

Edric
Mesmer

AMONG THE NEIGHBORS

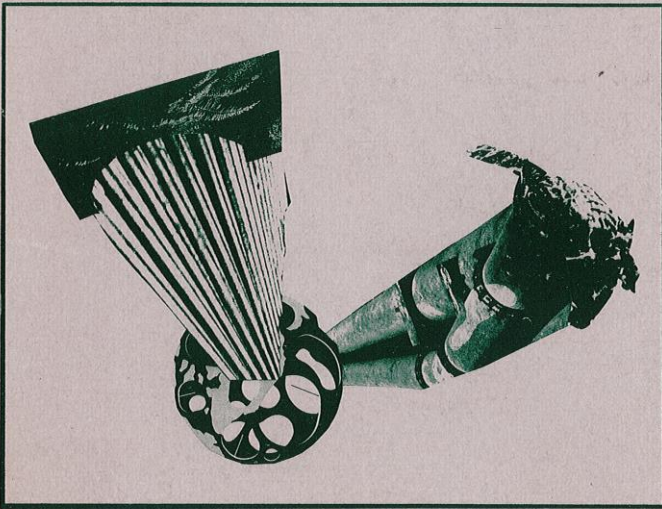
“some nights I stay there,
some nights I don’t”

Top Stories,
Fiction Diction, and the
Work of Donna Wyszomierski

TOP STORIES

\$1.00

*Too Good To Be
Entirely True*



Donna Wyszomierski

Cover of the first printing of *Too Good to Be Entirely True*
with collage by Donna Wyszomierski
[Image courtesy of the Poetry Collection]

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AMONG THE NEIGHBORS 17

The Poetry Collection of the University Libraries,
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AMONG THE NEIGHBORS

a pamphlet series for the study of **Little Magazines**

The Poetry Collection of the University Libraries, University at
Buffalo

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cover design by Patrick Riedy and Edric Mesmer

Preface

Some time ago, probably more than ten years now, my friend Norma Kassirer (writer, poet, painter) asked me if I'd ever read the short fiction of Donna Wyszomierski, whom she considered one of Buffalo's many true originals. I hadn't, so Norma lent me a pamphlet of short prose paragraphs titled *Too Good to Be Entirely True*, which turned out to be the first in a periodical series called Top Stories. The series had been started in Buffalo by Anne Turyn (editor, writer, photographer), under the umbrella of the not-for-profit arts organization Hallwalls, now an institution in the Western New York cultural landscape. I was astounded by Donna's prose, which is subtle, sharp, sibylline in its assessments of gender and socioeconomics. As I looked more at the Top Stories series, I was similarly awestruck by the roster of writers and artists found there, many of whom I was familiar with, many not.

"Many whom I was familiar with, many not" is—to me—a great poetics for a periodical, and I felt immediately drawn to Turyn's curatorial imperative. Soon I would write a couple iterations of an essay on Donna's work,¹ which (after a lengthy hiatus) would grow into this pamphlet. I have been hesitant to contribute a full-length work to the Among the Neighbors series, as its editor, but have carefully considered that the call for work includes focusing on small press endeavors, publishing networks, and bibliographies of works by a single author or group of authors. This constellation, which has fascinated me as a reader these many years, seems to fit the criteria. Donna's writing, via Norma, led me to the "prose periodical" Top Stories, then to Fiction Diction, a reading series at Hallwalls—which I had until then associated exclusively with visual and media arts—

¹ Early manifestations of my words on Donna Wyszomierski's work were first presented in April 2012 in the talk series *Small Press in the Archive* (hosted by the University at Buffalo Poetics Program), together with a reading by Donna Wyszomierski; and as another iteration specifically on Donna Wyszomierski's work in June 2012 at the *Poetry and Poetics of the 1980s* conference (hosted by the University of Maine, Orono).

that ran for a time in tandem with Top Stories, eventually evolving a path of its own.

A few more happenstances shaped the course of this pamphlet: Hallwalls had entrusted its archive to the Poetry Collection of the University at Buffalo, where I work as a cataloger; and a hanging file folder labelled “Top Stories” was there pointed out to me by Michael Basinski (poet, artist, curator emeritus). Also, I discovered that Anne Turyn had given a couple interviews on Top Stories (in *Publishing Against the Grain* and in *TANK Magazine*, both referenced below), which are highly recommended places to learn more about the series.

The narrative told by the “Top Stories” file folder among the Hallwalls papers is an archival story, and I hope one that sheds light on the struggles of little magazines, small presses, not-for-profit arts organizations, and the people who do the cultural work of keeping all of these going. I need to stress that it is decidedly not a narrative of the series, nor of Hallwalls as a whole. Top Stories was a sliver of the largesse of artistic activity—including performance and video art—operating within Hallwalls during its early years as a not-for-profit with director Bill Currie at the helm. I cannot tell that full story in this “little venue,” but remind the reader that the treasure trove of currently unprocessed Hallwalls material is housed here at the university, awaiting investigation.

Against this backdrop I place my reading of Donna Wyszomierski’s work, as Wyszomierski was participant in Hallwalls, published in Top Stories, and curated Fiction Diction for a time after Turyn’s departure for New York. My hope is that the archival narrative of Top Stories will speak broadly to a moment of literary foment in Buffalo literary arts and will balance with a close reading of Wyszomierski’s prose. I have also provided a bibliography of Top Stories as well as a list of Fiction Diction events, aggregated by way of the Hallwalls website’s online archive.

I begin with a bibliography of Top Stories to introduce its astonishing roster and to highlight the curatorial imperative Anne Turyn set forth.

A Bibliography of Top Stories

Notes on my method: I have used the Connexion interface of the Online Computer Library Center database to record the publisher information for each title. This will lack uniformity, as evidence of the item in-hand, and the interpretation of that print item, may vary from item to item. Noted in the discussion that follows, volumes 1-5 were printed by Hard Press; 1-18 were published during the affiliation with Hallwalls. Reprints are identical to the first printing, unless noted (and when I had access to all iterations). Years are bracketed where the cataloger for that title noted only a copyright year. All volumes in the series are 22 centimeters high. All artwork is in black and white, unless otherwise noted. Pagination is based on the cataloging practice of counting pages of content only, unless relying on another cataloger's judgment. Cover artwork is noted when relevant to the network of series contributors or the larger network of the series. Contents are given only for those titles containing individually titled works, and for anthologies.

TOP STORIES ISSUES

- 1a. Donna Wyszomierski. *Too Good to Be Entirely True*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Hard Press, 1979.**
15 pages. Cover artwork: collage by Donna Wyszomierski.
- 1b. Donna Wyszomierski. *Too Good to Be Entirely True*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Hallwalls, [reprinted 1983].**
15 pages. Cover drawing by Michael Sticht.
- 2a. Laurie Anderson. *Words in Reverse*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Hallwalls, 1979.**
13 unnumbered pages. Cover photograph of Laurie Anderson with the Tape Bow Violin by Martha Resnick. [Extracts from "Like a Stream" (1978) and "Americans on The Move" (1979).]

- 2b. Laurie Anderson. *Words in Reverse*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Hallwalls, [reprinted 1982].
- 2c. Laurie Anderson. *Words in Reverse*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Hallwalls, [reprinted 1983].
- 3a. Pati Hill. *3 Stories*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Hard Press, 1979.
9 pages. [Cover: photocopy artwork by Pati Hill.]
Contents: Mrs. Starling -- The Falcon -- The Ballad of Annie Bates.
- 3b. Pati Hill. *3 Stories*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Hallwalls, [reprinted 1983].
4. Suzanne Johnson. *Agent Pink*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Hard Press, 1980.
9 pages. Photograph of the author on endpapers by J.T. Hrywniak.
- 5a. Linda Neaman. *Foot Facts*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Top Stories of Hard Press, [1980].
17 unnumbered pages. Chiefly illustrations.
- 5b. Linda Neaman. *Foot Facts*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Hallwalls, [reprinted 1983].
6. Gail Vachon. *This Is My Mother, This Is My Father*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Top Stories, Hallwalls, 1980.
25 pages.
7. Jenny Holzer. *Eating Friends*. Drawings, Peter Nadin. Buffalo, N.Y.: Top Stories, Hallwalls, [1981].
18 unnumbered pages. [Entire issue printed in bronze ink.]
8. Judith Doyle. *Transcript*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Hallwalls, [1981].
9 unnumbered pages.
Contents: Part One. On Pain. -- Part Two. On Emigration from Portugal to Canada.

[Text is from a performance, based on spoken accounts from Andy Patton, Maria Camara, and Anna Camara.]

9a. Kathy Acker. *New York City in 1979*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Top Stories [Hallwalls], [1981].

24 unnumbered pages. Photographs by Anne Turyn.

Contents: The Whores in Jail at Night. -- Intense Sexual Desire Is the Greatest Thing in the World.

9b. Kathy Acker. *New York City in 1979*. New York: Top Stories, [reprinted 1986].

10. Lynne Tillman. *Living with Contradictions*. Drawings by Jane Dickson. Buffalo, N.Y.: Hallwalls, [1982].

41 unnumbered pages. Illustrations.

11. Kirsten Thorup. *Marie*. Translated by Alexander Taylor. Buffalo, N.Y.: Top Stories, [1982].

18 unnumbered pages. Cover image by Aja Thorup.

12. Janet Stein. *Shattered Romance*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Hallwalls, [1982].

24 unnumbered pages. Chiefly illustrations.

13. Anne Turyn. *Real Family Stories*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Hallwalls, [1982].

20 unnumbered pages. Illustrations.

14. Lee Eiferman. *95 Essential Facts*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Hallwalls, [1982].

12 unnumbered pages.

15. Constance DeJong. *I.T.I.L.O.E.* Buffalo, N.Y.: Hallwalls, [1983].

24 pages. [Cover photograph by Anne Turyn.]

16. Ursule Molinaro. *Analects of Self-contempt While Trying to Stop Smoking; Sweet Cheat of Freedom* [2-in-1]. Buffalo, N.Y.: Hallwalls, [1983].

14 unnumbered pages, 6 unnumbered pages, tête-bêche.

[One of the two cover images is an illustration by Linda Neaman.]

17. Romaine Perin. *The Human Heart*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Hallwalls, [1983].

36 pages.

18. Donna Wyszomierski. *Forget About Your Father & Other Stories*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Hallwalls, [1983].

21 pages. Cover drawing by Michael Sticht.

Contents: Forget About Your Father -- A Bad Move -- He Only Likes Blondes -- A Friend of the Family -- A Smart Niece -- Caught Up in Romance.

19-20. Cookie Mueller. *How to Get Rid of Pimples*. With photographs by David Armstrong, Nan Goldin, Peter Hujar. New York, N.Y.: Top Stories, [1984].

77 pages. Illustrations.

Contents: Introduction -- Actual Letter Sent to Me from A Person Who Wanted This Book Way Before It Was Put Together -- Case 1. Andrew: Secrets of the Skinny -- Case 2. Brenda -- Case 3. Iona: The Third Twin -- Case 4. Goda -- Case 5. Julie: The Mystery of Tap Water -- Case 6. Joe -- Case 7. Dora -- Case 8. Valerie: Losing -- Case 9. Randy Eros: The Sexiest Kid in Town -- Case 10. Gena: I Hear America Sinking -- Case 11. Alexandra -- Case 12. Miguel La Madrid -- The Actual Cure -- Index.

21. Ascher/Straus. *Red Moon/Red Lake*. [Sheila Ascher and Dennis Straus.] New York: Top Stories, [1984].

28 pages.

22. Susan Daitch. *The Colorist*. N.Y.C.: Top Stories, [1985].

37 pages. Cover drawing by Jane Dickson.

23-24. *Five, an anthology.* New York, NY: Top Stories, 1986.

49 pages. Illustrations. Cover woodcut by Gail Vachon.

Contents: Twice told tale / Constance DeJong -- Mein Wittgenstein / Joe Gibbons -- Future saint #1160 / Tama Janowitz -- Jokes / Richard Prince -- Her weak memory of the tornado. Peggy and Fred in Hell / Leslie Thornton.

25-26. *Tourist Attractions.* Edited by Anne Turyn and Brian Wallis. New York, N.Y.: Top Stories, 1987.

79 pages. Cover design by Nancy Linn.

Contents: Excerpt from Home Sick / Lynne Tillman -- Gran Turismo / Glenn O'Brien -- Tex / Caryl Jones-Sylvester -- Friendly Flies / Judy Linn -- I know the Climate's Wonderful, but How's the Truth? / Robert Fiengo -- To Japan and Back / Linda L. Cathcart -- Sanjiro's, Thumb's and Apple Pie / Micki McGee -- Gothic Tourism / Cheryl Clarke -- Driftings / Douglas Blau -- Incunabula #3 / Susan Daitch -- Foreign in Life / Jane Warrick -- Leaving Quito / Gary Indiana -- Painted Desert / Suzanne Jackson -- Pop Life / Sekou Sundiata -- Legend 1 Inch : 1 Hour / Constance DeJong.

27. Lou Robinson. *Extremes of High and Low Regard.* New York: Top Stories, 1988.

30 pages.

Contents: Door of confounding -- Moving Objects at a Distance -- Naming the Urge -- Extremes of High and Low Regard.

28. Lisa Bloomfield. *War Comics.* New York, NY: Top Stories, [1989].

21 unnumbered pages. Chiefly illustrations [p].

Contents: Part 1. War Comics I-VI -- Part 2. Motivation.

29. Mary Kelly. *Pecunia non olet.* New York: Top Stories, 1990.

47 pages. Illustrations.

Contents: Mater -- Conju -- Soror -- Filia.

OTHER PUBLICATIONS

**Ann Rosen with Jan Sutcliffe. *Wenat-Chee Walla and Me.*
Rochester, N.Y.: Visual Studies Workshop, [1980].**

1 folded sheet (16 unnumbered pages). Illustrations. 27 cm.
Issued in envelope.

[Accordion-folded artists' book. Edition of 500 copies. Title
page: "Top Stories of Hard Press."]

**Top Stories catalogue. New York, N.Y.: Top Stories; Buffalo,
N.Y.: Hallwalls, [about 1983].**

18 pages. Illustrations. 22 cm.

[Catalogue advertising issues 1-18 of the Top Stories series.]

***Top Top Stories.* Edited by Anne Turyn. San Francisco: City
Lights Books, [1991].**

241 pages. Illustrations. 21 cm.

Contents: Foot Facts (excerpt) / Linda Neaman -- This is My Mother,
This is My Father / Gail Vachon -- Eating Friends / Jenny Holzer --
New York City in 1979 / Kathy Acker -- Living with Contradictions
/ Lynne Tillman, Jane Dickson -- Shattered Romance (excerpt) /
Janet Stein -- I.T.I.L.O.E. / Constance DeJong -- Analects of Self-
contempt, Sweet Cheat of Freedom (excerpt) / Ursule Molinaro --
Forget About Your Father & Other Stories / Donna Wyszomierski -
- How to Get Rid of Pimples (excerpt) / Cookie Mueller -- Red
Moon, Red Lake / Ascher, Straus -- Jokes / Richard Prince -- Gran
Turismo / Glenn O'Brien -- Incunabula. #3 / Susan Daitch --
Leaving Quito / Gary Indiana -- Extremes of High & Low Regard
(excerpt) / Lou Robinson -- Pecunia non olet (excerpt) / Mary Kelly.

Top Stories, Hallwalls

In 1979, *Top Stories* published its first three issues: Donna Wyszomierski's *Too Good to Be Entirely True*, Laurie Anderson's *Works in Reverse*, and Pati Hill's *3 Stories*. Labelled "a prose periodical" on back covers, the issues present serially in the form of discrete, monographic chapbooks. Initially under the imprint of Hard Press (up through issue #5), the series was soon umbrellaed under the burgeoning Buffalo, New York arts organization Hallwalls.² Anne Turyn—series founder, writer, and photographer—was living then in Buffalo, and the series was able to continue with the at-times inconsistent financial support of Hallwalls, reliant as it was on grants.³ Aside from funding, geography presented the other great quandary for *Top Stories* during these years, when Turyn relocated to New York City, and organizing and planning the series traversed the length of New York State.⁴

Funding is often a conundrum of small arts organizations reliant on granted philanthropy, and often squares along categorical lines of genre. Belying such strictures, Anne Turyn's publication track can be read as demonstrative of changes in the relational gender politics of the 1980s and as evidence of the textual and visual aesthetics of that

² "Hallwalls was founded on Buffalo's West Side in late 1974 by a group of young visual artists (some of them still students at the time)—including Diane Bertolo, Charles Clough, Nancy Dwyer, Robert Longo, Larry (LP) Lundy, Cindy Sherman, and Michael Zwack." "History." Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center, 16 April 2020, <https://www.hallwalls.org/history.php>

³ As Turyn recalls of her founding of *Top Stories*: "John Maggiotto [artist, photographer, teacher] was director and I had the idea to do a publication. I asked him for money. He said that if I wrote a grant for a reading series that was funded, he would give me money. That little bit of money seemed to be the seed money (as well as my 'salary' or stipend). [Later] I applied for [and] got a 501(c)(3)." Personal communication, 26 May 2021.

⁴ The distance between Buffalo and New York City is about an 8-hour car ride, or a one-hour flight.

era. In line with many of the artists at Hallwalls, Top Stories featured work engaged with feminist inquiry,⁵ often in tandem with questions of genre. A review from 1983 in *The Village Voice* states: “Top Stories is punk chic and feminism, soul-searching and social criticism, photos essays and a comic book.”⁶ In more recent, retrospective words, Michael Basinski has said it presented “a feminist avant-garde of the 1980s,” with all its attendant identifications, expansive aesthetic developments, and critical trappings.⁷

I highlight notions of funding and geography in order to focus on Top Stories as a case study for an avant-garde [feminist] little magazine, exhibited through the struggles Top Stories faced in the pre-digital days of print publication. These struggles are—at least partially—documented in the Hallwalls archived correspondence related to Top Stories, and tell the broader struggle of many small literary presses and arts organizations. Furthermore, I would like to focus on this publishing aspect of Top Stories, as Anne Turyn has told the story of the series elsewhere, including in a highly recommended 2018 interview with *Makhsjin* editor Mirene Arsanius; Turyn recalls there an era of impulse, a lack of careerism, and a pre-internet community that Top Stories was forged within:

There wasn't any market, it seemed. In a way, you could just make the art you wanted because art didn't sell for a lot of money. The market didn't exist for us, so people could focus on what they were interested in. This was in the late '70s. We still had a little bit of '60s idealism going on there. Artists Space wasn't even 10 years old. Hallwalls was just a couple years old, now it's almost 45 years old. Who knew that these little pockets of energy were going to tum

⁵ “Well we were definitely feminist, but saying you're feminist is like saying 'I'm breathing.' Of course we were feminists, and we were also being avant-garde and breaking rules and forging territory.” Turyn, Anne. “Top Stories: Anne Turyn on the groundbreaking New York periodical.” Interview with Hannah Nussbaum, 25 January 2018. *TANK Magazine*, 16 June 2020.

⁶ James, Caryn. “Top Girls.” Review of Top Stories fiction series, edited by Anne Turyn. [*The Village*] *Voice*. 5 July 1983, p. 44.

⁷ Conversation with Michael Basinski, Buffalo, circa Spring 2012. Basinski was also an attendee and participant in Hallwalls events.

into Institutions? Back then, people could do a little of everything and there were many intersections.⁸

I offer that the counterpoint to the perception that there “wasn’t any market” would be Turyn’s tenacious marketing, demonstrated in this 1983 letter to bookstore owners:

Top Stories is inexpensive enough that everybody buys them, yet the writing is good enough that they are read and reread [...] people haven’t stopped buying them. Many stores feature Top Stories on small racks by the cash register or in larger racks with the small press items, as well as in alphabetical order in their fiction sections.”⁹

One observes Turyn instructing booksellers not only how to include Top Stories in their inventory, but also how to display the issues, as well as how to market them. As the *Voice* reviewer had noted, “Turyn’s biggest problem is not financing or getting the books into print; it’s getting them into bookstores.”¹⁰ That there wasn’t a market is met again and again by the fact that there was a *readership*.

⁸ Turyn, Anne. “‘And Then Sport Said...’: A Conversation with Mirene Arsanios of *Makbuzin* and Anne Turyn of Top Stories, November 14, 2017.” *Publishing Against the Grain*, 8 May 2018. <https://curatorsintl.org/posts/and-then-sport-said>. As mentioned, because this interview covers much of Turyn’s memories of her inspiration to begin Top Stories, its material production, and how she came to ask different writers to be part of the series, this essay will focus on additional aspects of the series related to the struggles of a little magazine.

⁹ Turyn, Anne. Dear Book Store Owner/Book Buyer letter. 1 November 1983. Top Stories folder, PCMS-0026, Hallwalls Collection, 1974–2008, The Poetry Collection of the University Libraries, University at Buffalo, The State University of New York. (This collection is currently unprocessed.) Hereafter cited as Top Stories folder. In the same letter, Turyn also asserts that the series is “labelled ‘a prose periodical’ but is really a series of chapbooks which features prose.”

¹⁰ James, Caryn. “Top Girls.” Review of Top Stories fiction series, edited by Anne Turyn. [*The Village*] *Voice*. 5 July 1983, 44.

Top Stories presented the feminism of women writers and artists recognizing, identifying, and serializing non-complacency with certain notions of gender—notions that, at their most culpable, dovetailed with a system of global capitalism and “normalcy” developed in the United States following the end of the Second World War. This can be read across every issue in terms of the marginalization of women’s narratives. Specific issues also address the marketing of accessories¹¹ and “advice columns”¹² for women, the capitalist exploitation of impoverished communities,¹³ family dynamics,¹⁴ intimacy,¹⁵ the urban metropolis,¹⁶ and much more. Many of these issues locate such address within the domestic sphere, through examination of gender and class dynamics in the overlap of a patriarchal and consumerist culture.¹⁷

One example of the series poetics is printed in a Top Stories catalog, published around 1983—roughly a third of the way through the issues in the series:

Top Stories was established in 1978 in order to offer innovative, new, and exciting prose in quality editions yet at reasonable prices.

Every issue is the size of the volume you are holding in your hands. Each page in this catalogue is devoted to a single issue. At the end of the descriptions the lengths of the books in pages and the number of visuals (if any) are indicated. Most of the issues have glossy covers.

¹¹ Neaman, Linda. *Foot Facts* (#5).

¹² Mueller, Cookie. *How to Get Rid of Pimples*, with photographs by David Armstrong, Nan Goldin, Peter Hujar (#19-20).

¹³ Johnson, Suzanne. *Agent Pink* (#4).

¹⁴ Wyszomierski, Donna. *Too Good to Be Entirely True* (#1); Vachon, Gail. *This Is My Mother, This Is My Father* (#6); Turyn, Anne. *Real Family Stories* (#13).

¹⁵ Holzer, Jenny. *Eating Friends*, with images by Peter Nadin (#7); Tillman, Lynne. *Living with Contradictions* (#10).

¹⁶ Acker, Kathy. *New York City in 1979* (#9).

¹⁷ Lisa Bloomfield’s *War Comics* (#28), however, explicitly addresses the issue of militarized warfare.

We are confident you will find this diverse collection of writings (fiction, prose, narrative art) fresh and exhilarating.¹⁸

The advertisement further demonstrates Turyn's marketing savvy, listing the first eighteen publications along with cover reproductions, brief descriptions, review blurbs, and pricing. Notably, the publisher is still listed care-of Hallwalls in Buffalo, but with all correspondence to be sent to an address (Turyn's) in Manhattan; the printing of issues was also taking place in New York City.¹⁹ This straddling in some ways allowed *Top Stories* to flourish, with Turyn doing much of the legwork in the more metropolitan area, while maintaining a reciprocal relationship to the engaged and noncommercial scene of innovation found at Hallwalls, which often brought writers from New York City to Buffalo, and led to some Buffalo writers to publish in New York-based magazines.²⁰

A further notion of a collective poetics for the series is found in Turyn's more recent interview:

Donna Wyszomierski was someone who was associated with Hallwalls and I liked her writing [...] When I started *Top Stories*, I thought to myself, "Well one day, people will look at the whole series and maybe they will read Donna Wyszomierski because they like Laurie Anderson." That's what I had hoped.²¹

¹⁸ *Top Stories Catalogue*. New York; Buffalo: Top Stories, Hallwalls, [about 1983].

¹⁹ Between #18, Donna Wyszomierski's *Forget About Your Father* (1983), and #19, Cookie Mueller's *How to Get Rid of Pimples* (1984), mention of Buffalo and Hallwalls disappears from the publishing information for issues.

²⁰ Some of the authors of early issues lived in Buffalo, such as Donna Wyszomierski and Suzanne Johnson, while others had come to Buffalo through Hallwalls to read in the Fiction Diction series, like Laurie Anderson and Kathy Acker. See also the Fiction Diction reading series listing below.

²¹ Turyn, Anne. "And Then Sport Said..."

This vision of a developing network, made explicit through associative interests, is inherent to the founding of Top Stories: “Our community was small, there was no Internet. That made it an exclusive club but one could still find what was happening and what was interesting in the art scene.”²² And it is interesting to see—more specifically—that Turyn understood this from the outset of the series; how the inclusion of more high-profile writers, such as Anderson, would simultaneously advertise and *fund* work by lesser-known writers “that wouldn’t otherwise get published.”²³ Furthermore, Top Stories allowed Turyn to publish “‘structurally unconventional’ work that publishers hate to touch.”²⁴

A number of issues appeared in the first few years of the series. Early sources of funding included a grant from the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines (CCLM), awarded in April 1981,²⁵ as well as participation in CCLM’s New York State Library Project (1983), *New Voices – New York*, “designed to promote New York’s Literary Magazines through our State’s public and academic libraries.”²⁶ Support also came from the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA), via Hallwalls, as exhibited through the inclusion of Top Stores in their Literature Program; for the latter occasion, Turyn wrote that the intention or philosophy of the magazine was: “To present new writing in a single-author format. Hope to produce a high-quality literary magazine at a price affordable to everyone.”²⁷

²² Ibid.

²³ Turyn, Anne. Letter to Bill Currie. 24 April 1982. Top Stories folder. This matter is also discussed in another letter from Turyn to Bill Currie and Nancy Peskin, 22 June 1982.

²⁴ James, Caryn. “Top Girls.” Review of Top Stories fiction series, edited by Anne Turyn. [*The Village*] *Voice*. 5 July 1983, p. 44.

²⁵ Turyn, Anne. Narrative Report form. April 1981. Top Stories folder.

²⁶ Graham, Chael. Dear Editor letter. 18 February 1983. Top Stories folder.

²⁷ Turyn, Anne. Fact Sheet Literature 1982-3 form. 26 August 1982. Top Stories folder. (Members of the Top Stories “editorial and/or advisory board(s)” are listed as: William Currie, Linda Neaman, and Donna Wyszomierski, though Wyszomierski remembers this as a device to seem more legitimate, with Turyn doing the lion’s share of the work.)

Despite these successes, questions of genre and geography sometimes quashed funding, as the early 1980s recession unfurled. A letter from NYSCA in late 1981, responding to Hallwalls director William Currie's request for funds to hire a technical assistant (Nancy Linn, former director of Printed Matter in New York), to help with the distribution of *Top Stories*, underscores this. The letter, from NYSCA staffer (and translator and activist) Gregory Kolovakos, states: "I'm afraid that there are no TA funds at the moment: they've been frozen by the state. All TA must come out of our state purposes budget for local assistance."²⁸ Furthermore, the letter suggests that there is a disconnect between funding Hallwalls in Buffalo for a position in New York City, and Kolovakos suggests that *Top Stories* should instead look to fund a TA through an arts organization similar to Hallwalls but located in New York City, such as the Center for Book Arts.²⁹

Hallwalls searched more broadly for funding as well. A sample letter seeking funds for *Top Stories* provides a list of foundations Hallwalls pursued for financial assistance, and whether or not they were favorable toward the publication: Dayton Hudson Foundation (favorable); Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (unfavorable); General Service Foundation (unfavorable); Rockefeller Brothers Fund (favorable); J.M. Kaplan Fund (favorable); Ford Foundation (not stated); Charles Stewart Mott Foundation (not stated).³⁰

In the Spring of 1983, dated a day a part, letters of rejection came in from the Ford Foundation and the Jerome Foundation. Wrote the Ford: "I am sorry to have to inform you that there is no provision [...] for the activities you describe as we do not, as a general rule, support magazines or other publications."³¹ And from the Jerome:

²⁸ Kolovakos, Gregory. Letter to William (Bill) Currie. 25 November 1981. *Top Stories* folder.

²⁹ 11 November 1981. *Top Stories* folder.

³⁰ Whittington, Christin. Sample Letter for Foundation Guidelines. 29 November 1982. *Top Stories* folder.

³¹ Mayleas, Ruth R., program officer. Letter to William Currie. 10 May 1983. *Top Stories* folder.

“The Jerome Foundation is small and therefore limits funding to a restricted geographic area which includes Minnesota, adjoining Midwest states and New York City. We do not fund in outstate New York. Also, our funding in creative writing is limited to projects which assist emerging writers.”³² Ironically, *Top Stories* was ineligible for being a magazine, for being in New York State, and for *not* being (wholly) in New York City. Doubly so: Turyn’s strategy of including more established writers, such as Anderson, to fund the publication of emergent writers made the series, at least in the eyes of the Jerome Foundation, ineligible for support.

Closer to home, there were the additional complications of running a literary publication within a not-for-profit arts organization, as shown through the letters between Turyn, Bill Currie, and Nancy Peskin, who worked at Hallwalls as the Administrative Assistant to the Director.³³ I find this correspondence heroic for what it reveals of the work done by those active in small arts organizations and publishing outfits. For example, a typical letter might include congratulations to Bill on the birth of a child, plus a list of expenses enumerating the costs of postage, printing, advertising, and attending a book show.³⁴ Not-for-profit organizations often rely on a mixed labor of full-time, part-time, and volunteer workers, which sometimes comes with the added problems of discontinuity and miscommunication, as noted in this handwritten postscript from Turyn to Currie:

“P.S. I was very distressed when I heard that the reviewer from *Print Collectors Newsletter* called Hallwalls this summer + the person who answered the phone said they didn’t know anything

³² Davis, Patricia K., program officer. Letter to William Currie. 11 May 1983. *Top Stories* folder.

³³ Nancy Peskin (MacCallum), writer, often signing her letters “nc”; the position was full-time and paid. Nancy’s cousin Dianne Currie was also a member of Hallwalls and married to director Bill Currie.

³⁴ Turyn, Anne. Letter to Bill Currie. 5 May 1982. *Top Stories* folder.

about Top Stories. The reviewer finally tracked Jenny [Holzer?] down in North Carolina.”³⁵

Other miscommunications abound, as when the 1981-82 budget report overstated Turyn’s “salary” by double, and, together with other misallocations, resulted in a Top Stories budget that was actually \$4,000 under what it was intended to be.³⁶ “I want the books to be straight,” Turyn insists, also suggesting that Nancy should be given a raise, and stating: “I realize that HW is doing a lot for TS but TS isn’t hurting HW reputation either.” This letter is both evidence of the reciprocity of these entities as well as the stresses shared between the correspondents,³⁷ as the letters are warm and amicable, mixing printing quotas with family news. Top Stories was one small piece of what Hallwalls was trying to do, amid many sliding schedules and many calendars of programming and events. Further research has yet to address Bill Currie’s legacy in this capacity.³⁸

In a letter from Peskin—signing her letters to Turyn “your penpal,” a nod to Turyn’s photo exhibit “Dear Pen Pal,” first exhibited at Hallwalls³⁹—Nancy playfully responds: “These are the answers to your questions of your 5/30 letter that I have wrung out of Bill: 1) yes, 2) no, 3) no, we don’t have the money, 4) yes, 5) yes, but we don’t have the money.”⁴⁰ As was common, the letter also discusses Top Stories sales, grants, the Curries’ new baby, and organization of the Hallwalls paperwork. The letter also reveals that checks for Top

³⁵ Turyn, Anne. Undated letter to Bill Currie. [Circa early 1982?] Top Stories folder. This publication later reviewed Acker’s contribution to the series.

³⁶ Turyn, Anne. Letter to Bill Currie. 30 May 1982. Top Stories folder.

³⁷ Ibid. The letter is signed “Love, Anne.”

³⁸ Readers should consult *Consider the Alternatives: 20 Years of Contemporary Art at Hallwalls*, edited by Ronald Ehmke, with Elizabeth Licata. Buffalo, N.Y.: Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center, 1996—with thanks to Nancy (Peskin) MacCallum for pointing me to this great source.

³⁹ Turyn, Anne. *Dear Pen Pal: Traditional Still Lifes, 1979-80*. Anne Turyn: Image Text. <http://anneturyn.com>. My thanks to Anne for explaining this reference.

⁴⁰ Peskin, Nancy. Letter to Anne Turyn. 9 June 1982. Top Stories folder.

Stories have been received from Phyllis Rosenzweig, Papabach Paperbacks, CCLM, Judy Levy, and Lynne Tillman; with bills sent to Joe Flaherty (of Writers and Books, Rochester, NY), Art in Form, Beyond Baroque, and Woodland Pattern—and we are able through such notations to trace networks of affiliation and distribution.

One watches as these many affiliations illuminate: that Lucy Lippard might contribute an issue to the series (which unfortunately never materialized);⁴¹ that the Franklin Furnace arts archive has requested⁴² and is collecting Top Stories;⁴³ interest from as far away as artist-writer Peter Lyssiotis in Melbourne;⁴⁴ a request from John M. Bennett of Luna Bisonte Books to exchange issues for his *Lost & Found Times*;⁴⁵ and letters from various museums, such as the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC.⁴⁶ In fact, Top Stories was widely collected—and is still held—by the libraries of many art museums, including the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, the California Institute of the Arts, the Museum of Modern Art, the Victoria and Albert

⁴¹ Turyn, Anne. Letter to Bill [Currie]. 24 April 1982. Top Stories folder. The note about Lippard is handwritten as a postscript. Turyn clarifies that Lippard was working with Jerry Kearns (in 1983 or 1984) on a work called *Tense*, which was slated to be issue #19 in Top Stories, which was ultimately not included in the series (personal communication, 26 May 2021). [*Tense* was eventually published to accompany the exhibition “Top Stories,” held April 2 to June 25, 2021, at Kunstverein in Amsterdam.]

⁴² Edgar, Anne. Dear Top Stories letter. 28 May 1982. Top Stories folder.

⁴³ Edgar, Anne. Postcard to Nancy [Peskin]. 29 June [1982]. Top Stories folder.

⁴⁴ Lyssiotis, Peter. Dear Bookpeople letter. 5 May 1982. Top Stories folder. Peskin responded on June 9 with “printed information on Top Stories and Hallwalls’ catalogs of exhibitions.”

⁴⁵ Bennett, John M. You got Top Stories? letter. 29 October 1982. Top Stories folder. Peskin replied on November 23, 1982: “Due to financial pressures we are unable to comply with every request for such an exchange.” A request to exchange was also made by The Alternative Press (Michigan), though I have no record of response.

⁴⁶ Currie, William. Letter to Anna Brooke, Hirshhorn Museum Library. 19 December 1983. Top Stories folder.

Museum, and the Whitney Museum.⁴⁷ This further speaks to Turyn's inclusivity in curating the series, with attention to the written and the visual, as well as hybrid and collaborative works.

Other aspects—from a distance—become humorous, as with a letter from the Umbrella Associates (whose letterhead reads “Art Information Specialists”), ordering a review copy of *Top Stories #9*: “Laurie Anderson? or is it Kathy Acker?”⁴⁸ The confusion of the two more high-profile authors printed by *Top Stories* seems to gain significance. In keeping with Turyn's poetics, Peskin responded by sending the reviewer Acker's book along with a copy of Lynne Tillman and Jane Dickson's collaboration, *Living with Contradictions* (#10).⁴⁹

There is also the instance of Turyn's numerous requests for boxes, needed to ship the issues and to convey them to book shows. The editor's passion to carry out the artistic vision of the series is beset with the frustrations of distance, more immediate priorities of the larger organization, and perhaps budget. However, the clever, persistent, and eventually direct ways Turyn brings the boxes into her correspondence is marvelous to read. In May, 1982, Turyn suggests that Hallwalls order the boxes.⁵⁰ On a postcard, mailed a month later, Turyn asks: “Are the boxes ready? Waiting, Anne.”⁵¹ In July, another postcard arrives, bearing a photographic image by Turyn from the Kathryn Markel Gallery; the image is a grid of different images squared off into boxes. On the reverse, Turyn has drawn a *box* around the title: “Money,” detail, 6' x 4', 1982; Money and cancelled checks.”

⁴⁷ OCLC Connexion database. Accessed 22 April 2020.

⁴⁸ Hoffberg, Judith A. Dear Publisher letter. [Undated; about 1982]. *Top Stories* folder.

⁴⁹ Peskin, Nancy. Letter to [Judith A.] Hoffberg. 9 June 1982. *Top Stories* folder.

⁵⁰ Turyn, Anne. Letter to Bill [Currie]. 15 May 1982. *Top Stories* folder.

⁵¹ Turyn, Anne. Postcard to Bill [Currie]. 11 June [1982]. *Top Stories* folder.

The postcard is signed “Don’t forget some \$. Love, Anne.”⁵² By August, the tone is one of exasperation: “PLEASE ORDER THE BOXES.”⁵³ Later that month, another letter opens “WHERE ARE THE BOXES?” and also contains this fabulously honest editorial: “Maybe I’m just ruthless, strict, and cheap, but I think firm budget cuts are in order.”⁵⁴ Eventually, these frustrations—together with geographical distance—would push Turyn to continue the series by herself in New York.

There is much that can be said about the term Second Wave Feminism—its wide-ranging querying and its exclusionary politics, just two extremes of a large cultural moment to be noted. Mirene Arsanios addresses this in her interview with Turyn where she asks: “Why didn’t a press like *Top Stories*, which published women who were trying to experiment with form and new ways of making art, engage communities of color?”⁵⁵ Turyn responds with frankness:

I would say that was a problem. In 1980, I felt like I was giving voice to minority in terms of women and also the form. I remember the New York State Council criticizing me and maybe cutting funding for not publishing enough people of color or minorities. I wasn’t catching up so well with the times. [...] Certainly things are different now.⁵⁶

This notable absence is consistent with other disparities between histories of the avant-garde and artistic works by writers of color. That historical moment is further complicated by the disparities given sharp relief in the unfolding of Reaganomics, the first public signs of the AIDS crisis, and—in Buffalo—an unprecedented economic downturn related to overseas steel manufacturing.

⁵² Turyn, Anne. Postcard to Bill [Currie]. 20 July 1982. Top Stories folder. This missive also states that John Howell from *Alive* might review Top Stories for *ArtForum*.

⁵³ Turyn, Anne. Letter to Nancy [Peskin] and Bill [Currie]. 9 August 1982. Top Stories folder.

⁵⁴ Turyn, Anne. Letter to Bill [Currie]. 22 August 1982. Top Stories folder.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Among the papers of the Top Stories correspondence is an announcement from Emma, the Buffalo Women's Bookstore, which operated (in various iterations) from the 1970s until 1992, almost exactly paralleling the span of Top Stories. As with many "small" literary endeavors—then and now—Emma suffered from "burnout and economics." The quote comes from the last owner of the bookstore, Ann Montes, reported in the *Buffalo News* at the time of Emma's closing: "She never turned a profit, she said, and can no longer subsidize the operation."⁵⁷ The economy was changing, technology was changing, and feminism was changing. "Collectives seem destined for a limited life span," the article continues. "They demand constant infusion of new people willing to donate a great deal of time and money. Eventually they must compete for talent with graduate schools, careers and families."⁵⁸ Amid board meetings, travel bookings, and graduate school, the double struggle to sustain the series became "less necessary," as stated in Turyn's more recent interview: "I was busy teaching and it became less necessary because it wasn't so much fun anymore."⁵⁹

That it was once necessary to publish this "structurally unconventional" writing is still striking; and it is pleasing to hear Turyn's statement (in her interview with Arsanios) that much of her interest in narrative was sparked by reading Louise Fitzhugh's *Harriet the Spy*:

Harriet the Spy by Louise Fitzhugh. It came out when I was in fifth or sixth grade and I loved it. You knew what the character was thinking straight from the prose: "And then she said," "And then Sport said." But you also read the book through what's assumed to be her journal. So you know from these multiple viewpoints: the description, the characters' conversation, and from the main character's journal what's going on. This was mind blowing to a 10 year old. I never got over it.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Swift, Pat. "Closing Marks the End of an Era." *The Buffalo News*, 15 January 1992. Accessed 15 April 2020.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Turyn, Anne. "And Then Sport Said..."

⁶⁰ Ibid. In the interview with Hannah Nussbaum in *TANK*, Turyn also cites Gertrude Stein and Jane Bowles as models on the literary landscape.

I likewise might not get over that Top Stories succeeded in publishing as much as it did, and for as long as it did. As Nancy wrote to Anne in October 1982—

If you agree with these figures then you must also agree that we are staying pretty much within TS budget. Considering that TS operates from two geographical points with two people writing checks, I think this is an accomplishment.⁶¹

3

Fiction Diction

In their introduction to the pamphlet *Fiction Diction: A Reading Season: 1981/82 Season*, series curators Anne E. Pluto and R.D. Pohl state:

Since its inception in 1974, programming at HALLWALLS has reflected an interest in artists working with words. HALLWALLS has brought to the community painting, installation, and performance art which incorporate narrative and literary elements, as well as an expanding program devoted to artists whose primary medium is a literary one.⁶²

Pluto and Pohl note that an earlier, less-structured writing workshop and reading program, *Writeratio*, had been formalized into the Fiction Diction series, which brought established writers to Buffalo and paired them in readings with local authors.⁶³ This, to me, reads as parallel evidence of Anne Turyn's work to recognize lesser-known writers through a broad and interactive network of writing. Though Turyn notes a "lack of careerism" among the avant-garde scene in her interview with Arsanios, the opportunity for Buffalo writers to network and publish alongside more established writers from New

⁶¹ Peskin, Nancy. Letter to Anne [Turyn]. 21 October 1982. Top Stories folder.

⁶² *Fiction Diction: A Reading Season: 1981/82 Season*. Editors, Anne Elezabeth Pluto, R.D. Pohl. Hallwalls, [1981].

⁶³ *Ibid.*

York's Downtown Scene was rare and perhaps only facilitated through a space like Hallwalls.⁶⁴ This is further evidenced in print through the contents of three Hallwalls anthologies (*Angle of Repose*, *Blatant Artifice* [1], and *Blatant Artifice* 2/3; all listed below) and the contents of magazines such as the Lower East Side's *Between C and D*.

Turyn was one of the many curators of the series, later including Donna Wyszomierski, Ann E. Pluto and R.D. Pohl, Nancy Peskin (MacCallum), and (current executive director) Edmund Cardoni. In a draft of a grant for Fiction Diction and Top Stories intended for the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the connection between the two series and their affiliation with Hallwalls is further outlined:

Top Stories, Hallwalls' literary magazine, was founded in 1979. Seven issues in single-author format have been published to date, ranging from nine to fifteen pages of prose, sometimes with visual elements. Cost is from \$1.00 to \$2.00 per issue. Issues 1-6 were printed in editions of 500, and beginning with #7 editions of 1000 are being printed. Offers of publication in Top Stories are extended to writers participating in Fiction Diction and occasionally to other writers who are unable to visit Buffalo.⁶⁵

I include here the extensive list of readings that demonstrate Turyn's poetics of pairing established and local writers, the massive flurry of readings occurring at Hallwalls, and the connection between intersecting literary networks. I have derived this list from the extensive digitized archive on the Hallwalls website.

⁶⁴ I'm indebted to Nancy MacCallum for this insight. Nancy (Peskin) MacCallum, personal communication, 11 June 2020.

⁶⁵ "Fiction Diction and Top Stories Grant" application draft to the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. Undated, circa 1981. Top Stories folder. The grant draft also contains this aesthetic statement: "Our facilities [...] allow the artist to present the entirety of his work without concern for categorizing." Turyn has clarified that she did not write this grant statement (personal communication, May 26, 2021).

Additionally, I have normalized names (such as writer and series curator Bob Pohl as R.D. Pohl, the name he publishes under). I did not include open readings or events where the participants were not listed, though I did include events for the launches of the three anthologies published by Hallwalls, with their contributors. The physical Hallwalls archive, housed at the Poetry Collection of the University at Buffalo, also contains numerous recordings from these events, and presents a tremendous site for archival investigation. The constellation of writers featured speaks to intensity of the writing community in Buffalo, its ties to myriad intersecting networks, and the labors of these dedicated series curators.

FICTION DICTION READING SERIES

1. Constance DeJong. Sunday, April 17, 1977 (During a week-long residency, April 17–22, 1977)
2. Constance DeJong. Monday, April 18, 1977
3. Ursule Molinaro. Tuesday, October 17, 1978 (Co-founder and editor of *Chelsea* magazine)
4. Donna Henes. Sunday, October 29, 1978
5. Laurie Anderson, Constance DeJong. Sunday, November 12, 1978 (Hallwalls performance benefit)
6. David Antin. Tuesday, November 28, 1978
7. Anne Turyn, Donna Wyszomierski. Sunday, December 3, 1978
8. Pati Hill. Sunday, January 14, 1979
9. Dick Higgins, Suzanne Johnson. Sunday, February 18, 1979
10. Carol Edmondson, L.P. Lundy. Sunday, March 11, 1979
11. Raymond Federman. Tuesday, April 17, 1979
12. Judith Doyle, Eldon Garnet. Tuesday, May 15, 1979
13. Gail Vachon. Tuesday, July 17, 1979
14. Anne Costello. Tuesday, September 25, 1979
15. Anne Pitrone. Tuesday, October 16, 1979
16. Lucy Lippard. Monday, November 26, 1979
17. Joe Francavilla, Penelope Prentice. Sunday, December 2, 1979
18. Kathy Acker, Sylvere Lotringer. Monday, December 10, 1979 (Lotringer did not make it to the event)
19. Leslie Scalapino. Sunday, January 20, 1980
20. Joe Lutz, Michael Tetenman. Sunday, February 3, 1980
21. Ivy Goodman. Tuesday, March 25, 1980

22. George Chambers, Raymond Federman, Steve Katz. Tuesday, April 22, 1980 (Benefit for Fiction Diction)
23. Suzanne Johnson, Joe O'Connor. Tuesday, May 6, 1980
24. Harry Mathews. Wednesday, May 14, 1980
25. Judy Keeler. Sunday, October 26, 1980
26. Jennifer Bartlett. Monday, November 24, 1980
27. Carol Emshwiller, George Howell. Sunday, December 7, 1980
28. David Sipos, Donna Wyszomierski, Norma Kassirer. Sunday, January 25, 1981
29. Robert Coover. Wednesday, February 4, 1981
30. Jay Boyar. Sunday, February 8, 1981
31. Dorothy Handelman. Sunday, February 22, 1981
32. Ron Silliman. Sunday, March 1, 1981
33. Don Scheller. Thursday, March 5, 1981
34. Edmund White, Lynne Tillman. Sunday, March 15, 1981
35. Lee Eiferman, Anne Turyn. Tuesday, April 28, 1981
36. Michael Andre. Tuesday, May 5, 1981
37. Anne E. Pluto, R.D. Pohl, Carole Southwood. Sunday, May 17, 1981
38. Richard Martin, Donna Wyszomierski. Wednesday, September 16, 1981
39. Walter Abish. Wednesday, October 7, 1981
40. Richard Brautigan. Tuesday, October 13, 1981
41. Carole Southwood, Stephen Bennett. Sunday, October 18, 1981
42. Carlene Polite, Geraldine Wilson. Sunday, November 22, 1981 (Polite did not make it to the event)
43. Norma Kassirer, Deborah Kloepfer. Sunday, December 6, 1981
44. Tom Lucas, Sharon McPeters. Sunday, February 21, 1982
45. Poets Overload Expeditionary Troupe. Wednesday, March 24, 1982 (A reading of current fiction)
46. Manny Fried, Phillip Pawlowski. Sunday, March 28, 1982
47. Robley Wilson, Jr. Thursday, April 15, 1982
48. Raymond Carver. Tuesday, April 27, 1982
49. Jonathan Baumbach. Thursday, May 13, 1982
50. Jane Phillips, Jane Creighton, Anne E. Pluto. Friday, September 10, 1982
51. Raymond Federman. Wednesday, October 6, 1982
52. Dennis Cullinan, Peter Spielberg. Tuesday, October 19, 1982
53. Anne Costello, Welch D. Everman. Thursday, November 18, 1982
54. Ernest Bigelow, Jr., Gary Indiana. Wednesday, December 1, 1982

55. Leslie Fiedler, Attica Writers' Workshop. Wednesday, December 8, 1982 (This reading was held at the Attica State Correctional Facility and was not open to the public but taped for broadcast by WBFO radio)
56. Keith Hudson, William S. Hudson. Wednesday, February 23, 1983
57. Joseph Francavilla, Samuel R. Delany. Wednesday, March 16, 1983
58. Grace Paley, Carole Southwood. Wednesday, April 6, 1983
59. Kate Wheeler, Michael Sticht. Wednesday, April 20, 1983
60. T. Coraghessan Boyle. Wednesday, May 11, 1983
61. Alice Walker. Monday, May 23, 1983
62. Carole Southwood, Edmund Cardoni. Wednesday, June 8, 1983
63. Joey Vojtko, David Wojnarowicz. Wednesday, November 2, 1983 (Selected and introduced by Gary Indiana)
64. Cookie Mueller, Emily XYZ. Friday, December 9, 1983
65. George Howell, Stokes Howell. Wednesday, February 15, 1984
66. Carl Clatterbuck. Saturday, March 31, 1984 (Winner of the Fiction Diction Literary Award 1984)
67. Marianne Hauser, Mark Leyner. Tuesday, October 23, 1984
68. Lisa Blaushild, Catherine Texier. Wednesday, November 28, 1984
69. Raymond Federman. Sunday, December 2, 1984
70. Martin Pops. Tuesday, January 29, 1985
71. Welch D. Everman, Carole Southwood. Tuesday, February 26, 1985
72. Patrick McGrath, Ron Ehmke. Friday, March 15, 1985
73. Jay Cantor, R.D. Pohl. Tuesday, April 16, 1985
74. Norma Kassirer, Alan Bigelow. Tuesday, May 14, 1985
75. Arnolde Ramos. Tuesday, November 19, 1985 (Critical Issues Series)
76. Leslie Fiedler, Manny Fried, William Loos. Sunday, December 1, 1985 (Mark Twain birthday party Fiction Diction benefit)
77. Barry Yourgrau. Tuesday, January 28, 1986
78. Joel Rose, Reinaldo Povod, Lynne Tillman. Thursday, February 20, 1986
79. Doug Anderson, Ed Bak, Jeffrey DeShell. Tuesday, March 11, 1986
80. Paula Farkas, Karen Moebius, Norma Kassirer, Nancy Peskin, Michael Sticht, Donna Wyszomierski. Thursday, March 20, 1986 (First Person Plural #1)
81. Tama Janowitz, Natasha Norelli. Friday, April 11, 1986

82. Josef Skvorecky. Friday, May 2, 1986
83. Luisa Valenzuela. Tuesday, October 28, 1986
84. Lenora Champagne with Peter Cherches and Lee Feldman. Friday, November 7, 1986 (A cabaret event)
85. Launch party for *Angle of Repose* (edited by Nancy Peskin) and *Blatant Artifice* [1] (edited by Edmund Cardoni). Sunday, December 14, 1986
86. Readings from the two Fiction Diction anthologies [above] by Raymond Federman, Norma Kassirer, Martin Pops, Alan Bigelow, Nancy Peskin, Donna Wyszomierski, Susan Dix, Ronald Ehmke, Welch D. Everman, and Carole Southwood.
87. Glenn O'Brien. Wednesday, March 4, 1987 (Critical Issues Series)
88. Jamaica Kincaid. Wednesday, April 15, 1987
89. Janice Eidus, Jill Ciment. Friday, May 15, 1987
90. Judy Lopatin, Rachel Salazar. Saturday, May 16, 1987
91. Manuel Ramos Otero with Alberto O. Cappas and Gregory Kolovakos (reading his English translations). Tuesday, September 22, 1987
92. Ron Kolm, M. Kasper. Tuesday, October 27, 1987
93. Boulder-Buffalo Pipeline feature, introduced by Raymond Federman. Jeffrey DeShell (reading Ronald Sukenick), Theodore Pelton (reading Steve Katz), Nicolette de Csipkay (reading Marilyn Krysl), Alan Bigelow (reading the personal correspondence of Robert Steiner). Sunday, November 15, 1987
94. Patricia Eakins, Ann Carlson. Saturday, December 5, 1987
95. Victor Montejo. Sunday, February 21, 1988
96. Grace Paley. Sunday, April 17, 1988
97. Gloria Naylor. Friday, May 13, 1988
98. Release party for *Blatant Artifice* 2/3 anthology (edited by Edmund Cardoni).
99. Holly Hughes. Monday, October 10, 1988 — Sunday, November 20, 1988
100. Women of Steel, or Arts & Leathers, a selection of New York City playwrights curated by Holly Hughes; features Alison Rooney, Ana Maria Simo, Suzan-Lori Parks, Claire Moed, and Lynn Hayes. Wednesday, October 19, 1988

HALLWALLS ANTHOLOGIES

Angle of Repose (Buffalo, N.Y.: Hallwalls, 1986) features fiction by Carl Clatterbuck, Susan Dix, George Howell, Stokes Howell, Gary Indiana, Norma Kassirer, Cookie Mueller, Nancy Peskin, Joey Voitko, David Wojnarowicz, Donna Wyszomierski, and Emily XYZ. Edited by Nancy Peskin (MacCallum); cover art by Bill Huggins; with editorial assistance by Karen Kassirer; layout by Bud Jacobs.

Blatant Artifice [1] (Buffalo, N.Y.: Hallwalls, 1986) features fiction by Alan Bigelow, Lisa Blaushild, Jane Brakhage, Ronald Ehmke, Welch D. Everman, Raymond Federman, Marianne Hauser, Norma Kassirer, Mark Leyner, Patrick McGrath, Martin Pops, Carole Southwood, Catherine Texier, and Carole Southwood. Edited by Edmund Cardoni; cover art by Paul Kalinowski.

Blatant Artifice 2/3 (Buffalo, N.Y.: Hallwalls, 1988) features fiction by Doug Anderson, Fred Bacher, Ed Bak, Cynthia Brown Dwyer, Jeffrey DeShell, Ron Ehmke, Manny Fried, Norma Kassirer, Nancy Peskin, R.D. Pohl, Alan Sondheim, Michael Sticht, and Donna Wyszomierski. Edited by Edmund Cardoni; cover art by Paul Kalinowski.

4

The Work of Donna Wyszomierski

Too Good to Be Entirely True by Donna Wyszomierski was the first publication in the Top Stories series. Selling for one dollar in 1979, the chapbook is printed in green ink over gray papers, stapled, with a surreal collage boxed in by a green border on front: assorted fragments of imagery spire away from or perhaps toward a vanishing center. Are these images coming or going? This question seems a good place to begin discussing Wyszomierski's short fiction!⁶⁶

⁶⁶ The uncredited collage was also by Wyszomierski, though her oeuvre in this genre was largely lost.

There's an indeterminacy at play in *Too Good* on the level of the sentence, as the syntax of Wyszomierski's early prose slips skilfully, easily, in different directions—loose cabooses that double as engines of meaning. This plasticity, situated in “one-sided dialogues,”⁶⁷ allows Wyszomierski to both highlight and undermine reductive expectations of gender and gender roles—as well as the domestic, the emotional, the marital, and the soap operatic. One paragraph begins like this:

garbage day not up to par lie down on the floor they
think you're crazy take the day off you're home alone⁶⁸

The many units (or semes) of the sentence seem to hang in the balance of an unsolved equation, released from “adding up” by an abstraction of prose. Opening on such a symbolically untethered day as “garbage day” helps stage this, being a day that shifts, neighborhood to neighborhood, dependent on locale and jurisdiction. This emphasizes the importance of routine days while also generalizing the insignificance of significant days. It is explicitly a named day if not an iconic day, such as New Year's; if the day is meant to mark anything, it might be the merits of civic order, of the common.

I focus on the syntactic units of the sentence because they help to shed light on the building blocks of Wyszomierski's subtly avant-garde prose, where “not up” invites the idea that one is down, with the figurative quickly followed by its literal equivalent: “lie down on the floor / they think you're crazy.” Working equates with well-being—with productivity—but the sentence withholds such consolidation through its lack of fixity. Consider these sentential units, and how they slip:

⁶⁷ *Top Stories Catalogue*. New York; Buffalo: Top Stories, Hallwalls, [about 1983], p. 1. The term comes from a blurb by writer Allen Barnett, discussed further below.

⁶⁸ Wyszomierki, Donna. *Too Good to Be Entirely True*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Hard Press, 1979, p. 2.

garbage day | not up to par | lie down | on the floor | they
think you're crazy | take the day off | you're home alone

Is garbage day not up to par, or the narrator? If you're not feeling up to par, is it given you lie down on the floor? If you're on the floor do they think you're crazy, or do they think you're crazy if you take the day off? And if you take the day off, at home alone, are you worse off or better? The use of second-person narration adds an additional layer of abstraction, as it implies a dialogue with an unseen listener (the reader?) while remaining implicitly monologic. An air of gossip or paranoia enters through the mention of "they." The emphasis lands on insignificance: on the day, its ordinariness, the mundane, the ennui, the routine (or lack thereof), the aloneness. All the while, the trash collectors out on the street perform the most necessary of labors.

"not up to par" might further qualify: perhaps the unidentified narrator is unwell, physically or mentally. The sentential unspooling to "lie down on the floor" leads the reader to think the narrator is prone—"on the floor they / think you're crazy." Significantly, if the speaker is on the floor they are also unseen, at least by the garbage collectors outside. What is the equation between daylight, labor, and well-being, still left unsolved?

The paragraph continues—

sister used to live there too old to stay by herself
supposed to have an operation but it wasn't convenient
think he'd be responsible second wife's as bad first one
killed in a crash don't know where the kids are school
teachers but they're eccentric⁶⁹

In the end, it is the reader who has necessary work to do here; and *Too Good*, with its slippery meanings, often gives the impression of a teeter-totter held in mid-air, where author and reader strike a balance.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

If the reader is searching for a larger architecture of syntactic order, prepare for marvelous disappointment: the third page offers only these lines: “this has to be signed by the priest honey or you don’t / get the money for rent love you.”⁷⁰ Such tottering held at bay might highlight unsure power relations while also underscoring an ascendant normalcy of patriarchy, of the nuclear family, of religiosity, written into the Cold War climate of the late 1970s. Inequality of gender is relayed through the multiple institutional lenses of marriage, of the church, and of the socioeconomic (in terms of rent), which further granulates the silent issues of gender, class economics, and domestic space.

Wyszomierski’s prose in *Too Good* arrives in blocks of text (similar to Jenny Holzer’s, in that blocky way), demonstrating how complicity in institutions and incidental nonconformity might fit together, even while ideologically opposed:

only ones working christmas eve not children don’t need
to be told not worth it except for the pay can’t be
over thirty mother worked forty years nothing for it⁷¹

This time, the day *is* marked with significance, though undercut by the fact of having to work; the holiday isn’t capitalized, but is instead capitalized upon. One could not be farther from the political workings of the capitol, where economic policy regulations—like wealth tax, like holidays—are centralized. The clause “not children don’t need” opens many questions: of being of age to work; of being of maturity to understand; while also allowing the slippage toward what children (implicit here) don’t or do need. Or: “not children / don’t need / to be told,” as a series of dual negatives cross-cancelling their own exclusive concerns. Is it that the workers don’t need to be told it’s wrong to have to work Christmas, even as they may still need

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 3. It should be noted that the line breaks I offer may not necessarily reflect authorial enjambment, but instead reflect the limits of the page; I have used slashes to allow the reader to infer the shape of Wyszomierski’s prose, as printed, and pipes to show units of the sentence.

⁷¹ Ibid., 4.

to work to support their families? Or is it that the (implicit) “children don’t need” or want for anything, materially speaking, or that the narrator is working the holiday season to meet their needs? Or all of the above.

The balance is further complicated by the unpunctuated coming and going of sentential enjambment, as in “don’t need / to be told not worth it.” Value hesitates between the traditional notions of the individual in society and labor under capitalism. The narrator, characteristically, remains ungendered, though gender is particulate in this atmosphere with regards to labor, holidays, parenting, and material needs. This “atomizing” doesn’t downplay the significance of resistance to such notions, instead flattening hegemony and anomaly to show the relation between the two; after all, feminism, as a movement, might be said to be “born of” patriarchy, as a site of resistance. That these narratives withhold gender identifications makes this more poignant, and pointedly harder to bear definitive analysis.⁷²

In the undated catalogue for *Top Stories* (circa 1983), a blurb from writer Allen Barnett appears for the reprint of *Too Good to Be Entirely True* (1983):

Fifteen pages of unpunctuated and one-sided dialogue
resembling the conversation
of the ladies in the pub in Eliot’s *Wasteland*, Read it aloud and be
struck by the pathos of an overheard intimacy, like the far off
unrequited voice on a telephone line.⁷³

Consider how Barnett locates these narrators: in femaleness, in social-ability, in a canonical modernist text; aloud, in pathos, in eaves-

⁷² Ann Eden Gibson, in *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), points out that such withholding of meaning—in painting—even if momentary, is itself a site of resistance.

⁷³ *Top Stories Catalogue*. New York; Buffalo: Top Stories, Hallwalls, [about 1983], p. 1. Comma between sentences appears as is in catalogue.

dropping, in a long-distance call, in intimate gossip. All apply, even while none may be validated. Again, from *Too Good*:

took her daughter to the doctor for the pill sixteen
do you think that's right my sister has a girl and
she never got married didn't need to i was married
twice good husbands both times always held a job⁷⁴

With little fixity of subject, it is still possible to splice many concerns: sexual reproduction, age of consent, parental consent, and sexed expectations (as tied to giving birth)—all intersect and obtain. Content expands everywhere to include Barnett's markers, while form streamlines to the occasion. How does this “add up” to the narrator stating that she had two husbands? Did both hold jobs? Or is the reader to understand that the narrator always held a job, during both marriages? There is an evenhandedness of oddity here, where relationships are emphasized at the expense of identifications. Gendered expectations and identities, meanwhile, sometimes square discomfitingly—as where one narrative concludes: “I'd rather see a man get ahead.”⁷⁵

The matter of relationships comes to the fore as Wyszomierski's prose develops in her second collection, *Forget About Your Father*, issued as Top Stories #18.⁷⁶ In this collection of six stories, differences between men and women, differences among women, and generational and material differences evoke relational paradigms. As a cultural gift of second wave feminism, the paradigm shift—or the ability to recognize structures of power, especially where the power of recognition prefigures the agency to reconfigure such structures—is helpful to distinguish Wyszomierski's development. If in *Too Good* this illumination is located within sentence structure, in *Forget About*

⁷⁴ Wyszomierki, Donna. *Too Good to Be Entirely True*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Hard Press, 1979, p. 9.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁷⁶ Wyszomierski, Donna. *Forget About Your Father*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Hallwalls, [1983]. Wyszomierski is the only author to have two monographs published in the Top Stories series.

Your Father it operates in coteries and networks of kin. Wyzomierski's sentences become longer, and doubly complex if more conceptual, where pronouns ("she" and "he") signify so often that it becomes difficult at times to recall who is signifying; or rather, with whom narrational privilege resides. This too is one of her prose's disruptive subtleties.

For example, in the title story, the narrator reflects on her relationship to her son's older girlfriend's "homely" sister's husband—

Finally he looked up. I believe in honesty, he said. Let's have an affair, my wife's used to it by now. He said she liked to read, I should look at her library sometime. I said I would, I wanted to avoid hurt feelings. He wasn't much of a lover and I was glad to get back to the house. I discussed my favorite author with his wife. We had a lot in common, and I promised to write when I left the next week.⁷⁷

When the narrator says she will look at her lover's wife's library, as she wants "to avoid hurt feelings," it remains unclear whether she wants to avoid hurting the wife's feelings over the extramarital indiscretion, or (comedically) for not showing an interest in her library—or even the husband's feelings for not taking up his suggestion. This accepted recognition, of the husband/lover's recognizing the narrator's similarity to his wife, implies both difference and similarity between the two women. (It also comically emphasizes the husband/lover's inability to satisfy (and be satisfied with?) either.) While this deemphasizes sexual competition between the women through a shared love of—of all things—reading, implying a homosociality between the two women, this is not the kind of utopic story where women, as a class, unite. Instead, the homely wife's sister, "the blond" dating the narrator's son, hooks up with the eponymous father; the narrator and the blond continue to write to each other:

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

She promised to keep in touch. I got a card a month later, she was living with my son's father. They were working a big spread, owned a hundred head of cattle. How do you like that, I asked my son. He looked depressed there in the mirror. I went to my bedroom, sat down at the desk.

We're still legally married, I wrote, half of that is mine.⁷⁸

Wyszomierski's narratives work by way of abstractions and particulars, where "a" husband found turns out to be "the" husband estranged, if not yet divorced from. Within the broader structure of patriarchy—here symbolically parodied by the (somewhat) forgotten father—the two women compete not only for the narrator's son but also for financial gain under a system of capitalism, squared by patriarchy.

One thing that allows the prose such latitudes is its flatness of tone. Similar to Wyszomierski's bringing together of hegemony and anomaly, the abstract and the particular coexist in these longer, flattened sentences of *Forget About*, and I will try to quote a lengthier passage that demonstrates this from the story "A Bad Move." *Forget About* also opens Wyszomierski's regular use of the first person, where each "I" is a different person, and—paralleled in other experimental writing of the early 1980s—not necessarily reliable. In these stories, this unreliability works more through parody (possibly riffing off the form of tall tales) and hilarity, by way of preposterousness rather than through exaggeration or deceit. It is also interesting that gender itself is largely relational. For instance, the narrator of "A Bad Move" is implicitly male, though never stated except through [his] relations (marital, parental, sexual) to other characters. This male narrator also leads a life of accidental fortune, expansive privilege, and sexual incontinence:

There was nothing to do at night, the captain introduced me to his sister. They were from Connecticut, she was taking a trip to forget about her husband. None of the crew spoke English, we became very close. I didn't want to get involved, resisted her

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

advances. We were blown off course, landed in a small village. The captain went to get help, I couldn't resist the temptation. He came back in three weeks, had a letter from my wife. We had a long talk, I remembered my responsibilities. The captain's sister understood, she came from New England where families are important. I arranged for her marriage to a village elder, her brother was best man. I went home and promised to be a better husband, my wife asked her mother to move out.

The guys thought I was a hero, my wife was thrilled and did whatever I wanted. I helped my boy write a report for school, was invited to address an assembly, got elected to the town council, bought my wife a new coat.⁷⁹

These mock heroics parody not only the myopic insularity of male privilege, but also societal notions of libido in male-female relations, particularly for women within systemic patriarchy. For example, the fact that the narrator “remembers [his] responsibilities” via a letter from his wife, delivered by his lover's brother (the captain) is immediately undercut by the hypocritical conclusion that the lover understands because she's “from New England where families are important.”

The stories, while paying homage to tall tales—a most American genre—also collapse under their intentional house-of-cards structuring. This operates, again, by making strange bedfellows of diametrically opposed phenomena: life cycles and deadly sins, where neither gains meaning's privilege. As with “A Bad Move,” the story “A Smart Niece” also details border crossing as a means of exploitation, here for the purposes of tax fraud through a religious organization:

I know the minister will go along with the plan, in the best part of town they don't make enough. I asked her [an heiress] where we'd make the exchange, knew the place she suggested, it was under-

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 5. That the characters are “blown off course” may also allude to *The Tempest* and a further critique of colonialism in conjunction with white male privilege.

developed. Okay, I told her, I'll come up with a cover. I'm kind of attractive but could pass for a missionary.⁸⁰

Sliding scales of class, colonialism, female beauty, and religious posturing atomize throughout the narration. Wyszomierski's stories, which move by way of life cycles—marriage, divorce, pregnancy, death—are continually shored up by human vices—romance (or lust) pursued in lieu of commitment, and success (or greed) pursued instead of truth. By fitting these snugly together, sentence-by-sentence, Wyszomierski breaks down the binary construct that these are oppositional; they are, instead, corollaries of the human condition.

These singularities (to use another theoretical frame in circulation in 1980s literary discourse) remind us of the many possible permutations that undercut essentialism and classing. As at the end of "A Smart Niece," the sliding fortunes of the narrator and her indeterminate comings and goings—particularly those embedded on the level of the sentence—can remind one of the prose of Jean Rhys: "I was happy to give up the place on the beach. My girlfriend has a flat in a respectable alley, some nights I stay there, some nights I don't."⁸¹

I'd like to also mention Wyszomierski's later collection *Bad Mayonnaise*, published 33 years after *Too Good to Be Entirely True* and 29 after *Forget About Your Father*.⁸² A story-cycle, these eight short stories follow a unique narrator through a series of encounters with unnamed cousins, (surprise) relations, people in disguise, and doubles—even a time-travel episode in which the narrator approaches both her former

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 19. I'm thinking here of Marjorie Perloff's discussion of Frank O'Hara's fascination with Rhys's avant-garde prose, in *Frank O'Hara, Poet Among Painters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1998).

⁸² Wyszomierski, Donna. *Bad Mayonnaise*. Buffalo: The Buffalo Ochre Papers, 2012. This volume was published for the reading by the author to coincide with the talk I gave in 2011, at Margaret Konkol's invitation, on Top Stories and Donna Wyszomierski's work in the *Small Press in the Archive* series at the University at Buffalo; Ochre Papers was my own publishing imprint.

self and her former lover, in which the self and the former-self find themselves in romantic competition! The stories are peopled with abstract/particular characters, including: “a woman I suspected,” “my high school sweetheart,” “my younger self,” an old fiancé, a cameraman, a trio of sisters/researchers, “the dancer bartender,” a cowboy (“a tall guy with a cowlick”), a jockey, a chestnut colt, an orchid painter, “my old friend’s younger brother,” an uncle, and more. Introductions often come about casually and comically: “You must be my cousin, I said.”⁸³

In the fourth story, “A Sense of Apprehension,” paradigms are recognized, refused, and reconfigured. Consider the narrator’s encounter with her soon-to-be-fiancé, who is also the son of her mother’s former lover by another woman:

My mother was a milliner. She believed that in general clothes don’t make a man, but hats are an exception. I hadn’t seen her for a while. The nephew said he’d get the hats first thing after breakfast. He brought the hats. On the finest one entwined were his and my initials. Mother’d had her lover’s son in mind for me, I thought. She must be a romantic.⁸⁴

But the symbolic (monogram) turns out to be a misinterpretation:

Mother arrived by train one day. We talked at the station. She said I made that hat for my best friend, after whom I named you. I kept it secret since she died at the hands of her deranged husband. I’m sad to say I loved him, too, but he chose her so I escaped him.⁸⁵

The monogram, as a sign, doubles: it is instead that of the fiancé’s father and the fiancé’s mother (the narrator’s mother’s best friend, whom the narrator is named for); such complications and *unnaming* allow Wyszomierski to play with paradigms through relational dynamics. In this instance, the narrator refuses to recreate the hetero-

⁸³ Ibid., p. [25].

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. [12].

⁸⁵ Ibid.

matrimony, breaks off with the fiancé, instead carrying out a matrilineal enterprise of economic independence: “I designed a few hats of my own, revived the family business.”⁸⁶

In the words of writer and feminist Margaret Randall, revolutions happen in many different forms.⁸⁷ I believe that this is true of Donna Wyszomierski’s stories, which allow for revolutionary shifts by tracing the connectivity of cultural markers and then allowing them to unfix, remix, and mean anew. I hope that highlighting the Top Stories series, the network created by Anne Turyn, the non-profit work of Hallwalls workers like Nancy Peskin MacCallum, and the Fiction Diction series, will all lend context and contribute to a revaluation of this important cultural work and the prose of Donna Wyszomierski.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Noted during Margaret Randall’s conversation with Cecile Lipworth of Collected Works Bookstore & Coffeehouse over Zoom, 1 May 2020. Randall was also the co-publisher of the magazine *El Corno Emplumado/The Plumed Horn*, the subject of *Among the Neighbors* #5 (2018).

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*This consciousness within her
uncurled itself upon the rollers of objective experience
printing impressions
vaguely and variedly
upon Ova
in place of the more formulate education
coming naturally
to the units of a national instigation*

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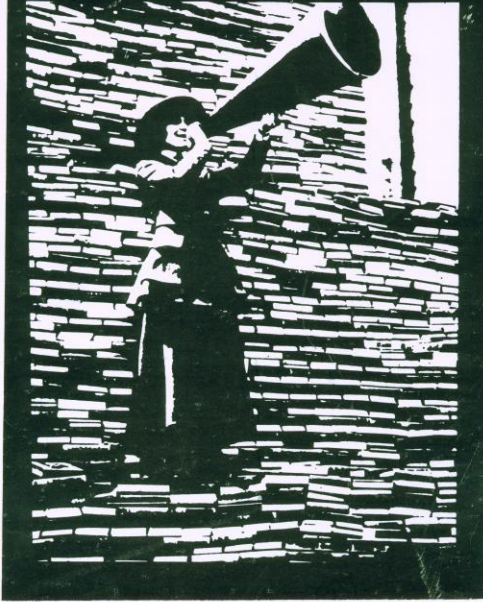
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