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## Digital Creation

Burt Kimmelman

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(Review)

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The 1966 album *East West* by Bloomfield's ally and employer, Paul Butterfield, had a major impact on the era's aspiring guitarists in a different way. It was a prototype for what is now called "the jam band" culture. Through a combination of vision and spontaneous combustion, the band recorded a long instrumental excursion hoping to emulate sounds they were hearing from great jazz soloists such as John Coltrane and Indian musicians such as Ravi Shankar. *East West* was fledgling psychedelic, modal rock, a new sound that would grow exponentially in the hands of The Grateful Dead and Hendrix. Bloomfield experimented with exotic scales that were foreign to a time when "Top 40 radio was preoccupied by British invaders, surfer dudes, and lemon twisters." Dann ably transports us into the volcanic fits and starts, battles, and brotherhood that characterized the Butterfield era, and the subsequent Electric Flag lineup.

An arm's length view of this music in 2021 offers perspective. What may have sounded startlingly new in 1966 seems quite naive now. Bloomfield's use of co-called Indian scales may have been the first stab by a rock n' roller to fuse east and west, so one must give him some credit. But the playing itself sounds childish in comparison to say, John McLaughlin, who would get serious about this fusion a mere three years later. Dann is only somewhat accurate when he says that after Bloomfield "All guitarists had to solo. They had to demonstrate competency as musicians not just as entertainers." I'm not sure that The Allman Brothers, for instance, would cite Bloomfield as their main inspiration! And the Beatles contemporaneous work certainly didn't lack gravitas. He was not the first rock n' roll guitarist to play substantive solos as George Harrison, Jeff Beck, Danny Cedrone (*Rock Around the Clock* [1955]), and Frank Zappa would agree. It's more accurate to say that he was one of the first white men to really *stretch out*, as if he were a jazz player. Once Jimi Hendrix came on the scene, though, everyone else seemed quaint by comparison. Yet Dann more than once avows that in the late 60's Bloomfield was the greatest living blues-rock guitarist, an impossible claim to support.

Still, there is something compelling about the alternate history Dann proposes. Whatever metric we use, Bloomfield deserves credit for being a scholar, an educator, and for a brief period of time a rock visionary. The very idea that you could record a discursive twenty-minute jam with wacky scales, and that it would sell hundreds of thousands of copies, was formative to youngsters like Sharp and Frisell. It's worth noting, too, that Butterfield led an

integrated band, two African Americans and three whites, which in and of itself was radical at the time. Up until that time rock music mostly consisted of three-minute Caucasian trifles. Bloomfield, smart, well-read, open-minded and inquisitive, cared little for any of that.

Rarely discussed is Bloomfield's advantages in a racist industry that *allowed* him to sell tons of records. His long solos were news partly because he was white, and he might be the first to tell you that the African Americans he emulated were adventurous soloists before him.

Any quibbles aside, what is most engrossing about this story is the insider's view of the life of a touring and recording rock musician in the infancy of the business. Happy tales of all-night parties and explosive performances in hallowed shrines such as The Fillmore West are followed by tales of exhaustion, insomnia, bad sound systems, poor preparation, sub optimal travel conditions, middling performance, and marginal pay. Bloomfield is tormented by the road; he is literally up for days, requiring copious amounts of depressants to bring him down. Dann reveals how suspicious Bloomfield was of the star-making apparatus. He was serious about art, didn't seem to care much for the trappings of rock n' roll fame. And yet Michael was a man of opposites, a contrarian. In a telling moment, he becomes deeply depressed after seeing the audience's outsized reaction to Hendrix at the Monterey Pop Festival in 1967. He starts to doubt his own ability. Naturally he wanted to be loved and appreciated as much as anyone else, and perhaps to remain the Guitar King for a bit longer. To do so, however, would have required that he remain serious and sober.

He did neither. At the tender age of twenty-seven he was already talking about retiring, content to stay at home and get high, occasionally jamming with friends or playing a local bar. His demons gained the upper hand. It's painful to read about all the opportunities he began to squander, recording sessions that lead nowhere, gigs that he performed poorly at, gigs he didn't show up to. Given these years it seems natural that history has not been generous to him. He became more and more dependent on heroin to soothe his anxiety, and when he gave up heroin, he became a sloppy drunk. His marriage ended, unsurprisingly, as he was incapable of remaining loyal and dependable, his home becoming a revolving door for drug dealers, hangers on, leeches, and old and new friends. Dann's account of Bloomfield's home life includes harrowing, intimate detail.

Through it all he was loved. Even with all his bridges burned Bloomfield's friends cared deeply for him up to his last days. His wit, enthusiasm, effervescence and caustic humor were dear to his band mates and lifelong pals, such as Mark Naftalin, Nick Gravenites, Al Kooper, and Roy Ruby. They seemed willing to forgive his trespasses.

No one could save him. By the late 1970's he was all but housebound in Marin County, requiring assistants or his ex-wife or a friend to drive him to the store. To insure he would show up to play you'd have to pick him up, and even if he *did* show up there are astonishing examples of him precipitously leaving in the middle of shows. On one occasion in Vancouver he was perturbed because a TV special on history of the blues that he had participated in wasn't available for viewing in the venue or hotel. Desperate to see it, and unable to, he got pissed off and before the last show started took a cab to the airport. He left a terse note asking his band mates to bring his axes home, which they did not. One of the guitars that was left at the club was his signature 1959 Les Paul, which in today's dollars might sell for \$300,000. One wonders where the guitar ended up that night!

Dann has done Michael Bloomfield's fans a great service with this book. I might wish for less information. At 650 pages, the book feels about a hundred fifty pages too long. For instance, I became exhausted by innumerable set lists for countless random gigs. But all in all we should be happy that Dann scrutinized this American icon with such insight. Though touched by tragedy, it is ultimately a story of triumph. Michael Bloomfield was charming and magnetic, an explosive player, powerfully devoted to music that brought joy to many people. His band mate Nick Gravenites said, "He'd walk into a room and things would perk up... people would start laughing. It was almost mystical the way people were drawn to him." By the end of the book you want nothing more than to go back in time and be in the room too.

*Joel Harrison is a guitarist, composer, arranger, vocalist, and writer. Named a Guggenheim Fellow in 2010, he has released twenty CD's on seven record labels since 1994, many of them jazz-based. He is a resident of Brooklyn, NY and founder of the Alternative Guitar Summit.*

## DIGITAL CREATION

Burt Kimmelman

### HOW THE UNIVERSE IS MADE: POEMS NEW & SELECTED 1985 – 2019

Stephanie Strickland

Ahsahta Press

<https://www.spdbooks.org/>

[Products/9781934103876/how-the-universe-is-made-poems-new--selected-19852019.aspx](https://www.spdbooks.org/Products/9781934103876/how-the-universe-is-made-poems-new--selected-19852019.aspx)

302 Pages; Print \$21.00

Stephanie Strickland began her writing life on the page, soon becoming an early practitioner

of poetry in the world of pixels and code (her new book's appendix offers generous accounts of her digital works). Even so, she has remained fully committed to print and to books. Admiration for her work, among the poets and artists whose creations

### *Strickland's artistic imprint is unmistakable.*

are destined for the screen, complements the various awards and prizes her traditional poetry has earned. Strickland is unique in this way. Even her first book was a fully mature poetry newly arrived, and there is no difficulty, now, seeing her endeavor in the one medium informing the other.

Her artistic imprint is unmistakable. Strickland's exquisite turns and leaps of thought, in either realm, are prized for their radiance and sense of form. I hold *How the Universe Is Made* in my hands and contemplate how space and words, arcs of thought, allow poetry to come into being. I reflect on how beauty, animation, the pathways within that haunting, fleeting presence of digital creation — which dazzled me from early on — are deeper, more resonant, when writing takes the imagination for a ride.

More remarkable still is the fact that a source of Strickland's aesthetic power is her informed, scientific intuition, which may account for her initial attraction to the screen. She possesses a knowing,

————— *Kimmelman continued on next page*

singularly graceful way of seeing, ultimately made material in her poem's prosody. Her lines absorb the reader within an abundance. The joy in such plenitude has been delicately crafted.

Strickland is not the first science-oriented thinker to have succumbed to an infatuation with the manifest world, its symmetries and quirks alike. In her writing, the observed and natural include equally the made and the given. She is a visionary — although, unlike William Blake, she has no use for the fantastical. The realized world is fantasy enough for her. Like Blake's, her incisive language, its music and discernment, provide us with elements we have been missing.

The abiding, protean image or state of being, in her work, is water. Here are the opening lines of "Constant Quiet" (from *Zone : Zero* [2008]):

constant quiet  
intercostal  
intercoastal green & silver  
muscle gillflesh slipping into  
opens out of  
constant quiet  
constant quiet  
Mississippi  
overflowing built a levee  
longer higher than the Great  
Wall of China  
constant quiet

The vista of the poem expands, the formal structure of the poem a constant — until the sixth, final stanza:

constant quiet  
who can open  
who can  
hold it  
constant  
quiet

After her first volume, *Give the Body Back* (1991), came Strickland's extended verse meditation, *The Red Virgin: A Poem of Simone Weil* (1993). It drew more than the usual public attention. The book's profound sympathy with and comprehension of Weil, as heroic figure, installs this intellectual woman within her historical tableau. Strickland's portrait of Weil as champion and redeemer of suffering is commensurate with the twentieth century's great cataclysms: workers' struggles, the horrors of colonialism, holocaust, war. Particularly in "Soul Learns Everything from Body" we start to understand her magnificent selflessness:

The bird forgets  
but the trap does not. Cassandran,  
her harsh voice worrying, probing: *If any  
human being show need of any other, a little  
or a lot, why does the latter run away?  
I have much experience, on one side or the  
other.*

Everything from the body:  
a boy  
running down the field can *read* so well, his  
hands  
are unimpeded, have already caught the  
pass;  
reached out before  
he saw. Finally  
not to *read* at all: hands alone  
fly up, whole body shaping the air, weaned,  
immediate.

The soul learns turning,  
inclination,  
fatigue:  
to be worn down.

The body,  
unastonished by reduction; it feels  
what can be shown:  
that there exist remarkable  
leafless trees of blossom,  
tiny  
back and forth of almond, long, touched,  
wands of pink  
that shudder down their whole length and  
are blown to the pavement

almost at once—

In 2002, Strickland published *V: WaveSon. nets / Losing L'una*, a companion volume to her digital poem *V : Vniverse* (also in 2002) and precursor to *V: WaveTercets / Losing L'una* (2014) along with its digital companion, the *Vniverse app* (2016). She has refigured the concept of *virgin*, with all its weighty implications since ancient times, as her own. Her in-time historicizing places Weil at a visceral ground zero from which the past is summoned, bringing to life the cast of Weil's mind.

"If you understand virginity," "WaveSon. net 1" begins,

you understand abstraction, you understand  
V —  
V which is flight, and you understand VVV,  
i.e., ric-rac, the earliest recorded

symbolic motif, Cassiopeian breasts  
pouring forth  
a Milky Way, a.k.a. zig-zag,  
world-over water, meander, serpentine  
cupmark U adjoining its inverse,  
upsidedown

U (please imagine), yourself  
optimizing, as you do not lift but leave  
your point (become pointed) pressed hard

to bone to pull that bone

writhing on your point, twist it one way,  
then the other — a rhythm method making  
your water mark.

Strickland is one of our great intellects. Her lissome, relational thinking lies at the core of her artistry. And, like Weil herself, she always begins with music. She will never abandon her verse for something else, as she aggregates experience to it. I would call this creative process "the formality of occurring" — to borrow a phrase from "Unsolved Problems," a much later poem of hers (in *Dragon Logic*, 2013).

Some of Strickland's recent poems remind me of the great tenor saxophonist John Coltrane, who ultimately put down his horn to thump his chest while singing/chanting—reaching for some primal genius within him, which itself was his connection to the world *per se*, the love supreme. Here's "Black \ White":

meter- . . . . made . . . . screaming . . . .  
wah wah . . . . brass  
mutes . . . . gag  
swallow . . . . gel-cling flame  
vet cemetery in the Wasatch . . . chestnuts  
. . . flags  
brick  
unutterable softness . . . low  
down . . . wall  
climb in . . . climb over . . . quiet

*split \\ \\ spilt // // silt  
domino  
\\ \\ \\ drama // // //*

disappeared . . . . trousers afloat . . . . float  
in the moonlight . . . . button  
black a shadow  
drowned and soaking  
white in the moonlight  
. . . . . haunt  
haint . . . . zomboid . . . . flow  
of clothes

in the twofold . . . torn . . . fold . . . tangled  
. . . river-  
entangled  
pole . . . pier

Water is the image, the ghost, which runs through this book. It is a way of knowing that, in its fluidity, in its uncontainability, is a metaphor for the universe, its secret. The first poem in *How the Universe Is Made*, "Seeing a Medusa," is about birth canals, forms of life somehow persisting within our own human fluidity, all phyla as one:

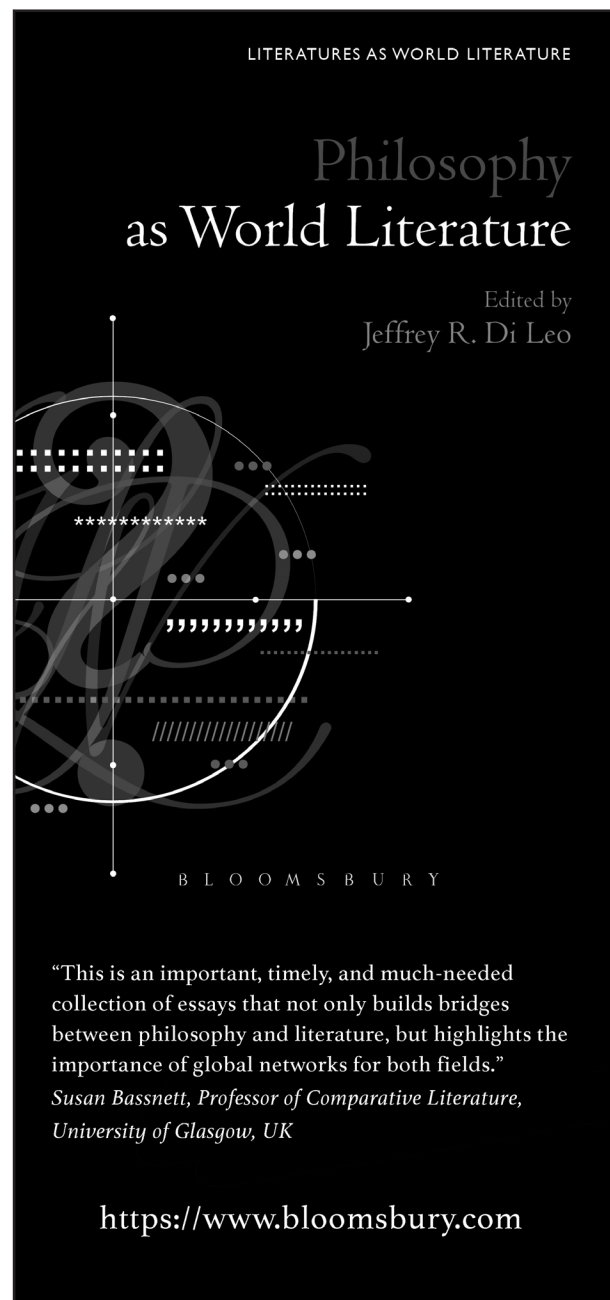
Only that tinge of crimson-pink  
like cyclamen flashing  
drew me down, made me see you

in the heave of the wake, all  
pale-jelly innard  
on your side, resisting nothing

in the wash of green glass, clear gray, the  
waves  
calm today, steady, as you slap  
up and down in their hands — a nest

of tentacles rolling with the foam,  
then hanging, white with poison. You  
collapse  
an inbreath of water, shudder. Glide.

————— Kimmelman continued on next page



Gone, before I grew faint  
 leaning over the boat: gone  
 before I even knew

it was you — alive! Not knowing. Reliving  
 the blow, remembering: you, torn out,  
 despised  
 and flung dripping to the waves.

Water defies the empirical yet makes science possible. Strickland’s fluid knowing pulls many dimensions together to become the single utterance. She never looks away from *appearance*, because, in the moment making itself known to her, there is possibility. This is typified in her late poem “Apparency Not” (from *The Body Obsolete* [2019]). She allows for juxtaposition, association, confident that poetry resides therein:

Apparency not eye-wash, as in hog-

wash, a costume or mask of zero weight;  
 apparency not eye candy, either, however

much it *is*, at times — who would count all  
 bower bird display, every stray blue petal  
 a reproductive cog? Apparency

could be eye-wash, cleansing or smoothing  
 glitchy codestreams, eye-and-eyemind  
 finding  
 an attractor, focus (filter) acting truly

—usefully. At first. Indeed, *appear* as you  
 are  
 (as if it could happen) gurus advise  
 tricksters,  
 fakirs, posers; and Puritans say so, too,

but mean the reverse, mean re-fashion  
 (apparently finding soul a frozen, yet

attainable (code) object, written just once).

I think of Dickinson, “apparently finding soul,” when I read this poem. Strickland rises to such an occasion, and then some.

*Burt Kimmelman has published ten collections of poems as well as eight volumes of criticism and well over a hundred articles mostly on literature, some on art, architecture, and culture. He’s a distinguished professor of Humanities at New Jersey Institute of Technology. Upcoming volumes of his include Visible at Dusk: Selected Essays by Burt Kimmelman (2021); Axialities: George Quasha and the Poetics of Zero Point, an edited collection of critical writings (2021); and Steeple at Sunrise: New and Selected Later Poems (2022).*

## CONFRONTING HETEROSEXISM

Iika Scobie

### FUNERAL DIVA

Pamela Sneed

City Lights

<http://www.citylights.com>

160 Pages; Print, \$11.87

Now is a moment when we crave bravery and inspiration. Pamela Sneed’s much acclaimed *Funeral Diva* provides both, as well as provocative explorations of race, gender, rage, compassion, and love. The poet, a remarkable performer, manages to replicate the energy and immediacy of her live readings in this volume.

Equal doses of self-examination and refreshing self-deprecation are juxtaposed in her exhilarating prose and poetry. Confident, charming, original and blessed with keen self-awareness, Sneed’s voice articulates her reality as a proud Black, lesbian, and adopted daughter. Her introductory chapter is a traumatized child’s travelogue, who grows up to be a punk adventurer, world traveler, bohemian, educator, and committed artist and activist.

The book begins with “History,” a prose memoir. With admirable Bodhisattva compassion, Sneed is able to forgive a birth mother who abandoned her, an adoptive and unstable mother who abruptly left, and an adoptive family whose suburban household was violent and unloving. Detailing an early love affair, she says she is unable to leave, “So I stayed... doing drugs and hurting myself.” Sneed recognizes she was unable to leave as “I couldn’t do someone what was done to me.”

“My father was a monster I know,” she writes in a memorial to her first adopted mother, “Ruth Vick.” And the adult Pamela is able to recognize, “I know now in retrospect she was fleeing / for her life / from abuse/ She tried to take me / but that failed.” She is even able to extend forgiveness to an old friend “who heap damage on you and act as if it never happened.” And who leaves her in a

loft where she feels “naked and afraid.”

As a young student Sneed recognizes, “The home I cried out for was not my parent’s house, but a warm place in me.” “Life changing” travels to the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe expand her vision, and she lands in New York. “In fact, if my life were divided into halves, I would label them pre- and post-Ghana.”

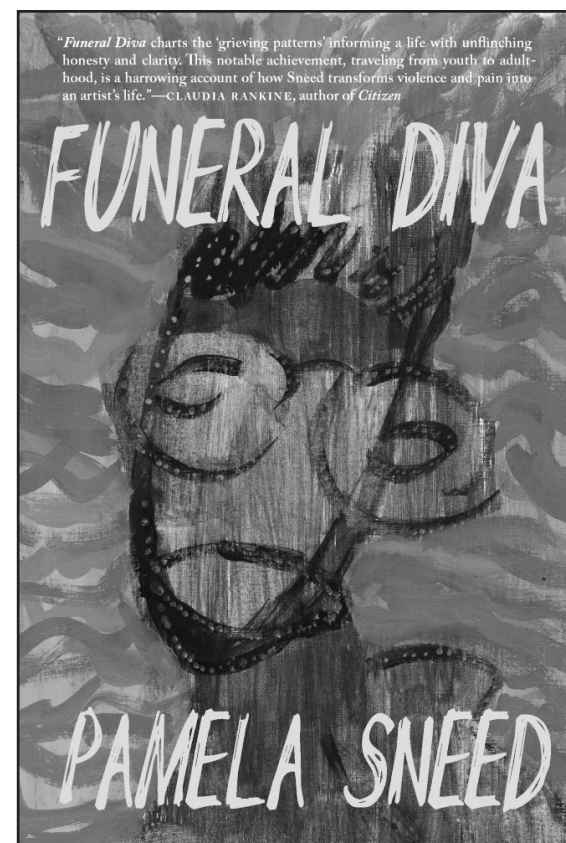
After the first compelling chapter, the engaging prose leaps from adolescent love affairs to “Ila” meditations on her true birth name, “because for child adoptees, birth names are fictitious.” With help from her mother, she legally changes her name to Pamela, “because it had the ring of a princess.” Thus, Ila becomes Pamela, “leaving my name like a country of birth behind.”

Following the recognition that her chosen name has truly become her moniker is the long title poem “Funeral Diva”. Sneed powerfully documents

***Confident, charming, original and blessed with keen self-awareness, Sneed’s voice articulates her reality as a proud Black, lesbian, and adopted daughter.***

an urban counter cultural history that begins in the 1980’s, the same decade that I returned to New York and confronted the ever burgeoning AIDS epidemic. Deeply immersed in emerging Black queer culture, Sneed says, “We were in formation. / We were making ourselves.”

Sneed is not describing a fashion victim’s romantic comedy fag-hagdom. Instead, she traces her growth as an “activist and founder” in “These were early days, AIDS in its infancy.” Documenting a Black male literary collective, Other Countries, she declares, “I saw each collective member as a brother. / In return I became their sister.” The self declared “Funeral Diva” “became a known and requested presence operating throughout the crisis. / ... called for at memorials, readings, wakes and funerals to speak / give testimony and credence to men’s lives.” Sneed memorializes and documents a decimated creative community that was lost too young, “a generation no longer here.” Sneed becomes the one who learns to “accurately portray and pay homage to the spirit of someone / who’d lived only for a short time upon this planet.”



Amid a battalion of prejudice, fear and disinformation, people — at first, mostly beautiful young men — battled a fatal and little understood new disease. I watched lifelong friends transmute from frivolous hedonists to courageous caretakers. I saw friends abandoned by their families and then nurtured by lifesaving community networks. Organizations like Visual Aids and ACT UP rose to focus on a health crisis the government ignored. Sneed gives dramatic voice and clear vision to the history of those traumatic times.

She queries, “Who will care for our caretakers?” She names names, leapfrogs from Audre Lorde to June Jordan to Hurricane Katrina, to fictional characters, to the haunted wards of St. Vincent’s and Bellevue Hospital. She gives shout outs to Oskar Schindler and Harriet Tubman, and writes “but wishing my hands and reach / were big enough and I could save / just one more.” In the twenty-three-page poem, Sneed presents herself as “Documenting the lives of Black lesbians and gays who died / of AIDS and cancer is part of my life’s work. / I am a professor.” And how lucky are her students.

Scobie continued on next page