



At Times Your Lines

Susan Lewis

Argotist Ebooks

Cover image by Susan Lewis

Copyright © Susan Lewis 2012

All rights reserved

Argotist Ebooks

At Times Your Lines

First the Gleam & Glitter

of something dazzling yet murky as magic, a new idea or a new view. Unreal to you but never to me. In which one of us wrong, blind because unwilling, unwilling because afraid. One slippery reality mistaken for another. A beautiful boy with long legs & the possibility of emergence. This might mean intoxication or disorderly words, pigment or angle of light, clouds or a girl whose eyes smile no matter who sees them. This might mean a beauty to be earned. By which I mean another horror withstood. Deny or ignore & return to Square One, try again or never in this arid limbo, this craven how-to, this picking-apart, this aha of comprehension, this one-way tunneling to the hope of any other

I Can't Say How We Got This Far

First I'm wading through daisies, nosing your breath, then we're like this, not one way but its opposite, in ever-more confusing rondo form. That we fail doesn't mean we shouldn't try to align ourselves, give or take reality's allowance. Do you hear the crickets yelling at those hungry birds? Do you smell the storm crackling in the hollows? I've tossed petals at the lot of them, they are not impressed. You would call me desperate, & I would demur. I would call you Babyface, or Salamander, or Mr. Critical, depending on the stuck market & the relative humility. Now there's sorrow raining down from the agitated clouds. They, too are underappreciated. Perhaps they yearn for a more congenial atmosphere. Who blames the cook for a flip of the wrist? Meanwhile you've aced more mean feats, leaving me jealous of my former self. Call it sweet-&-sour grapes, call it no-strings-attached, either way she'll be sorry, & sometimes I am. Other times I tremble for more of the same.

Only Dissect

Between rain & what it pounds, this gulf. Remote as gratitude & resentment or any awkward pair. Neither me nor my shady *doppel*, ganging up as ever on your inner emoticon. Like a rain shadow dampening, widening, yawning with unsated appetite. Sedated, you bow daily to your deontological pressure. After which there are sympathetic scalpels, melodic lies, & optimistic pharmaceuticals, to name just a few of my favorite things. Don't worry, you'll have more passions to succumb to, when they beckon. Look around again. None of this is yours. & yet you will lose it, as surely as my name is anything extrapolated from the evidence (equivocal). Perhaps you lack the appetite for this tasty tangle. Perhaps you'd rather dance a tarantelle or pillage something virginal, original or no. Still your aversions crouch in the corner, waiting to pounce. *This is a job for someone*, you never tire of reminding those who will & won't listen. But what should be the punch-line? Will we rebound when it clocks us on the chin? & who will glean the logic of the latest iteration?

In Praise Of Attention,

that stiff upper chamber of another bloody pump. Or upper cut. Or cut to the quick & the dead, to be blunt, to be simple as an animal in the grass, shooting the breeze with its momentary moods, its dry, whispering timbre. Not chasing facsimilar euphoria but synthesizing with the wisdom of chlorophyll. Attending, nursing plus paying out from your bottomless cache, that recirculating pump begging to be simplified to droplets of uncertainty, dubious nemesis of finitude. *What we observe is not nature itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning.* Yes, I recycle. Words grasping weakly at what is known grasping weakly at what is.

Eclogue (I)

Beyond the personal evolution of desire, aroused by the heat of the world's gaze. The aftermath of this attack leaving a confusion which threatens to swallow your leaking heart. In the park, on a Sunday or any day other than this, afflictual. The sun flowing like honey. This skin humming like bees in the rippling heat, resisting the urge to exaggerate the fecundity of flowers. You know what I'm thinking, you've been around this block & past, chipped off or not. Until the meal is over & we stuff ourselves like pillows dipped in sexy sauce. This despite the fug of complacency weighing us down, muddling our senses into pummeled zests. The answer may be more of the same. The answer is embedded in confusion, clogging our vesicles, clouding our fuddled perseverations, egging us on. Ditching us, itching to wiggle our toes & tickle the terra, until this twisted skin should rouse the *je ne sais quoi* to allude & elude

The Laws of Succession

Although she tried not to look over her shoulder, there were footsteps. That plus claw-prints, worthy of a giant canary or anything freakish but benign. Soon her friends grew webs between their toes. She found herself nodding off. Even moths took comfort in her ample shadow, sated in their mindless hunger. She could build a tower & launch it at the drop of a hat. She could spark phase change before its time. One day another god arrived, gifting her with rare & racy delights. The surfeit of pleasure compromised her concentration, making room for lesser beings to loosen up & shine.

If/ &

or any, which could be hordes, secreted perhaps, lorded over & scattered, aiding & abutting this edge, this easement, this *sine qua non* of communitarian dismay. No butts about what's strewn willy nilly like snowflakes, like fallen leaves, like gum splats. Only compress, as someone might propose, while the government insists you destroy yourself & obliging as ever, you oblige. In this way we neglect *noblesse oblige* & its naughty *doppel, negligée*, despite or because of that tantalizing through-line swirling & scrolling about our peaky little hot spots, tendriling back to nowhere we began, that universal end, in or out of conditional as the case may be & somewhat is (to the swell of strings).

Basic Research

Perseverating; that is, digging for the logic in this slow accretion. Realigned meaning well-intentioned to stop us in our tracks. & the periodic table, to which we're not invited. Through the murk, energy flowing to its chosen acolyte & victim. Beware bumping & grinding of the unctuous animal. Plus attraction & repulsion, repulsive attraction & headlong propulsion to the next bit, when butterflies sip nectar & flash their extravagant threads, to the swell of strings. Run while you may or may not source the right bauble, babbling as our lost world spins off toxins, hurtling from the fraught unsought alternative.

In The Meantime,

like dancing rabbits or hen-pecked pigeons, complicated. Gracile. Ambling with the melody. Kiss me on the downbeat; show me your teeth; hum. When you reach out I remember mostly everything. The babies riding on our backs. The surf cooling our tails. How you loved to ruffle my feathers. Another brand of passion for another version of this swirling flesh. The way you shoved your paws in your pockets, sleek as sheets. Your thoughts might have lost me but there's still one language only we can speak, if ever atmospheric conditions favor us again. I can wait if you can, if the balance sheet weighs in with a wink or a nod or any kind of sign.

In Praise of Mortality,

less something still & solid, notwithstanding something in & of, amounting to, achieved. Before the ashes. Until the. So sadly small, so meekly silent. Before the closed book of now & now without relent, that pointless mystery. After your turn another, cruel & opaque. In which the gift of beauty, cruel & opaque. That which I pretend/cannot pretend. Ignoring the skin of the heart of the matter, high fantasy of self manufacture. That time is eating us for lunch. While you, sweet snack, snapped off at the stem, tape your own wound & struggle to bridge the relentless gap. The caressing wind whisking up the minutes. Sun birthing & burying. Warming us to this simple fate. Let's say I know what I'm doing. Let's say I use this sing-song voice. You may or may not pay obeisance. The chest squeezed like a lemon, bringing forth this dubious juice.

A Variable Equation

This one had a weeping cat. In fact, he was a cat himself, when the notion struck him. He could leap from pool to pool like raindrops. When the pair of them cried, the earth beneath them shuddered, from pleasure or impatience. One day the cat's tears dried up. It lay still until becoming something else. Its man never found out who had ordered the new body, but he knew then & there he must get one like it. You could say he lorded it over his pet, but it was the cat become moonbeam which nurtured him before he had a self to speak of.

Murky With a Chance Of

You might feel better if you changed the scale. Microbes, say, for every place and time. No doubt they're anxious, or keep lists. Thus the master of ceremonies guards her precious innocence. By which I mean surprise is like a pill, to be swallowed. One word, you say: vitamins, stockpiling. Between trace minerals and other scant rewards I'd opt to vanish with a trace, though this race to any finish feels rather foolish. Every sour-faced dough knows to rise when punched down. Let's seek shelter where we can, then admire what's been done. It's sure to impress, if we let it.

For Times Like Now,

when the matter misbehaves, sending scrambled signals. Components clashing like mismatched mates. Bad flavors flowing in currents, a currency of missed comfort. Wave if you want to go. With the flow, for instance. Like a flower, bracing itself, inclined at times towards the bright improbable. Since each of us must bloom & rot or be cut down. Coughing like a ruminant startled by dark prospects. Choking on your borrowed cud. Strangled by your thankless dodder, binding you, sucking out your sallow juices & your useless fear, cleansing you, rousing your blindered loyalty.

In Praise of Lying

to oneself or others. Lying down & lying in, lie in wait until you pounce. As comfortable as a couch. Starched & bothered. Let him go, he is insufficiently insightful. Or any kind of threat. Like fairytales, like mythology, like hired guns selling you on what you never knew you. Comfortable as couches. Couched in pretty promises. Crouching, set to pounce. Animate the one you jilted or wait slack-jawed. Now breathe. More or less than enough. Tense & lunge. Then feed him promises & codicils, take him for another ride, run him ragged. Play another bar or two of evidence. Smile into the air. Temporize until he strikes at other bugs, then buzz off til something vital tapers off or snaps.

Eclogue (II)

Hours like droplets, choices clamoring & cluttering, tangled & nebulous, dispositive.
Disposed & indisposed. Or what, if not a tattered pocket. Frayed as nerves. A'feared of every
consequence, plus its inevitable evil twin. On the wind the latest news. On the wind the scent of
death. On the wind felicitation. The mountains turn their high-boned cheeks on you, their son.
They're going through a rocky break-up, (sings) *in the valley below*. You mustn't think I don't want to
live for evermore. Want to part-ay. Want to want. The organism makes me. The organism makes
the man. In the breeze things are likely. Blowing in decision. Indecision riding it, showering you
with apt regret.

Family Man

Made of sand, he felt himself crumble faster than the rest of us, whose favorite flavor is denial. He made an effort to avoid water & wind but as he was wont to say in his abrasive voice, what was the point of living if you couldn't live? Still he listened to his wife's entreaties and stayed faithful to his literally sheltered life until an epic heat wave pushed him over the edge, both literally & figuratively. I'm sorry! I had to know what it felt like, he shouted up to her as he plunged, & the truth was he could barely wait for that first & final excess.

Sunset in the Nursery,

soft-edged, like Play-Dough or consideration. In pastel colors, surging silently into the strawberry light. While we gaze in admiration & despair. The obdurate sun “setting.” Setting the date. Settling the score. Setting down the whys & wherefores. Settling down with its line in the proverbial sand. Settling into the distance, sending us packing, turning dutifully towards the more or less impotent satellite offering her second-hand luminescence. That one seems masculine & one feminine another sign of just how far we haven’t come. Meanwhile we whine like retrograde babies, shying from the shadows, closing our eyes & waiting for the heavy weight to reappear & show us if & why & how much we can grab before the curtain falls.

Righteous in Retreat,

thorns probe & prick your yielding feet. A path like any other. A math that some can puncture, pleadingly. Here & there you blunder into sacrificial traps. Mouth objections. Eye benedictions (like so many cracked seeds). Pith sprouting willy-nilly from the lips of babes. En route to the block you yield & yield again, a neck beautiful & bent, a sensibility or a fenced stability, an inutility to reign in the attack. Going for the. An offering like any mother, wet & warm, pulsing with ambivalence, holding back & gushing forth, rushing with the force of ages to an ageless innocent.

In Praise of Indecision,

whether or not I want what I assume you expect, in kind or its evil twin. With or without you & your comical but flattering demands upon my appetites. In the carousel of life, every tick a gold ring the rest of us have lost. Unmerrily. Unable to retry. Or strive to convert you, currently sucking both alternating & direct as is your wont, you red-blooded Americano you. Meanwhile, back at the ranch, I waffle. Should we or shouldn't we? There may be this roof beneath our feet but we are teetering here, in search of liar ground. For stability we should sway, for ability we should pray, for mobility we should stay this baffling course, *inter alia*. Honk if you know why anything. By our fruits shall they know us, which might be to love us, unless

The Logic of Her Dream

revealed the whimsy of her waking, bouncing her from meal to meal, child to child, lover to lover. There was a twist in her rope neither brain nor brawn could right. It took her all to hold on while it whipped her to & fro like a rag in the fickle wind. She managed well enough, never batting an eye when her babies grew beards, their nimble fingers crafting colored clouds worth coveting. Cameras pried into her secret caverns. She smiled & crowned & pushed like no tomorrow, which, like most abstractions in this immanent dimension, satisfied her lingering nostalgia & untold other appetites.

A New Leaf

Does this heavy lifting fray your seams? Do you covet your neighbor's wings? These trees grow blossoms of intoxicating sweetness. Some give off melodies like Tuvan throat-songs or the wavelengths of precious gems. These reptiles can smell what you're thinking. I know your wait & breadth, pain & depth. Worry not, your secret's safe with me. Some say money heals the wounds it can't inflict. We have ourselves to blame for what festers. Also the bump & grind of microbes with their better halves. Other options are abundant. Hollow men & angry women know where I aspire. Precocious babies too, though their lips are sealed with basics. You won't look into my eyes until they quit. Who doesn't fade, from time to time, from rank passivity? Why not linger in the past, until it brings us to this nowhere future? Sow what you can't say, unpack those sea legs, poise to pitch & roll. Do I see phaetons, or just lightening on the horizon? The sky cannot cease groaning. Perhaps it's not yet ready to give up & go dark.

In Praise of Efficiency,

beneath the surface, abandoned in layers. Passive, redolent of coffee, crushed herbs & nematodes. You know the ones. Listen to the trees, each its own edifice, aflutter with nervous energy. Not about to make a mark so much as add their energy to the bigger stew. Perhaps not heat so much as light or any brand of particle, waving improbably like the rest of us, here & gone & here again. Flitting about, whistling Dixie, like the genius tried to tell us. A weighty matter, you quip, & noisy too, blurry & caloric. Like ne'er-do-wells spinning webs off other webs: sexy grifters, purring as they lie in wait, taking up our slack. Supping on our naive juices, converting them to far superior schemes.

Eclogue (III)

A bird perched on a wire like a bird perched on a wire. Or another evening, another unexamined day. The bird's lover knows better, & dreads the consequences. But they speak no common language so the misunderstanding gels into a nest full of need. That should keep him busy, thinks the first bird, who hates doubt more than she hates owls, the beyond-horizon, or her wingless dreams. While on & on the other struggles, popping nuggets of philosophy into gaping yellow beaks.

Landscape with Impending Storm

Clouds blew in, tempers blew up. Impatient for an eclipse of something by something else. Farmers gathered their bitter harvest while bears and other self-appointed heroes rode shotgun, imagining themselves front and center, grumbling bitterly at their not-quite-opposable thumbs. The forest tried to teach them how to dodge the deluge, but no one paid attention to their computational mistakes. The scurrying on the streets beat out a martial tattoo. Those who had served in Her Majesty's forces knew how to turn and sharply turn again, *ad nauseum*. The rest of us cloaked ourselves in condescension, heading blindly for the same old precipice.

In Praise of Miscommunication

and her co-star, depending. Try not to stare at the posterior pronation of their disregard. Which may or may not be normal from an imaginary point of view. We have tried many things and failed them all. Still we are distracted by these weblike tentacles probing the crevices in which we work & play. How loudly they rumble while we watch & wait for intention to become laudable. Until the real work begins, without forfeiting any hope for tomorrow, or tipping off the Sandman to the secret of success. We should go to him & also stay behind, where the blossoming transgresses in fits & starts. Which is not to say fertilized, so much as dug in & reaching.

Either/Or

If & when. Else you suffer. Atop a mountain. Atop this mountain. To dive off. To sink or soar. You might hear them murmuring, you might take their interest as encouragement. Or something out of bounds. Amounting to leaves rustling, thighs rubbing, sex on stilts. The hills alive with no more choice. Clipped, but not cut off. Down, but not out. One way is to laugh. By their humor shall ye know them. Another is more muscular. Extend & contract. Honk if you conflict, alone or in pairs. Listen to the finches, working the room in pairs & pairs of pairs, knowing what they know. By their edification shall ye know them, with or without any not-to-be-counted-on Late Bloomer's Special.

Diddling & Dawdling

with woulds & worlds, ambi-valent towards sweetness & bite, heavy & light. The gravity of situations situated somewhere between nothing & something, obscurity flirting with irrelevance, dancing nude near its own persistence. Or envy the flashing lights, the jingle to jangled ears, whose game may or may not be over (*insert coin to continue*)—no matter how tinny to the point of tenacity, as narcissistic as mammon itself, the neat trick of coveting immortality in anonymity, revolution in allusion, illusory or illustrative as any stitch in time or fashionably late. Right yourself by any borrowing of your own invention. For faster results, bake cookies or strike something in 3:4 time until it comes to life, or its insidious nemesis.

At Times Your Lines

bring me to tears. On page & canvas brow. I want to mouth your worry, trap & release it to the distance. Round the heart of things is shadow. Plus slaves struggling from stones. I'd cry emancipator, free thyself, but that seat's been taken. Consider Dante. Consider the lilies, trailing death & taxes. Also lingerie, opaque or sheer, depending on your ideology & the prevailing winds. Nature abhors a vacuum, she needs what threatens her, like anyone. Or drown in the commonplace, its chaotic tides. Taking hold of attraction (extrapolate). Sprinkling the path with any sort of glean. & wander towards lips & their admissions (please).

Afterlife

In which I stand around cinch-waisted, smoking something that won't kill me. Accessorized to walk like a giraffe. I might be surrounded by Italian beaches, effeminate convertibles, a population sworn to self-revelation. Brooding in silent majesty, accepting admissions, arbitrating secret yearnings, biding my time. This is all before I am born. At the end of the rehearsal we sit cross-legged on the carpet & gently probe the actual. Offered freely are puppy cuddles, clandestine observation, ambiguous incentives. In this version, we will take another turn, after which there should be wine, women, & a certain nasal twang. Not to mention a bevy of babies for those in the so-called audience craving complication.

Notes & Acknowledgments

“In Praise of Attention”: The italicized quotation is from Werner Heisenberg’s “Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science” (1958).

“Eclogue (II)”: The italicized fragment refers to Bob Dylan’s “One More Cup Of Coffee (Valley Below)” (1975).

* * *

Many, many thanks to Jeffrey Side, the editor of Argotist Ebooks, for publishing this book.

Thanks also to Ed Go and Michael Whalen of *Other Rooms* for first publishing “Murky With a Chance Of.”

And thanks, as ever, to D.G., for keeping me on my toes.

About the Author

Susan Lewis is the author of *How To Be Another* (Cervena Barva Press, 2012), *Some Assembly Required* (Dancing Girl Press, 2011), *Commodity Fetishism*, (winner of the 2009 Cervena Barva Press Chapbook Award), and *Animal Husbandry* (Finishing Line Press, 2008).

Her work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and appeared in *Atlanta Review*, *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *Boog City*, *Cadillac Cicatrix*, *Chronogram*, *Cimarron Review*, *Cross Connect*, *Cutthroat*, *Descant*, *The Dirty Goat*, *Eclipse*, *Fact-Simile*, *Fast Forward Vol. 2* and *The Mix Tape*, *First Intensity*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Fox Cry Review*, *Fugue*, *Global City Review*, *G. W. Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *The Griffin*, *Gulf Stream*, *Hampden-Sydney Poetry Review*, *Hubbub*, *The Hurricane Review*, *The Journal*, *Kitchen Sink*, *Lilies and Cannonballs Review*, *Lullwater Review*, *Lungfull*, *Mad Hatter's Review*, *The Madison Review*, *Minnetonka Review*, *Monday Night*, *Nestmonger*, *The New Orleans Review*, *The New Press Literary Quarterly*, *Ninth Letter*, *Off the Coast*, *On Barcelona*, *Other Rooms*, *Pantophobia*, *Pearl*, *Pool*, *Phoebe*, *Prairie Winds*, *Quantum Tao*, *Raritan: A Quarterly Review*, *RiverSedge*, *Sawbuck*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal of the Arts*, *Seneca Review*, *Snow Monkey*, *So To Speak*, *South Carolina Review*, *Sulphur River Literary Review*, *Sycamore Review*, *Terminus*, *The Tusculum Review*, *Verse (online)*, *Verse Daily*, *Xavier Review*, and *Zone 3*.

Her collaborations with composer Jonathan Golove have been recorded and performed at the Kennedy Center and Carnegie's Weill Hall, and her collaborations with artist Melissa Stern have been exhibited at the Brooklyn Artist's Gym and the Fetherston Gallery in Seattle.

She is Poetry Editor of the *Mad Hatters' Review* and co-edits the *Mad Hatters' Review Blog*. Her website is www.susanlewis.net.