

An Interview with Jill Magi and Pierre Depaz, Author and Programmer of SIGN CLIMACTERIC

by Brandon Krieg

Jill Magi is on the literature/creative writing and visual arts faculty at New York University Abu Dhabi. Her sixth book, *SPEECH*, is forthcoming from Nightboat Books in 2019, and the work published here is an excerpt from that work originally published by Hostile Books as a chapbook. The chapbook was contained in a plastic bag with two tablespoons of water, echoing rising sea waters and temperatures and prefiguring the digital degradation in this collaborative version of the work. Contact: Jill.Magi@nyu.edu

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[Editor's note: readers can find the degrading digital chapbook at the end of the interview—the PDF version will not degrade, however.]

Brandon Krieg: Could we start the interview with a simple question about the origins of the chapbook project *SIGN CLIMACTERIC*?

Jill Magi: The project began with a call from the wonderful editors of [Hostile Books](#) out of Buffalo, New York. They sent me a request for a proposal for a chapbook that could be considered hostile to the traditionally-received notions of the book.

I thought about a section in my manuscript *SPEECH*—forthcoming from Nightboat in 2019—about “the climacteric,” which refers to menopause in women, and in botany, refers to a stage when a fruit has finished growing but the ripening is completed on the vine. If you look up climacteric, you’ll see that the menopause version of the meaning is lack, death, decay, and symptoms. But the botany meaning is positive! There are all sorts of interesting things going on with cellular respiration at that stage in ripening.

About two years ago menopause became visible in my life, and I was floored by the onset of hot flashes—by how little I knew about it and by the bind I found myself in: taking hormone supplements could cure the hot flashes, but HRT (hormone replacement therapy) has also been linked to cancer. I decided to sweat it out.

I probably don’t have to provide the feminist analysis of all of this—it’s devastatingly obvious: if this hot and sweaty thing sprang up in the lives of all aging men, my guess is that there would be tons of research about it, and if cures weren’t found, men would get time off from their jobs or the life stage would be framed as not something to hide or to be ashamed of. The signs would have entirely different meanings. I have this analysis, yet I was utterly embarrassed and fearful, wondering: what if I got a hot flash in the middle of teaching? In the middle of a faculty meeting? Should I take a leave of absence? Hot flashes can happen throughout the night, and when they do, they wake me up. So I had insomnia and wondered how I was going to function on the job. Though I am childless by choice, I started having feelings of solidarity with new mothers and parents who go through years of interrupted sleep.

What to do when the body is activated as a social creature in new ways, as a sign, as an other, as a social text exceeding itself—a text beyond author’s or subject’s control? Go to poetry, of course. So I was living this climacteric poem. I needed to write my way further into my body in order to find the connections, most importantly, between my singular body and the world. Heat is rising. Maybe my new condition is a chance to connect, utterly, with the over-heated and tipping-point state of the world.

So, back to Hostile Books. I took this section of my manuscript, called it *SIGN CLIMACTERIC* and presented it to readers inside a little Glad sandwich bag along with two tablespoons of water. I wanted to forefront the degradation of paper, the fragility of bindings, and present the gross and shameful experience of public sweating as a kind of tactile experience for readers. And then your most excellent call for work came along, and I saw an opportunity for a further degradation.

BK: Could you explain how you envision the transformation of *SIGN CLIMACTERIC* from physical chapbook to digital?

JM: When I talked to Joe Hall at Hostile Books about the work living in digital format, he suggested that it take on another form altogether. I was thinking about this around the time my colleague, Pierre Depaz, invited me to be a guest lecturer in his Software Art: Text course. Pierre and I met and talked about code, how poets work, what natural language means to people who code and to poets. Working with Pierre, I began to think of *NANO* and the digital realm and what could live there—perhaps a degrading digital form?

BK: Pierre, could you explain your role in creating the degrading digital chapbook?

Pierre Depaz: As Jill and I discussed the degrading, physical chapbook, I was immediately struck by the materiality of the project. As a software artist, I am consistently faced with the fact that digital texts are very good at making the reader forget their materiality. When pages can't be turned, smelled, or dog-eared, we tend to assume that words and sentences exist only in the illuminated limbo of our screen. However, there's an incredible number of technical intricacies that support the display of verse, and this infrastructure is surprisingly malleable.

I wanted to echo the phenomenon of paper becoming pulp and of ink becoming stains through the form and content of the Web: HTML and CSS. The program I wrote is twofold. On the one hand, I coordinated with Jill to provide a gradual reveal of the "thought materials" that informed her poem, by adding references, footnotes, and addendums as the reader scrolls down the page; on the other hand, that program inserts, at random, the characters that make up the infrastructure of digital text: the essentially invisible `[\]"<>=`. They hash out the text with complete disregard for what words mean, returning them to their state of encoded information—and, in the process, offering new meanings to the reader's mind.

JM: And there's an ecological aspect to this degrading virtual version as well. Too often we think of computers as neutral, or even environmentally friendly—as in the popular phrase in the signature line of many of our emails: "think of trees before you print this"—but what remains hidden is the fact of wars and violence and environmental degradation in order to secure the natural resources to make screens, metals—to make the computer itself. In the digital version of *SIGN CLIMACTERIC* I wanted this information to show up as subtext. So this version, coded by Pierre, includes links to that information and those political consequences.

One thing that Pierre and I dialogued about along the way was the fact that when I read his programmed drafts, I noticed that somehow I could never reach the end of the poem. As author of the poem, I actually crafted something that would feel, lyrically-speaking, like an ending. As an artist, I am fond of endings: cell walls that provide a boundary. And when we hold and read a book, we are physically connected to its end by virtue of holding the back cover—we sometimes judge or count how much we have left to read by leafing through all the way to the end. We can calibrate our stamina accordingly! The screen sort of asks us to keep going until the scrolling stops so I realize the sense of length would never be there. Yet, from a compositional standpoint, I wanted readers to be able to encounter the actual end of the poem. We were encountering, in our collaboration, some interesting ideas, I think, about code and computing, screens and books, authorial intent, and chance operations.

PD: Interestingly, nature and technology have that in common: that they are expected to function in a particular way, and expected to dysfunction in a particular way. We think of the end of the world as tides, volcanoes, and comets, but not as slowly sliding glaciers and jagged curves on charts of average degrees Celsius. Similarly, what we imagine of glitch and chance rely on a very specific representation, halfway between *Tron* and *The Matrix*, and highly visual and time-based, while, in reality, the decaying of a program usually means its complete shutdown—true till the end to its binary nature. Still, I suppose some of these highly-controlled, anthropocentric representations are useful in raising awareness of the fragility of those systems to a reader/viewer.

JM: So, Pierre, in performing the controlled and not-totally-technology-driven degradation, I think your coding work returns us, in a sense, to the possibilities for art and the artist. As artists we sit somewhere in the middle of nature and technology, or maybe our work troubles that very divide. So we intensify possibilities that already exist, including chance as well as control. It seems to me to be a good idea for artists to entertain finitude in these times of ecological crisis, but we don't necessarily give in to it either; that would be nihilism. Our desire to make meaning pulls us back from that edge, maybe letting us know that the binary is never really true: when we think of the end of the world, of course it will not end. The supposedly inanimate will reform, somehow.

BK: Pierre, how have you resolved the tension between Jill's desire to allow her degrading poem to be read to a finite end and the necessity that at a certain point, when code breaks down, the system simply stops functioning? Does the reader have to beat the code to the end of the poem?

PD: That's actually one of the most interesting parts of working in digital arts—in my opinion. There's so much that goes on below the interface: a lot of the work that happens isn't just separated between what's in your head and what's on the final print. There's a lot of scaffolding between those two, a lot of meticulous, careful, and sometimes painful planning. And I believe this is where a lot of digital artists find an intrinsic pleasure, in that mental exercise of writing the code itself. So you get very attached to the essence of the code, to its true form. Still, I reminded

myself that what matters most is impression over reality, what the user reads should still prevail—because the emphasis was on decomposition, and not destruction.

BK: I seem to see a formal multiplicity in the poem parallel to the multiplicity of the definitions of climacteric you mention—on the one hand, the poem contains repetition of phrases, sudden bursts of rhyme, snippets of commonplaces, all of which seem almost to proliferate out of the encoded imperatives (and ideologies) of the language itself; on the other hand, the poem is full of interruptions, fragments, floating words, startling enjambments, and threads of commentary or counter-narrative that subvert the easy transmission of the language and its inherent ideologies. Could you talk about how the multiplicity of the form of the poem enables you to reimagine menopause, the body, climate change, environmental justice, and the other themes you explore?

JM: Thanks for your close and attentive read of the work. I absolutely go to poetry for the multiple. When a pre-packaged ideology or common sense is troubling, unsatisfying, utterly false even as its disseminated and gulped down without thinking, I go to poetry. I go to poetry when things in the bones do not feel right, and I have to ask, “What’s really going on?” Poetry is a way, for me, to take what’s given and look at it squarely while asking it for more. About menopause, for example: I’m holding it under poetry’s surface to see what will grow. This is what “proliferated” out of “the encoded imperatives” (love your language here!) in the word climacteric.

Environmentalism’s discourse is similarly problematic. Often it goes like this: we’re all going to die and soon and we should focus on the non-human in order to save the human and animals that are photogenic. That thinking fast-forwards to an end without imagining the reality of the middle: that there will be death and strife as well as regenerative and revolutionary ideas around resource allotments, borders and mapping, ways to lead and govern, ways to live and to die. Poetry isn’t afraid of death, so I use it to think about what happens before death and how to go into or toward death with some semblance of clarity, maybe even joy, and definitely an attitude of learning.

Just today I was reading Robert Kocik’s *Supple Science* and something he writes seems to get at your question also. He asks, of poetics, if logos is the only way to go. I like that expansive notion of poetics: so, yes, I *am* making a poem, but as I do, I am also making a life consisting of many spaces and structures. It’s not possible for a poem alone to provide the multiplicity I need in order to live. But it is a way to think and to be in multifarious ways. This inability to be singular is not some expressivist ideal or a celebration of uniqueness: an overblown ego. Yes, I am an individual self, breathing and solo at birth, as well as solo at death, but I am also comprised of the stuff of policy: lack of access to health care at times in my life, struggle against scarce housing, my white skin gaining me imbalanced entry and access, my lungs taking in particulate matter. Awareness of this leads to a poetics of susceptibility—not just doing, making, resisting, protecting, striving, being sure, and being strong. But also sensing, allowing, inviting, succumbing. That’s one of Kocik’s poetic meditations as well: the susceptible system and its

functions. Thinking about poetics and the body, he likes to think with the susceptible rather than the more common thought pathway: immunity. I appreciate this in his work.

The totality might seem maddening in its multiplicity, and in our susceptibility to any sliver of it at any time, but here is where form—craft: the stuff of art—comes in. The lines in this work are short, like a pace, a step. I made the poem in between taking walks and thinking about walking in my city, Abu Dhabi. When you walk in a city, you actually enact fleeting notions of who you are to others and who you are to yourself. When I pass by a mother who is holding a baby adoringly, my awareness of climate change undergoes change itself. My awareness of myself as a woman, as a person who is not having children, as a person in menopause absolutely changes. I think that poetry lays everything out on that same kind of multi-textured and utterly future-oriented surface. I hope this makes some sense—

BK: I love the way you describe turning to the multiplicity of poetry as a way of being more fully in our complex reality. You also allude to a larger social function for poetry in the phrase “poetry is a way, for me, to take what’s given and look at it squarely while asking it for more.” Could you say more about what you think poetry does? You make it clear it enriches your perception of the world and of the shaping force of language. I wonder, does it have other efficacies? Does it increase empathy or reduce suffering? Does it contribute to social change? Does it need to be that instrumental? I realize these are fraught questions. I ask without agenda, poet to poet, eager to hear your take.

JM: Thanks for this line of questioning. The further I go, the less sure I am about what poetry does for social change, but I am more sure than ever that no matter what happens—atrocities, victories, violence, peace—poetry is always going to be there. It will be written out of the need for comfort. It may also cause harm: poetry and art can be totally fascist! It will be written in order to face the complexity of whatever is happening. The work I want to tune in to especially is poetry that resists public relations and management and self-help speak. And if the poets aren’t hired to speak for the powers-that-be, poets will come forward to say what no one is saying. This takes time, and this is not to say that poets are better people than others. And, maybe the utterly necessary poems will go unread by most people. Sometimes poets and artists dodge the reality of suffering in the world and this does not make them or their works any less vital. I am thinking of the painter Agnes Martin and all her contradictions; her mandate that an artist not do politics, and then her writings about art being a vital form of nonviolence—a very political statement! There’s the artist Richard Tuttle who has said that we need what artists do even if what they do is not clearly political—he calls art what is made on the way to new awareness. And then there’s Amiri Baraka who said something like this at a reading at the Poetry Project some years back: if you think poems don’t matter, write poems that do. So a poet decides about risk and what they can take on. Wayne Koestenbaum once told me that a poet who takes on history in their work suffers hubris in that they think, as a poet, that they can say something about history’s events. I will always remember that, not sure if I agree, but not totally disagreeing either. And then there’s Susan Sontag who said in an interview in *The Paris Review* that literature’s very purpose is to strengthen the “adversarial consciousness.” I like that, because it doesn’t mean that we write “adversarial” poems—we use poetry to tune in to the

unsaid and this is a good life practice. It's a good practice to take to political organizing meetings, to a staff meeting, or to remember when you hear or read the news. There is always something more complex happening than the soundbite that's fed to us—poetry is the manifestation of this sense.

As I mentioned earlier in this interview, I have been thinking that poetry is not afraid of death and that this is very important, politically. I've been reading *The Impossible Indian* by Faisal Devji who argues that Gandhi spiritualized politics by not tying, as the west does, morality to the preservation of life. In other words, if all we care about is living longer and better, saving our own lives, we are likely to shirk duty, shirk risk. And the only way that a better world is made is through the kind of morality forged by people willing to face death. That sounds high and mighty, but it gets played out in small everyday acts: an unwillingness to sit with pain, a fear of speaking up at a meeting, being utterly strategic and pre-packaging what we contribute. Most importantly, we make the mistake of looking to the state to protect us with its idea of human rights. We actually believe in this! Gandhi was not for this. He thought that those who suffer atrocities must not accept humanitarian aid because that action would let the perpetrators off the hook. It's tough to embrace this as a practice, let alone agree, philosophically. And I'm asking, what does this have to do with poetry?

I can't think of any other practice that allows me to sit with ambiguity and even death. I want *SIGN CLIMACTERIC* to reveal and question the obsession with youth that is a sign, in the western construct especially, of a lack of recognition of death. I wrote that poem, in a sense, toward my coming death and even the death of the world. But I don't feel nihilistic. New life in forms beyond our imagination will sprout up after death.

There's so much more to say, Brandon. But I'll end this line of questioning, as you say "poet to poet," with my biggest hope, and I think it's political: that poets refrain from judging other poets for not being political. I also want poets to take the career out of their poetry writing. That's very hard because we are competing over a limited set of jobs, but we have to do whatever it takes to get this fear of precarity out of our poetry. And, honestly, I am a little tired of the echo chamber in which poets continue to look to themselves for the better political ideas. We poets need to study up—read social theory, read what the activists are saying, what the hardest, most challenging thinkers and theorists are saying—and we need, I think, to develop the imagination for the kind of otherness that allows us to listen to our enemy. That's another thing Gandhi believed—that morality is forged from the relations between enemies. Are we willing to grant personhood to the one we perceive as utterly against us? Enough to stop and listen to them and meet them where they are? I want us poets to write from there. That's political. And maybe no one else, in the arts, is going to do it.

SIGN CLIMACTERIC

Jill Magi

who dead told

who failed told

who no longer labors

who takes in chemically

so altered as to placate

the word syndrome

who studies fear who

sweats again sweats

to see the world swerve

who lives as lacuna asks

do you remember her

whose skin papers who

soaks who disgusts who

beware cruel of youth

she

poured without spilling

smelted with no faults

drowning the knot of care

told who

wears a syndrome of climacteric

the antonym of apex

fallen into your gutter

rises ripe to cross out

the word produce

who pulls off the mask

who masks who

refugee patriot never individual

pa>thos unmaking liberty making

woman double woman who

publishes who profits who

tells the daughter who

finds her mother revolting

I am not your mother

because daughter skin

thinks too much of loss

instead of the gain in

done the grain in

tilt sift

float fall

fold, she> entombs nothing

being, that birthing body being

folded into queer earth staging

a party all night a strident

fold, revolt

flow away from

servile supplement

who young judges who

who empties while in

whose eyes a gone grasp

I know

without seeing her

she walks past who speaks

who enters easily

who exits easily

who lets the leash

of time fall slack

she

supple while rigid

because wi"sdom is not

who gifts but who savors

the edit of their demand

SIGN climacteric

SIGN see peri-

menopausal word DIS-

\

appointment INSIGNIA

see INSIGNIA body of meno-

pause imprints DIS-

>

stench of over-stamping signage

lit up to see too much

earth

to see what speech removal

tells

in surge

her heat turns

away from<

away

mothers

tell me how to

permission this

swell

edit out

the child invisible

give back gentle

and care less

if it shows

crestal crossover

epochal payoff

pivotal watershed

go-no-go fateful

quantal versus

words trending now:

pundit tycoon cudgel

as between life and death

she experiments with

two sets of numbers

count up or down

to environmental end

in sharp actual sight

sinking into planet skin
back into placenta skin
into the glow of algal bloom
recovering the polluted
burning personal trouble
down from the inside
to the rough edge of
big ethics I turn
<\br> I turn into you
and away to come near
stitching memories of
childhood dreamlike
<
I know why they wrote
and no
to increase peace to clear
the bloated choice of an individual
freedom legacy exchanged
for a sure system of making
that includes giving away

"

Good or bad, I'm happy to welcome both.

I don't hear with my ears, I don't see with my eyes.

A voice speaks inside my heart,

My jewel-lamp burns bright even in a rampaging wind.

mother woman DIS-

young womb

hoard tomb

dividing the body sex

of woman DIS-

body earth whole

DIS- other mother DIS-

essential ghost repress

=

her failing woman not

certified to be a self

today testifying her

speech of the change

speech as a claim as ripe

for murdering the service=

of accumulating for him oh!

the dream of youth extracts

and drills out divides up

stashes away while

she knows how to kill
that boy that girl
to protect to protect her
arms snaking orchestrating
a climate change conversion
a dark indigo stirring she
laughs at the heat of certainty
"
her laugh gives it all away so
she sings

All for you, baby, all for you

All for you, baby, all for you

You took me out to the [inaudible]

You took the hammer, you knocked my head

You took the razor, you cut my throat

All for you.

I love you, baby, I love you

I love you, baby, I love you

I'll take and send you to U.S.A.

I'll give you all the fine things you need

I'll give my precious life up for you

All for you.

you wondering if she
is true
says
hurl your eyes
over the edge
midway up
watch them roll
tiny globes
from the top
/ of their game
down into muck
because you finally see
you feel days
as a soft brush
back and forth
on your brow linking
this with that one side
with the other
take your lips
hurl them into the trash pit too
because now you know
how to speak

everything reflects ancestors

everything an empty ear

everything her grey streaks

is yours

so follow oceans of pod leaders

allowed now to gather

the swarm to lead the song

you can nest in her

logistics you can pick up

speed in her wake she

is a menopausal whale

it's true!

there are few who distribute

resources so evenly

whose curriculum of loss

< teaches how to

DIS-

to go further

into the future with care

detached from progeny

to balance the last egg up

on her knee playful despite

toxic inevitability

to lounge with the spill

into the seventeen-mile crack

swift lone swimmer

how to DIS-

pull

at nights not

dark

DIS-

inherit mothering

soma DIS-

inherit home

sweet moon

sincere thread

slack line

warping loom:

take back technology

who would force
a future shape upon
her flow
her own mother a full
paycheck as her heat
rose so free on one end
so tethered
on the other

pulling site lines as string
dipping wick into oil
lighting a lamp for his death
she lit a lamp toward her own

so what to teach is
flatness away from
authentic away from depth
the death of proof
the death of that book of faces
appearing as disappearing
where what to teach is flatness
a need to surface all the reserves
in a stir of our sweat

a DNA tangle too impure
for screens for maps
at the airport
I watched her fall
and seeing myself tumbling
into age I ran to help her up
placing my palms under her arms
her sweat through silk flowing
into me
we blacked out together
never knowing each other knowing
everything
you of too many days
teacher
walk away with their heavy
need her heavy need
to slice the scar off in
her retreat studio
her surgical theater
lets go
of the gate

of the grid
to perform

too-clean skin
is not love she knows
as her forearm
tattooed with a feather
of blue
sticks to the seminar table
as she tracks
their agendas
on chairs wheeling life-
less liquids around
their windowless rooms
as her wet imprint
melts with time her
shame catering
= to their spills until
DIS-

until her freedom is finally
to know their freedom was never
for her

I can't translate myself into language any more.

so she dreams of

a guaranteed income

she checks the facts of

this history

she thinks about this

guaranteed income

spoken by MLK Jr. then

and now this research

radiates onto her and from her

this fact glides as she thinks this

would solve the polar ice caps

she thinks as she feels

how much poverty they ignore

how much they plant

ordering up surplus schemes

for few

as her heat of clarity rose

as her heart electric

melted the whiteboard

blew up the tangled

r> philanthropy web-site finally

sinking everything cute

sinking every market saying free

sinking her teeth into radical

ripening fur

and the seventeen-mile crack

opened its gouge further

as pressed into paper she

felt their fear their heavy

shoulders paying

for their muscular

offspring who

middle class sopped up

she

too OK with inequality

the young barking

verve of youth their

screens shut their screens

demand violence

in extraction but they pledge

to recycle her scoffing

at their easy concern for pulp

please put away your

moralism phones and

make your own paper

DIS-

scantron DIS-

office of hours

and hours of

expression she

yawns openly

to be held at the root

to be seen by the owl

flood the inbox with owls

press your sternum it sends

signals to speak and not to click

the box of a person to like

shelter owls in corridors

shelter rooms filled with wings

talk in time when silence

talk in time when interrupt

talk in time when clarify

shelter living >time shelt

no record no retrieval

no archive no autobiography

as waters rise

told who de"mands

to claw success to badger

it out to dig up

the loss of lace pulled

\apart under batter<="" span="" style="box-sizing: border-box;">

in self and self to g

DIS-

told who demands

to succeed

a self o"f programmed

care of jacket confidence

slouching> tweed= immune

o>ver owning

over-coding

so she walked

out fr"om under autology

into a net

of who applies blueness

in steady /never-night re-

reinterpreting she

saying

wings told me

their layer"ed ways

The following texts were absorbed by and occasionally surface in SIGN CLIMACTERIC: Culture of One by Alice Notley; From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice by Thomas F. Jackson; "Why Killer Whales Go Through Menopause" by Steph Yin, NY Times, January 12, 2017; "A Crack in an Antarctic Ice Shelf; Grew 17 Miles in the Last Two Months" by Jugal K. Patel, NY Times, February 7, 2017; "Why Do Ladies Sing the Blues? Indigo Dyeing, Cloth Production, and Gender Symbolism in Kodi" by Janet Hoskins in Cloth and Human Experience; "All for You" sung by Ms. Eupheme Cooper, from The Library of Congress Endangered Music Project", Arthur S. Alberts Collection; The Empire of Love by Elizabeth Povinelli; I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded, translated by Ranjit Hoskote; Reinterpreting Menopause: Cultural and Philosophical Issues, edited by Paul Komesaroff, Philipa Rothfield, and Jeanne Daly; my own text, "Compass & Hem," an unpublished manuscript, and "Overcoding Class, Version 2" published in Columbia Poetry Review in 2013.