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## **Musing*With*: Kimiko Hahn**

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# In the Spirit of a Sestina

*Kimiko Hahn*

*where she was drugged. She said she woke up naked*

*As in many brothels, the torture of choice was electric shocks*

*The jolt causes intense pain, sometimes evacuation of the bladder and bowel - and even unconsciousness. Shocks*

*After the beatings and shocks,  
Sina said she would be locked naked  
in a wooden coffin  
full of biting ants.*

*The coffin  
was dark, suffocating and so tight that she could not move her hands up to her face to brush  
off the ants.*

*Her tears washed the ants  
out of her eyes. She was locked in the coffin*

*as 14-year-old girls are being jolted with electric shocks -*

NOTE: "The Evil Behind the Smiles," Nicholas Kristof, *The New York Times*, 1 Jan. 2009.

# From the Clipping Morgue

## a monostich sequence

*Kimiko Hahn*

*like a barn coming out of the faucet*

\*

*Asia (partly because they stitch girls up and resell them as virgins several times over),*

\*

*blinded her and burned away her eyelids and most of her face, leaving just bone*

\*

*as smoke rose from her burning flesh and she ran about blindly, crashing into walls*

\*

*flooded with thousands of pickles, vast flows of discarded chicken heads*

\*

*a blanket of black plastic balls that blocked the sun*

\*

*8 and 12, move through their house like newly hatched birds, barely able to stand*

NOTE: all quotes are from *The New York Times*.

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## Wendy Anne Lee

### I. Spirit and Form

Kimiko Hahn's poem opens with an acknowledgment and a riddle. As the title makes clear, the poem does not take the *form* of a sestina. There will be no kaleidoscopic sestets or plaiting of six end-words, no *envoi* or *tornata* to call them together in a final, fitting constellation of meaning. Instead, Hahn presents us with thirteen lines, eight of which are grouped in a stanza. Some end-words repeat but not in an obvious pattern. The very idea of a pattern, which could be called the spirit or essence of a sestina, is compromised by the subject of the poem, the systematic electrocution and enslavement of a child sex worker. What then is "the spirit of a sestina," and what does it mean to be "*in*" that spirit?

A sestina is traditionally about love. Petrarch in his last of nine sestinas in the otherwise sonnet-heavy *Canzoniere* deploys the end-words *lieto* ("happy"), *notti* ("nights"), *stile* ("style"), *rime* ("rhymes"), *pianto* ("tears"), and *morte* ("death"), as in the first stanza:

*Mia benigna fortuna e 'l viver lieto,  
i chiari giorni et le tranquille notti  
e i soave sospiri, e 'l dolce stile  
che solea resonare in versi e 'n rime,  
vòlti subitamente in doglia e 'n pianto  
odiar vita mi fanno et bramar morte.* (Poem 332, lines 1-6)

My kindly fortune and my life, so happy,  
the clear-lit days and all the tranquil nights,  
the gentle-flowing sighs and the sweet style  
that would resound in all my verse and rhymes—  
all of a sudden turned to grief and tears—  
make me hate life and make me yearn for death. (Musa 463)

In the fifth stanza, Petrarch's speaker announces love as the obvious motif of his poem (*Chiaro segno Amor pose a le mie rime*) ("Love set a clear note for my rhymes"), but the sudden arrival of "grief and weeping" (*subitamente in doglia e 'n pianto*) changes, if not defeats, his style (*mutato stile*) (25, 5, 64). *Amor* is noticeably not one of the sestina's privileged end-words. Love is, as ever, present in Petrarch's poem, but it appears as a kind of given, or stable context—what *once* could be relied on so naturally but can no longer be recuperated, even as it persists as a fantasy of ease, plenitude, and innocence. *Ove è condotto il mio amoroso stile?* ("Where did my loving style go?") (13). The *chiaro segno* of the sestina is not love but loss and the relationship between loss and writing.

There is a formal reason why the spirit of a sestina is not simply *Amor*. Despite its historical topos of courtly love, the sestina's structure of recapitulation lends it a more ambivalent disposition, a working through of the mysterious joys and ravages of erotic, platonic, and writerly love (not just something one writes *about* but what shapes, disables, or insists on writing). Love is embedded and re-embedded in lines both mosaic-like (glittering, static) and incantatory (echoing, performative). For Petrarch, the result is a meditation on happiness, hopelessness, time, suffering, and style. The kingdom of love (*regno d'Amor*) is over, never to be experienced in the same way again, although it continues to organize desire. The sestina must trade in *amoroso stile* for *doloroso stile* or rather, a "double style" of love entwined with grief (*doppiando 'l dolor, doppia lo stile*). This shape of love—refracted, persistent, foreclosed—describes the spirit of a sestina.

Where would we begin to locate the complex spirit of love in a poem completely cut and pasted from a news story about the torture, rape, and forced prostitution of young women in Cambodia? In a poem, moreover, whose scattered end-words ("naked," "shocks," "coffin," "ants") dismantle the operations of sensibility? "*The jolt causes intense pain, sometimes evacuation of the bladder and bowel - and even unconsciousness. Shocks.*" Hahn's source-text, a 2009 *New York Times* column by Nicholas Kristof headlined "The Evil Behind the Smiles," explicitly addresses how sex trafficking destroys the meaning of affect, revealing through the ordeals of a former brothel worker how "coquettish" prostitutes are brutalized into smiling and looking "seductive." For Kristof, it should not be possible, after knowing the experiences of Sina Vann, the subject of his article and the named "she" of Hahn's poem, for western men touring red-light districts in poor countries to continue "tak[ing] the girls' smiles at face value." For Hahn, what becomes impossible is the very coherence of a face, the subjectivity through and on which such atrocities take place.

Hahn's first line explains that to be "*In the Spirit of a Sestina*" is to be "*where she was drugged,*" in the space of violence itself, the underground "torture chamber[s]" of the brothels reported by Kristof where, the poem repeats, "*She said she woke up naked.*" The space of the sestina narrows even further to the "*wooden coffin / full of biting ants*" used to punish noncompliant or unsmiling prostitutes. Hahn lineates Kristof's prose:

*The coffin  
was dark, suffocating and so tight that she could not move her hands up to her face to  
brush off  
the ants.  
Her tears washed the ants  
out of her eyes. She was locked in the coffin*

In this space where Sina cannot see, move, or breathe, she can still cry. And yet crying, far from Petrarch's *pianto*, does not describe affective experience understood as the expression of "feeling" or interior experience, as in the cause-and-effect of "grief and weeping" (*doglia e 'n pianto*) or "pain and weeping" (*d'ira et di pianto*) where tears attest to internal injury. Crying in Hahn's poem signifies the production of tears to rid the eyes of ants, no *larmes délicieuses* (as in sentimental poetry) but a saline solution, generated when the hands cannot reach the face, when one is locked in an ant-filled coffin.

## II. "her face"

Of the encounter with the face, Emmanuel Levinas writes:

*Le visage se refuse à la possession, à mes pouvoirs. Dans son épiphany, dans l'expression, le sensible, encore saisissable se mue en résistance totale à la prise. Cette mutation ne se peut que par l'ouverture d'une dimension nouvelle. En effet, la résistance à la prise ne se produit pas comme une résistance insurmontable comme dureté du rocher contre lequel l'effort de la main se brise, comme l'éloignement d'une étoile dans l'immensité de l'espace. L'expression que le visage introduit dans le monde ne défie pas la faiblesse de mes pouvoirs, mais mon pouvoir de pouvoir. Le visage, encore chose parmi les choses, perce la forme qui cependant le délimite. Ce qui veut dire concrètement: le visage me parle et par là m'invite à une relation sans commune mesure avec un pouvoir qui s'exerce, fût-il jouissance ou connaissance. (172)*

The face resists possession, resists my powers. In its epiphany, in expression, the sensible, still graspable, turns into total resistance to the grasp. This mutation can occur only by the opening of a new dimension. For the resistance to the grasp is not produced as an insurmountable resistance, like the hardness of the rock against which the effort of the hand comes to naught, like the remoteness of a star in the immensity of space. The expression the face introduces into the world does not defy the feebleness of my powers, but my ability for power. The face, still a thing among things, breaks through the form that nevertheless delimits it. This means concretely: the face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised, be it enjoyment or knowledge. (Lingis 197-98)

What is this relation to the face advanced by Levinas as incommensurate with pleasure or knowledge? How can the resistance initiated by the face be both total and *not* insurmountable, *unlike* the hardness of a rock? And what kind of “new dimension” is imagined to open (*l'ouverture d'une dimension nouvelle*), which alone makes possible the epiphany of the face, the transformation into resistance (*la résistance à la prise*), a resistance to being taken that is nonetheless still graspable, still seizable (*encore saisissable*)?

Is the face of Sina Vann, whose photograph accompanies the *Times* article, the face of such resistance? The woman we see in the picture is youthful, dimply, sweet even with her frizzled ponytail and swept bangs. But the charm of her expression is exactly what is undercut by the text that flanks her image, drawing out the socio-economic distress, physical brutality, and political inertia that coerce her affect. These conditions render her smile a tight and uncomfortable contraction rather than an expansive show of feeling or even conscious self-presentation (as in Kristof's own genial, toothy portrait, placed beneath Vann's). The story of Vann's life (abducted, drugged, raped, tortured) calls attention to the most pronounced detail of her photograph, her totally averted eyes. At first (before we notice the grimness of her smile), they appear out of place in her approachable, affable countenance—like in cartoons where, in a painting that lines the portrait gallery of some haunted house, the eyes suddenly shift direction, suggesting the presence of someone peering behind the canvas.

Given the topic of child prostitution, we might be tempted to read Vann's expression as shame, or what the *OED* defines as “the painful emotion arising from the consciousness of something dishonouring, ridiculous, or indecorous in one's own conduct or circumstances (or in those of others whose honour or disgrace one regards as one's own).” Do Vann's averted eyes register the pain of disgrace, the internalization (taking on “as one's own”) the dehumanizing acts of others? The fact that Kristof was the photographer works against such a reading since the object at which Vann cannot look is the same one to whom she chooses to speak. (In subsequent columns, Kristof refers to his enduring friendship with Vann.) Offering a more subtle alternative to disgrace, Silvan Tomkins formulates shame as “an ambivalent turning of the eyes away from the object toward the face, toward the self” (137). In Tomkins's theory, shame describes a boomerang-like movement of sociality, first a curve towards the other person and then a whip-like return to the self. Tomkins's story of shame might read like the following: “I wish to know you and to have you know me, but then I retreat into painful consciousness of myself and this makes me ashamed of my wish to look at you and to have you look at me.” In the context of Kristof's photograph, do Vann's averted eyes tell this story of shameful encounter (the story of how to tell a terrible story), or do they, as I want to suggest, reflect another kind of relation, the resistance that animates ethics: *la résistance totale à la prise* that nonetheless extends an invitation not premised on power, neither that of enjoyment nor of knowledge?

If what is at issue are victims and victims' faces, then what Levinas describes as the ethical imperative of the encounter ("the look and the welcome of the face" that declares "you shall not commit murder") would appear to have been already violated (198, 199). Levinas, writing as we know in the wake of the Holocaust, states: "The epiphany of the face brings forth the possibility of gauging the infinity of the temptation to murder, not only as a temptation to total destruction, but also as the purely ethical impossibility of this temptation and attempt" (199). What demands, we might ask, does the already violated face make? Once the attempt at destruction has been made (and repeated), what epiphany remains possible, and what kind of resistance would be made manifest by that epiphany?

Kristof's story and Hahn's poem, which reenacts Vann's testimonial (making her speak even more directly for the "*14-year-old girls [who] are being jolted with electric shocks*") reposition Vann as agent, advocate, fighter—the "trusted lieutenant," in Kristof's report, of one of Cambodia's leaders in the dangerous campaign against human trafficking. The photograph of Vann—and, in particular, the impact of her glance away—redirects attention to the gaze of the reader, who is suddenly caught looking at someone who does not want to be looked at. The subject's very disengagement, her un-meeting of one's eyes, permits a kind of unlimited access to her face (*le sensible, encore saisissable se mue en résistance totale à la prise*), and yet we cannot call this an encounter with passivity. Vann's face remains an object of contemplation as well, perhaps, as a distinctly American variety of pity, in which one is implicated just enough (Vann is Vietnamese) to experience umbrage without responsibility. And yet even as we regard Vann's suffering and heroism, history has ruled out in our relation the possibility of *jouissance* or even *connaissance*. She does not meet our gaze; Kristof's mediation remains in the foreground. Without pleasure or knowledge, what is it we are left with?

"In the Spirit of a Sestina" returns us to the form's prismatic preoccupation with love and, specifically, I want to conclude by suggesting, to feelings of kinship for and between women. Like Marilyn Hacker's "Towards Autumn," whose end-words ("daughter," "friend," "bread," "mother," "lover," "myself") thread women's lives across geographic and generational distance, Hahn's poem invokes a kind of maternal surrogacy, a relation to its subject as if "she" were one's daughter, or, in a variation, as if this were happening to one's daughter. The immediacy of Hahn's opening into the space "*where she was drugged*" and the troubling present tense of the final line ("*as 14-year-old girls are being jolted with electric shocks —*") call forth the urgency and intimacy of a parental response, simulating a closeness of encounter that any news article would be hard-pressed to achieve. That said, Kristof also locates the heart of his story in a surrogate maternal relation, revealed in a buried detail about the human rights advocate who is Vann's liberator, mentor, and ally: "To get at Somaly, the brothel owners kidnapped and brutalized her 14-year-old daughter. And six months ago, the daughter of another anti-trafficking activist (my interpreter when I interviewed Sina) went missing." Here, as political, economic, and sexual violence take aim

at mothers and daughters, survivors enlarge their family circle to include what Hacker's sestina calls all "Earthbound women." As "Towards Autumn" announces, "What your mother / left undone, women who are not your mother / may do. Women who are not your lover / love you" (24-27).

Petrarch's sestina explores the question of how the mutability of love alters writing, resulting in a *mutato stile* that swings between *dolce* and *pianto*, *Amor* and *dolor*. Writing is, above all else, suffering, and only death can bring both practices to an end. Hahn's poem knows this truth about the sestina, but it also imagines something like Levinas's *dimension nouvelle* that gives rise to the encounter with the face and its paradoxical challenge to grasp resistance, to recognize the limitations of one's ability for power (*mon pouvoir de pouvoir*), and in that moment to exist in an ethical relation with the other, however tenuous or sorrowful. The tears that wash the ants from Sina's eyes evoke the "equinoctial tears" in Elizabeth Bishop's "Sestina." Like "the rain that beats on the roof of the house," the old grandmother's tears are "foretold by the almanac" (7-9). The autonomic aspect of Sina's tears (the difference between a crying girl and a tear-producing body) recalls the inevitability conveyed by Bishop's lines: "It was to be, says the Marvel Stove. / I know what I know, says the almanac." And yet the explicit impact of Hahn's poem is to "jolt" or alarm her reader to a primal political scene of violence against daughters, and then to leave us with the uneasy sense of historical obligation that experience entails.

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