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An Interview with Johannes Göransson

by Matt Miller

Johannes Göransson is the author of several books of poetry, including most recently *Summer* and (together with Sara Tuss Efrik) *The New Quarantine*, as well as the translator of poets such as Aase Berg, Ann Jäderlund and Eva Kristina Olsson. He is the editor of Action Books, the poetry editor of Notre Dame Review, and teachers at the University of Notre Dame. Contact: jgoranss@nd.edu
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Abstract: This interview features poet and scholar Matt Miller in discussion with poet, translator, and editor Johannes Göransson. Göransson is the author of ten books of poetry and criticism, including *The New Quarantine* (2023) and *Summer* (2022), and he is a prolific translator of authors including Aase Berg, Eva Kristina Olsson, Ann Jäderlund, Helena Boberg, and Kim Yideum. In this unscripted, playful interview, Miller and Göransson discuss an eclectic range of topics, including the state of contemporary poetry, Kafka's fiction, David Lynch and Twin Peaks, Göransson's influences and obsessions, and the inspiration of dreams and nightmares.

Keywords: painting, drawing, exhibitions, literature, poetry, studio art, sculpture, artist interview

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[Transcript of Göransson interview from Jan 17, 2024, produced by Zoom, edited for clarity by Matt Miller]

Miller: My name is Matt Miller, and this is an interview which we're starting now with poet and translator Johannes Göransson. The interview is going to be published in the next issue of *New American Notes Online*, edited by Sean Scanlan. I want to start this interview just by thanking you for agreeing to do the interview. Thanks.

Göransson: Thanks. Thanks for organizing it.

Miller: As organized as it will be. I thought I'd start with the question that I asked in my very first interview many, many years ago, with a very different, now deceased poet who I also admire, Hayden Carruth. I asked him, you know, what kind of state… this was in the late 80s… I asked what do you think the state of poetry is in right now? And where do you see it headed? So here we are in 2024. Very different poet. What do you think?

Göransson: Well, it's a huge question. And one reason it's huge is because any answer, I think we would have to assume a certain homogeneity or like there is a thing called poetry. I think something that interests me about poetry is, is exactly that. It isn't that the question isn't answerable. Simply like there are so many different, you know, even within the US, there are a lot of different movements and groups doing different kinds of poetry. But also, I'm really interested in and oftentimes feel more connected to stuff that's going around, going on in other countries.

I think if you were to make like broad sweeping, descriptions of what's going on, then I think you would have to focus on something like, media or social media. You would have to focus on responses to, I mean, different responses coming from different directions to events that are taking place. Those would be the simpler way to answer the question.

But for me, the more interesting question, like the more interesting answer would have to be super detailed or myopic answers. That has to do with what just one person is doing, or what two people are doing, or what a group of people are doing. But once you focus in like that, the answer becomes more interesting, but it becomes less legitimate. This is not a macro answer. So, I guess I'm punting on the very first question.

Miller: Yeah. I mean, it is a hopelessly broad question. And I agree that the lack of coherence makes it difficult. And you're, you know, being a poet of mixed ancestry with one foot in European poetics, one foot in American, I guess I was thinking about, I don't know, for lack of a better framework, Western poetics. Although I know you've also worked outside of that tradition as well. That sense that there's a lack of coherence, that there hasn't been anything you might call like a movement like Language poetry was or is in a long time. Is that lack of coherence in your mind an asset? It sounds like it kind of is in a way.

Göransson: Yeah. I mean, it's been more interesting, isn't it? More interesting than if a lot of people are doing different stuff? There is always the urge. The urge I feel like when we are discussing poetry and especially in academia, to create that coherence, like “this is what is happening right now.” But whenever people do that, I always think of a million different exceptions. They are different, often the very exact opposite. If I were to mention some things that I thought were interesting, then I would say, there's a lot of interesting stuff going on with media, not necessarily like social media or Twitter, but people whose writing may take on different shapes as it crosses different media. That is really interesting, and that has become more available to people now with technology. And so on. I guess I'm sympathetic to an imagination that it's constantly moving, crossing boundaries. Rather than trying rephrasing itself. So that I would say that that would be something that I'm interested in, that I've been paying attention to.

Miller: Is that ability to bypass the publishers and speak directly to audiences through different forms of media… is that mostly a positive development or are there drawbacks to it as well? I guess I see drawbacks to it.

Göransson: Yeah. So, what drawbacks do you see?

Miller: Well, it does seem like the poetry I love the best often emerged out of a certain agreed upon set of conditions that were developed by not just one individual. I don't think they were traditions, like in a canonical sense, but they were like micro-traditions or something. There wasn't one individual that led to Whitman, you know, it wasn't just Emerson. It wasn't one individual that led to Ginsberg. You know, they were a group. Ginsberg's work is something I really like, and it would never have existed without the social context that it emerged from. So that lack of cohesion maybe does have, at least historically, has had some drawbacks.

Although I agree with you that there's always exceptions, and I agree that academics want to pinpoint things and define things, and poets hate being defined and pinpointed. So, there's that push and pull and tug, a little of both. And I like the definitions. I like being able to get a handle on things, but I don't want to solidify things too much. But yeah, I mean, like, it does feel like if we had something more coherent that there would be an easier way to judge things. I don't know. I don't know, and I'm not just a judge. But I guess I do *want* to know where I'm at. Right? Ultimately, I want to know, and I want poetry to help me figure that out. And it's not.

Göransson: Yeah, well, you know, Whitman did self-publish and so there's that long tradition of, even if, even if it existed as part of a cultural movement, that is, he still had to publish it himself. And that's true of, you know… Rimbaud had to self-publish, basically, and Emily Dickinson. But yeah, I agree. I mean, I'm not opposed to people making those arguments or I'm slightly opposed to it, I guess. I like it when people are doing it to start a discussion. So, you can say, well, a lot of people are doing this thing and somebody else can counteract that. And maybe it can be an interesting discussion.

I mean, even dumb, like “best books of the year” lists could be interesting if you were allowed to disagree with them. But you're not. So, they're not interesting.

Miller: No, I don't think so either. I don't want to be in the best American whatever. I don't really buy them or read those things, and the poetry that I read in them is boring. I'd rather just scroll through my own Facebook feed and read the poems that pop up there, just like so many other people. So yeah, sure. I mean, I get it.

But I feel like that lack of cohesion may also be reflecting a lack of concern--a lack of love for the art--a critical mass necessary to make it feel more alive culturally than it is right now. At least as far as I see it. When poetry is most alive, doesn't it kind of form micro-

traditions on its own, just out of the social vitality of people getting together who love the same thing and so on? I don't see these as oppressive things, necessarily, I think of these as commonly generated helpful things.

Göransson: No, I hear what you're saying. I see a lot of different, you know, compilations and curriculum and, you know, like mixings and, and formations and often they into part like, I feel like sometimes I join a formation for a year or two and then move on. And that might be because I'm reading a certain journal, or it might be because I know somebody or whatever. Maybe part of the heart of the issue is actually having something to do with those best American [anthologies], and the emphasis on awards, which tend to make invisible all the actual cultural movements and isolate the worthiness into one particular, you know, "quality poet." And so maybe what's missing is actually more critical writings, and it might be that people feel a little bit... That people are unwilling to write about contemporary poetry in that way, or that people are not publishing it, or maybe they are, and I'm not reading it, but, yeah, I agree, I don't think they are.

I wish critics would do a better job of it. I mean, if you're afraid to write a dissertation on a contemporary poet or a group or whatever, because it's not going to be regarded as significant by the committee, and it's going to lower your chances of a job prospect, and you're being pushed into some other area because it's perceived as more politically savvy, that's not a good sign. I mean, that's not what living, thriving art forms tend to be doing. That does happen a lot. I mean, I think that happens a lot. So that's unfortunate.

Miller: Yeah. Yet here we are, and we still keep doing it. There's a lot of talk about poetry as a community builder. What do you think? Is poetry like a natural community building thing? That just seems so counterintuitive when you look at the history of poetry and all the lonely wackos who've dedicated their lives to it and mostly died lonely.

Göransson: Well, I think the idea of community, which came into popularity, I think maybe in the 90s, maybe partly as a result of Language poetry entering the Academy. It's really powerful and really pedagogically useful. Like when I teach grad students, once you start, I think actually most people have this model, whether you know, consciously or not, that the writer is an individual and they depend on the approval of some higher, you know, a critic or an award or publisher to say like, oh, now you are a real poet.

It's actually a very disempowered position, like you are very passive and you're waiting for it to happen. Once you introduce this ... whatever we want to call it ... community-based or collaborative model. Like, you can start your own journal. You can, you know, start having conversations with people online that might be just as useful or just as interesting and productive as getting published in some famous journal.

That totally changes a lot of people. With a lot of students I've had, it changes their approach to publishing, and it changes their approach to writing. So, I think that is really

powerful. Community itself comes with a lot of issues that I have trouble with. So, for me it's like, a way of unsettling this other model, like the meritocracy model, which is very hierarchical and insular and, and even provincial, and that disempowers people and feels like they're just waiting to be approved of.

But yeah, community has so many problems. Like, in order to have a community, you have to exclude people. You have communities develop hierarchies really easily. Even the ones who want to be anarchists I feel sometimes are the ones that are the most hierarchical.

Miller: Yeah. How do you keep from becoming the new gatekeepers?

Göransson: No, I agree. I mean, that a community that definitely has gates around it, right?

I think what I've wanted, how I've tried to see poetry has been as maybe taking something from community, but wanting a community that was open to self-estrangement and open to forum. In my book about translation, *Transgressive Circulation*. I mean, I hate that phrase. Transgressive circulation is like that. The circulation will unsettle the community. It'll be part of it. But then it's no longer really a community. Then it's something, something else.

Miller: The idea of viral infection, it often appears in your work in the context of community and influences. So, I don't know if you fully consider that a metaphor. What do you mean? How literally do you mean that? And if it's a metaphor, would you mind giving me a little bit of direction about what you're thinking of when you use that phrase to signify influence or whatever it is you're using it for?

Göransson: Well, I mean, I also talk about influence, and I use a very traditional word like that. Maybe in an infection or something like that, maybe it focuses on an almost material kind of influence and maybe one that you've opened yourself up to, but know you're not entirely in charge of. Also less of a linear influence. I mean, usually when we talk about influence, we kind of fall back and kind of account on tradition. And it's like you have to overcome Shelley or something. Whereas I feel like some of these metaphors that I use like, circulation and infection, are less linear and less patri-linear, maybe a little more anarchic.

Also, there's something inherently nonlinear about traversing boundaries, about traversing boundaries of the body, but also the nation. Traversing them, not avoiding them or not rising above them. So, I like them better than the metaphors that I feel I inherited from my teachers, which were more like it was a seance or something. That just seems like bullshit.

Miller: Contagion I like because it seems less in control. And I agree that we don't really have control over how we influence anybody. But there's something interesting about your approach to describing poetry. It’s why I started with this question. I think it could appear on the outside as strikingly negative, you know. I can't remember the exact quote, but it

was in maybe your third or fourth book. And it was something along the lines of, let's see if I can remember: It was, you said that poetry isn't good for us. And, you know, there are those that want to keep up that facade, something along those lines. And, I guess, if poetry isn't good for us, why do we want that? How does that make poetry seem attractive or relevant? I've never really understood that as a branding approach. It's not quite the right word, but no, it's a terrible brand: Hooray! I want to feel terrible!

I mean, for me, it *is* kind of good for me, I think. At least I'm happier when I'm writing it than when I am not.

Göransson: But that's not the same thing, though. I mean, that's not the same thing as it being good for you. I mean, like, there is a whole rhetoric going back about how literature will make you a better person, but clearly it's not the case.

Also, it's like a simplistic idea of morality, you know. I see no evidence that if does necessarily make you a good person, even if I believed in that model of the good person. But poetry does, like you said, poetry does a lot of things and it makes you happy and makes you feel excited about something, especially when you're writing it, which I think is a notable aspect of it. Like you are in it. You are in the zone of poetry, and it's doing something for you. It's allowing, I mean, then it allows you to investigate. It allows you to not just investigate poetry, but the world and yourself and your brain and what you're thinking about, and stuff might come out, and that stuff might not be so, might not be nice or tolerable even. It might be painful.

So, I mean, it does a lot of stuff. I think it is powerful, but is it making you good? I think it's a hallmark of poor reading and poor poetry, if that's what you're looking for. I think you have to read poorly. And the poetry that will satisfy it will be some pretty shallow poetry.

Miller: Yeah. And the community that it builds may not be the kind of community I want to be a part of. So, poetry is contagion. Does that thought originate with Burroughs? Do you think you're working out of a Burroughs thing in that “language is a virus”?

Göransson: It might be. I mean, I definitely read my share of Burroughs. But, you know, this is long before Covid. The metaphors of contagion are so powerful in our culture. I think it comes from paying attention to that, especially having to do with things like immigration and the outsider. And thinking that people need to be kept in quarantine. They're like foreign languages that need to be kept out.

Miller: I love how this gives your own work, I think, a distinctive flavor or characteristic that I can't really… I must think of other European poets from many decades ago to find one that I can make it relate to. I mean this as a compliment. You’re so outside the parameters of, you know, acceptable mainstream American verse. And yet you're at a great school, you've got a great job. You're editing and producing all this important work by others. And that's

what I meant earlier when I said, “how do we avoid becoming the next gatekeepers,” and how do we keep from doing that to our students, right?

Göransson: [To be] like us. Right. And then there's “is it a tradition or what?” What kind of strategies can we use to resist just duplicating the same problems that lead poetry to this cultural dead end in the first place? I think you mean, like, when I teach.

Miller: I guess I feel like you are getting to the point where you've been successful enough that you've got a little power in the world now, you know? I mean, when we knew each other, nada. When we first met each other, neither one of us had any power. We were outsiders at a major inside institution. And decades later, we're both tenured. Maybe I'll have to cut this part out. [Laughter.]

I mean, I guess the community part does come out with me and my students and I have enjoyed community with my students, and I feel that there is a political power to that. But the more populist poetry becomes, the more that sense of like, general mainstream populism, infects, if you will, poetry, the less I tend to like it.

I don't personally have a use for it. It's like social media. Poetry is its own thing. We have no control over it. What's her name? Rupi Kaur? People like that. And in a way, that is the purest expression of the thing we're talking about. But there's something about it I find really unsatisfying.

Göransson: Yeah. I mean, I don't like her poetry, but it's not for me, you know, like my when my daughter's, like said, I was like, how can you like this? And she's like, you know, she had her reasons, so it's great, you know. There can be lots of different kinds of poetry. And there are some things I like about her. Like, I like the fact that she has a kind of attitude, and I like she has a super performative way of reading, that poets make fun of online. But I'm like, man, it's interesting. You know, it's like an interesting way of reading. It's not the typical poetry reading. It adds a little something, but, yeah, I mean, I don't like that poetry. What I also don't like, you know, is the stuff that's published in *The New Yorker*.

Miller: It's different stuff going on. Yeah. I'm glad. I mean, I guess I'm glad that scene exists, but I guess I'm implying that a certain amount of exclusion is intrinsic to the practice and is always going to be there and isn't a bad thing.

We need editors. I value editors, but I think the paradigm for editing has really changed, and it's become much more idiosyncratic and person by person. It’s like I'm going to look to this venue, there's this one individual that I trust, like a YouTube mentality for how you find stuff you like. Now, that is problematic to the extent that it doesn't create possibilities for poetry to grow from, to become something more coherent. It does feel like if we had that in poetry, it might inject some life into it.

But the other thing I wanted to talk about--and I'll shift gears just a little bit right now--is the idea of something that's maybe kept your own poems from reaching as mainstream of audiences as I wish it had, because I admire your work, which is your continued persistent attraction to violence, images of violence and sexuality, and this disruptive, confrontational imagery and how that figures in your work. And you've been doing this ever since I met you. There's nothing that's changed at all about that. Which again, I guess I mean as a compliment. But in some sense, I've always felt like in a way I've never fully gotten it.

What are you trying to represent? A mimetic? So you put a mirror up to the country, and in a sense, like, the violence of culture needs to appear there for your poetry to be relevant. Is it that? Or is it just more that these are the themes that interest you? This is what you want to write about. Is the violence in your poetry mimetic?

Göransson: I have a few different answers to that question. First of all, like many people, I follow my, you know, my fascinations and my obsessions. And that's why I ended up there. So that is correct. I am really interested in violence and in sexuality, sexual kind of stuff as well. But yeah, the violence definitely runs through all my collections.

Also, a lot of my poems take place in hospitals. There are a lot of hospitals and a lot of violence. And I started thinking about an experience I had when I was like in the summer between fourth and fifth grade, and I had a huge sinus infection, like my head, my face, swollen up. So, they had to cut the sinuses open and drain all the stuff out of it, you know, and I'd stay in the hospital and after... Okay, so during the operation, I still remember the dream I had. I was put under, and it was these doctors with strange masks on and sledgehammers smashing hospital equipment, computer screens, and so on. And then when I came out, I wouldn't eat any food. I was so repulsed by all the food they offer me. And I kept saying I wanted horse broth, and people said, that's disgusting. What are you asking for? A horse? But what they didn't know was that, like a week or two before I had my operation my parents had taken me to this avant-garde play about the Paris Commune.

Miller: This is in Sweden?

Göransson Yeah, this is in Sweden. So, this is like when I was like ten. Part of the Brechtian approach to this play was at halftime. At the intermission, they gave us, you know, chicken broth. And they said here's the horse broth because, you know, the Communists are like, starving. They have to kill their horses, and they have to eat their horses. And so here's the horse. So just the other day it strikes me, and I'm like, what does this dream and its violence and my own infected face have to do with the Paris Commune? And that I feel is the site of a lot of this poetry.

So in some ways, it might be, could be said to be like some kind of political invocation of the Paris Commune through a super material. It's like not me thinking about the Paris Commune. Remember me wanting to drink the Paris Commune? But then also the

violence, somehow the violence of these figures in my dream had something to do with some kind of anarchic, some kind of anarchic force.

Miller: Did it ever come back to you, that vision?

Göransson: No, I don't think so. I did have, maybe, you know, like, a few years later. I remember there was a Depeche Mode video where they smash a car, and I remember having this, like, feeling of recognition in that. So, yeah, I guess it did come back.

Miller: Was one of the doctors named Benway?

Göransson: Maybe. I'll tell you another thing, this quote that I often think about that will, that will kind of go against what I just said--or maybe complicate it, this quote by Raúl Zurita, the great Chilean poet, who, you know, who was arrested after the coup in 1973 and has been writing poetry about that ever since--is still writing poetry about the coup in some ways. But it's become more metaphysical or even religious.

This is what he said, “all that I came to do in those years… This is right after the coup, like maybe, you know, the 70s… I felt that pain and death should be responded to with a poetry and an art that was as vast and strong as the violence that was exercised over us, to place in opposition the limitless violence of crime and the limitless violence of beauty, the extreme violence of power, and the extreme violence of art, the violence of terror, and the even stronger violence of all our poems. I never knew how to throw stones, but that was not our intifada. You can't defeat a dictatorship with poetry, but without poetry (and this is no metaphor) humanity disappears literally in the next five minutes.”

So to me, there's something like a violence of beauty, like there is a violence of poetry. And my poems never tried to create some kind of space of freedom from that kind of violence or from our culture. And he's talking about a coup. But, I mean, even in America, you know, there's constant violence in our system. And I never was interested in poetry that creates some kind of nice space outside of that. So is it that my poetry was a way of engaging with it?

I also love the idea of this, in this, quote about how this sounds almost mathematical--like this equals that, this equals that. What is that equal sign? I'm fascinated by that. Like how exactly do they interact? This seems like it has to be stronger. The beauty has to be stronger. According to the reader. But it also has some ways. It's not just totally opposite from the there's a strong connection between the two of the beauty of the poem, the violence of the poem and the violence of the dictatorship. It's like an unruly equation.

It doesn't come out, doesn't necessarily come out neatly. And it will often … I feel like it has to take some of that violence into it. And you see that in Zurita’s work where he, you know, famously said, you know, the Bible taught me to turn the poor my other cheek and to

explain why he burned his face. His first artistic response to the coup was to burn his own face. Which is not actually what the Bible means when they said turn the other cheek. But again, there's this like, weird, you know, equal sign. There's weird distortions that happens in the equal sign, like turn the other cheek equals burn my own face. And, yeah, the unruly mathematics of that I'm interested in.

Miller: Yeah, that's a fascinating answer. It reminds me of the … I'm blanking on his name right now, but the famous installation artist that was involved in a plane accident and was rescued and wrapped in felt by…

Göransson: Joseph Beuys.

Miller: That's right. Beuys. Yeah. I have to say, I wasn't expecting that story. That's news to me, and that's something that I think is going to be really fascinating to a lot of people. Do you frequently have moments like that, like when you had a kind of hallucinatory vision? Is that something that's come up in your life again?

Göransson: Yeah, I guess I do have a lot of things like that. Yeah. I don't think about it that much, strangely, but I do. I do have moments like that and dreams like really powerful dreams or like waking dreams. Yeah.

Miller: And you try to, like, find those spaces again in language? In your poetry?

Göransson: Definitely. I definitely do. Yeah. Sometimes I will directly invoke them or describe them, but a lot of times it's about the feeling of them. Yeah.

Miller: When you write poetry and your poetry assumes the form of a voice, does it feel like your voice?

Göransson: I mean, I feel like my poet's voice, you know, like I have a poet's voice, and I try to push it in different directions. That's how I make it interesting. But I'm not the kind of person who can just assume a lot of different voices.

Miller: It seems like you let yourself become a vessel in a way in your poems. And you let things kind of pour through you--not romantic bullshit in the sense of giving a voice to others--but more like an open vessel, you know, like a hose.

Göransson: I guess, I mean, my answer about the violence seems to suggest that, like, I feel like you have to allow the scary or the unsettling part of that. Having the approach to art that you have to let that violence into you, just like you allow the foreign influence of, you know, other poetry into you. I mean, when we think about voice, again, we tend to think there's so much agency involved and poets, they're like, this is my voice and this is how I go out and describe the world. I don't think of my voice like that. But I do have, you know, I

have an aesthetic. I have that, like you said--it's pretty constant my whole life writing, and I try to push against that, just to explore different things.

Miller: One thing you also push against in your poetry is a conventional sense of musicality, I guess, call it. And this reminds me of conversations that we had many years ago. We were discussing the influence of American music on our writing. And we talked about Dylan's Basement Tapes and Lou Reed and a few others. And, you said that these people influenced you more than any poets at the time. I was struck by that. I'd never heard of somebody else whose first love is poetry, first love in art seems to be poetry, say that before. I'm still kind of struck by that. I wonder if you still feel that way, and how do those kind of, I don't know, musician troubadours, or whatever you want to call them--how do they influence your work?

Göransson: I was actually thinking about this like maybe 15 years ago, somebody asked me this question and I said, I said no. I remember this person had seen that I mentioned a lot of indie rock songs or like I paraphrased a reference, and I felt really uncomfortable about that. I think mainly at that point I was just taking inspiration from it, but it was unfair of me not to acknowledge it, because I think that music did influence me then.

When I first started writing it was this, there was a Swedish band, The Imperiet, [translates] The Empire, which is like a synth, kind of post-punk, I guess. They were a post-punk band, and they were in love with this Swedish poet Bruno K. Öijer, who I've now published in translation. So that was really my beginning, listening to Imperiet, reading Öijer.

I guess from there, yeah, I found Tranströmer, who is obviously not a singer at all. But then, my mom had these old Bob Dylan records and Leonard Cohen records, and Velvet Underground records. And those things were really powerful for me when I started writing. I mean, I don't know how many hours I spent in what I now realize was a kind of training, but I was looking at different things Bob Dylan was doing, for example, like weird surrealist cuts or contortions of language and then just sit and rewrite those kinds of phrases … just endlessly because it gave me a lot of pleasure. But I guess now that was a kind of training. Those albums like *Blonde on Blonde* or *Highway 61*. Those moves are in my … in my DNA.

Miller: Deeper than the poetry, do you think?

Göransson: Well, I mean, then I also I also read Allen Ginsberg. To me, like “Howl” and “America” and those early poems are really, really profound. Tranströmer’s poems, I mean here is a poet who was also really influenced by Cohen and Bob Dylan and Ginsberg.

Miller: Interesting that they're all Jewish.

Göransson: Yeah, that's true. They are, yeah, Swedish and Jewish. I hadn't thought of that, but I don't necessarily think that there's a huge contradiction there in the singing versus

poem. I feel like they're still belong to the same general aesthetic terrain. I mean, that's something to do with surrealism, but I always wanted my poetry to be, like, visceral. But I never wanted to be a difficult poet in the sense of, like, you have to have a scholarly background or whatever. I wanted to have poetry that made an impact, that might be difficult to deal with or might be difficult to handle. It might be hard or painful to engage with. But I wanted it to be striking poetry. And I think that might come from coming to it partially through singers or music.

Miller: Yeah, that's what I assumed you meant when we were first talking about it, because we were both bemoaning the lack of cultural power that poetry had, and at the same time, we also agreed that it wasn't the same as lyrics. That it is its own thing in that it doesn't have musical accompaniment most of the time. Actually, yes, let me ask that as a question. I don't know this for sure. Have you ever worked with musicians before? Have you ever written lyrics?

Göransson: No, I don't think so. I have a really poor memory. So any questions about my past, I have... I'm uncertain. I don't think so. I mean, like you said, my poems have their own kind of rhythms, but they're not usually like musical. Yeah, they don't really lend themselves to music.

Miller: In your more recent work, you've become more interested in line breaks, I think, and less explicitly prose poetry or mixed-genre prose and poetry. What is it about the shorter lines in your newer work that's called you in that direction? By the way, I've loved a lot of those poems, especially that poem about being an immigrant that you shared with me years ago. That was one of my favorites. Sorry I can't recall the title right now, but I think it's in *A New Quarantine,* right?

Göransson: I don't know which one you mean, but I agree that is something I've become more and more and more interested in for a long time. I wrote ... like you said, I've written a lot of prose poetry, partly because I felt like the line breaks made the poem kind of precious or something like that. And I didn't want that. But yeah, lately line breaks for me ... the way they can create a rhythm, like a different kind of rhythm. And the way that it can open up in a sentence or a word multiple valences.

Miller: Your poems also arise out of anaphora a lot. You repeat a phrase and see where that takes you. Feels like a kind of improvisatory poetry in that sense. It's also very different from the songwriting. Do you think that's an accurate description?

Göransson: Yes. That I use anaphora a lot? Yeah.

Miller: And it's improvised through that a lot of the time.

Göransson: Yeah, for sure. For sure. But that's ... you know, some might say that is the music--anaphora has some musicality or something like that. I mean, I've always been super interested in anaphora, in how repetition is ... in how repetition is never static. It always changes. That's definitely a core interest of mine.

Miller: You mentioned surrealism when we were talking about songwriters. Do you see your poetry as emergent from surrealist traditions? On the margins? Outside of it altogether?

Göransson: Yeah, totally. It definitely comes out of surrealism. Like I said, like early on, Bruno Öijer, it comes out of surrealism, too. I mean, Ginsberg comes out of surrealism, but also I read a lot of surrealist poetry, like French surrealist poetry. I loved Rimbaud from early on. And then, yeah, in the 90s, I became really engrossed by this Swedish Stockholm Surrealist Group, which was this kind of ... really wild surrealist group in the late 80s, early 90s.

So, I mean, those were profound influences on me and this is where I [unintelligible] who I translated, this is how I first came across her. And so that has had a big part in my life. I mean, I believe in ... I believe beauty must be convulsive.

Miller: Yeah... convulsive. That's reminds me of Kafka. There's all these moments in his work where K is sick, and he just starts coughing, and then it goes back to being what it was before. They're interrupted by sickness and the body betraying him. His body's, you know ... tuberculosis. He was dying. That's another mutual interest... I know you love Kafka. I know you've read a lot of Kafka, and there's a quality in Kafka that I see in your work, and I'm wondering if you agree that this is maybe where you got it, or if you feel there's some connection. I do, but I'm thinking of the like, violence and sexuality in *The Trial* and the way it kind of just erupts into the plot. It can also be sort of contained in a way like that, that you probably remember the scene. I think it's called "The Stoker," when he opens the door...

Göransson: Yeah.

Miller: And there's this room and there's these two men in black leather enacting this sort of S&M routine, one torturing another. And it's sort of Beckettesque, kind of *Waiting for Godot* stuff. And then he shuts the door, and everything is normal again. Then he goes back a month later, he opens it, and everything is the same as it was. There's this sense of the violence just being there, waiting. Any time you open the door, it's going to be there--like this is other room, beside your own room.

Göransson: Uh-huh.

Miller: And that that's a characteristic I feel ... one of the things I love about your poetry is the surprise of it, and the way it genuinely is disruptive, whereas in so much other work,

the violence, when it's too mimetic (or in my mind, too mimetic), it becomes like this new frame--its own thing, and it's not able to be disruptive anymore.

How have you continued to sustain this kind of disruptive, you know, outpouring of creativity without it … well, without like, you know, sort of adhering to any one thing that might marginalize it, or make it into a coherent new normal.

Göransson: I think, you know, it's possible I got this from Kafka. I always felt when I read Kafka that I had a close connection to it. And I feel like maybe we both got it from the same place, and that's dreams. Like to go back to our earlier discussion, I mean, I feel like that is some … like that is a dream likeness. And I feel like, you know, people have different views of Freud, you know, mostly negative, mostly disagreeing. But I feel like at least on a personal level, like Freud got a lot of… and I'm not talking about Oedipus complex … something about the way dreams work. I feel like he really got that right—I feel like he got a lot of things right--the refractions and distortions that happen.

Miller: I think the concept of the uncanny has been useful to you as well.

Göransson: Yeah, absolutely.

Miller: That can't be faked, right? Because it's that that Freudian quality of when the dreamlike intrudes, which also makes me think of David Lynch, who I know we also both love. Lynch is a great example. Lynch has this balance between normal and weird. And they intensify each other. And there's something kind of like that in your poems too, where I feel like the weird is weirder because of the mundane. And there's like these two rooms in your work and you can open either door whenever you want and go into in. To me, that's maybe the most distinctively original quality about your poetry when I think about it in connection to other people--what makes your work really stand out. And I guess I wondering what your reaction to that is, if that's something you're going for… And how does it relate to Freud, while we're talking about it.

Göransson: Like I said, I feel like there's a kind of dream likeness to it, and that I draw a lot of my energy from those experiences. And also, I love the way you describe it with the two door. I mean, it makes it sound a little bit like a fairy tale, right? Like the poem is a fairy tale.

Miller: I was thinking of the Red Room [from Lynch's *Twin Peaks*].

Göransson: Yeah. Okay. Yeah.

Miller: The front and back, you know.

Göransson: Yeah. Yeah. Like what [André] Breton famously said, that what he wanted to do was write fairy tales for grownups. And I think that's true of Lynch as well. I mean, he's

remaking *The Wizard of Oz* and referencing fairy tales. And so there might be something like the surrealist interest in folktale and fairy tale and in dreams. I think those things are really formative for me.

Miller: Yeah. I guess outside of the US, you're also increasingly well-known and perhaps best known for your translations of many Swedish poets, including Berg, whose reputation I think has grown a lot because of your work and your advocacy. Do you see your own poetry as in dialog with or perhaps even in the same "tradition" as Berg's?

Göransson: Yeah. I mean, I would say, there might be two answers to this. On the one hand, I feel a little disappointed in myself sometimes, and that is that my poetry does fit into a Swedish kind of tradition. More than it does in an American tradition. Americans tend to be more outraged by it. And the Swedish are like, oh, you are obviously somebody who read a lot of Larsson. Larsson is another Swedish writer. So there definitely is that. But then the other hand, I have taken a lot of inspiration from and I've learned and been inspired by a lot by people who are neither American nor Swedish. A lot of times I feel I have a close connection to some of these poets, like Kim Hyesoon from Korea or Hiromi Ito from Japan. And these are not even, you know, they're not even European poets, but underlying that, again, is that we tend to think of translated poets as existing inside their nations. But of course, all these Swedish poets and these Korean poets, whatever, have read very widely, usually more widely than most Americans, because that's just, part of our deal is that we don't read foreign poetry.

So it makes sense. It's not that weird that I should have a lot in common with several Korean poets, or that I have a lot in common with a lot of Swedish poets, etc., because poetry moves transnationally. So I would say on one hand, yes, I do, I think there definitely is a place for me in in Sweden or a place inside of me for Sweden. But I also feel like I'm a part of something that's transnational, that I've made that effort. I might not have made that if I had never emigrated. I think being an emigrant or an immigrant kind of opens these portals to where you realize that poetry has all these potentialities, and it might be interesting to investigate it. Whereas if I would have stayed in Sweden my whole life, I might have just been a really Swedish poet and not gone in that direction.

Miller: Yeah. I mean, it reminds me of conversations in Iowa and resisting taking a class with a certain person, because you *don't* want that person to influence your work. You're too, you know, aware of that possibility, and it's just not where you want to go.

I want to ask one other question that's in a little different vein here. And it's more of a personal curiosity of mine, since I'm kind of in a similar situation, which is we both teach at very religious universities--Notre Dame and Yeshiva University. I don't know Notre Dame, but I imagine you're working with students whose politics and life positions are very, very different from yours. Probably somewhat hard to relate to, at least speaking personally, it is where I teach anyway. What's it like having such iconoclastic views and being so kind of

invested in disruption and all these values that really don't strike me as Catholic values, and being, you know, one of the heads of the humanities program at a major program, like, the largest Catholic university, I imagine, in the United States, if not the world. Have you run into troubles with that? Is it difficult, or does it work somehow? I'm curious.

Göransson: I don't think it's that difficult. I mean, it took me a while to figure out that in teaching you have to kind of meet the students where they are. And if I were in, you know, a Jewish school or something like that, I would have to, obviously take a different direction, take a different path to them. But then at the same time, I mean, Catholic … iconology? Iconograph …

Miller: Iconography [laughs].

Göransson: Yeah, you know, it's full of, it's, it's really violent and beautiful and, you know, and this is like the source of a lot of Baroque art. So, it might not be that big of a leap.

Miller: I like that. Yeah.

Göransson: I mean, like, in our classrooms, we have, like, a naked guy, you know, on a cross, being tortured. So how shocking can a little lyrical poem be?

Miller: Or like how Catholicism expresses itself in Latin America. it's much more squirmy and complicated. Image driven.

Göransson: Yeah. That's true. And I don't know, maybe my students don't think of Catholicism that way, but that's there, that's there. It's in the Catholic in the images, and it's in the, also in the thinking about it and the theology, you know, it's strange. It's a really peculiar theology, which I don't understand, I don't claim to have any understanding of, but as far as I can tell, it's, you know, it's very strange. And there's a reason why surrealism and the baroque have a Catholic connection.

Miller: Sounds like you feel fairly at home there.

Göransson: Yeah. I mean, but on the other hand, also people who feel at home, I've not been that person. I've not felt at home for a very long time in my life, and so I'm not really that bothered by it. If somebody can't go and teach to people who aren't like them, that must be a person who does not have much experience being an outsider, does not have much experience being out of your comfort zone or out of your home. I actually do have experience with that. My whole life, more or less, has been in a state of not being at home. So I've had some training at it. Though maybe with my natural combativeness it took a while to figure out how to not alienate people. But yeah, I get along pretty well.

Miller: Well, it's been really fascinating catching up with you like this. And I'm sorry it's taken so long for us to have this conversation. But this reminds me of old times, and I learned a lot. So I guess I just want to end this interview by thanking you again for doing it, and I hope we see each other again soon and can talk some more.

Göransson: Thank you so much for your questions.