

FROM METAPHOR TO META-FORK:
Tine Traveling with the Poetics of Thylas Moss

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The face of Thylia Moss fills the front cover of her first volume of poetry, *Hosiery Seams on a Bowlegged Woman* (1983). On the inside cover are three more sepia-toned photographs of Moss reading from behind a lectern. Her hands gesture, and her facial expressions suggest the theatrical style of a charismatic performer. The back cover provides biographical details that serve as standard stepping stones to a first publication: BA in Creative Writing from Oberlin College, Phi Beta Kappa, a poetry prize, and an MFA from the University of New Hampshire. The poems inside are slice-of-life narratives, with quirky personalities inhabiting the pages, such as a barren midwife (8), a celibate daughter (5), a one-legged cook (28), and “One Taken by Bandits” (19). Only two of the twenty-two poems extend beyond two pages in length, and most fit on a single page.

Fast-forward twenty-three years, and the cover of *Tokyo Butter* is nothing like the photo gracing *Hosiery Seams*. Just as the title—*Tokyo Butter*—carries an *almost* familiarity with both individual words recognizable, but not the phrase, the cover image too seems *almost* identifiable. The close-up photograph is obscured by its very magnification. What we see are rough ridge lines with shadows in the gaps, but it’s not clear what the actual subject is—loosely piled leaves? potato chips? or perhaps fried wontons? I know I’ve seen that texture before, but with such magnification and cropping, such context, the yellow, bubbled surfaces yield to abstraction and association. In the end, the image looks a bit like a landscape or, perhaps, the contours of a brain.

The brain is precisely where Moss has been carrying her sense of self in recent years. “I wanted the author photo in *Tokyo Butter* to be a scan of my brain,” Moss told

Malin Pereira in an interview in 2007. “No other image of me would offer as much authenticity of self, but the publisher rejected the idea” (133). Just as the title and cover art have shifted from representational to abstract over time, so too, the poems in *Tokyo Butter* are marked by an abstract splattering of image and metaphor. Far from the short punchy poems in *Hosiery Seams*, the poems in *Tokyo Butter* spread across pages. Moss’s early brief lyrics seem bare-boned in contrast to imaginative layering and sprawling text found in the long poems of *Tokyo Butter*, including a thirty-page centerpiece showcasing a Google search, titled “DEIRDRE: a Search Engine.”

Fast-forward again to 2011. And even the notion of Moss’s page is an abstraction. Works like “Ostrich Consultation in the Culture of Snowmen” are published—or posted—on *Moving Poems*, an online anthology of “videopoems, film poems, animated poems, and other poetry videos from around the web” (Bonta). You won’t hear Moss calling her works “moving poems,” nor even “poems,” for that matter. Her University of Michigan faculty page reports that Moss is no longer writing poems; rather, “following *Tokyo Butter* she has not written ‘poems’; instead, makes *Poams* (boundary products of an act of making) and *poams* (contained products of an act of making)” (“Thylia Moss Faculty Profile”). According to the Limited Fork lexicon that Moss and her pink-haired online alter ego, forker girl, have created, her multimedia literary mash-ups like “Ostrich Consultation in the Culture of Snowmen” are properly categorized as Limited Fork video poams (“Ostrich”)

Granted, the work of any poet publishing over a thirty-year period is likely to show signs of change due to life experience, experimentation with form, and the refinement of one’s poetics. With her interdisciplinary attention to new technologies,

cosmology, fractal design, and her own Limited Fork Theory, Moss has covered as much evolutionary territory as any poet I know. And to explore the arc of her work is to get a glimpse of the very thing that she sought to represent her self: a picture of her brain.

Multitasking with memory, association, and imagination firing simultaneously, “Moss Mind,” as I call it, is not just a linear *stream* of consciousness, but a multi-directional *cyclone* of consciousness. And it’s that attentiveness, as she investigates a subject while exploring her own thought patterns, that marks her recent work. A brain scan might not show that, but I think the poetry often does.

I. Multiphoria: The First Decade, 1983–93

In graduate school Moss focused her own critical scholarship on Sylvia Plath and Ai, and their influence can be seen in Moss’s early poetry. Like Plath and Ai, Moss explores dark corners of human experience, writing at times with Plath’s confessional “I” and at times in Ai-like monologues of human brutality presented in *Cruelty* (1973) and *Killing Floor* (1979). Moss also conjures up imagery marked by the clever, mind-like-a-cleaver imagination of Emily Dickinson while also writing with a political urgency reminiscent of Carolyn Forché’s poetry of witness.

In her first collection, *Hosiery Seams on a Bowlegged Woman* (1983), Moss highlights inequalities with an efficient narrative style, creating dichotomies and ironic twists that drive the work. Eighteen of the collection’s twenty-two poems employ a first-person speaker, as Moss contrasts rich-poor, black-white, female-male, uptown-downtown, and other social opposites.

For example, the narrator of “One-Legged Cook” plays the “have-not” to the “have” of the students of Calvert Hall, where she works in the cafeteria. “Hop to it, Velma” she, the adult worker, is chided by the privileged students well versed in being served. But even without a leg or a private school background, Velma reflects, “Never occurred to me / I was missing something” (28). And if Velma seems to have less than the students at the start of the poem, the tables turn with an ironic twist in the second half of the poem, as she is the one with the most attentiveness and appreciation for the beauty in life, admiring the burdock’s growth, “an eighth of an inch / since yesterday. / A lot of folks didn’t notice” (28).

No poem in this collection better shows this utilization of dichotomies than “Rush Hour.” The structure of the poem reinforces the contrasts between the daily life of a cleaning woman and those who hire her to clean. The two lines of each of the six couplets that make up the poem seem to slide past each other like two trains heading in opposite directions on parallel tracks:

He boards the train downtown,
same time I get on in Lee Heights.

Eastbound passes westbound.
Can’t pick him out,

square-shouldered every one of them,
under 40 years old, over 40 thousand a year,

never glancing up from their papers
till they pass Quincy, Central Avenue’s

guttled brownstones, record and head shops,
Joe D’s Tavern where I rent the back room.

He’s ashamed of what we have in common.
I just left his house. Spotless. (29)

The narrator sees “him,” but he cannot see her, let alone acknowledge what they share—the “spotless” house that he lives in and she cleans (29). The echo of that final word “spotless,” rings with the bite of irony, leaving a big stain of privilege and ignorance on those whose houses are now so clean.

These early poems derive their power from the tension created by two-sided opposition—contrast, irony, contradiction, and, more often than not, a jarring image at the end. “From the Bride’s Journal” contains no nuptial joy, despite what one might expect of a wedding night poem. Instead, the bride and groom stand in stark contrast to one another in their new home, a dreary cabin of cracks and cobwebs, where even “the light / is dusty and old” (6). Nothing about this cabin welcomes the bride, so she eats nothing and keeps her hat and coat on.

The groom, on the other hand, seems fully at home, as if the cabin is an extension of him: “His will / holds the wood together, thoughts / compress logs into planks” (6). The bride has little physical agency—“I stare” and “I sit”—while the husband actively “removes my full plate from the table, / takes it outdoors, throws it, / shoots it” (6). A picture of passive fear, the bride is positioned in opposition to the active threat of her husband. In the final stanza, when he “cracks his knuckles / in the doorway, shakes off snow, / carries me over his shoulder,” it is a brutish ironic twist on the traditional marriage ritual of being carried over the threshold. The final image leaves little doubt of the marriage’s consummation, and it’s not a pretty one. The final line haunts: “His zipper sounds like a saw” (7).

The superiority that the husband exerts over his bride is a physical one, while the superiority that the servants have over those they serve is a moral one. Ironically, the

richer, wiser characters emerge from positions of less power and fewer economic resources. “About Flags” points to the spiritual superiority, or at least a spiritual otherness, for an individual positioned in opposition to his surroundings, and it does so by circumventing the notion of dichotomy. The poem addresses Ira Hayes, the Native American WWII Marine present at the famous flag-raising on Iwo Jima. Noting Hayes’s presence in the iconic photograph, the speaker points out what distinguishes Hayes’s participation from the others:

your hand doesn’t touch the pole.
I know you could have,
had you wanted,
that pole wasn’t out of reach
but the hawk—one of your flags
raises itself. (26)

Hayes is both participating and not. He is helping to raise the flag and not. He embodies the triumphant, heroic American by virtue of being a victorious Marine—a conqueror of another people—and not by virtue of being Native American. In fact, his Native American heritage gives Hayes an ironic claim to this celebration of American military conquest.

Like the bride’s individual sense of alienation from her surroundings, so too, Hayes is individually at odds with his own situation. However, he is not injured by its violence. Rather, he is subject to other flags, one of which is—in a metaphysical leap—the hawk, which flies outside of the binary of America’s for-us-or-against-us patriotism to a sky that encompasses a larger system of loyalties.

This kind of metaphysical leap becomes more common in Moss’s second book, *Pyramid of Bone* (1989). Although the majority of these poems are still first-person

lyrics, they have a more complex metaphoric dimension than the personal conflicts presented in the first collection.

If someone says “she runs like a cheetah,” or “she’s a cheetah on the rugby field,” we generally take that to mean that she’s fast, even though it *could* mean that she runs on all fours, or with a spotted body, or with her teeth exposed. But with common metaphors, we rest comfortably knowing that, in general and with context, we can work out the relationship between the tenor and vehicle. A cheetah’s speed is the most easily accessed of the comparison, and we can look to other elements of the poem to support or refute our reading of the metaphor.

The comparisons in *Pyramid of Bone* often resist simple correspondence of the tenor and the vehicle. Situating the poems in fairy tale, myth, and historical events puts their emphasis on cultural and societal, rather than individual, juxtapositions. For example, “The Wreckage on the Wall of Eggs” compares the speaker’s isolation of living “on the wall” with Humpty Dumpty’s tragic tale. But her own eggs become the “humpty-dumpties” that “spill from me and die like so many babies mercy-killed / out of slavery” (2). Add to this mix the “hundreds of girls / perfect for the part of Heidi,” and we’re heading for crash of myths that ends in mixed feelings: “I want to but can’t hate Heidi well” (2). Gone is the clear sense of dichotomy of the first collection that seemed to separate the haves from the have-nots, as the poem concludes, “When I look down at the wreckage on the wall of eggs that / came out of me, I see that what’s inside is as white and / gold as Heidi” (2).

What emerges is a more layered set of metaphors, allusions, and images to rub up against one another in ways that leave meanings mixed, shifted, or unclear. By bringing

Humpty Dumpty, Heidi, Snow White, Whistler's mother, Little Red Riding Hood, Catherine the Great, Jim Crow, and even Wallace Stevens's blackbirds into her poems, Moss lifts narrative from a individual personal story to one that contains personal, social, artistic, and historical dimensions. While the poems of *Hosiery Seams on a Bowlegged Woman* seem to illustrate that the personal is political, the poems in *Pyramid of Bone* reveal that ways that political and social forces have personal consequences.

Although "Lessons from a Mirror" begins with the contrast between the narrator and Snow White, it ends with recognition that the system of injustice is more complex than the one-to-one contrast of these two individuals, as the racial difference occurs in a broader cultural context. Simply "turning the tables" won't address the other dimensions of inequality (3). The poem begins as if the speaker is playing dozens, calling Snow White "so white / the gown seemed to disappear when she put it on" (3). The next couplet introduces comparison, beginning on a note of hope that sours after the line break: "Put me beside her and the proximity is good / for a study of chiaroscuro, not much else" (3). Hope rises and falls with the line break again when Moss writes, "Judging strictly by appearance there's a future for me / forever at her heels, a shadow's constant worship" (3).

Ultimately, the dichotomies used in this poem give way to their own limitations, as there are dangers lurking beyond the two spaces occupied by the two girls: "Turning the tables isn't fair unless they keep turning. / Then there's the danger of Russian roulette" (3). Limiting the dichotomy to what is "white and what isn't" makes for an inherent imbalance, as one is identified by a presence of a characteristic and one by absence of it. The same is true for comparing the one named for snow and the speaker,

for whom “nothing falls from the sky / to name me” (3). In the end absence fails to adequately define; it leaves something unknown, just as the final lines of the poem do:

I am the empty space where the tooth was, that my tongue
rushes to fill because I can't stand vacancies.

And it's not enough. The penis just fills another
gap. And it's not enough.

When you look at me,
know there is more than white missing. (3)

That “more than” white “is missing” marks another absence in the poem. Defined by what is not, as a shadow, the one without name, “vacancies”—metaphors abound, but not with the clarity of a cheetah’s speed. And it’s a no-win for this speaker who both hates vacancies and *is* one. She fills the empty space with a part of herself, her tongue. And the “not enough” of that has her recounting other alternatives. The stakes go up as “The penis just fills another / gap. And it’s not enough” (3). The ending contains a sense of futility, as if nothing will ever be enough. The “Lessons” alluded to in the title seemed to start out about racial difference but shift to other territories. The final line possesses insistence, the command to “know that more than white is missing” (3). While the end undercuts the idea of comparing in terms of opposition—Snow White and not-Snow-Whiteness—it also leaves readers wrestling to make sense of the individual metaphors.

The metaphoric equations are even more complex in “There Will Be Animals,” as Moss offers an apocalyptic vision in which “animals . . . teach us / what we can’t teach ourselves” (12). The opening lines make it seem as if we humans will learn animal virtues that will allow us to save ourselves. Ironically, and in line with Moss’s sense of opposition and reversal, the lessons turn out to be the skills and attributes the animals will need to save themselves from us. The egret will “evolve without plumes so we cannot

take them” (12). The lessons highlight the wisdom of the animal kingdom in contrast to the foolishness of humankind. The species represented are, at first, unburdened by symbolic meaning—baboons, egrets, ewes, macaws, mackerels—until in a playful turn, the penguin, thanks to its tuxedo looks, will keep “alive Hollywood’s golden era,” as if the lessons of popular entertainment magically carry the secret to survival (12).

The playful turns edgy in the wordplay that is typical in this period of Moss’s work: “The chaparral cock will continue to outdistance man,” and the “Coffin fly dun will leave the Shawsheen River / heading for the lights of Lawrence” (12). The images grow more specific of place and more disturbing and then cross over to surreal as “the first of six million Jewfish will emerge” from the mouth of a lizard. Finally, the prophetic vision culminates in an amalgam of images pulled from different story systems—the gospels, fairy tale, and history: “the nameless among us will have Peter’s thumbmark . . . the lion lying with the lamb, the grandmother and Little Red Riding Hood / walking out of a wolf named Dachau” (13). This “wolf named Dachau” seems to me a cousin to Yeats’s “rough beast, its hour come round at last.”

Whole systems collide in this multidirectional metaphor, as the biblical lion and lamb enter Little Red Riding Hood’s forest occupied by a wolf who represents a Nazi concentration camp. These metaphors that compare one system with another or a number of others systems is what I, in the spirit of Moss’s wordplay, call *multiphors*.¹ A multiphor remains open to a broader interpretation than those driven by simple ironies or one-dimensional comparisons.

¹ Etymologists suggest that *metaphor* is derived from from meta- "over, across" + pherein "to carry, bear" (Harper). It seems to me, then, that when one thing carries *many* meanings to another thing, which also might have many meanings, we have a *multiphor*.

Multiphors drive Moss's poem "A Reconsideration of the Blackbird." This reimagining of Wallace Stevens's celebrated poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" opens up issues of the literary canon and very quickly introduces a racial lens for "looking at" the blackbird: "Let's call him *Jim Crow*" (10). The line contains a pun and a serious charge . . . and an uncertainty about which meaning of Jim Crow applies—the minstrel? the pejorative term for anyone Black? the entire racist system of separate-but-equal laws?

In the subsequent eleven stanzas, or "ways" of looking at—at what? the blackbird as racism in America perhaps?—the multiphors start piling with unwieldy and ambiguous sets of connotations. "*Guess who's coming to dinner?*" the poem asks, bringing in a context of movie trivia, a movie laden with meaning regarding gender and race in America. The answer turns a serious subject into another form of entertainment—a game show: "Score ten points if you said blackbird. / Score twenty if you were more specific, as in the first line" (10). The next stanza seems to remain with the movie motif, but the film title seems less an allusion to the film content and more a borrowing of a phrase: "What do you find *from here to eternity?* / Blackbirds" (10).

How are these answers to these questions? It's clear the poem references the Stevens poem, but it is neither a negation of his system of ways of seeing nor a total embrace; it's an alternative, a new system of lenses brought to bear on a newer, more complicated economic and social system. The multiphoric effects leave readers with innuendo of meaning, as if we get the connotation and not the explicit denotation. Like the untenable solution of turning the tables in "Lessons from a Mirror," each potential solution in "A Reconsideration of the Blackbird" introduces a new problem, and in each

new look at the experience of Jim Crow or black experience, the blackbird seems to be carrying multiple meanings:

Problem: What would we do with 13 little black tongues?

Solution: Give them away. Hold them for ransom. Make belts.
Little nooses for little necks.

Problem: The little nooses fit only fingers.

Solution: Get married. (10)

How quickly the black tongues become belts become nooses become rings for the finger become marriage. This piling on of metaphors is what drives the work. They take the poem outside of the binary system and away from the polemic. Not only are the simple oppositions of male and female, black and white complicated beyond simple dichotomy but even the binary of problem-solution fails, as each solution creates the next problem; situations embody both problem and solution at the same time, as well as good and evil. So, why does marriage fail as a solution to the problem? Not for the reason the readers might object to—that the wedding ring arrives in the lethal form of a noose—but because embedded in the solution of marriage is the *next* “Problem: No one’s in love with the blackbirds” (11).

The poem’s resolution has the characteristic jarring last line—jarring, in that it haunts, it flips things, it surprises, it punches a reader in the gut, it transcends reality, and it complicates the poem. To solve the fact that “No one’s in love with the blackbirds,” Moss proposes this solution: “Paint them white, call them visions, everyone will want / one” (*Pyramid* 11). Clearly, whiteness itself will not “solve” anything, even if one *could* paint the blackbird. So, the poem offers yet another paradoxical solution—one that is no solution. And one that promotes either a mask or tokenism. Furthermore, the poem’s

allusion to lynching, prison deaths, and suicide makes for a chilling set of comparisons between marriage and premeditated deaths.

What multiphors add to Moss's work is room for multi-dimensionality, and ambiguity. Reflecting on her own teen admiration for Ai's work, Moss writes:

She made the cruel point of view seem essential and inevitable,
the way to all else although her poems disputed the existence of
anything else. . . . The horizon was still there but it was a desolate
variety of horizon and in it I saw a truth I had tried to deny. I
stopped trying. There were no more contradictions to reconcile;
there was only cruelty." (*Tales of a Sky-Blue Dress* 207)

While some of Moss's early poems certainly hold Ai's "cruel point of view," the multiphors infuse poems with a wider, more fluid horizon, possibilities between the *either* and *or* of life's dichotomies. In her poetry, Moss starts "trying" again, trying to acknowledge the contradictions, trying to reconcile.

Moss distinguishes her own writing from Ai's by the room for joy she makes and her use of humor: "My poetry had tried to emulate Ai's perspective and had tried to deny joy until I was twenty-seven. In graduate school, I learned that humor was crucial," Moss writes in her memoir (*Sky-Blue Dress* 237). And I believe Moss's multiphors are one of the techniques that allow for both of those qualities.

So in one of the most multiphoric poems of this period, "The Rapture of Dry Ice Burning Off Skin as the Moment of the Soul's Apotheosis," Moss opens with the question: "How will we get used to joy / if we won't hold onto it?" (*Rainbow* 6).

The title of this poem from *Rainbow Remnants in Rock Bottom Ghetto Sky (1991)* is a simile to wrestle with, a rapture that burns not with fire but with ice, a deification born of the paradoxical and a metaphysical freeze that burns.

The answer to the opening question—“How will we get used to joy / if we won't hold onto it?”—begins as a riff about desire and buffalo. First the buffalo functions as a metaphoric resistor of extinction, then as the proverbial bull in a china shop, as the animal's fur coat is described as

. . . fringes on Tiffany lampshades; they can be turned on
so can I by a stampede, footsteps whose sound
is my heart souped up, doctored, ninety pounds
running off a semi's invincible engine. (6)

The double entendre of being “turned on,” combined with the vague “they” (the buffalo? the lampshades?) leaves the reader hanging for a bit halfway between lamp's light and the buffalo's desire. Then the stampede becomes the speaker's heartbeat running of a truck engine. It's as if each metaphor turns sideways into a new plane of meaning, a multi-directional Jacob's ladder flip-flopping into new understandings. And just when the new dimension of the image starts to make sense, the image flips on language again, in some new direction. In this case, the stampeding buffalo becomes a place found on a New York state road map: “Buffalo / heaven is Niagara Falls. There their spirit / gushes. There they still stampede and power / the generators that operate the Tiffany lamps” (6). And we're back to those Tiffany lamps. It's as if the six degrees of separation are operating between the metaphors in the poem so that even the seemingly unrelated comparisons come around to having some connections with one another based on something that comes later in the poem.

Next, the poem sinks to a lower level of desire, from the buffalo's drive and determination to stampede to a junkie's urgent craving and then on to the smell of flowers. Eventually the speaker finds joy in the here-and-now and says so to the Jehovah's Witness at the door in a pun-filled, brand-name response: "What joy will come has to be here right now: Cheer / to wash the dirt away, Twenty Mule Team Borax / and Arm & Hammer to magnify Cheer's power" (7). The answer continues in witty terms of laundry detergent and credit cards, connecting consumerism and capitalism to racism and oppression, so that the correlations between images—images that represent entire complex systems—keep turning, brushing up and bouncing off one another:

Celebrate that there's *Mastercard*
to rule us, bring us to our knees, the protocol we follow
in the presence of the head of our state of ruin, the
official with us all the time, not inaccessible in
palaces or White Houses or Kremlins. (7)

Next, the poem asserts that "every / ritual is stylized, has patterns and repetitions / suitable for adaptation to dance," citing all the shapes and forms available for use in this creation: "toe shoes, / brushstrokes, oxymorons. Joy" (7). These lines point to Moss's ever-expanding vision of connectedness, her move from dichotomies to a broad all-encompassing spectrum in which everything is connected to everything and, no metaphoric comparison too great a stretch, even those that seem to contradict one another.

And the word *Joy* hangs at the end of the line, at the end of the stanza, until finally, the next stanza locates the Joy "at our tongue tips" (7), a location that's problematic whether taken literally or figuratively. If something's on the tip of a tongue, is it barely touching the tongue or just out of reach?

This apotheosis, this elevation, comes only when we can devote ourselves to emotion and embrace the joy in the hardship, to recognize that it's not an either/or world; it's all—at once:

let the great thirsts and hungers
of the world be the *marvelous* thirsts, *glorious* hungers.
Let heartbreak be alternative to coffeekick, five
midmorning minutes devoted to emotion. (*Rainbow* 7)

Moss offers up an unusual substitute—heartbreak—for one's common morning ritual. It's both painful and healing, leaving room for the oxymoronic joy. "How will we get used to joy / if we won't hold onto it?" Moss asks at the start of the poem and answers by the insistence that we remain open to the complexity and contradictions of living, that we do our best to recognize and embrace joy, even when it's wrapped in difficulty or heartbreak.

Even as the value of the buffalo as metaphor changes with a kind of instability—first representing an animal facing extinction, then one capable of stampeding, later still an image of sexuality, a city energized by the great falls—it gives the poem a stability by representing an intense passion, a spiritual need throughout. The shifts that follow do not undo that original sense of passion expressed when Moss writes, "Not even extinction stops me; when I've sufficient craving" (6). The poem stays centered on that passion as it builds to its proclamation: "let the great thirsts and hungers / of the world be the *marvelous* thirsts, *glorious* hungers" (7).

Complexity and contradiction are essential to the success of this poem. Even when I cannot fully account for every shift in the poem, I ride out the wave and recognize that parts transcend reality:

I'm something of an alchemist. Extinct.
 He would tell me time is running out.
 I would correct him: time *ran* out; that's why
 history repeats itself, why we can't advance. (7)

Moves of surrealism, like this transcendence of time and death, are not the only complexities of these poems, but they do beg questions of scale: how big a leap can a metaphor make? When does the distance between two things or ideas become so great that a comparison between them takes a metaphysical jump? Moss's poems suggest that a kind of transitive property, or "electricity," is in effect for poetry, where references can be connected retroactively through commonalities that evolve over the course of a poem. For example, the way the tiffany lamp and Niagara Falls are connected in "The Rapture of Dry Ice Burning Off Skin as the Moment of the Soul's Apotheosis" because they have the buffalo in common.

This notion of metaphor turning in multiple directions aligns with what Moss calls "going fractal" in her definition of "Kaleidoscopic Extension" ("Limited Fork Theory Limited Glossary"), making "The Rapture of Dry Ice Burning off Skin as the Moment of the Soul's Apotheosis" (*Rainbow*) a precursor to the next stage of Moss's work: *The Forefork Years*.

II. The Forefork Years, 1994–2003

When Moss put together *Small Congregations: New and Selected Poems* (1993), she took the unusual step of significantly revising many of the previously published poems, occasionally retitling them. She reordered them to reflect where she was at the

time rather than to lay out a chronological record of work.² *Small Congregations* is a remarkable collection—remarkable enough to move critic Harold Bloom to place it on his 20th Century Western Canon list (Teeter). This volume highlights Moss’s metaphoric wizardry. She uses conventional similes and metaphors that haunt—the sound of a zipper sawing through the night’s silence. She’s as good with a final line as anyone. The poems are multilayered, marked not by extended metaphors that build in one direction but by the complexity accrued when metaphors “go fractal” and shape-shifting, turning sideways with wordplay and alternate definitions, as buffalo turns animal turns city. And, of course, the mutliphors bring complex systems to bear on one another, further complicating the poem. The aggregate effect of all this leaves the reader to sort it all out—and sometimes the meaning does not come easily—leaving multiple interpretive options and a richer reading experience.

Q: So, where does Moss go from there?

A: Even further.

Further in extending the distance between tenor and its vehicle in metaphor and between individual associations of images, while simultaneously layering more connections into the weave. In *Last Chance for the Tarzan Holler* (1998), the lines are longer, the stanzas denser than in earlier work; even the size and shape of the page has

² The revisions threw publishers for such a loop that a lawsuit ensued. In Malin Pereira’s *Into a Light Both Brilliant and Unseen: Conversations with Contemporary Black Poets*, Moss explains how she saw the process as “an opportunity to repair, revisit, and rethink” her earlier work (125). As she tells Pereira, “I was ‘selecting’ or deciding how to configure poems that evolved to be products of the moment in which they would be repackaged and reconsidered, not replacing their previous incarnations, but existing beside them” (125). When Ecco Press failed to acknowledge some of the revised poems as previous versions of poems published by Persea Books, Persea sued Ecco, and Ecco, in turn, sued Moss: “I was served a subpoena to appear in court with all versions of the poems in dispute so that it could be legally determined at which point a revision became a new poem and not a revision or version of an existing poem at all. *How exciting!* I thought. *How scientific the proof!* I had no idea how this was going to be proven or who might be called upon as expert witnesses for both sides—imagine!” (128).

been increased to accommodate the line length. Most notable are the increases in the elasticity of language and images. Metaphors morph but never derail. Multiphors move between the micro and the macro, among the personal, the political, the spiritual, and the metaphysical.

Verbal wordplay and narrative overlap as the ant in “Ant Farm” first appears in an anecdote of pest removal, then in recollection of a childhood ant farm. This sparks rumination on gendered life in an ant colony. Still later, meditation on the parasitic relationship between the Cameroonian stink ant and a fungal spore echoes back on other relationships in the poem. And ants assert themselves everywhere—in an ant hill, ant recipes, the belly button crevices, an ant farm in the bedroom, five thousand species of ants, Diva ants, and ants on a boyfriend’s leg, in the Florida grass where one might get pregn-ant.

Among other things, “Ant Farm” is about pregnancy—unwanted, unplanned pregnancy—and the relationships biology creates to perpetuate survival of a species: exploitive, parasitic, symbiotic. It’s about our ignorance of biology, too—“I was told not to eat watermelon seeds, that vines and snakes would grow within me” (23). And, the poem is about killing unwanted life.

The poem takes sharp turns in time, place, subject, and tone. It is a narrative that carves a path as mazelike as the cross-section of a plastic ant farm. All the while, a highly organized colony is at work. The poem begins so innocently, it is cliché: “One summer day” (21). The speaker performs a simple household task: “I took a kettle of steaming water and flooded an ant hill.” From there the poem moves to something more alarming, as the dead ants are called “balled black bodies” floating down a “my Brewed Nile” (21).

The next sequence moves out of the external world of the speaker to the imaginative: Because the dead ants look “sugared, cinnamon-cruled,” the speaker considers options—creepy options: “I should have baked them into cookies . . . Or thought to serve them poached” (21).

Here in the poetry is that scan of the poet’s brain. One image opens doors to new lines of thinking. The only external event of the poem is the pouring of water on an ant hill. Everything else is in the imagination, but not exactly with the Romanticism of a Keatian Ode. Moss’s thoughts move to backbones, to meat eating, to bones—“picked clean, not only by piranhas eating their instinct, but families / in public: Red Lobster, Bill Knapps, Kentucky Fried, countless rib joints; clean / as ivory: meals conclude with skeletons” (21). The poem shifts focus from bone to teeth to the womb: “Fetus eats as if entirely an embryonic flower” (21). The line of thinking bounces from one image, simile, metaphor to another—ant, sugar, death, survivor, vertebrates, food, piranhas, people, bones, teeth, eating, fetus feeding, flower, navel, ricocheting like the steel marble in a pinball machine—the thought arriving back at the image of the ant: “In the slits fanning around the navel like the possibility of petals / are dark slivers reminiscent of ants without their legs and my first boyfriend’s / delight I killed them ” (21).

Although the line and stanza breaks hang the pronoun “them” in the stanza that suggests this them would include a fetus and a first boyfriend, the punctuation has us reaching forward—like Moss’s mind already moving past this thought—to the ants she is killing that remind her of her ant farm. One encounter with an ant hill calls forth every

Myrmecological ant-ecdote and association to ants that Moss carries in her head. Only later does Moss name and put theory to this practice:

In Limited Fork theory metaphork systems, the number of ends or origins and destinations of an equivalence or equation (such as metaphor) is open. The number of participants interacting in the comparison is not limited to two. The ends of metaphork may split and split, bifurcate and bifurcate endlessly, someone studying the metaphork system determining (configuring) a logic of a field of consideration, investigating some number of bifurcations. A rationale emerges that establishes temporary limits of consideration. The knowledge that the limits of consideration are a flexible frame, in some regards arbitrary in light of other framing systems being able to configure limits differently, may encourage the trying out of different configurations. (*Introduction to Metaphork Tines*)

This is “Moss Mind,” the weaving produced by a consciousness too dynamic for linearity trying to accommodate all the connections. The multiphors, forking, and metaphorking come closer to a *cyclone* of consciousness than a stream of consciousness. Trying to articulate what any of these individual metaforking poems are “about” is not easy task. The title poem, “Last Chance for the Tarzan Holler,” centers on Susan Smith, a young mother who strapped her two sons into their child safety seats and rolled the car to the lake bottom and then cried, “Carjack.” But the poem gets there through Dali paintings, fairy tales, Greek myth, knock-knock jokes, a girl on the Internet in need of a

bone marrow transplant. Meanwhile, reflections on cannibalism, filicide, saving lives, and taking lives are also part of what the poem is “about.”

Smith’s seemingly isolated act is not so rare. “She’s not alone,” the poem repeats, pointing to a “drawing board of unlimited ideas / where Medea, Gretel are born” (17). And were it only the drawing board, we might sleep easier, but in these poems the cosmic and the mythic are never far from the more specific or the personal: “I see everyone at the market, everyone at / the clinic. And they see me” (17–18). The connections are disturbing and everywhere, a stretch, always expanding rather than pulling into simple categories or dichotomies.

The poems in *Last Chance* prefigure the emergence of her Limited Fork Poetics because they make use of the technique that Moss later identifies and defines. According to Moss’s online “Limited Fork Theory limited glossary,” *to fork* is:

to bifurcate, branch, to subdivide, to travel, to reconfigure a system or subsystem, to be reconfigured; to use a limited fork, to attempt to access (part or parts of) information yet managing only temporary encounter system with configurations of what apparently manages not to slip completely through tines whose spacing discourages absolute capture and absolute meanings while providing additional locations to fork pursuit of them. (“Limited Fork Theory Limited Glossary”)

“Temporary encounter” and slippage build into these poems an incompleteness. The experience of reading the poems that fork in *Last Chance* is like following a pinball game, as the images glance, ricochet and rebound. It is an interactive and

gratifying game provided, the reader is willing to read outside the comfort zone of certainty. Moss calls *Last Chance* “a breakthrough” because “the ways in which I process experience and information became the organizing principles” of the poems (Pereira 135).

Of *Last Chance*, Moss says:

I had agenda; the book is the outcome of an investigation of the boundaries of humanity. I set out to determine whether or not evidence of humanity could be found in the pathological. Each poem is an outcome of a facet of that inquiry. (Pereira 135–6)

These poems capture this epic scope of exploration into the pathological. They investigate and convey meaning. It reveals the imaginative course of Moss’s mind and, like the tracer on a bullet that allows a viewer to see the trail of something that moves too fast for the naked eye, the lines on the page give readers the chance to follow along and arrive at a destination that satisfies.

As Moss sees it, *Last Chance at the Tarzan Holler* is her first step outside the conventions of poetry and the expectation of poetic form:

For the first time, the complexity of my identity was indulged; I was playing, not taking seriously the intellectual necessity of any human product. I was enjoying the arbitrary nature of meaning, the ability to assign it anywhere, the marvelous flexibility of rationale, the ability to create theory, systems of thinking, systems of meaning that can not be proven. (Pereira 136)

The balancing of final product with the complexity of identity—as defined by how she thinks, how her mind works³—mesmerize in a way that her earliest and latest work do not.

Moss published a memoir, *Tale of a Sky-Blue Dress*, just after *Last Chance*. At the final chapter as she is addressing the role of art, Moss writes:

As long as someone wants revelation, there will continue to be an outpouring of art that defines, revives, encourages, and elevates people. I want us to be more even if, at the end of existence, it is all for naught. When we are striving for a more, an ineffable existence beyond mortality, an unfettered potential for consciousness to exceed all known bounds, then do we produce our most striking and moving art: the poetry, for instance, that supplants the poet’s intentions with an enduring resonance that glimmers, illuminating abundant water, and revealing meaning beyond the limits of the poet’s mind. The products of struggle and striving are made of the grace sought. (251)

That Moss believes in poetry that can “supplant the poet’s intentions” and reveal “meaning beyond the limits of the poet’s mind” is almost Keatsian in its vision. This, compounded with Moss’s experience of creating “theory, systems of thinking, systems of meaning that can not be proven,” reinforces the idea that both the reading and the writing

³ Moss on the confessional element of her work: “I confess what concerns me, what I notice, what I do not, what I find embraceable negatively and positively. . . . Full disclosure of my intellectual diet—that is far riskier than to admit to an affair, to an abortion. My intellectual diet reveals identity; to have an abortion reveals only something that happened, an event, not a trait, not a quality of being. I am not an abortion; I am a dancer with bits of flux, with partialities in transit” (Pereira 133-4).

of this work demands a leap of faith. It also speaks to the ambition of the poet in this period. Moss has claimed that her Limited Fork ideas became “inevitable” after *Last Chance* (Pereira 137). Inevitable may be a stretch, but in hindsight, at least, the trajectory is noteworthy. If this emphasis on investigation, on layering, on multiphor, and on the nonlinear workings of Moss’s mind is good, then as she moves into the writing that would become her next, and most recent collection, more is better—or butter: *Tokyo Butter*.

Butter spreads, and images of butter spread throughout these poems are even more ubiquitous than the ants: shea butter, peanut butter, ghee, butter deprivation, “big butter-pat lips” (86), fairy butter, someone named Karen Butter, Funk Butter Travel Page, and “Butter residencies / in apothecaries” (95). But butter is only one of the ever-present images woven in and out of these poems: the disappearance of Cathy Song, the false conviction of Ronald Cotton, facelessness, and most importantly, the loss of cousin Deirdre.

Tokyo Butter: A Search for Forms of Deirdre is the complete title, and there are brief Deirdre cameos in many of the poems. The collection’s thirty-page centerpiece, “DEIRDRE: A SEARCH ENGINE,” is the best illustration of what Moss calls her “efforts to reconfigure the universe around answers to the question ‘What persists?’ In which forms is it still possible to access aspects of Deirdre” (Pereira 134).

Deirdre slips in and just as quickly out of the poems of *Tokyo Butter*. In the ode to butter “Ghee Glee,” the word *prematurely* seems to evoke the narrator’s lament of a cousin who died too young. Recalling childhood antics, Moss writes of selling

what we called bog water (taken from vases
and saucers under potted plants, spruced up

The edited “AUTHOR’S NOTE” [[[that the author has edited even further]]] continues for another six lines before the second editor—the one I take to be Moss—proclaims: “[Cook them in butter.]” (98), which is a natural enough response [[[or recipe]]] to eggs, but seems far away from where we’ll find Deirdre.

Or not. Such is the human mind: “Every story / can be told through a search for butter / if diligence prospers: I will find Deirdre again” (96).

Moss Mind. Hyperlinking. Associative thinking. Imagination. The lyric call of the Nightingale. The brain does what the brain will do. Moss trusts the connections her mind makes. The cliché “I am walking on eggshells” is enough for a detour halfway through the last word, enough to send the searcher on a riff about eggs, because the brain stores things with a logic that looks nothing like conventional lyric poetry, even if the impulse sounds familiar: “Know me through what I notice, how I notice and what I do not,” Moss said as a way of explaining the autobiographical nature of her work (Pereira 134).

Of her own thought process, Moss says:

I’m aware that I love nonlinearity, that the swirl of the funnel is what attracts me to it, that every idea is a tornado in my mind, that an idea is not stored in one location in the brain, but is filed simultaneously in all the locations that house any part of any of the components of the idea. As information is added, the network adjusts, more connections and layers become active, and the structure of the idea is reconfigured. (Pereira 136)

That tornado-esque thought process, when translated to the page, often drops a reader in unexpected, unfamiliar places. So unfamiliar that the sense of connection is lost.

At times, the amalgamation of metaphor and strataphor and multiphor build up to a muckaphor. And how big is that? It's *Mucka!* Mucka—as in a clam so big and buried so wicked deep in the wet sand that it has to be wrestled out. In my lexicon, a muckaphor is too big to grasp. It may inspire awe, but it can do more baffling than enlightening. It seems to me that foregrounding the mind's journey, at the expense of the work's meaning to others, tends to mystify. They may be poems—products of acts of making—but they don't work for me as poetry. Awed or not, I'm not fully satisfied as a reader by being mostly mystified.

Some of the connections, metaphors, and associations in *Tokyo Butter* are unclear; the link between image and meaning, between tenor and vehicle just don't seem to carry their weight. Since it's the totality of the work that matters, a poem or poam can be buoyed up by other images, associations, and links. Moss acknowledges the connections as temporary but worth exploring nonetheless. "Limited Fork Theory can still produce known and familiar forms, including known and familiar forms of poetry," says Moss, "but in the study of interactions, Limited Fork Theory seeks to identify the patterns that temporarily emerge when any things are partnered" (Pereira 159).

III. Limited Fork Theory: The Birth of a Notion, 2004–06

Tokyo Butter was written during the time of Moss's self-proclaimed paradigm shift. In October of 2004, a full six years after *Last Chance for the Tarzan Holler*, Moss experienced what Proust might have called her "madeleine" moment. She credits the crawl of credits rolling across a movie screen at the Quality 16 Cinema as the catalyst for her new understanding of poetry as a dynamic system, as the genesis of Limited Fork

Theory. In that moment of seeing text scrolling, Moss saw how systems—all systems—have the capacity to interact with everything else. *Tokyo Butter* reflects this paradigm shift, and that afternoon in the cinema inspired Moss to head off in new directions, into interactions with sound and image and a variety of other “systems.” She saw a fork in the road and took the one less traveled by poets. Beginning on that day in October 2004, Moss became a Time Traveler, and there was no looking back.

This fork in the road, this journey to Limited Fork Theory eventually led Moss to create forkergirl, Moss’s online alterego who shares in the advocacy and explanation of Moss’s Limited Fork Theory and Poetics. According to Moss, “limited fork is a fantastically flawed tool that helps give temporary shape to anything that manages to stick to any of its branches (tines, prongs, etc.) anywhere on any scale for any duration of time. Use it with everything” (“Limited Fork Theory”). Ultimately, this line of thinking expands the notion of metaphor wildly, to the point of the infinite possibility.

The “Limited” in Limited Fork Poetics points to the limitations of our own knowing. Forking is many things to Moss, least of which is not the fact that it’s a four-letter F-word that can fashion itself for multiple meanings, functioning as a verb, a noun, an adjective as needed. Metaphorically, *fork* suggests that something can be both connected and unconnected at the same time—one end is solid while the other bifurcated, and each of those tines has the possibility of further bifurcation, and further still. With this, Moss offers the acknowledgement of a beauty, even an aesthetic, whether in the form of pattern—think fractals—or the randomness. One of forkergirl’s refrains is a digital audio tag of these two lines playing over one another: “It’s the Limited Fork! Poetry is a dynamic system” (“It’s the Limited Fork”).

With Limited Fork Theory, Moss began exploring with new media. She brought in video, music, T-shirts, algorithms, and other systems with which to investigate, and from which to create. She also began professing online and in the classroom about the benefits of The Fork.

Limited Fork Poetics gives writers permission to match up any two (or more) things with a point of connectedness. The more different the conjoined elements are, or the less obvious the point of comparison, the no less valid a connection. At times, these expansions are exhilarating, and the resulting connections add up to more than the sum of their parts. The poems hold together amid the pull though some invisible web-like associations. And the poems are incomplete: “My poems, whatever form they take, document investigations, configurations of outcomes of tethering expeditions, that are necessarily incomplete” (Pereira 151). The metaphor of the fork insists on this incompleteness, as the tines hold information and ideas, and the gaps between them pretty much guarantee that other information will fall between the tines. As a result, sometimes the theory of the work outshines the work itself.

IV. Forking Around, 2006–

Limited Fork Theory centers on the endless possibility of everything being able to connect with everything else. And each of those infinite connections has meaning and omissions. The scope of this is overwhelming. The poems in *Tokyo Butter* often seem to harbor a hundred meanings, and Moss trusts those connections to stand on their own. She doesn't worry about whether the reader can access a specific meaning or not.

But even when I'm not sure what is intended, I always feel close to understanding. I almost get it. And it fulfills my expectation of poetry when I can see enough connection to make out a picture—even if it's abstract or expressionist or out of proportion. Moss has moved from the representational to the cutting edge of something.

And when Moss explains her theory, I am mesmerized—even by the parts that I do not fully grasp. In conceptual art and poetry, the cerebral elements matter. One of the things I've learned to appreciate about graphic novels is the way the text and image triangulate the reading process. No two readers will read a graphic novel in the same way as eye moves from word to image, to part, to whole, back to image, or back to word, or both, and again, before turning the page. Some of the forms in *Tokyo Butter* make a “standard reading” of the poem difficult, particularly the column poems.

For someone as established⁴ and celebrated⁵ for her poems as Moss has been over the years, the paradigm shift of such an articulated theory of poetics is a radical one—and one that has Moss's poetry fans and colleagues baffled-but-admiring. On the blog *On the Search for the Genuine*, Jen Michaels, who earned her MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Michigan, posted this story:

The first time I heard Thylia Moss's name, I was a senior undergrad at the University of Virginia sitting in Rita Dove's office. She was suggesting potential MFA programs to me, and when we began discussing the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor,

⁴ Over the years, Moss has established herself by having poems published in established literary publications such as *Field*, *Iowa Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Callaloo*, *Pushcart*, and *Best American Poetry*.

⁵ Moss has been celebrated with a Whiting award, a Dewar's Profiles Performance Award, the Witter Bynner Award for poetry, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a MacArthur Fellowship.

Rita said, “Thylias Moss is there. Thylias is a maniac, and that’s exactly what you’ll think of her when you meet her. You’ll get over that in about 30 days—she is a madwoman, but she’ll teach you to see the world in a new way.” And sure enough, Rita was right. For about 30 days, I couldn’t figure out why I was being assigned books on chaos theory, fractals, and the Platonic and Archimedean solids in what was “supposed” to be a poetry class. (Michaels)

Nevertheless, chaos theory, fractals, and Moss won over Michaels. Soon, she writes, she found herself thinking, “If poem is like fork, and fork has branches, then is web more like fork or like spoon?” Eventually, Michaels concludes, “I owe Thylias a great deal, not only for changing the way I think about poetry but for changing the way I thought about words and literacy.”

As Moss has moved from being a writer to collaborator, from poet to maker, her work has taken new forms: text, audio, video, or as she puts it, from poem to poam. Around Moss’s concept of the poam is an elaborate world of theory brought to us by Moss’s alterego, forkergirl, who waxes on about Limited Fork Poetics, an off-shoot of Limited Fork Theory. Moss’s Website, 4ker.com, is an interactive collage of links and explanations, bringing together Limited Fork Poetics with Carl Sagan, the six degrees of separation Kevin Bacon game, Multiverse theorists and Big Bang metaphors. Forkergirl talks of “Bifurcation” and “Particle Popping” to explain her poetics or, perhaps as the case should be, poatics, and I fear I’m becoming a bit of a poaddict. So whimsical is

Moss in her wordplay and punning that it's not always clear how seriously to take this move. Is she just forking with us?

Thylas Moss

as forkergirl

Image taken from the online video "Forkergirl Particle Pops a Beaded Multiverse," posted on the forkergirl channel on Youtube.



Last spring, my students had trouble taking forkergirl seriously because she doesn't look/sound like a literary authority. Forkergirl, with her stressed pink hair, oversized white-rimmed sunglasses and glossy lipstick, is a diva from across the tracks of academia. If Moss were to dress her self and ideas in a suit and tie, perhaps people would feel more comfortable taking the ideas seriously—and that's just the point. Race, class, and gender consciousness have always been visible in Moss's work—whether the so-called subject of the work or not. Like Moss, forkergirl is theatrical—coy at times, and willing to get “in your face,” or at least a little too close to the camera lens. Forkergirl has a smile with an edge to it, a tongue-in-cheeky-ness to her, and teeth.

In her online introduction to “Particle Popping,” forkergirl's face morphs, doubling or moving around the screen. She holds out a string of blue plastic beads, using them as a prop to illustrate her “consideration of this connectedness.” She talks first about

the uniformity the beads represents, what she calls an “absence of bias.” In a relatively quick aside, forkergirl acknowledges that “bias is very much part of universes—bias, perspective, agenda, and other such things. But here with this uniformity, well, bias is being bypassed” (“Forkergirl Particle Pops”).



forkergirl illustrates the “Loop of Omission” in Particle Popping

image from Moss’s “Forkergirl Particle Pops a Beaded Multiverse.”

Once bias is bypassed, although the very raising of the issue to dismiss it puts it firmly in the viewer’s consciousness, forkergirl offers this explanation of the string of beads (all line breaks and punctuation are estimates to help reflect the pacing of the spoken and printed words):

each bead could be vastly far from each other. They do not have to occupy the same plane or intersect at all / all the time / may do so briefly the string, only one string here (not eleven) the string connecting them needn’t be needn’t be this definite / obvious / this

apparently solid solid solid imagination would suffice. The point here though is that in an idea of everything that everything is held together by the idea itself and so this string is an idea of everything. (“Forkergirl Particle Pops”)

In the video, forkergirl goes on to equate each individual bead to a separate reality and, in doing so, notes the impracticality/impossibility of “visiting” every individual bead or “the infinities” that separate the beads from one another (though every combination is possible). Instead, she invites viewers to watch as she brings two beads from opposite sides of the strand together until they touch—causing an encounter. As the two beads touch, gravity does its job on the rest of the strand, as the “bypassed” beads form a loop underneath the two touching beads. This “loop of omission,” as forkergirl dubs it, acknowledges all the beads (read as: realities and/or other possible interactions) “not visited” between the two connected beads.

Forkergirl says of this encounter (approximate transcription):

this bypass forming this loop perhaps nevertheless exerts some influence, that is to say my having brought these together marks the occasion in some way, some kind of evidence occurs be it an echo, be it vibrations moving through the omitted beads that somehow, then, affect the nature of the interaction of the beads that have come together, some kind of feedback, some kind of feedba— feedba— -eedbackack, if you will. The point is, they can be configured endlessly. (“Forkergirl Particle Pops”)

With this explanation, Moss's use of "bypass" echoes with its loop of omission of the bias bypassed earlier. If bias is bypassed in order to make this other point about connection, the fact of "bias, perspective, agenda" still lingers or vibrates through everything else said.

Particle Popping provides a way of understanding metaphors that tax the intellect, stretch past the point of any recognizable connections, or resist logic-based interpretation. This is theory, of course, not poetry, but I like the idea of language echoing and images carrying the shadow of some omitted meaning. Poetry can—and should—feed the head and the heart in some combination. But I do question work that simply puts information—even carefully placed information—on the page and calls it poetry. The phone book would then qualify. Though juxtaposition is a technique, juxtaposition alone rarely makes poetry. Admittedly, this ongoing question links back to a urinal titled "Fountain" by Marcel Duchamp in 1917.

Perhaps I should start looking for 13 Ways of Looking at Moss's Poams:

Let's call her Performance Artist.
 Conceptual Poets scream "Butter"
 and hear Particles Popping.
 Avant garde-ing the hen house
 is a wolf named Deirdre.
 Or substitute "Undertaker" for "hen."

While poems in *Tokyo Butter* stand alone, the search for Deirdre is the work of the whole collection. Over half of the poems are identified as "cultures": "The Culture of the Missing Song," "The Magnificent Culture of Myopia," "The Culture of Saving Cindy's Face," "The Culture of Near Miss," and "The Culture of Funnel Cake," to name a few. Moss creates worlds, systems, cultures and subcultures, and in multiphoric fashion they collide and give new meaning to each other.

Q: When does a metaphor morph into something not more, but less?

A: When it's a mashup.⁶

No matter the medium, when Moss's works carries interplay between the contrasting or competing metaphors or images, I do believe poetry happens. It remains metaphoric, playful and complex. And though I would never call anything I've seen from Moss "derivative," the work that fails for me, does so because the complexity and layering of combinations distracts and, ultimately, detracts from the journey. Lines and footnotes can get to the point where they seem to be functioning only as dead ends in a labyrinth of language—and that may well be the point To what degree do all of those Wikipedia definitions of *Mashup* aid in my ability to communicate my ideas in this essay? Does allusion to a *Glee* episode alter your understanding of Moss and her poetics? Has *War and Peace and Zombies* been translated into Russian yet? Does not knowing answers to these questions (in)validate their inclusion? Though certainly present in web searches and personal journeys, do dead ends serve the poem? Can a false start tangent go so off mark it loses the reader? Sometimes, the mashup seems to function as an end and not the means to a point—and that's just not enough for me.

⁶ According to Wikipedia, *Mashup* may refer to the following:

Mashup (digital), a digital media file containing any or all of text, graphics, audio, video, and animation, which recombines and modifies existing digital works to create a derivative work

Mashup (music), the musical genre encompassing songs which consist entirely of parts of other songs

Mashup (video), a video that is edited from more than one source to appear as one

Mashup (book), a book which combines a pre-existing text, often a classic work of fiction, with a certain popular genre such as vampire or zombie narratives

Mashup (web application hybrid), a web application that combines data and/or functionality from more than one source

Mash-Up (*Glee*), an October 2009 episode of the television series *Glee*

Lotus Mashups, a Business Mashups editor developed and distributed by IBM as part of the IBM Mashup Center system

MashUp (Restaurant), a Rockford, IL based restaurant, founded in 2011, that focuses on creating comfort foods with a gourmet twist

Band Mashups, the former name of the video game *Battle of the Bands* ("Mashup")

If this is sounding cerebral, it is. The scientific and conceptual nature of Moss's poetics explicitly challenge the intellect. The context sometimes serves as the metatext, and her poems are often generated out of headiness, intuition, and experimentation. More often than not, Moss manages to shape them in ways that tug not only on the intellect but also at the gut.

Q: Which came first—Deirdre or the butter?

A: "Every story / can be told through a search for butter / if diligence prospers: I will find Deirdre again" (*Tokyo Butter* 96).

Much of *Tokyo Butter* hits a reader in the gut, whether generated by algorithms, whimsy, a Google search, attention deficit, Limited Fork theory, or the laws of gravity. As Moss's poems move off the page, and onto the Internet, Limited Fork Theory offers a vision of poetics in which everything verges on being everything. Moss is not interested in simply dramatizing a poem or having text move creatively across the computer screen. She's layering the audio and visual in ways that come closer to approximating her brain's processes than paper can accommodate. The work deserves a new critical vocabulary, as the language of poetry on the page fails to adequately address line break, volume, and so forth.

With her understanding of poetry as a dynamic system, Moss seems particularly interested in how forms form, and then how they re-form elsewhere, using the idea of the fork in two particular ways—as the reminder of division as a form of re-creating as well as a way to change course, the new path. Likewise, the tines themselves have a kind of Zen quality of using what is and what is not: the tine that can hold, and the spaces

between tines, which allow substance to move through. On one of her many forkergirl websites—www.4orked.com—Moss writes,

Limited Fork is food for thought and a way to serve it. Alternative and warped fractal mapping of infinite path systems that connect anything, everything. From these connections come poems: products of acts of making (any acts of making by any makers)—all of them creative and possible. (“Limited Fork Theory by forkergirl”)

V. The Tines They Are A-Changing

If, as Moss has suggested, the development of Limited Fork Theory has been an inevitable one following on the heels of *Last Chance for the Tarzan Holler*, then I would like to consider this inevitability in the context of Howard Nemerov’s assertion about the legacy of the Romantics when he wrote:

you cannot rebel merely against the technical, or craft, part of poetry without rebelling also against something deeper and of more generally human concern, the belief about the world and the place of mankind in the world that produced the technical conventions you find intolerable; and this rebellion, if thoroughly pursued, involves the rebel in making his own creation myth, his own story of how things came to be as they are. (6–7)

Moss is this kind of rebel, thoroughly pursuing. She has fashioned theory and a practice, a poetics and a provocative body of work. The shape her own creation myth is rooted in is a commonplace experience at the movie theater and celebrates the union of

the human imagination and the possibilities of technology.⁷ Limited Fork Theory is born of personal inquiry, popular culture, scientific principles, wordplay, and imagination. The story told in the work is partly the story dynamic the thought process is—and Moss tries to create structures stable enough to hold thoughts as they travel and shift.

The online work Moss has been creating most recently is an extension of what she's been doing on the page, but that does not make it poetry—not more, not less, but not poetry in the traditional sense. Moss seems to be bringing even more systems to bear on her investigations. She has an entire *Forkergirl Channel* on YouTube dedicated to video poems like “Ostrich Consultation in the Culture of Snowmen” (April 2011), which is a video poem made, in part, from video footage and audio from a visit to a zoo and Moss's poem *Tokyo Butter* titled “The Culture of Snowmen.”

“The patterns and structures that my imagination arranges and builds are perhaps even more revelatory of my identity than the disclosure of facts,” said Moss in an interview, “The mind itself is a location that hosts events, that co-makes, co-houses my poems” (Pereira 133). Her poems offer readers not the brain scan she once tried to pitch as her author photo, but a paper version, like a textual nonlinear EKG printout. It seems to me that she is most interested in the structures she builds to reflect that thinking—on the page or online.

This is the rebel Moss, and although at times her work may lack clear meaning for her readers, it will push language to new places and offer new ways of seeing the world. Systems collide, boundaries soften, ambiguity and contradiction take hold. Moss trusts

⁷ Moss offers *DOD: The Death of Depth*, the Limited Fork Theory video chapter book in 13 tines, which “forks up details about the birth, as much as can be known, in a movie theater, of a simple and limited tool that can reconfigure perception. Implications of applied Limited Fork Poetics led to a paradigm shift in poetry and from there led to much more generalized acts of thinking, configuring, playing, responding, making, creating, perceiving, framing, etc. across boundaries” (“DOD: Limited Fork Birth”).

that in true fork fashion, something of value will stick to the tines and some things will, inevitably, fall through the gaps. “Limited Fork assumes connectedness,” she writes, “assumes stuff is connectable; there are more ways to put together a puzzle than pictures on the box indicate” (“DOD: Limited Fork Birth”).

After her publisher rejected the idea of a brain scan for her author photo, Moss suggested a picture of her shadow and was denied a second time. The compromise headshot offers *The Fork* in action: Moss’s face is lit brightly from below, dividing her face in half light/half shadow bifurcation. Behind her and looming large is the shadow cast, creating a dark echo of her head on the wall. With systems interacting, light encountering object, creating shadow, Moss is forked into two images: the tine of her head, the tine of her shadow—and it’s the tine of her life.

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