

Language is the Other Sun

By S. Portico Bowman,

For Lori Martin: Editor, *Midwest Quarterly: A Journal of Contemporary Thought*

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The personal life is lived in the context of a political will. And yet the political will manifests through personal judgements fermented in a collective culture, and a few oddballs that want to be in charge. And yet because writers and artists are the first shapeshifters we govern the augmented reality we create and our work becomes pure political action. But I would never call myself an activist, or a politician, or a troublemaker. And while I'm troubled by how artificial intelligence will attempt to deem my life as arcane and outdated, I'm more troubled trying to understand natural intelligence and symbolic language. And this is why I write. I create conditions that absorb my consciousness into the numinous so I can disappear into a force field I command, and yet I don't want to be a dictator. I'm simply after my free world. And comfort.

However, that comfort is quickly subsumed by cultural gatekeepers that force me to question my worth, and by extension the importance of democratic acts fighting for the freedom of my natural self. Somewhat exhausted by the mirage of false promises that supercharge my ego and exhaust my integrity I have moved through decades searching for something or someone I could trust.

I found that someone.

I've never met Paulus Berensohn anywhere but in my imagination. He died at age 84 six months after I heard about him for the first time in 2017. My husband shared Lewis Hyde's 2004 essay, "The Senses of Penland." Here I was introduced to Paulus and his frothing list of sixty senses. I was intrigued, but no more. However, a three months later, when I read The New York Times obituary that described Paulus as a dancer, potter, teacher, and environmentalist my life was rescued. I was awestruck by the breadth and depth of a creative life that fused into the

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service of deep ecology. Another three months later, on the day I arrived as a guest archivist at the ASU Ceramics Research Center then Curator of Ceramics, Garth Johnson, handed me the Paulus Berensohn classic, *Finding One's Way With Clay*.

“You don't know about this book?” Garth asked.

“No.” I didn't. Three hours later I left the nearby Starbucks. I could see why none of my academic art degrees had introduced me to Paulus.

Writing my book *Would You Give Up Arms For Wings? A story inspired by the visionary life and writings of Paulus Berensohn* has salvaged my dedication to the freeform experience of creativity and I'm inspired to save not only myself, but the whole world. I think that makes me political and no doubt a troublemaker.

In *The Grass Roots of Art* Herbert Read suggests, “If we could show that what we mean by a work of art is always and inevitably the product of the individual personality and of that personality operating, naturally not in a social vacuum, but in maximum conditions of personal freedom, then we should have established the irrelevance of all those cultural patterns which attract or menace us from the future” (1946, p.23). He goes on, “From this point of view culture is relevant only when it becomes interiorized within the person as a set of personal ideals, attitudes and traits.”

In this sociological regard Berensohn's life is his greatest artistic achievement. He fashioned clay and creative forms in an effort to fashion a meaningful creative life unfettered by fear, or focused on fame and careerism. Writing a book about Paulus is my opportunity to enter into the free creative space and remember I don't write and make art to be famous. I write and make things to be me.

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Paulus held the heart of the world in one hand and his pipe in the other. He pumped blood-iron-stardust through veins of ink, yarn, and the capillaries of clay particles. These practices were the medicines he imbibed and prescribed. All matter was his companion. The vast cosmos did not terrify him. Berensohn was humorous. Curious. Fearless. Generous. Sincere. And he is also my teacher.

In Paulus I found someone who had learned how to integrate body, soul, mind, spirit, and science into their creative life with the language and intention I'd been seeking but could never find in any of the institutions, professors, art programs, books, articles, or churches I attended. I could find these things, but in separate places. When I embarked on the journey into my creative adult life — wide-eyed with ideals and a deep desire to serve — making art about soul and spirit was a formidable taboo. It was 1980. Tie-dye tee shirts, braids and ideological bravery were replaced with polyester, pinstripes, and hairspray.

The revolutionary mindset of the 1960's counterculture intent on overthrowing the systemic ideologies destroying the earth had mostly disappeared, but their echo remained. I could hear their poetry on the radio. I could see them in vintage clothing stores, poster fonts, album covers, and I could learn from the "hippies" in used bookstores. Theodore Roszak's *Making of a Counter Culture*, written in 1969, became the bible for my early twenties. However, the general impression from my dominant culture was the planet didn't need to be saved, and notions of needing to do so was outdated like vinyl records and picnics. What was a young person to do? Something an older person can.

Would You Give Up Arms For Wings? has become my narrative study of the human psyche's essential longing for freedom and the potential for natural fulfillment through a study of

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Paulus and his penchant for enchanted mystical experience. It's also become the opportunity for me to be my natural self and do my part to uphold the creative future of our Earth. I was not born ten years too late. And although *Would You Give Up Arms For Wings?* is first and foremost the non-fiction story about the man, writing a book about a person dedicated to creative discovery is also my pure permission to make up a lot of stuff. I didn't want to write a traditional biography.

The magical realism I've constructed around Paulus and the telling of his true "visionary" story is also rooted in my intention to validate my claim that the parallels of Berensohn's bodily malaise and cancer diagnosis — responsible as they are for the non-fiction elements of the book — are reflected in the eco-catastrophe of our time. Achievement and expansion are marketable, remunerative, stressful, and too often toxic. Paulus offers an alternative where awe and wonder are life sustaining. The marshalled tedium of the peer-review watchtower is rejected and ignored. For twenty years every pot he made was buried back in the earth after the pleasure of its creation. Paulus and his life tells a story of regenerative health through a creative practice that is slow and easy.

Bargello tapestries are not going to reverse climate change, but remembering the human capacity to relax and celebrate the intangible but real somatic rewards of the handmade might. And while Paulus healed himself through a full immersion in the craft art of Bargello tapestry, emerging as he did, dedicated to deep ecology, and seeking a solution to the healing of Mother Earth, he had also healed from unintended, but well-placed psychic wounds of his own biological mother.

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However, hurting people hurt things. And yet psychic healing on a global scale is the condition for freedom. Symbolic language through creative writing is a medium for such a restoration to take place.

The life-changing book project has filled stacks of notebooks and five years. I have dug deep to unearth the structure that would hold the non-fiction story and true re-telling of Berensohn's *Silver Sword* handwritten memoir buried in 8.6 linear feet of papers at the Archives of American Art.

From the first day of writing my narrator has always been a five-hundred-and-sixty-two-year-old Eurasian Eagle Owl Angel named Susannah. The chapter that explains how she managed to turn herself into an owl was believable enough to be awarded a Canada Council for the Arts Research and Creation grant, but that didn't mean I had a book that "worked." Alison Pick, Man Booker Award nominee, has been my mentor throughout the process. I've gone from a first draft mostly non-fiction text, where her advice was simply, "Start over," to a second draft where Alie wanted to say, "Start over again," but didn't. Instead, she said, "Where is Paulus?"

Because Paulus only existed in my imagination, yet there are thousands of people who do know Paulus, I struggled to not offend. I didn't want to present a Paulus they did not know, so I shied away from going deep and writing about the person. I stuck to the side of the pool and wrote about Paulus and his creative philosophies. That meant Paulus, the man, was a stick figure in my story. Alie pressured me to give Paulus agony and ecstasy. That wasn't hard. He's always been my Michelangelo. So, I created the fictional character Toni who provides ample opportunity for conflict, dialogue and more imaginary experiences. My solution to fend off the

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offense will be to invite readers to meet the Paulus in my imagination, and to become immersed in a text of non-fiction and magic realism.

The book now functions through the use of a frame story device found in classic texts such as *The Odyssey* and the *Ramayana*, and Ingmar Bergman's film adaptation of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. In fact — and not one particle of fiction — it was Bergman's film that fostered and inspired Berensohn's mystical healing vision of *The Silver Sword* on Christmas Day in 1974. It would have been helpful and expeditious to see this solution in the first year and the first draft. But I didn't.

However, as I worked through the third year and the third draft, I discovered the mind-bending connection that the New Age is actually a very Old Age. Mozart's *Magic Flute* is inspired by the ancient Greek and Egyptian figure and philosophy known as Hermes Trismegistus, and so is the entire countercultural era of the 1960's and the 1970's. If I'd not already invented a lost magic stone this alchemical coincidence might not have mattered so much, but because I had, it did, and it mattered a lot.

I felt a part of something much larger than me. My earnest intention had been trusted with something. The happenstance of this unexpected discovery became the cosmic key to confirming I was on the right path with my story. It seemed saving the planet was no longer outdated. Vinyl records and picnics have made a comeback too. Conservationists and role models had been hard for me to find, but now the story I was writing was also writing me. The comfort and company of Paulus has been profound, and political.

Because I wasn't finished. I had one more bra to burn. The personal is always political.

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Discovering as I did, the solution of the frame story, I needed to find a narrative voice that would not shy from the magical realism or mangle the non-fiction elements. An omniscient narrator in the frame story allowed me to expand into the space of the Cosmic Witness.

Here I could override my limited viewpoint, the annoying self-doubt of my ego, and my limited skill. I could surrender to an experience of discovery not linked to my own limited life. The personal and the political could dissolve into the wonder and mystery of Being a Writer. The omniscient narrator is not the only place this literary discovery happens, but I intuitively feel empowered by the promise of knowing everything even if the omniscient narrator has fallen out of favor in contemporary literature. I get it. Our species is coming to terms with our limitations. That said, I'm fortified and sustained by the experience in this place of discovery, and I set about to begin. Again.

Here in the fourth year of this project, for the fourth draft, I created Helen. She is the main character in the frame story, and a young student of Paulus. Helen is writing the biography of Paulus. And Helen is also the name of my mother. I knew the character Helen was both me and my mother, and that I the writer would relive my first trip abroad to study art in Venice in 1985. And my dead mother could relive her life through me in the book, as she lived through me in my real life. The new recursion was my memoir in the memoir of Paulus and the frame story. Soon, I found myself grappling with the buried unconscious issues of my mother. I didn't expect this. I thought Edith Berensohn was the only mother in my book.

Edith took Paulus to the Brooklyn Museum to see Uday Shankar's Hindu ballet. Paulus was enchanted. On the way home he told his mother he wanted to be a dancer.

She told him, "Boys don't dance."

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Paulus said to her, “But I just saw boys dancing.”

She replied, “Boys in my family don’t dance.” It was his first wound. It’s not fair when it comes from the mother. Let it be the fat neighbor’s black Labrador dog or the kindergarten teacher. But not the mother. And yet how can it be otherwise given the mothers’ power over our young lives. I shouldn’t be surprised my mother showed up in my current writing project to help me heal from her. She was distracted by her own need of healing when she was alive. That was part of our problem.

Paulus believed in artists as animals, as living souls, and as celebrants of the senses. In his essay “Clay: The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth,” he writes that “art is a specific kind of participatory consciousness” (2001). And in notes for his transformative Shining Clay Workshops that “our survival depends on a deep ecology, a metanoia, an extension of our soul to include the living world. The inscape is the landscape and a crossing point. I must turn toward the eco-centric” (1990 – 1994, 1998).

Paulus believes that “the earth needs the participation of the people in her life. She needs thankfulness, and gratitude, and praise to encourage her continuous productivity and evolution. The function of the artist is to sing up the earth and to tell her dreamtime evolutionary stories in some small way, one way or another. The craft artist is to live in a reciprocal relationship with the earth’s body and story, that is, her soul (circa 1980’s).

I believe eponymous holy humans called “Nature” by Nature — rather than Monsanto named after Olga Méndez Monsanto, heiress of the Monsanto family — are yet to be born. Absolute Nature in this form will render money useless. I am betting on it.

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Greed is a habit that money feeds. It's a trait worth starving. I believe this has begun. Let the science of brilliant human minds be free to ferry a future that celebrates life abundant enough to include a small dandelion sun. There will be no conceivable reason to concoct batches of poison for a perfect lawn and the chemical companies' bottom line. The ray and disk of the small sun holding onto every milk-filled stem will come to be seen as a beloved and revered scintilla in the natural theology of growth. The luminous yellow petals and divine roots will be first in line as contents for the new sacrament.

Ask the child. You will never convince them not to blow the whiskery rounds. The world is seeded by that four-year-old feeling of summer freedom and the efficacy of breath. And because Nature will never stop making wiser children the future is secure.

We desperately need the example of Paulus as the present-day alchemical Hermes Trismegistus necessary for transformation and radical change. Greta Thunberg speaking at the Brilliant Minds conference in Stockholm told her audience, "I know we need a system change rather than individual change, but you cannot have one without the other" (2019). The personal is the political. The creative act is both.

For me, Paulus' past is my future. Paulus moved through the world as a natural force at the intersection of creativity and Creation. He showed up in the midst of economies and institutions that were bound to time in history, however his experience of life was timeless, unbound, and original. It is Paulus who taught me about my heliotropic sense. From the Greek *helios* for sun, and *tropos* to turn, a plant body turns toward its daily income of the sun. And because language is for me the other sun, I sit at my writing table to grow and to live. My work

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as a writer is not an artifice. Puzzling over symbolic meaning is how I come alive in the natural world.

When Paulus died in 2017, Hyde's 2004 essay was out of date. I pulled from one of the 2,900 documents I collected his final number. And although Paulus was so dyslexic his mother called her young son retarded, Paulus had no trouble with counting. He departed the planet with a final sum of sixty-three senses.

I am now in the final stages of the book and I labor at the heart of the matter. Three hours will change three words over three pages, and fundamental meanings are concealed and revealed in a condition of Creative Being I don't understand, but I experience. The alphabet is doing more than spelling words. Images justified by language pry open new senses and become a spell. Infinite options become a final choice of one word over another and craft the images that become characters who have unpredictable and transformative lives to transform my own. This is the body politic I do live in, and will write and die for. Freedom is a troublemaker.

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Further Resources

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To Spring From the Hand, This film follows the life and work of acclaimed craft artist, Paulus Berensohn: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2987938/>

S. Portico Bowman is Professor Emerita in the Department of Art at PSU, a Grade Three Faculty Assistant at Pembroke Hill School, writer, aspiring poet, and ceramic artist living in Prairie Village, KS. Her first novel *Cashmere Comes From Goats* was published by Stonehouse Publishing in 2022. Bowman gratefully acknowledges the support of Alison Pick, the Canada Council for the Arts Research and Creation Grant 2022, and a Professional Development Grant 2020, and the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. Bowman offers deep gratitude to her husband Tom who originally shared the Lewis Hyde article, and The New York Times Berensohn obituary. Publication of *Would You Give Up Arms For Wings? A story inspired by the visionary life and writings of Paulus Berensohn* is pending. For more information please visit www.s-portico-bowman.com