem with a social or political ambition], a sort of blockade where a renunciation of all political relevancy has resulted in a cancellation and a procuration of literary status, has shown itself less and less successful.) Non-existing texts are texts that have been read to pieces. They are non-existing in the act of reading itself. Strategies

for removing the voice. Close-reading of non-existing texts is impossible. I am thinking of Emmanuel Hocquard. That is why it is a political act. Close-reading leads to non-existing texts. That is why it is a political act. Non-existing texts makes close-reading impossible. That is why it is a political act. A political act neither leads to non-existing texts nor makes close-reading impossible. I am thinking of Olivier Cadiot. I transfer the text to me. Literally. Now it takes an extensive reading. As extensive as possible. I think of Charles Bernstein. Preferably it will miss literature. Preferably it will miss literature altogether. An altogether extensive reading is no reading at all. An altogether extensive writing is no writing at all. Reading is paralleled by writing until there is no way of telling them apart. They become one and the same. I am thinking of Kenneth Goldsmith. The tone disappears and returns. The I disappears and returns. The rhetoric disappears and returns. The velocity is fluctuating. Reading and writing are one and the same. I transfer the text to me. Nevertheless it is not mine. All pronouns. All referentiality. All historicity. All intertextuality. All time. All locations. All narrativity. Like this:

With pumice dry just polish'd fine
To whom present this book of mine?

Translated by translated by translated. Catullus. Ebbe Linde. John Nott. To whom present this book of mine? Who? You, Cornelius. And you, O muse. Lesbia. Clodia. Ebbe Linde. Jörgen Gassilewski. Anders Lundberg and Jesper Olsson. John Nott. Paul Bové. And you, reader. The book? Carmina Catulli. Catullus. Poems. Images of the gates. *boundary 2*. Reading and reading and reading. With pumice dry just polish'd fine. Pumice, pumex, a polished piece of lava, with which the surface of the paper or the parchment is prepared. I am (and everyone before me) close-reading Catullus until the text does not exist anymore. Polish'd fine. I read very slowly. It ceases to exist in reading and writing, and imperceptibly I transfer it to me. I think of Charles Reznikoff. I remove the I. I remove the tone. I mount the I. I mount the tone. What I assert is rhetoric and it lacks substance. I assert. Pronouns. Referentiality. Historicity. Intertextuality. Time. Locality. Narrativity. I fill it (the text) with everything between as the crow flies between Smygehuk and Treriksröset. I fill it with Strindberg, Bergman, Ekelöf, Tranströmer. I fill it with Södergran, Boye, Jäderlund, Frostenson. I think. I fill it with bourgeoisie drama, expressionist drama, modernism, postmodernism. I fill it with the 1930s, *Spektrum*, *Clarté*; the 1960s, Fahlström, Johnsson, Hammarberg, wettex-cloths, kitchen tables, student revolt, Vietnam War; the 1980s, deconstruction, and romanticism, Larsson, Jäderlund; the

1990s, liquidated Welfare-State, Eriksson, Raattamaa, less and less successful blackmailing strategy. Now it is time for extensive reading and writing. As extensive as possible. Best if it misses literature altogether. The text is not mine. Close-reading of non-existing texts is a political act.

(Translated from Swedish by Anders Lundberg and Jesper Olsson)