

## Interview

### Both Metaphor and Reality: Sharon Mesmer and the Poetics of Flarf

**Sharon Mesmer** is, among other things, a poet, novelist, librettist, teacher, blogger, and member of the flarf collective. She was born and raised in Chicago and moved to New York in 1988 where she accepted a MacArthur Scholarship from Brooklyn College on the recommendation of Allen Ginsberg. She has twice been named a New York Foundation for the Arts fellow in poetry. *Annoying Diabetic Bitch* (Combo Books, 2008) is her first full volume of flarf poetry. Her other books of poetry include the lyric collections *The Virgin Formica* (Hanging Loose Press, 2008), *Vertigo Seeks Affinities* (Belladonna Books, 2006), *Half Angel, Half Lunch* (Hard Press, 1998), and *Crossing Second Avenue* (ABJ Books, Japan, 1997). Collections of fiction include *Ma Vie à Yonago* (Hachette, France, 2005), *In Ordinary Time* (Hanging Loose, 2005) and *The Empty Quarter* (Hanging Loose, 2000). *Lonely Tylenol*, a collaborative visual art book produced with David Humphrey was published by University of Central Florida/Flying Horse Editions in 2003. Mesmer and her husband, the cartoon artist David Borchart, currently divide their time between Pennsylvania's Pocono mountains and Brooklyn, NY, where she teaches writing and literature at The New School. Her blog can be accessed at <http://virginformica.blogspot.com>.

**Owen Percy** tries not to be what Mesmer's poem "Oh Sorry, Smarmy" calls "a self-important critic belaboring the obvious and touching himself in confusion" (29). He is completing a PhD in contemporary poetry at the University of Calgary. This interview about flarf, poetry, the Internet, and *Annoying Diabetic Bitch* took place over email in the early days of 2009.

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**OP:** You are most often described as a "flarf poet." Several varying definitions of what constitutes flarf poetry seem to exist, be it any compositional practice which makes use of an internet search engine, or any "found" internet language recombined to be frivolous, funny, or intentionally awful. Flarf-guru Gary Sullivan has suggested that, whatever it is, its necessary constitutive element is that it house "a kind of corrosive, cute, or cloying awfulness" and that flarf exults in that fact that it is "Wrong. Un-P.C. Out of control."<sup>1</sup> How do *you* describe or understand the term "flarf"?

**SM:** I don't think one can describe – and, by doing so, understand – flarf (or any "school" or "movement" – or, for that matter, poetry in general) without including in the description what came before it, and how/why it came about. That's what I tell my students when they tell me they hate Language Poetry (and/or poetry in general!). As to the how/why of flarf, I think most who are familiar with it know the whole story about Gary Sullivan submitting an intentionally bad poem to a contest sponsored by something called the International Library of Poetry. That was around 2000. After that, Gary and some others (Drew Gardner, Katie Degentesh, Kasey Mohammad, Nada Gordon, Mitch

Highfill, Jordan Davis, Mike Magee, Dan Bouchard) were doing Google-sculpted poems at work. No one set out to make it a school or movement, or to purposely piss everybody off. When Gary asked me to join in 2003 we were just putting terms through Google, coming up with poems, sending them around, and then flarfing those poems to make new poems. Then after Kasey's *Deer Head Nation* came out in '03<sup>2</sup> we started to get some shit from people. And now it's kind of heated up. People seem to think we're trying to piss "them" off, but the truth is that flarf developed organically. As an aside: I really wish people (especially people who flame about how they hate flarf) could read the emails that go around – to see how the poems morph, take on new tropes, incorporate styles and themes. That might be the best way to understand flarf: to actually see the process.

Anyway, back to the what/how/why – at the risk of stating the painfully obvious, you can throw into the mix the inevitable influence of the New York School and its various generations, a dissatisfaction with certain LangPo products, a crying need for humor, and the creeping realization that American poetry overall was a bit lacking in life. To me, this lack of life can be blamed on the over-reliance on theory that leached into the work.<sup>3</sup> Now, that said, I'm certainly not suggesting that everything theory-related is bad! Or that these responses should never have happened. Questioning reader involvement, authorial hierarchy, what the page constitutes – all very necessary. I'm just saying it might be time to come up for air now. Was narrative really that bad? It's time to see what comes after those very necessary explorations and innovations. Some might say that I'm positing that it's precisely flarf that should come after those explorations and innovations. I'm saying that flarf – among other things that we maybe aren't aware of yet – is an organic result of those explorations, and can best be described and understood in the light of what came before.

I usually say that I'm a member of the flarf collective – just to make the point that what I write isn't limited to flarf poetry. Form follows function, as the architect Louis Sullivan wrote – how I write usually depends on what I'm writing about. In 2008 I published two poetry collections, one of which was flarf and one that wasn't (*The Virgin Formica*, from *Hanging Loose*). Some moments demand flarf. Other moments, something else. Though those other moments are rare. Actually, that Louis Sullivan quote (which actually originated with someone else<sup>4</sup>) comes from an interesting poem that he wrote:

*It is the pervading law of all things organic and inorganic,  
Of all things physical and metaphysical,  
Of all things human and all things super-human,  
Of all true manifestations of the head,  
Of the heart, of the soul,  
That the life is recognizable in its expression,  
That form ever follows function. This is the law.*

**OP:** In forging a flarf poem what “craft” is involved on your part? How does your process engage with what literary history has taught us to believe about authorship?

**SM:** What I usually do is start with a phrase from someone else's poem ("annoying

diabetic bitch" came from Drew Gardner's "annoying diabetic advice") and Google it. I very quickly scan the search results and then take the ones I like the most (for whatever reason) and copy and paste them into a Word doc. I do this with the first five pages of search results, and I usually don't go further than that unless there's just nothing there. I also throw in lines from flarf emails of that day. When I get a good page or two I start putting the lines together – I actually exert a lot of editorial control at this point because I want the poem to cohere when I read it in public; I want it to sound like someone – not necessarily me – speaking. (That said, though, I don't want it to cohere TOO much.) Also, I look through notebooks and I throw in lines or ideas that I've been dealing with. The poem should happen very quickly because there's a feeling right at that moment that I want to hit. I mean, I do edit them – I'll let them sit for a while then go back and manipulate some elements – but I don't work on them for very long. I find nerviness works best for flarf. I like to send a poem back out to the list within fifteen minutes. In fact, that's the only way I write flarf. My non-flarf poems (and essays and fiction) don't tend to work out so well that way though!

**OP:** What is its relationship to the tradition and practice of found poetry?

**SM:** Flarf is obviously found poetry, but for me there are two additional dimensions to it, which I think I can best explain by just posting some bits of the Postscript for *Annoying Diabetic Bitch*: "I'd been collaging text material in poems almost since I first started writing, in 1978, and had always been drawn to running funny, vulgar, non-‘poetic’ language — the beef-tongued, stockyards parlance I grew up with on the south side of Chicago — up against "beautiful" words (after all, as a poet I am attracted to ‘the Beautiful’). It seemed like a generous, wabi-sabi kind of poetry that could inhabit bodies very different from the poet's own and allow them to speak. Plus a certain amount of control (i.e., ego) would have to be surrendered, allowing the word-image to come under the influence of chance. Who knew who would be speaking? People I didn't know, certainly. People I didn't necessarily like."

So, flarf allows me to speak as different people because of the nature of those search engine snippets. I think I spend a lot of time trying to get away from the things I tend to write about in other forms (novel, short fiction, non-flarf poetry), and flarf certainly helps with that. The other way that it breaks off from found poetry is the communal aspect of the project. Again from the Postscript:

“The community aspect of the project appealed to me as well. The poems seemed to have been written by a meta-mind: in my poems I could see traces of my friends' poems, and in theirs I could see my own. By constantly incorporating bits of the posted poems into new poems, the content of each subsequent poem reflected the collective sensibility, while still containing the indelible stamp of its lowly origin. And while the original poem might remain inviolate, we could watch it morph again and again, creating hilarious, outrageous fractal integers of itself, as if composed by a team of comedy writers in the Darwinian TAZ of Googleland.”

So – there's the found element, and then there's an extra thing when you Google a phrase

from a poem that went around. A good example of that would be the "Grover poems" – one weekend Gary sent an email around with the subject line "I Need Grover's Voice!" What he meant was he wanted some audio of Grover from Sesame Street for the first Flarf Festival<sup>5</sup>. That subject line morphed into MANY poems featuring the Grover trope – they went around very quickly (a lot of poets must've been at home that day!). Later Stan Apps and Matthew Timmons published several of them as a special supplement to their *FOLD APPROPRIATE TEXT* magazine<sup>6</sup>. The supplement was called "Manuscript Found in Grover's Bottom" (one of the poems was titled "What Is Wrong With Grover's Bottom?"). "Community organizing" is having a media crest courtesy of our new President. Can flarf be considered a form of poetry community organizing? I think so!

**OP:** I've often thought that 'recombinatory' is an apt description of your poetics on a literally generative level in your flarf work, but the term also seems to shortchange the often awe-inspiring poetic constructions that already exist on the internet.

**SM:** You mean the constructions that you find when simply Googling are awe-inspiring? If so, I would agree. This may be stating the obvious, but bear with me just for a bit: the way I got to those kinds of constructions before the Internet popped fully formed from the head of Al Gore was to jot stuff down in my journal for a few weeks, then collage all that. Later, when I was about 17 I came across *The Third Mind*<sup>7</sup> and the Burroughs/Gysin material and started doing it that way – cutting pages up with scissors, and then putting the journal material in the mix. In fact, I remember the first poem I ever wrote like that: I used to have to take care of my grandmother during the day while my mother worked, so I sat at her kitchen table one afternoon and cut up "The Wasteland," "Female" by Patti Smith, and some Sylvia Plath poem. From putting together those 2-3 word fragments I got lines so close to things I'd been thinking about (but wasn't able to logo-fy) that I actually got a chill.

The efficacy of recombinatory methods is that you really do get at things beneath the surface, which is what I'm always trying to do. I've got nothing against plain-spoken poetry if it's good, but there is something really AWAKENING to the brain about juxtapositions. I studied with Allen Ginsberg at Brooklyn College and we had a long talk one day about the hydrogen + jukebox juxtaposition. In the notes in the annotated "Howl" he connects the impulse with Cezanne and also with haiku. In line 18 of "Howl" he uses the phrase "eyeball kicks," and then in the annotated "Howl" he explains that phrase, and then some later lines toward the end of Part One ("a sudden flash of the alchemy of the use of the ellipsis catalog a variable measure and the vibrating plane" ... "incarnate gaps in Time and Space through images juxtaposed, and trapped the archangel of the soul between 2 visual images and joined the elemental verbs and set the noun and dash of consciousness together jumping with sensation") in this way:

"the juxtaposition of deliberate images to create a gap of understanding which the mind fills in with a flash of recognition of the unstated relationship (as 'hydrogen jukebox') ... One theory of haiku is that it presents two opposite images that connect only in mind of reader. In Buddhist psychology, ordinary mind includes the space between thoughts, awareness, of sunyata. Or, as in Cezanne: the space gap between hot and cold colors ...

Cezanne re-composed his 'petite sensation' of space on the flat canvas by interlocking squares, cubes and triangles of 'hot' colors advancing and 'cold' colors retreating in the optical field. His innovative paintings create the appearance of gaps in space without recourse to conventional perspective lines ... Eisenstein applied this insight to film, thus the terms 'montage' and 'jump cut.'" ("Howl," Original Draft Facsimile, page 130)

In a way, flarf is like this – juxtaposing contrasting colors/ideas/phrases to get at the space between thoughts. And that space is filled with what it's filled with. Usually, as a quick flarfing suggests, “a scrapie-infected sheep brain framing experience.”

**OP:** Is flarf a contemporary attempt to “Howl” in that it self-consciously peels back the layers of a particular moment in history in its performance of that moment?

**SM:** I would never say, myself, that "flarf is" *something*. All the flarf poets see their work differently. Although I do like what you wrote, and would agree (and also append my own additional glosses). It might be right to say that flarf is a performative moment. Though I think that "moment" happens both self-consciously AND unconsciously, since in constructing/collaging poems one leaves much of the content to chance. In doing so, a kind of suspension of ego is involved. Also, I don't know if I'd say that flarf is a contemporary attempt to do what Ginsberg did. I was just touching on a tiny aspect of it when I brought in the "eyeball kicks" stuff. To me, flarf is more like "The Wasteland" than "Howl."

**OP:** I used the word 'performance' above, because flarf seems to me to be primarily performative at its core. The clips of your reading at the 2006 Flarf Festival have garnered over 5000 hits on You Tube<sup>8</sup> and for poetry, this kind of pop-culture impact seems to be matched only by that of Spoken Word—a form which has been equally maligned as 'unpoetic' poetry by critics, scholars, and even poets themselves.

**SM:** I was a Slam semi-finalist in 1991, and I remember the early Spoken Word/Slam poets like Paul Beatty, Tracie Morris, Edwin Torres (who's on the flarf list) and there's just no way anyone can say their work is un-poetic. People who say with certainty that a school or movement or genre is this or that are just not paying attention. Art is a process that requires participation. The only art that does what it's supposed to do "on contact" is pornography. Art is like a tree – it's a sentient being, meaning: it responds to change. If you're not used to looking at trees, if you can't grok the fullness of a tree, you'll never see its tree life. You have to learn to "see" the tree. You have to learn to "see" art. If you loved a poem when you were young, that poem will take on new meanings as you get older, if you keep it with you as you go along. As you change, it changes, even though on the surface it stays the same. This is how you see beyond the surface – how you see the meanings that fan out from an object. To understand one poem, you really do need to understand the whole history of poetry. Some people may see that as a burden, others as an adventure that enlarges your understanding of the world. Poetry is a conversation through time. Take any poem and do some research and you'll see. Allen's "Sunflower Sutra" for example – it's an "answer" to Blake's "Ah! Sunflower." Blake's poem "asks" several questions – they're really phrases that make up an unfinished sentence (I think

Northrop Frye pointed that out in *Fearful Symmetry*) – that Allen "answers" in his poem. Spoken Word is an answer to LangPo, which is an answer to the New York School, which is an answer to the Beats, which is an answer to the Confessionals, which is ... you get my point. And yes, the Slams were contests whereas flarf *depends* on collaboration, so maybe flarf *is* an answer to Slam.

**OP:** As an extension of this, and to return to the influence of the New York School that you discuss above, do you also feel connected to Dadaist or surrealist traditions?

**SM:** Flarf is a lot like the exquisite corpse. And, as you know, the New York School had an affinity with the surrealists, especially Apollinaire's "Zone."

**OP:** How does the immediacy of the internet change the way we think about poetry?

**SM:** I don't see how it couldn't add to (rather than change) the way(s) we think about poetry. Quite honestly, I find all the flaming on blogs about flarf to be ... I don't know ... anti-poetic. And boring. I don't get involved in it. It's depressing. Poets are supposed to be looking everywhere! Looking to everything! Why shouldn't we look to the Internet as a source of language? Even my husband, a cartoonist, said to me long ago, "There's some really funny and possibly poetic stuff in these Google search results." To say, "There's something wrong, something antithetical to poetry, about constructing poems this way" is antithetical to poetry! I'm always appalled at how closed-off some poets are. Imaginative thinking requires you to at least be curious, to be willing to consider something new. Maybe not necessarily incorporate it into your own method, but at least know what it's about. In some ways flarf has become a sort of litmus test for me: the reactions of poets I know – poets who've published me – to flarf has been very revealing. The answer to my question, "Just what is it that you don't like about flarf?" invariably proves that the person I'm talking to only knows hearsay about flarf. One answer, "Well, I like *your* flarf," means that they've only ever heard *me* read it.

To get back to the Internet changing the way we think about poetry: if anyone wants to bemoan how the way we think about poetry has changed, let them bemoan the invention of writing, because THAT'S what changed poetry. For all time. Poetry was originally just the way stories were told – the meter, the rhymes were there to make the story memorable to tellers and listeners. Poetry was STRUCTURE. Since the invention of writing, poetry has continued to subsume and reflect all human experiences, and will continue to do so. Flarf is just one way of writing poetry. After flarf will come something else, and with it will come a new bunch of bemoaners.

**OP:** I also pose this question in terms of production and distribution of poetry—two processes that (intentionally or not) have historically leant some conception of sacredness to texts simply because they transformed language into a material good which took a long time to produce and which were relatively difficult to acquire without certain amounts or types of capital. Is flarf the democratization of poetry?

**SM:** Poetry has always been democratic. In a way, however, flarf makes poetry less

democratic because you need a computer to create it! But it makes up for it by recycling everyone's waste language. Flarf is the *WALL-E* of literature. I like to think that flarf's guiding spirit is Hekate, the dark moon goddess who makes sacred waste and garbage (I mean that she makes those things sacred – not that she makes waste). Flarfers are sort of like the recyclers of waste language, the stuff no one thought fit for poetry. Production and distribution become secondary processes with flarf though. The invention of writing is what transformed language into material. AND, in my opinion, *took away* its sacredness. I gave a lecture a few years ago that touched on this idea. I'll quote from it here:

*The French Symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud wrote, in a letter of 1871, that “In Greece ... words and music gave rhythm to action. Afterward, music and rhymes became games, pastimes.” What he meant was that in ancient Greece before stories were written down they were spoken to audiences in the rhythms of poetry — dactylic hexameter, the meter of The Illiad and The Odyssey. Once writing was invented, what need was there for poetry? Because despite all we've come to know — or think we know — about poetry, its original function was as a mnemonic device — a memory aid. Whereas we now think of poetry as perhaps the heart and soul of a piece, originally it was all about structure, the exoskeleton (in Greek the word “poem” means “thing made”): all that rhyme and meter stuff — all that we now refer to as “prosody” (the means by which Greek and Latin poetic works were codified for readers) — was intended to make it easier for storytellers to remember what they were supposed to say, and for listeners to remember what they had just heard. Poetry wasn't poetry as we know it now — it was the method by which stories were told.*

*Once there was writing — the visual record of spoken language — the job of poetry was over, and meter and feet and rhyme became, as Rimbaud says, games, ways to make the acts of writing and reading more challenging and interesting. And writing and reading are relatively late developments in the history of human beings. Stories and histories were passed down from teller to teller and transmitted to audiences using mnemonic devices for a very long time before they were written. The word “mnemonic” — another word for memory, or remembrance — comes from the name of the goddess Mnemosyne. We don't hear much about Mnemosyne these days. Ironically, she's been forgotten. But she, the goddess of Memory, was the mother of the Muses (Zeus was their father; but he was pretty much everybody's father). And it makes symbolic sense, doesn't it, that Memory would be the mother of the Muses, of the Arts?*

*Writing wasn't originally invented for artistic purposes, though that did come later. Sometime around the third millennium BCE, Neolithic agriculture took a dramatic leap forward owing to improvements in irrigation. This leap resulted in unprecedented population growth and wealth (for some people). With these changes — comparable in scale to the industrial revolutions of England and America — came the establishment of cities along the banks of rivers (the Nile, Tigris, Euphrates, and Indus) where goods and services were exchanged. And once goods and services crop up, money and property can't be far behind. And then comes the need to monitor and regulate, and from that need “writing” emerges, circa 3,000 BCE. In its earliest incarnation, writing was*

*simply information storage. And it usurped the power of memory (the memory of a specially trained and selected group of people) as the prime method of information storage.*

*Let's jump now from the Fertile Crescent scene to that of ancient Greece around the time of the Homeric epics (going back to what Rimbaud said). The Trojan War, the basis of The Odyssey, is believed to have taken place in the twelfth century BCE — the late Bronze Age, about 2,000 years after the invention of writing. The story of the Trojan War and its aftermath was likely transmitted originally via short songs and ballads, by storytellers known as "rhapsodes," and only much later unified into the works now known as The Iliad and The Odyssey. It seems likely that with the rise in literacy at the end of the eighth century BCE, a single author — perhaps Homer — with an intimate knowledge of the techniques of oral composition and the art of writing was responsible for shaping the final forms of the epics and for unifying the various internal elements and connections between the two works. So, from the 12th century to the 8th century (approximately), The Odyssey was a spoken performance piece without a text.*

*Literacy in ancient Greece was on the rise by the 6th century. Once stories like The Odyssey could be written, the job of remembering was taken over by writing. And once that happened, Story and Poetry were freed from each other's embrace. Poetry was no longer just the method by which stories were told — a set of rules for organizing language to make it memorable — but an art unto itself. Poetry could still tell stories, but those stories were now called narrative poems. And stories went on to become prose, fiction, and the novel.*

**OP:** How, then, should the 21st century poet's job description read in your mind?

**SM:** Well, the flarf answer is this: "The successful candidate will be an ill-natured headcase with bloggy fantasies of fighting heroically against 'The Big Career in Academia' while siphoning off the scarce intellectual capital therein originally intended for poor countries suffering from underdeveloped meta-logos. We are particularly interested in a shrieking middle-aged, squid-fisting dirtbag fully invested in his or her own muscular dystopia of extremism and halitosis. Scrapie-infected sheep brain framing experience desirable, though not required."

**OP:** One of the joys of flarf—if not its greatest—is its humour. *Annoying Diabetic Bitch* is an excellent example, because it derives its humour from its wild and absurd juxtapositions that the reader must reconcile. You mention above that this attempt at reconciling these things is what brings the ha-ha to the fore, and this seems to me to be a question of meaning as well. How does a poem like "Holy Mother of Monkey Poo" or "Who Put the Frogs in Grandma's Shit" 'mean'? By *not* meaning? Does it begin and end with humour?

**SM:** There is a crying need for humor in poetry, as I said. I think flarf owes a lot to stand-up comedy. If you pare those two forms down, what you find is the reliance on those wild and absurd juxtapositions. Steven Wright: "I used to think the dictionary was a big poem



about everything." That's a haiku! I mean, look:

*I used to think the dictionary* (one idea)  
*was a big poem* (pivot to next idea)  
*about everything* (conclusion)

And it's true – the dictionary *is* a big poem about everything. I've stolen liberally from the OED. And look at Lenny Bruce's "Jewish versus Goyish" routine (put into stanzas by me):

I'm Jewish.  
Count Basie's Jewish.  
Ray Charles is Jewish.  
Eddie Cantor's goyish.

B'nai Brith is goyish,  
Hadassah, Jewish.  
Marine corps – heavy goyim,  
dangerous.

Kool-Aid is goyish.  
All Drake's cakes are goyish.  
Pumpernickel is Jewish, and,  
as you know,  
white bread is very goyish.

Instant potatoes – goyish.  
Black cherry soda's very Jewish.  
Macaroons are very Jewish –  
very Jewish cake.  
Fruit salad is Jewish.  
Lime jello is goyish.  
Lime soda is very goyish.

Trailer parks are so goyish  
Jews won't go near them.  
The Jack Paar Show is very goyish.

Underwear is definitely goyish.  
Balls are goyish.  
Titties are Jewish.  
Mouths are Jewish.

All Italians are Jewish.  
Greeks are goyish--  
bad sauce.

... etc., etc.

**OP:** Although it is consistently comedic, *Annoying Diabetic Bitch* is both tonally and generically diverse. The poems are all different lengths and forms; you write sonnets, couplets, dramatic exchanges between characters, and so on. Two good examples of the book's diversity are the poems "My Lithuanian Fireman," which comes dangerously close to being a directly coherent and narrative piece of prose, and "She Do the Prettiest Dog Vagina in Different Voices," which is an uncanny parodic re-writing of "The Wasteland." How much editorial/ authorial control do you exert in terms of tone/style and why?

**SM:** I exert A LOT of editorial control after I get the main content from the searches, though I pretty much never change actual wording gleaned from there (though I do sometimes change spelling and tenses). I think this comes from having epilepsy (temporal lobe – not convulsive) and needing everything I look at to be not-chaotic. Also, I seem to do at home what I do in poems (flarf or otherwise): I'm constantly straightening things out. So, when I do the searches, I like the content to be as caroming as possible, but I like for there to be surface "straightening." This is against all the tenets of LangPo, but I never was a LangPo poet, really. I appreciate the idea of non-hierarchical text, but I was never able to get behind it 100%.

About " ... the Prettiest Dog Vagina ... ": I had broken a bone in my right foot in '06 and was in a cast up to my knee for almost five months, so the poems I wrote during that time tended to be longer because even though I was using a walker to get around (I was still going in to teach two days a week) it was kind of a pain to get around – I had four rods sticking into my foot, holding the bone together. Before the accident, and then for a little bit after, I was reading a bio of Vivienne Eliot, *Painted Shadow*<sup>9</sup>, wherein the author discussed Pound's editing of "The Wasteland" – what he left out: the love that T.S. Eliot had for a young man appropriately named Jean Verdenal, who drowned (of course) during WWI. All direct references to Verdenal had been excised from the poem by Pound, thus making the poem's content MORE about loss than it had been originally. Interesting, no? "The Wasteland" has been an influence on me since 1978 – my dad found a copy in a Salvation Army and gave it to me saying, "This looks like something you like." Funny – as I'm writing this it occurred to me: my dad was a butcher, his first job was in Chicago's Union Stockyards, so maybe there's something there re: cut-ups! (Also, when he was first diagnosed with cancer he refused to have an operation. He said: "No doctor's gonna cut me up." Weird.)

**OP:** This is a collection that is literally *from* the world-wide-web, the scope of which we can hardly even conceive, yet certain usual suspects keep popping up in different poems. A line from "Ezra Pound's Masala" seems to put it best: "I repeat myself because I am vast and/ contain multitudes// I work towards an æsthetics of disappointment/ like a dryer full of eyeballs" (46). George W. Bush, Paris Hilton, and Olivia Newton John all make repeat appearances, Canada is referred to inordinately more than other countries that aren't America, and the word "fucktard" appears, well, more than once, which is in itself remarkable! Inasmuch as the internet is 'limitless,' do these poems come from selected

and recycled Google searches, or does the internet itself draw on a limited pool of language? How much of a constraint is the internet in your flarf work?

**SM:** You know, I don't think most people appreciate the WWW. It's truly an amazing thing. It's freaking huge, yet it's never "there." There's truly no there *there*. Just try to describe it to someone who doesn't know what it is! I mean, my online students sit right in front of a computer, but when they encounter a word or reference they don't know, they hardly ever bother to search for it, and instead ask me what it means!

"Fucktard" was a trope that went around the list around circa summer '03. Someone posted something called "Moist Fucktard Newbie," which was probably a response to something someone else had posted. It's sometimes hard to remember the naissance of these tropes (except for "Grover" and "unicorn boner"). If you think about it, the 'Net is like a sentient being. It contains all of humanity. It changes, it influences, it "responds." (When someone says "I'm famous on the Internet" they're not kidding.) Like I said, it's both there and not there, for better and worse. Worse: it's making people stay inside too much. Better: if you want access to the lives of human beings, their voices, their thoughts ... it's all "there." It exists as "good" (knowledge) and "bad" (knowledge). Net/web. It's mythic.

As for "constraint" – for me, all the flarf I write has to come from searches, and directly from poems that other flarf poets have sent around. Or at least from some idea, phrase, or trope that went around the list at the time of writing.

**OP:** To return again to the comparisons we've made with "Howl" and "The Wasteland," I'll quote from the closing words to your Postscript from *Annoying Diabetic Bitch* which you quoted from earlier: "There's a scene in Werner Herzog's 1979 remake of *Nosferatu* where the citizens of a town gripped by plague dance and sing and carouse among corpses rotting and burning in the town square. In a way, flarf does pretty much the same thing. But without that awful stench." The sense that the internet is the harbinger (or at least the synecdoche) of our declining society is not new—Robert Fitterman's *Metropolis XXX*<sup>10</sup> is another good recent example—but do you believe that there is little or no hope in flarf? Is its primary social function to keep the band playing as the ship sinks? Does it/should it demonstrate a social conscience?

**SM:** There's a problem, I think, that occurs when art is made to demonstrate a social conscience. Whose social conscience? And how is "social conscience" defined? Art needs to be as varied and as multi-dimensional as humanity is if it's to accurately project/reflect humanity.

Going back to *Nosferatu*, and the citizens of the town gripped by plague – were the citizens demonstrating a social conscience? Were they "protesting"? What were they doing? Basically, making the best of a bad situation. Which is, I think, what flarf was doing these last eight years. I'm really bad at writing what might be described (or what used to be described as) "protest poetry." I just can't get across what I want to say, and the poem ends up sounding like watered-down Ginsberg. So I wrote flarf. Flarf, to me,

communicates a kind of "what I see raying out from all the surface shit" vision. To use another movie comparison: *The Matrix*. The first installment was prescient, really. It came out in 1999. And it's an apt story of what happened here over the past eight years: dead souls and lying machines (by that I don't mean machines that lie, though that's true, too; I mean people who are lying machines, who lie over and over like perpetual motion machines) sucking the life out of democracy, and us, to keep themselves going. So many people were put to sleep by the simulacrum of existence that was presented to them – that they could have beautiful homes for little money, that money was easy, that life was amazingly easy and cheap and "convenient" but thinking and making decisions was hard. It's been absolutely appalling. And now the facade is crumbling. Is it any coincidence that Bush's presidency began with the collapse of the World Trade Center and the breaching of the Pentagon, and now it's ending with the collapse of the stock market, the banks, the Republican Party itself? (Though I worry that they're going to remake themselves and return more evil than ever. I have the feeling, and I hope it's wrong, that we're in a kind of Weimar Republic now.) And let's not forget Katrina. All these things were both metaphor AND reality. 9/11 now seems like a premonition badly interpreted. Speaking of badly interpreted: what deeply offended me the most was the constant deployment of Christianity. Which is probably why there's no much Jesus stuff in *Annoying Diabetic Bitch* – the name/image/idea of Christ was as skewed by "Christians" as it had been by the Nazis and the KKK. The poem "What Is Wrong With Our Savior's Wedgie?" is way less crazy than most of the shit "Christians" were laying out! I also think that we (Americans, I mean) should've taken to the streets after the stolen election. We had no clue. And, somehow, we got even more clueless. But the night of Obama's election was the first time I ever (literally) danced in the street. The first time I ever cried because my candidate was elected. The euphoria around here was incredible<sup>11</sup>.

**OP:** I must say that I can understand how this book might have raised the ire of certain segments of society who would seem to be justified in thinking that this art was taking aim at them, George W. Bush is not treated kindly in *Annoying Diabetic Bitch*. Throughout the book he variously "hates black people" (9) and "help[s] his 15-year old girlfriend get an abortion" (15). In one poem Ashley Olson even tells her sister that he "just broke into our backyard and raped our favourite kitty" (86). His Religious Right, it is elsewhere suggested, "can be easily replaced/ by a baby with a Pez dispenser" (59). This is not to say that more left-leaning politicians are spared from criticism of their "eff-ed up Democrat stuff" (29) (one memorable line being, "Fuck you, Al Gore, you fucking loser" (55)). And although this is all recombined material, it is recombined in a very subjective way. In what ways do you see flarf as a p/Political form?

**SM:** Of course, much of the Bush stuff was meant to be absurd. Bush raping a kitty. Absurd. To say that I have absolutely not an iota of positive feeling about Bush would be a gross understatement. People were complaining that the crowd on the Mall (for the inauguration) laughed at Cheney when they saw he was in a wheelchair, but I think both of them should feel very lucky they didn't get what Ceausescu and his wife got. There's still time and opportunity to bring Bush to justice, and I really hope that happens. And I think the religious right *could* be viably replaced by a baby with a pez-dispenser.

For the record, I don't think Al Gore is a loser. He didn't "lose" the 2000 election, after all. I admire him. I also have nothing against the Olson twins! Their names just came up in searches, and the results made interesting combinations. I wrote a "play" consisting of a dialogue between Mary-Kate Olson and James Madison. I'd like to see someone dope that one out!

**OP:** I'm sure that the sheer amount of Bush material on the internet was unbelievable as the discontent grew throughout his terms, but Barack Obama has recently entered the White House under literally unprecedented international media attention. He is talked about—by nearly everyone—in the language and rhetoric of celebrity which seems particularly well-suited to internet gossip sites etc. How might the poets—not just flarf poets—treat Obama? Have you sculpted any Obama poems?

**SM:** At around 8am on the morning after election Gary sent around a message that read "FLARF IS DEAD!!!!!!!!!!!!!" And then Rod Smith sent around a response: "o, wait a minute." Later, Gary sent around a fake Associated Press-type news release: "Historic Election May Signal Death of Flarf." And then a few days after that I sent around a poem (and keep in mind that Obama is the first political figure I actually love) called "Sorry, Even Mariah Carey's Dog Has Had Enough of Obama." He'll probably get his share of flarf. But whatever happens, I can say with certainty that I will always be incredibly grateful and amazed that he became our President.

*\*The day after this interview was completed Gary Sullivan published a brief state-of-the-flarf-union address on The Brooklyn Rail website. It can be accessed at <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2009/02/books/%20flarf-from-glory-days-to-glory-hole>*

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This definition was posted on Sullivan's personal blog, *Elsewhere*, (<http://garysullivan.blogspot.com/>) under the heading "My Definition," on July 17, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Mohammad, K. Silem. *Deer Head Nation*. San Diego: Tougher Disguises Press. 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Mesmer directs readers to <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2008/09/books/raising-poetry> for an example of this phenomenon.

<sup>4</sup> Originally attributed to Boston-born sculptor Horatio Greenough, the idea that form follows function was made famous by Sullivan after he published the above poem as part of an article entitled "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered," which he published in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* (Philadelphia, PA) in March, 1896.

<sup>5</sup> Past Flarf Festivals have been organized by Gary Sullivan in New York. For more information see <http://flarffestival.blogspot.com/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://insertpress.net/index.php?s=fold>

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<sup>7</sup> Burroughs, William S. and Brion Gysin. *The Third Mind*. New York: Viking Press, 1978. This book contains essays, creative work, and interviews on and about cut-up methods of writing.

<sup>8</sup> Mesmer's reading from the Flarf Festival in New York in April, 2006 can be accessed at <http://ca.youtube.com/watch?v=HZI8DsouAK8>.

<sup>9</sup> Seymour-Jones, Carole. *Painted Shadow: The Life of Vivienne Eliot, First Wife of T.S. Eliot*. New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Fitterman, Robert. *Metropolis XXX: The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Washington, DC: Aerial/Edge, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> A brief video posted on Mesmer's blog on November 4' 2008 attests to this jubilation: <http://virginformica.blogspot.com/2008/11/park-slope-euphoria-november-4-2008.html>