

*Book Review*

## Speaking the Self

STAN SANVEL RUBIN

*Crow Funeral*

Kate Hanson Foster

Eastover Press, 2022

88 pages

*Customs*

Solmaz Sharif

Graywolf Press, 2016

72 pages

*The Collection Plate*

Kendra Allen

Ecco Press, 2021

96 pages

*"i": New and Selected Poems*

Toi Derricotte

University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019

298 pages

Can we imagine the shock to American poetry some sixty years ago when the Confessionals opened poetry to the personal life? This included the bigger shock of women's bodies, not as metaphor but as lived experience. There was a "post-confessional" reaction when many workshop leaders warned against the "I" as if the personal pronoun was a taint that would shrink a poem into something self-centered and solipsistic, shutting out the world. As a poet and workshop leader myself, I have always found such prescriptions pointless, never more now, when the world finds so many ways to enter a poem—and poets to embrace it.

There is something here worth thinking about. Given that a poem is received as a kind of fiction, yet often seems closer to memoir, is the audience to understand it as play or truth? These questions in a way define the aesthetics of every era since Modernism. Even Plath and Sexton, each of whom published her first American collection in 1960, denied the fully autobiographical truth of their “confessional” poems.

The sources of the contemporary Self are many. The truthfulness of poetry—apart from its “sincerity”—is a surprisingly old question. In *The Invention of Literary Subjectivity* (Johns Hopkins, 1999), Michel Zink points to a shift in the poet-reader relationship as far back as thirteenth-century French poetry, when inherited patterns of meaning were fading and the work’s truth “was only what it was granted by the author, who had the sole authority to define its nature and bore responsibility for it.” (64) Zink could be writing about the Confessionals—or us.

We have learned to say “the speaker” to mask our ambivalence concerning the poet’s “I.” In a 2005 essay, Cate Marvin offers a witty take on this:

I find it obvious that the “I” of my poems, when I employ first-person, could never be me. The speaker of my poems couldn’t live in my world: she wouldn’t wake for work, she’d tell the neighbors to shut up, she’d be arrested for public indecency, she’d no doubt be locked up eventually. My life would be far too boring for her to stand for more than fifteen minutes.  
<https://poets.org/text/tell-all-truth-tell-it-slant-first-person-usage-poetry>

Poet-critic Marianne Boruch’s lively collection *Little Death of Self: Nine Essays toward Poetry* (University of Michigan, 2017) takes an opposite view. Following an account of how she attended a medical school cadaver lab, Boruch leaves us with a direct challenge:

Maybe the individual face is the most public part of the body. . . . Still, each face is *what it is*, private, unique as any turn of voice in a poem must be, because that is the poem, in whatever edgy way it takes shape.

Do you believe such a voice? Can you hear it? All meaning comes through that. (106–107)

Is the poet’s “I” just a persona? Several recent collections show women poets speaking the Self in new and urgent ways.

Kate Hanson Foster’s dark first book, *Mid Drift* (2011), explored a Self diminished, rather than supported, by time, place, and relationship. The poems are honed to a pervasive tone of diminishment:

myself

as reader. I turn off  
our light.

Sharif is always engaged in a frustrating act of translation. “The End of Exile” describes a return to Tehran as anything but healing:

As the dead, so I come  
to the city I am of.  
Am without

Despite the title, the “exile” doesn’t end. Instead, the poet owns the condition of being “without” as her self-definition:

A without which  
I have learned to be.

She listens to a man calling in one of Farrokhzad’s alleys whose words she cannot understand:

How to say what he is selling—  
  
it is no thing,  
this language thought worth naming,  
No thing I have used before.

Lack in poetry is often inscribed as loss or desire, but lack *as identity* has rarely been so painfully expressed.

The second section of *Customs* is colored more by the past tense than the present. “Without Which” condenses autobiography to bursts of mysterious phrases and untitled units. The poem starts with a personal “I” and ends with an archetypal reference negating it:

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I have long loved what one can carry  
I have long left all that can be left  
behind in the burning cities and lost  
  
even loss—not cared much

Dry and dusty  
writer, how your lips forget

themselves, how your voice  
has taken you by the tongue.

Words like tiny crosses  
on the side of the road

crumble and crawl  
into your mouth.

My God, you better cling  
to those bones,

you better write your name down  
on paper and swallow it.  
("Paper Breath")

Foster's *Crow Funeral* is a return from these depths: "I only want to return / to where the water isn't gentle. // *Can you get back what you lost?*"—"Tapering Off of Chlorazepam." The poem enacts a woman's self-questioning with a candor that might have seemed transgressive even in the Confessional era:

The world was not my undoing.  
It was something smaller.

A house inside of a house.

A place where darker veins eel together.

And my body  
on a mattress looking up. Not at the world.

But at minutes turning loose of the clock.  
*You need rest*, my husband says. *The children are  
playing in the yard.*

When did the sound of joy  
become an urgency? I wondered.  
("Grease")

*Crow Funeral* replaces isolation with relationship, despair with an enlarged Self accompanied by new vulnerability:

I firmly press his body  
inside the cloth—first one  
  
point of the diamond—then another,  
then another. Just enough  
  
room for breath and nothing  
else. How quiet he becomes—  
  
a little bud before the push,  
a bird egg back inside  
  
the nest, head peeping  
out. Eyes that say this is all  
  
just the beginning.  
It is crucial that we get it right.  
("Swaddle")

Since Sexton and Plath's collections, the question of how to balance the "I" of a woman with the identity of Mother is by now familiar but still finds no easy answers. (Adrienne Rich cited motherhood as the reason for her eventual radicalization.) *Crow Funeral* uses new strategies to express old tensions:

She was mother. She was  
body in house, dedicated  
  
to bleach until shine  
spilled across porcelain.  
  
She was feminist—flame  
struggling to break from candle.  
  
She swallowed a pill  
that removed herself from her-self.  
  
And when she fucked  
she was man and woman  
  
crashing her selves on herself,  
glad to be crushed by her own redundancy.  
("She Was")

The poet plays with labels (mother/body/feminist) and pronouns (she/herself/her-self) to deconstruct linguistic and cultural identities, as well as to disrupt the continuity of past and present once presumed essential to a unified Self.

Foster's subject matter recalls Plath, who never made it past the contradictions that tore her, but Foster's poems are of our moment, a culture whose promise of self-determination can exacerbate the Self's deepest rifts. *Crow Funeral* cuts through flesh to a disembodied place where Self and Non-Self merge:

Gulp ugly  
 everything—  
 face the faceless  
 road kill. We suck  
 the wireworms pluck  
 tongues of slaughter-  
 house waste. Love  
 cannot fill us, no  
 dream-caress  
 nor actual. Turn  
 the cow pies in  
 the pasture to snag  
 the dung beetles—  
 attack the fawn  
 at all angles. Come  
 infinite answer  
 to our infinite  
 want—because  
 there is nothing  
 desire cannot split  
 open. Nothing  
 need can't catch  
 before it lands.

(“We Who Are Nothingness”)

This lean-as-a-dagger poem with its line-end turns, its weave of sounds, its repetition of “infinite” and “nothing” is an instance of poetic “degree zero,” language speaking only what it needs to speak without narrative. There is no “I,” only an opening “you,” a single “we,” and “us.” The three positions signal a transactional identity, a galaxy around the black hole of identity.

A sense of absent liturgy pervades *Crow Funeral*. The world accompanies the personal as a subject for lament:

Another body has been buried,  
 and yet, there still is no page in the prayer  
 book ready. No wick in the candle long enough.  
 There is no song for that same old story—*metal*  
*entered the body like the first heavy raindrops landing*  
*circles into a pond.* No—the body is folded quietly  
 back into earth.

("On the News")

Nature plays a notable part in Foster's enlarged frame. In "Nesting," the poet speaks in the voice of a mother bird. The ambitious title poem is choreographed across two pages in three-line stanzas broken into columns by a caesura of blank space. The poet notices a dead crow lying at the side of a road, witnesses "hundreds of wings collecting / in ceremony" and puts the natural ritual into a larger perspective:

No one sees the plane vanish over the ocean,  
 no one feels the thick multitude of salt and sky  
 take hold, metal cutting or not cutting the water.

And how the earth goes on breathing, stubborn  
 in its own perpetuity.

...

The crows scold loudly as if to say look:  
 look at one of us fallen, see the danger,  
 feel how it hurts—the dead crow sizzling

on the pavement like a fallen roof shingle.

By contrast, we humans "count the days since the vanishing" and watch "TV headlines roll":

Is this God?	Is this terror
Someone needs to find the plane, find the answer.	
The crows disperse slowly, silently.	A few at a time,

and then more.	They know sooner or later
to move on.	The clouds always let go,
the wind falls apart.	Everyone knows sooner or later

we have to stop counting.	There will be something
new to cry out for. Something else to gather	

and dress us all in black.  
 a chorus of music—a poem or prayer  
 will get it just right.  
 let us make it more

And there will be urns and roses,  
 God or no God,  
 than what it is.

(“Crow Funeral”)

Foster’s carefully constructed poems display an exacting clarity, however complex the underlying thought and feeling. This combination of restraint and urgency can be called elegant. Wrestling with some of the toughest questions of identity, *Crow Funeral* is the courageous work of a gifted poet.

Solmaz Sharif’s *Customs* draws its power from an interrupted self. Born Iranian in Turkey from parents fleeing the Iraq-Iran war, Sharif can be termed a “double exile.” Place, which provides an essential grounding for many contemporary poets, is for Sharif an obstacle, a site of alienation as she describes to interviewer Alina Stefanescu:

I generally have a reticent relationship to place, because it is one of the most obvious and glaring reminders that I am not living the life I was supposed to have lived . . . Something has been lost that is unnamable, and place is a surefire reminder of that loss. (*Bomb* 158, February 16, 2022)

Sharif contextualizes her aesthetic as a strategy with a revolutionary purpose, but what makes her work distinctive is a primal discontent with identity itself, closer to Kafka than to Marx.

*Customs* records the experience of a writer who inhabits a non-place from which the Self speaks its “I.” Who or what can sustain such an identity? The only answer is language itself, a “home” that travels with her, yet which functions as one more site of exile and incompleteness. As in Sharif’s first book, *Look*, the one-word title forces a dual reading: “Customs” as the place of official entry (or denial) into one country from another, and “customs” signifying the daily practices of the culture an immigrant is expected to learn, but which often proves to be one more barrier to identity. In the book’s prefatory poem, the repeated “I” signifies extinction rather than the empowerment America claims as an ideal.

I had  
 to. I



learned it.  
 It was  
 if. If  
 was nice.  
 I said  
 sure. One  
 more thing.  
 One more  
 thing. Eat  
 it said.  
 It felt  
 good. I  
 was dead.  
 I learned  
 it. I  
 had to.

("America")

Translation is a key term in Sharif's intricate dance of displacement and identity, as she says in the interview:

I wanted to transcribe and translate, from one alien to another, what this American place is. I think of my poems as laced with arsenic. With these Aleph poems, I turned the volume up a bit, writing back to some sort of origin, reduced to the first letter of the alphabet. And while my own wrestling with belonging and place and displacement is tied to a particular country and language, I am also forced as a member of this nation to edit according to the English-speaking audience. I say this now because I anticipate these will be read as poems about Iran when they are more about the US if they are "about" at all.

Three "Dear Aleph" poems refer to the lost origin, a mythical unity:

Like Ovid: *I'll have no last words.*  
 This is what it means to die  
 among barbarians. *Bar bar bar*  
 was how the Greeks heard  
 our speech—sheep, beasts—and so we became  
*barbarians*. We make them reveal  
 the beasts they are by the things  
 we make them name. David,  
 they tell me, is the one  
 one should aspire to, but ever since  
 I first heard them say *Philistine*  
 I've known I am Goliath  
 if I am anything.

From the first line, the poem surprises with a synoptic backward sweep from classical Latin to Greek to the Old Testament, returning at the end to the speaker's present, which, in a neat twist, includes a personal past ("ever since I first heard"). The ending offers archetypal identification while negating Self ("If I am anything—").

"He, Too" describes the poet passing under the gaze of an actual customs officer:

Upon my return to the US, he  
asks my occupation. Teacher.

What do you teach?  
*Poetry.*

*I hate poetry, the officer says  
I only like writing  
Where you can make an argument.*

Anything he asks, I must answer.  
This, too, he likes.

I don't tell him  
he will be in a poem  
where the argument will be

anti-American.

I place him here, puffy,  
pink, ringed in plexi, pleased

with his own wit  
and spittle. Saving the argument  
I am let in.

I am let in until

The ending is again incomplete. Sharif deploys language not to reveal identity, but to keep it inaccessible. The poem is a defense, an act of aggression (by what *isn't* said), as well as political satire. The title implies that this authority figure represents a familiar oppression. Characteristically, the poem ends in suspension, without completion of syntax, punctuation, or story.

“Learning Persian” reduces that ancient language to euphonic sounds, meaningless the way a beginner might hear them: “deck-tech/deek-tah-nor/behn zeen.” The clipped series of syllables drives home the poet’s “otherness” to a voice that might in other circumstances have been her own.

“Into English” pays homage to Forough Farrokhzad—in the 1960s a leading poet of Tehran—its alleys, its poor, its ugliness and corruption, as well as random beauty. Decades after her untimely death in 1967, the icon of rebellion and feminism in pre-revolutionary Iran has been resurrected by a generation of women who follow her in resisting cultural and legal restrictions.

The poet’s response on being asked to translate Farrokhzad sharply focuses the difficult connection between personal identity and the nuances of language:

In my  
hours, I find it is  
very

private  
to be in another’s  
syntax.

The reclusive “my” sharpens a bitter defiance of “them”:

I say let them have  
it: the

think-tank wonks, the panty-  
sniffing  
critics, the consultant  
for the  
U.S. Navy. Noble,  
they call  
it. These saviors into  
English.

The outer-directed bitter voice returns to an intimate one with three uses of “I” in six short lines. An unspecified “you” could be her oppressors, her readers, or herself:

Who would I do it for?  
You? I  
have forgotten even

or learned to. I turned and looked  
and not even salt did I become.

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What is there but silence after one has “lost / even loss?” The voice declares the speaker emotionally dead, but every line feels under pressure of the unsaid. Entire pages are mostly or wholly blank (one is black). Graphic marks between the journal-like entries indicate a place for what isn’t there. The resonant phrase of desolation reappears at the end, slightly altered: “To lose even the loss.”

The sequence ends with three blank entries and a single word “touching—” hinting at a past relationship: “Before you came, I hadn’t touched another / in years. / It was unintentional. / Frugal.” Intimacy is another instance of loss, but provided a momentary respite for this speaker for whom everything is transient:

To watch you  
get dressed while still in bed

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is a little city where  
I’m most grateful to be alive, gently

The poet’s acute interrogation of syntax reveals a Self built on the smallest linguistic units:

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*Of*  
is such a little city

]]

and can only hold so much.

*Of* is the thing without which  
I would not be.

]]

Of which I am without  
 or away from,  
 I am without the kingdom

]]

and thus of it.

I am—  
 even when inside the kingdom

without

A page literally black on both sides marks a transition to “The Master’s House,” two pages of infinitive phrases, including snippets of autobiography, politics, even eroticism. Again, the poet is uncertain of who she is or needs to be, but the possibilities for connection have expanded. Her life becomes a movie in which she is both actor and spectator:

To disrobe when the agent asks you to.  
 To find a spot on any wall to stare into  
 To develop the ability to leave an entire nation thusly, just by  
 staring at a spot on the wall, . . .

To say, this is my filmdom, The Master’s House, . . .

Montage-like fragments gather many strands that threaten to unravel identity. Family provides personal motivation for her ambivalent relationship to English:

To recall the Texan that held a shotgun to your father’s chest,  
 sending him falling backward, leading, and the words came  
 to him in Farsi  
 To be jealous of this, his most desperate language  
 To lament the fact of your lamentations in English, English being  
 your first defeat

The long last sequence, “An Otherwise,” takes up a rhythm of renewal.

Twenty-one pages of journal-like entries are under the shadow of a single memory, the return to Iran with her mother:

I found nothing.  
It died there: desire.  
All fantasy  
of return.

From the image of her mother waving goodbye, from loss itself, the poet finds a future in her identity as a writer:

*Enough*, I said.  
I plotted.  
In the mornings, I wrote.

In my sleep, I wrote  
with fancier, more elaborate inks.  
And in my writing, I began to write of cypresses.

In the final lines Sharif pledges herself to poetry as her new destination:

I set out, as she set out,  
armed, later than I would  
  
like, to follow  
the music, mine

“Mine” is a rare possessive in Sharif’s, drama of identity. Here it’s an achievement.

*Customs* is meant to be destabilizing, and it is. It forces engagement with a Self that’s by turns vulnerable, hostile, sad, and alarming. Sharif’s minimalism may be too minimal for some readers, but it surgically displays the interior of a writer for whom language is a nervous system. Alienated from any “I” that speaks from a culturally empowered place, *Customs* might be especially necessary for Americans complacent in their linguistic, if not political, identities. It challenges how much we take for granted in both.

The best introduction to Kendra Allen’s first book of poems, *The Collection Plate*, is her stunning prior collection of personal essays, *When You Learn the Alphabet* (2019).



shaped not randomly but as individual beings, each with its own life.

*The Collection Plate* was written after a breakup with her father. In the interview, Allen notes how she was “conditioned to worship male figures . . . yet the people I actually worship have been the women in my family.” Five separate powerful “Our Father’s House” poems are visually crammed almost off the page in the far-right margin. An exception, the four-line “Our Father’s house (iv),” flows right to left as if defying ordinary reading and maybe time itself:

I like to ride  
in Caddys too

because of what apostles  
represent

Words shaken from the narrative context of the titles function on several planes at once. For example, the ordinary lowercase “house” emphasizes the uppercase “Our Father” with all its childhood connotations of religion and family.

The opening lines of “I ain’t never baked a thing from scratch a day in my life” foreground the “I” and transform baking into a sensual metaphor:

Every time  
I enter

I       leaven,  
my     liquids

Allen can speak on multiple levels at once. The “I” could refer to the poet or the great-grandmother whose house (according to the interview cited) she dreaded visiting, or to her own mother and grandmother whose grave she did visit on what would have been the dead woman’s 100th birthday. More expansively, it could be read as an encompassing female. “I,” a part of her family legacy

One of the most appealing aspects of both of Allen’s books is the way she continually reframes her perspective, including her life’s most difficult aspects (for example, in “The many times I failed to defend my mother to Our Father”). In the interview, she cites what she now understands as what she took from the grandmother, who to the child seemed “kind of mean and didn’t really talk”:

Sitting in silence, I learned that from her. I learned how to read these silences.



Silence plays a dynamic role in the way Allen’s poems are displayed on the page. “I’m tired of yo ass always crying” targets at a certain type of hypocrite:

They cry wolf when they are wolves. Their tribe	
puffy eyes. They cry _____ when nothing hurts	
at all. Watch us perish	_____ ,
	_____ ,
	_____ ,
then cry _____ .	They lie
then cry _____ .	They take
then cry _____ .	They offend
then cry from shame that they could ever lose	They lose
	with those tears.

Identity can be built on what a Self refuses as much as what it accepts. The tonal range of these opening lines is nuanced well beyond personal anger.

Water, the universal symbol of transformation as well as recalling Allen’s own Baptist background, is another major motif that marks her growth. Two side-by-side memory poems demonstrate Allen’s transformative magic. The first is an acute and almost comic character description:

In Miss Lady’s science class she compromises the water cycle but none of us can stop

Staring at her ass. The thong in her crack slacks around the water which always leaves, that lil opening where we

Bloom. *The water cycle*, she sings. Manipulating moods for us to remember what will be on the weekly test.

Everybody knows she’s a singer interrupted by a coastline. *The water cycle*. Because of her we now know endowment’s lull.

*ECP—it repeats itself. It brings down raaaaain.*  
 (“The water cycle”)



Community is created by the final merging of columns and pronouns (“we,” “us,” “our”).

The water poems point not to drowning but to survival. The next, “learning to tread water,” begins with the metaphor of a treasure hunt (“A scam”). The five centered opening lines successively broaden as if descending to a submerged private place, before finally including “us,” a pronoun that does not abolish Self but provides a larger understanding of it:

Deep underwater, my breathing is still suspect. And deep underwater breathing even  
underwater, they’ve never called us an us or even silver and gold. That’s how I learned  
everything I is    been buried.

(“learning to tread water”)

Survival writ small and large is what this talented poet’s work to date adds up to. Memory and experience are a mirror for learning and discovery. In the final poem, unpunctuated lines sprawl to fill the page. Built around repetitions of “I,” the poem speaks of Self drawn from history, community, family, but asserts a necessary freedom from strictures:

		Ideally, I’m still acquainted with ties
Gifting back bread & barren land	’s wonder. Outlandish to resist	
Goodbye as an optioned flick	a giver’s tongue a rapture	
If this is a process, no	weight is left to coerce	
Only so many ways I can say oh	& sliver out	

Allen’s range of vocabularies, her virtuoso control of tone, and her new freedom on the page open a space for powerful self-reflection:

I touch commencements	stand in moot points
Of maybe there ain’t no mo’ people left to fit in to	our tributes of leasing
I be lying	
if I said proximity determined where my darling goes	by my breasts
or by the border—I replicate	I clone            I become

“Gifting back bread & barren land” contains the multitudes of a Self in touch with its past identities but proclaiming a necessary future one:

	I always been a better
writer than a figure	folk be carrying
transcripts for a full exit.	but I be leaving    all my clothes

Smart, scrupulous, and articulate, *The Collection Plate* reconstructs the possibilities of Self's relationship to identity. It asserts a freedom that is not denial, but continual discovery. A bold and comprehensively talented poet, Allen is at the start of a career worth following in any genre.

Toi Derricotte's "*i*," published just before the start of the pandemic, may have been overshadowed by that, but it's a collection that should be in everyone's poetry library. The collection carries a small title that represents a lifetime exploration. Taken as a whole, Derricotte's exemplary work shies away from nothing. Her poems range across nearly every possible impediment or pathway to the formation of a positive Self. In addition to prizewinning books of inventive poetry, two of her most highly regarded publications are chiefly or wholly memoir: *The Undertaker's Daughter* (2011), which deals with painful childhood abuse, and *The Black Notebooks: An Interior Journey* (1999), a powerful confrontation with the complexities of race, including the paradox of being recognized as beautiful and smart while being light-skinned enough to "pass" as white professionally and personally, and the price of honesty. Derricotte's writing has been marked at every stage by vulnerability and early trauma. After prefacing *The Undertaker's Daughter* with "I Am Not Afraid to Be Memoir," the title poems begins:

Terrified at a Reading to read  
poems about my fears & shames,

a voice in me said: *Just*  
*open your mouth.*

With inspiring courage, Derricotte has formed from pain a formidable yet joyous Self. "Speculations about 'I,'" the "Preface" to the new volume, is a short sequence of even shorter numbered poems. Unlike the title, the first-person pronoun is capitalized, but scrutinized with the freedom and candor of a whisper meant to be overheard. The sequence starts with this:

I didn't choose the word—  
It came pouring out of my throat  
Like the water inside a drowned man.  
I didn't even push on my stomach.  
I just lay there dead (like he told me)

& “I” came out.  
 (I’m sorry, Father.  
 “I” wasn’t my fault.)

The following twelve entries continue a fluid, probing exploration that is linguistic, existential, self-revealing, and playful. The parenthesized titles range from “Is I speaking another language?” to “Why I?” to “I Deny ‘I’” to “I found ‘I’” to a definition of survival:

XIII  
 They say what I write  
 Belongs to me, that it is my true  
 Experience. They think it validates  
 My endurance.  
 But why pretend?  
 I is a kind of terminal survival.

The final entry marks the enduring duality of Self in four lines with two unpunctuated capital I’s and two punctuated:

XIII  
 I didn’t promise  
 “I” anything & in that way  
 “I” is the one I was most  
 True to.

Whatever the “I” stands for, the mature poet has taken its measure and understands its use. This could serve as a summation of the books by the younger poets discussed above. Despite very different styles and backstories, all share with the accomplished Derricotte a common motivation: the need to define a Self, to express in vivid writing its struggle for coherence, and to find its purpose. In our time, this is not merely playfulness, but may be a saving urgency.

