

by **Scott Bloemker and Judd Hess**

Awe Strikes: An Interview with Linh Dinh

On 3 November 2009, Linh Dinh visited Chapman University as a part of the Poetry Reading Series. During his visit, he showed a selection of portraits of the residents of one of Camden's tent cities and discussed the current economic crisis. In the wake of his visit, graduate students Scott Bloemker and Judd Hess conducted the following interview via e-mail.

Scott Bloemker and Judd Hess: You seem to have multiple roles as an artist—short story writer, poet, photographer, cultural critic. Can you describe what draws you to both photography and poetry? What are the differences, as you write, between poetry and prose?

Linh Dinh: There are many overlaps between the two arts: photography and poetry. In each, I try to create an emblematic moment, to make each photo or poem represent life as a whole. (The fact that I fail nearly always is inconsequential.) In a successful, triumphant work of art, there should be beauty and tension, just as in real life, a bit of raw, erotic tickling coupled with an endless perspective of post-coital bewilderment, memory loss and nostalgia, maybe a plastic skull in a corner. As I practice it, photography forces me to become more civic and social. Walking miles to take photos, I get to experience actual environments with my body. I sweat, freeze, bump into people. Photography is also bad for my liver, since I sometimes drink with my subjects. Poets enjamb, prose writers don't, but syntax is absolutely crucial whether I'm writing stories or poems. One cannot become even a half-assed writer without knowing how to construct a sentence many different ways. Clauses are my best friends.

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Bloemker and Hess: How do you define or think of yourself as a poet? Do you see yourself as an urban poet, or perhaps a Vietnamese-American poet? Are there labels others have given you as a poet that you see as particularly fitting or inapt?

Dinh: I was born into a city of a million, Saigon, and have spent most of my adult life in Philadelphia, which has 1-1/2 million people. I have also lived in smaller cities, the suburbs, and even Certaldo, an Italian town of 16,000. But, yes, I am primarily an urban specimen. Saigon and Philly are both very dense and walkable. As soon as I hit the sidewalk, I become aware of many other bodies, most of them unknown. I also have a heightened awareness of my own body as I dodge, sidestep, and yield. I look surreptitiously, then slot myself deftly into a fleeting gap. At 46, I have owned only two cars, for two years altogether. As has been pointed out many times, the city is a mess of juxtapositions. One is also swarmed by language, visual and audio. Though much of it is nonsense, of course, pay attention and you will be rewarded. Having spent more than 20 years in Philly, however, I don't pretend to be constantly enthralled. There are too many visual cues here that can trigger a mortifying memory.

Bloemker and Hess: You mentioned in passing the poetry camps. How exactly do you think of those camps? What do you find are drawbacks of such labels or categories? Are there some ways in which they are useful to poets or to readers?

Dinh: One should always approach an unfamiliar poet or poem with an open mind, irrespective of attached labels. That said, these can be useful as rough demarcations of the poetic terrain. How do you want your work to be perceived? Who are you trying to impress and which poetic lineage do you want to belong to? When I started out, it was important that those with an experimental bent took notice of what I

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was trying to do. I gravitated towards certain journals such as *Sulfur* and *New American Writing*, while ignoring others. Still do. A common aesthetics defines each camp, but this solidarity often hinders real criticism. One rarely sees one “postavant” poet criticize another, for example. By penning a positive review or outright flattery, one gains a new ally or strengthens a friendship. This political capital may yield a reciprocal review, blurb, job, or a grant down the line. Negative comments, however, will ensure that one has made a lifelong enemy. So the unsuspecting reader reads one fluff piece after another, not knowing that they are mostly about politics, and have little to do with literature. Sniping between camps are more common, though still rare.

Bloemker and Hess: You spoke of being a “whore” in the piece you did for *The New York Times*.

Dinh: I felt whorish because I could only express half of what I wanted to say. For this, I only have myself to blame. For the last five years, I’ve been obsessed about the economy. I knew it would collapse. In 2005, I taught, for the first time, a poetry writing workshop called “State of the Union.” Students were asked to examine the alarming state of our country, at variance with the Muzak tinkling from Washington and mainstream media. I discussed peak oil, mortgage frauds, and the criminal complicity of our government. None of these topics made it into my *New York Times* article, however, because all they wanted was a personal account of someone making do with less, not my railing against Wall Street, Washington, or, god forbid, the mainstream media. The series itself is called “Happy Days.” Its main thrust is complacency.

Bloemker and Hess: What is your perspective on being a poet outside of academia? You mentioned your “State of the Union” course, you talked about your teacher Stephen Berg, and, of course, you visit campuses for some of your readings. So how are you connected with academia?

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Dinh: I never finished college and have worked as a filing clerk, house cleaner, window washer, art installer, and house painter. At 40, I got my first teaching job when Bard hired me for a few weeks. Ann Lauterbach has had me back several times and I've also taught briefly at the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Montana, and Naropa University. My academic career has been sporadic, to say the least. The academy is fine and necessary, but it's not good when nearly all of our poets are walled inside it. The academy is a utopia because that's where our most untainted, optimistic, and beautiful gather—and I'm not 55 only talking about the students, of course. Poets shouldn't loiter in paradise. Paying through his nose, a young person drops into utopia, does a few hits of acid, then leaves. But you can't get rid of a tenured rhymester with a crowbar, even if he hasn't written anything in decades, if ever.

Bloemker and Hess: Are there any canonical or contemporary artists—poets, perhaps also visual artists—you feel employ a style or purpose similar to yours? How has your reading and your background in visual arts shaped your writing?

Dinh: In a 2004 interview, I talked about Louis Ferdinand Céline, how I admired his energy, his dark sense of humor and the grittiness of his observations. Céline was someone who came into contact with a lot of people. That physical willingness to engage people is very attractive to me. I admire that Ginsberg managed to become a public figure, someone who could command an international stage to address the biggest issues. Among contemporary American poets, we don't have anyone like that. The allure of bohemia, common to the Beats and Abstract Expressionists of that era, is also gone. While in college in the 80s, I could still be inspired by Franz Kline saying, "A Bohemian could survive in a place where an animal would die" (I'm quoting from memory, so it's probably slightly off). Today, most poets are careerists who dream of never having to leave the

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academy. Their motto, Tweed jacket from cradle to grave! Compared to poetry, the art world puts a higher premium on originality. To be considered relevant at all, one must be distinctive. One must have a vision. While in college, I was very inspired by wild and playful contemporary artists such as Martin Kippenberger, David Salle, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Francesco Clemente. (At this point, I also discovered writers such as Rimbaud, Artaud, Rabelais, Kafka and Céline.) The boldness of the art scene in the 80s taught me much. In 1994, I curated a show at Moore College called "Toys and Incense," which focused on creativity as play. Many of my ideas about the creative process, I arrived at while trying to paint.

Bloemker and Hess: You have a blog, and you've published poetry online. But during your visit, you spoke of "reevaluating your relationship with the internet." Could you explain how the internet has affected your work— 56 perhaps your writing process as well as the dissemination of your work— and what you mean by reevaluation?

Dinh: The internet is certainly very useful, but it also encourages bad reading, writing, and living habits. Photography has helped to lure me away from this worldwide dumpster. But, paradoxically, it's also where I post all of my fine photos. Though media are comfortable blinders for us postmodern zombies, we must nevertheless strive to live life more in the flesh. Do you know where you are? Turn off the television and radio, crush that iPod. Do you need to hear that ditty for the millionth time? Our minds are so cluttered with repetitive trivia.

Bloemker and Hess: How have you become a cultural critic? Do you see your poetry as cultural criticism?

Dinh: I've always been interested in social issues. How can a writer not be? As an immigrant, I've also had many delightful or humiliating opportunities to reexamine all

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societal norms, from how to lean on a wall, masticate, to the elaborate shticks of a poetry reading, not that I employ any of them. I'm perfectly natural. Besides the U.S., I've also lived in Italy, England and Vietnam as an adult, so I've had a few chances to compare differences between cultures. What interests me most is the issue of power. Who has it? How is it gained? How is it deployed? Power is not just a bomb or a left hook, but the inflection of a single word. Who dares to unleash such a weapon?

Bloemker and Hess: While you were at Chapman University, you spoke of the poet as the "aristocrat of the servant class." Do you see that as your most essential role, both in your poetry and your photography? How do you define the "servant class" you mentioned? How do you balance the line you mentioned between witness and exploitation?

Dinh: I've written poems about this issue of the aristocrat of the servant class. One was published in a recent issue of Harper's and included in my new book, *Some Kind Of Cheese Orgy: 57 Clean, Clean, Clean*. Belonging to the lower class, you're expected to cater to the upper class' lower bodily functions, not to engage their minds but to wipe their asses, kiss their cunts on demand, suck cocks for tips. Unless, of course, you're an artist, in which case, you're an aristocrat of the servant class, to quote that grand maestro among slaves, Jasper Johns. I used to clean apartments and houses. Showing up for a new job, I was greeted by the mistress, "I have the most respect for new immigrants. You work so hard!" Down low, you'll get a disproportionate low down on all things funky and nasty. Nothing unusual, really, just shit and stuff. I cleaned toilets and fridges, folded panties, Got on all fours, dipped into the suspicious. A young woman confided, "I moved to Philly because California women were so beautiful." She was usually home when I came. The spine of her soft porn book turned to the wall. They all had some smut in the house. This was before the

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internet made these sad and surreptitious purchases unnecessary. I found a teen-aged Madonna in a closet, so I knelt and sighed. A fat one lived alone, but once she said, "Sorry, the house is so messy today. I had company last night," and her face brightened angelically. In a talk I gave at Texas State, I showed a few photos by Peter van Agtmael. Embedded with American troops in Iraq, he accompanied them as they barged into people's homes. He photographed terrified civilians, including a boy with a bloodied face. Granted, van Agtmael did document some abuses by "our boys," and his very presence likely prevented them from doing worse, but to an Iraqi family, I'm sure he was just another foreign invader. Imagine Vietnamese troops kicking down your door, turning your house inside out, with me snapping your whimpering mom as she cowers beneath the flat screen TV. I also showed Kevin Carter's photo of a vulture lurking near a starving Sudanese toddler. That's certainly emblematic, since every photographer, and, by extension, every viewer, is a vulture. Having said all that, I try my best not to offend anyone when I take candid pictures on the streets. One must be sneaky, and I've gotten better at it.

Bloemker and Hess: What are the ranges of responses you have received from your project—viewers, or perhaps those photographed? Have you ever feared for your personal safety?

Dinh: A few praises, but mostly indifference. But I don't fret since I will make sure my enemies pay for this gravest of insults against my dignity. My wife gets nervous because I often stray into the shittiest neighborhoods. As for photographing people without permission, I have written, "Most people don't mind being photographed, many do love it, but they don't want to relinquish control over their self-presentation. That's all we're about, really. Posing and vogueing. I must be seen in the proper light, from the right

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angle, with every hair and comma in place. Denied this right, I might just break your bleep bleep camera.”

Bloemker and Hess: What advice or idea would you offer writers like ourselves, perhaps yet to publish much or working toward academic degrees?

Dinh: Try to remember that you’re in this because you really love literature. You are trying to write because you are in awe of what language and the mind, even yours, are capable of.