

—with the “psychological moment”—which *cannot* be assessed?

By observing the two teachers in their student/teacher conferences, readers gain an appreciation for the delicate balance that exists between encouraging narrative depth and expression while offering technical writing tips. In her classroom, “Helena” uses a social constructionist approach that is suited to the socio-political topics chosen for student narratives. As a result, she finds herself addressing differing political views on issues of homelessness and race. “Debby” adheres more closely to expressionism and enters the private psycho-social domain of her students. She must strike a balance between entering into a psychodrama and addressing technical issues such as grammar.

*I Writing* is a thoughtful study; it offers teachers who use narrative in the classroom useful ways to critique students’ work. One issue that Paley raises is how to grade or assess narrative essays. Due to the highly subjective nature of the work, which often touches on personal trauma, teachers are compelled to walk an ethical line between honouring student disclosure and applying the contract that exists between “teacher as grader” and “student as learner.” More guidance from Paley on how to navigate this potential conflict would have been helpful.

Paley’s writing style engages readers. For the most part, her discussion is passionate, informed, and theoretically grounded. She challenges teachers who bring personal narrative into their classrooms to employ high ethical standards, and to do so with the compassion necessary to encourage students to write of their lives with honesty and depth.

## **Assignment at Vanishing Point**

Jane Satterfield  
Denver, CO: Elixir Press, 2003

### **Reviewed by Monika Lee**

The photo on the front cover of electrical lines extending vertically into space is an apt metaphor for a collection of poems whose direction is consistent and endless. These poems, with their clean density, their elliptical messages, and their exploration of time as linear space reflect an intellect steeped in art, literature, popular culture, and philosophy. The literary echo is pervasive, but not intrusive. The words of Charlotte Bronte, the Velvet Underground, Wittgenstein, Sartre, Baudelaire, de Quincey, and many others merge at the vanishing point of Satterfield’s anticipative voice. The vanishing point is paradoxical, assigned and yet forever reaching into an unattainable future or lost (“Archaeology” or “Stanton Moor”) in an irrecoverable past.

The poems in the first section of the volume lean backward in time. The voice is courageous, honest, and pondering. The purpose of the book declares

itself as “—not only to get somewhere but to know / where you have been—” (“Fugue”). The poems in the second section balance themselves precariously in a risky present—dangerous because it slips away from “the shattered histories you love so much” (“Ordnance Map”) and because “this interval” exposes us frighteningly and beautifully “where everything and I am open” (“Erotica”). In the third section, the poetic voice, ever lucid and always contingent, speaks both sceptically and longingly of destiny and desires: “I came here / with my eyes open, not by some hazard of fate” (“Letter from Exile: *On This Transitory World*”).

Satterfield is at her best when she allows emotion to crack through abstraction. “Double Exposure,” one of the finest poems in the book, locates a Wittgensteinian thought about utterance and silence in the metaphor of the frustration of an unexplored kiss—the kiss of clouds passing silently in the sky and the desire that urges a language embedded in silence: “We madden with what we cannot speak.” Similarly, the elegiac tone of “Late Letter, Tidmarsh Mill, 19” beseeches a lost lover (husband?) to “say you will remember it.” In these poems, what is left unsaid, the elliptical moment (“yr power of altering me—”), usually marked with a dash, is painful and evocative. Such moments intensify and focus the abstruser musings of the poet/philosopher, as do the details of memory (“your eyes hazed jungle green / singed stars, lamps and blessings, your beautiful face”).

The book ends with a superb homophonic translation of Baudelaire’s “La Muse Venale,” called “Mercenary Muse,” a poem that merges body and anticipatory moment in a superbly erotic celebration.