

Tan Lin

"A poem is like a cage, and you decide where it ends."



Interview by Olivia Kan-Sperling
Portrait by Jiv Johnson

I came to Tan Lin's poetry in college, because I had bad insomnia. I didn't really know how to like poetry in general, much less Tan's conceptual, experimental version of it, and when I tried to read his most famous book, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004*. The Joy of Cooking: [AIRPORT NOVEL MUSICAL POEM PAINTING FILM PHOTO HALLUCINATION LANDSCAPE], it felt boring and confusing in a way that trying to read a white wall would be boring and confusing. This seemed good for sleeping. After four years of listening to a thirty-minute clip of one of his readings almost nightly, I realized he was my favorite writer. Tan's writing feels both very soothing and very stimulating at once, a bit like scrolling Instagram. In his own words, "One reads peripherally if one reads at all: non-reading, a look-no-hands skimming; words are not read, they are seen as they are flipped through."

We start off in medias res, smelling Tan's perfume collection – most of it bought for his daughter.

Girls today don't really like to wear Joy, or Arpège, I guess...

Yeah, it's mostly boring. Marc Jacobs Daisy. You don't wear any perfumes yourself?

No, perfume hinders my ability to process things outside of myself. It's a casing. It's the same with clothing; I really like buying it for other people.

Perfume is a drug! Have you ever used mind-altering substances to write?

No.

What's your editing process like? I know you've been working on a novel/memoir about your father for the past twenty years.

I work on something forever. Right now, I have to cut down *Our Feelings* [Were Made By Hand, set to be published in 2025] from 130k to something less, but really I want to add! I revise, revise, revise. My friend has told me I must read the

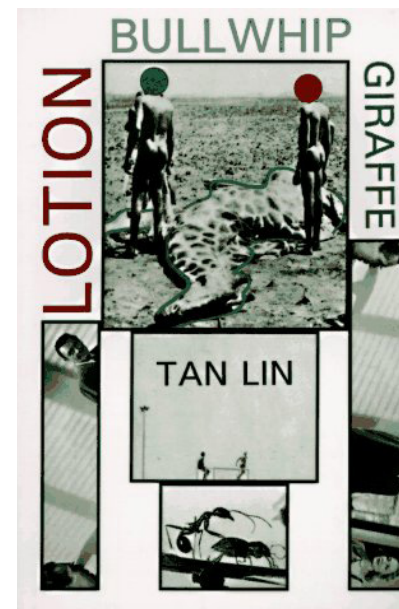
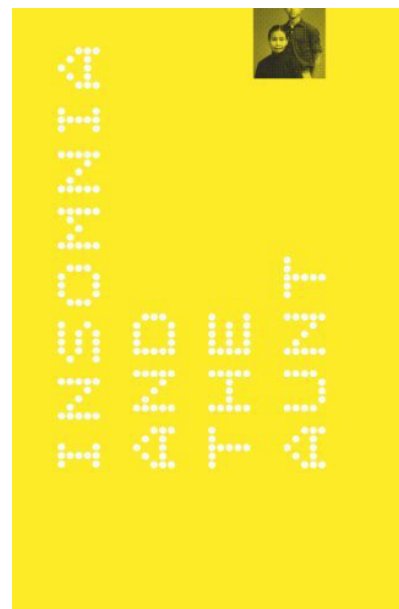
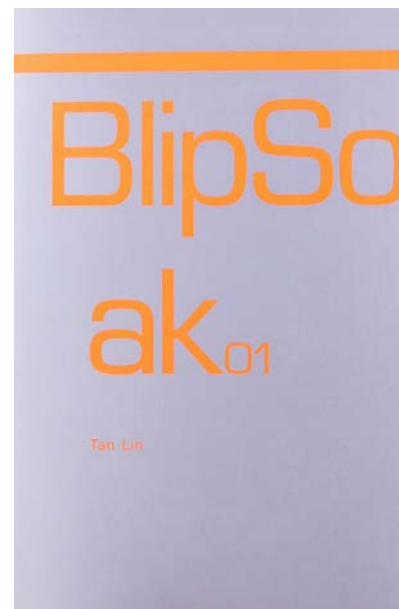
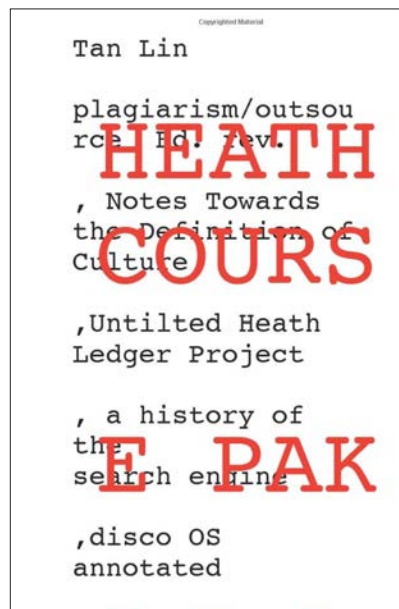
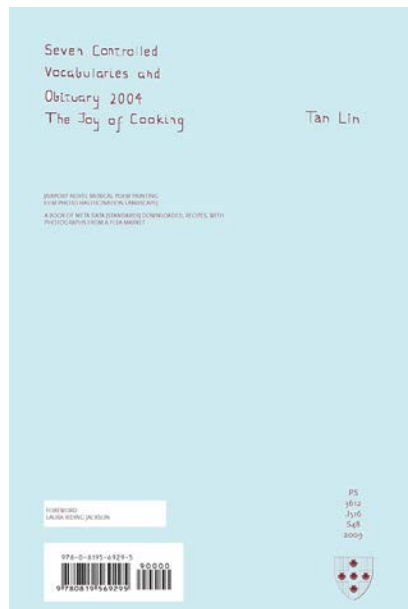
thing through and I've just done that, and now I see it as a shape. But I put this off for so long. I didn't have the patience. The patience required for fiction is much greater than that for poetry, at least in my case.

What is the difference for you between philosophy and poetry, as genres?

Well in my prose works, not much difference at all. They are aligned with recent medial thinking, so it makes philosophy a sort of time-based or narrativized event, but I suppose I'm trying to convert an event into something more like an envelope, or a shape, or an atmosphere. A philosophy lodged in a place that is mutating, or a landscape, something like that. Or maybe a smell. The acquisition of knowledge is accretive and incomplete at any given moment.

I wanted to ask about the mood of boredom. To what extent do you actually, genuinely like boredom?

I'm just lazy. If you're really lazy, you just don't want to do things. I can sit around for hours, doing basically nothing. And that's kind of boring, but I find it pleasurable. Extremely so. It's kind of amazing how much time I can while away. And also, more generally, I don't really like the big emotions. When you go see a movie, they try to wrench as much emotion out of you as possible, even though 99 percent of our life is not spent experiencing any emotions at all. We don't experience hate or love very often, we just live in a mushy vanilla kind of place. That's why I'm more interested in moods, which we inhabit more genuinely, like when we're sitting around with a kind of mildly heightened awareness of who we are in a place where we're not doing very much. I'm interested in that kind of steady state that has a minimal emotional impact on your psyche, where you're just coasting along. Story is so artificial and untruthful. When I pick up most novels I'm like, "Oh God, don't do this to me." It's so tiring.



From Left to Right: Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking: [AIRPORT NOVEL MUSICAL POEM PAINTING FILM PHOTO HALLUCINATION LANDSCAPE], Wesleyan, 2010; Health Course Pack, Counterpoint Press. 2012; Blipsoak0, Atelos, 2003; Insomnia and the Aunt, Kenning Editions, 2011; Lotion Bullwhip Giraffe. Sun & Moon Press, 1996.

How did you become a poet?

I wrote poetry all through high school. I went to a public high school in Southeastern Ohio, a free-form high school without walls and only partitions and no grades. We were sorted into phases, which meant that half the time I had no classes. It was a bit like college. So I took courses at Ohio University, mainly philosophy, but also some poetry. I read Kant, George Berkeley, Plato, Aristotle, and the existentialists, and quite a lot of poets who were contemporary then: James Wright, Mark Strand, Bishop, Stan Plumley, Kinnell, Ashbery, Ammons, Plath, Merrill, O'Hara... the works, really. I worked in publishing for a year at Viking Penguin, as a slush reader, then I was in grad school [at Columbia] for quite a long time. During that time, I thought I'd take poetry classes again, so I went to the 63rd Street Y, where John Yau was teaching a class. He gave us these assignments, like use "abracadabra" on line 1, then "pizza" on line 7. His only other instruction was not to make any sense. This really opened something up for me. If it hadn't been for John, I would not be a poet.

What were you writing?

All my early poems came from these constraint-based exercises; each was trying to solve a problem. I ended up with quite a few, and then I had the problem: how to structure all this? I thought it might be better to just hit the reader over the head with everything at once. But everyone said, "This is indigestible!" That's the problem I've had with every book of mine; they're all indigestible. With poems, you can just divide the thing into sections and kind of get away with it. I don't think it's completely convincing.

That's funny, because your work always gives the impression of an underlying structure that you, the reader, are trying to excavate, and I think that's part of the appeal. How would the work be different if you told the reader what problem you were trying to solve?

I guess I'd have to lay out the scaffolding in a way that is also interesting as scaffolding.

Do you think of your books as all part of the same project, or is each completely distinct?

I try to never write the same book twice.

Lotion Bullwhip Giraffe is language poetry in a lyrical mode, whereas Seven Controlled Vocabularies [7CV] was an attempt to do an artist's book in the genre of poetry. That was the first time I really dealt with how images might affect the reading process. But the temporal register is crucial to everything.

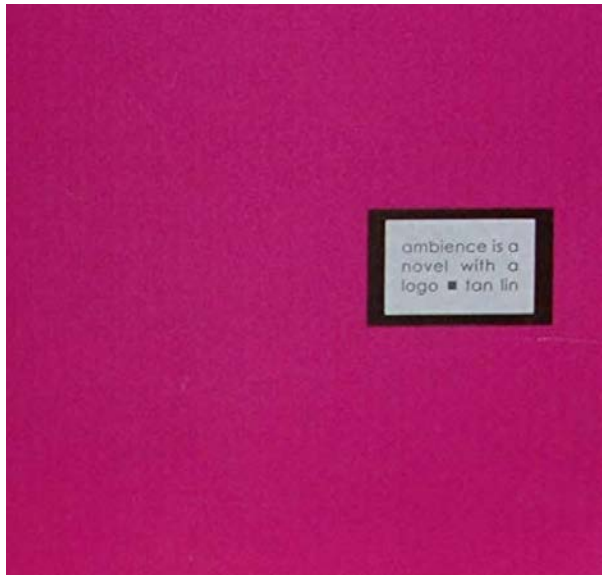
What about your latest book?

Our Feelings is interesting to me because it's ongoing; I don't think of it as having an end. It's something revised by the time in which it was written, which I suppose is the same thing. I put in repetitions that reflect this procedure or operation endlessly. For example, the book returns to a scene with a pile of books. But the second time we encounter that pile, there are different books in it, because there are different books on my desk as I'm revising, and it's in the same room but the room is as much a part of the authoring system – where writing, the writing of itself, is a recursive calculation. That room is, really, the novel writing itself. What does the room do after the human inside it is gone? It keeps writing.

With Our Feelings, I was trying to figure out: what's a family? How does it transmit material over time? Because it transmits a lot of material, some of it memory, some of it objects. It's maybe a medium, but that would indicate something static, a kind of rigid form, grid, or container, when I suppose I was after something that more closely approximates an atmosphere, or the concept of mediality more generally. There are a lot of storage devices in the novel: libraries, books, storage units, boxes with metadata, indexing systems, and a host of structural organizing nodes that we tend to associate with books (indexes, prefaces, captions to illustrations). These are all the mechanical devices and technologies marshaled to store and also to transmit information – in this case, the information that is a family.

I liked something you wrote, where you said that the right way to appreciate John Ashberry's work is by skimming it. Is that a mode that readers should bring to your work, too?

Yes. Ashbery said somewhere that a good way to read him is with a TV playing loudly in the background, and that gets at the distracted stream of language he sometimes produces. That way, the reading is continual; it's ongoing, and it's sort of in the foreground and the background at the same time. You are sort of half aware and, I suppose, half processing it. And that means that you will have to go back and read it again because you missed a lot the first time around. All those practices in which you go over something you've already read are interesting to me. That's where things feel true to life. Because if you're really thinking about something, trying to figure something out, it takes time. And you rethink things, decisions you've made. Who are my parents to me now? The whole notion that you're going to read something and finish it and it's done – you'll have understood something – is kind of antithetical to how life proceeds.



Ambience is a Novel with a Logo
Katalanch Press, 2007.

Can you talk a little about your interest in Warhol?

Warhol for me is about genre, or more specifically about translations, whether it's from photography into painting, film into painting, or film into photography – like his Screen Tests. That's a movie, but the people aren't allowed to move, so you get a film that's trying to be a photograph. He was really an artist in optical effects.

Do you ever have feelings or emotions when looking at his work?

Not so much with Warhol. A lot of this type of work I don't tie directly to the feelings, per se. They're more related to processing systems – of imagery, of objects, of genre. The feelings feel like operations, they exist in between things; there is something relational, recursive and medial about them. The artists that influence me don't make expressive work.

What artists influence you?

I'm looking at the xeroxes of Pati Hill, Jef Geys' photographic/newspaper work, and Claude Closky's books. All of them are interested in mediality more generally. And all of them explored books and printed matter in fascinating ways.

I'm always looking for that kind of material, whether it be written or visual. I used to go see a lot of art for that reason, especially because anyone who did poetry wrote for the art magazines. But as one gets older, there's less and less that can change your practice. What can I read now that can change my writing? I go through a ton of material in search of that. And I just skim a lot.

How do you recognize craft, and how do you teach it?

The ability to surprise me. That's it. How did you surprise me? And how hard did you think about something? What are the techniques that you used to pull it off? It's intricate. A poem is like a cage, and you decide where it ends, and how you're going to move me through it with punctuation and moving from one word or unit structure to the next. And then you need to recursively travel backwards to see what is starting again, which is a way of recognizing certain patterns repeating but with some variation, which is where the unexpected comes in. Once an expectation is established, it can be broken. In any poem there is a lot of forwards and backwards motion, and this kind of movement is a little incessant. So a good poem has a lot of broken expectations and a lot of pattern and near-pattern matching. The effect is quite asymmetrical, I think. And hopefully you can link the unexpected to the emotions or mood of the poem.

But that thing inside yourself isn't necessarily a feeling?

No, it's just finding something you didn't expect to find in yourself. Is that a feeling? It's something that wasn't entirely premediated or programmed and has somehow emerged in something about a relation, and this relation extends to the reader, who participates but doesn't directly control the order or choice of words. That thing I said about the cage earlier – it's where a little something manages to escape. 😊



Honor Levy

"I'm very impressionable."



Interview by Olivia Kan-Sperling
Portrait By Olivia Parker & Parker Hao

I think "Voice of a Generation" is supposed to mean something like "vessel." Vessels are a technology older than writing, though in a way they prefigure it. They're like memes: multipurpose. The fact that "being a vessel" is itself a meme indexes the truth that every twelve-year-old today has the kind of intuition for the infinite plasticity of word and image you used to have to study semiotics to acquire. This is why we're living through an explosion of linguistic creativity; it's also why Twitter eventually makes you feel like words are meaningless, and you are dead or "deconstructed."

But Honor Levy is not a twelve-year-old. What makes Honor a "V.O.G." is her ability to take all those dead metaphors, junk-bits of content rendered inert by their repetition – on Reddit, in Shakespeare – and give them new life, i.e. emotion. And she makes it look easy! Levy's sentences hopscotch through intricate sequences of signs with perfect control and infectious glee. Read and watch them play!!!

Your story Halloween Forever starts with an amazing description of what posting feels like: "I nod to every security camera I see. It's just who I am. When I was young I... smiled and I showed my teeth. In the elevator or at the bank I would look right into the little orb, grinning as wide as I could... I just liked to smile at cameras." Does your desire to write come from the same place – the instinct to smile at cameras?

Yes, I think so. If you're looking into a camera, it's mysterious: you don't know who's behind it. And then if you're looking at a page, you don't know what's going to be on it. Right now, though, I don't want anyone to look at me. Posting feels like making Horcruxes: I'm not even all here. Also, I don't want anyone to put the evil eye on me.

Same. I believe in magic.

Yeah, I'm having a huge breakdown because I keep getting those TikToks that are like "something bad will happen to you tomorrow; use this sound or else!!!!" And I can't not do it, because I have used the positive ones to get good things to happen to me, so I know they're real.

Were you always into the "mystical"? Sort of. When I was a little kid, I was so afraid of bad luck things. Like, if I don't tap my foot four times, my parents are going to die. But then I was like – wait... what if I do tap my foot eight times and then... I become president?

Making your own spells is a lot like writing.

I wanted to be pagan in middle school, but I couldn't pose like that. I couldn't perform like that. Some real people we know gave their blood to demons in middle school. No wonder they're having problems. Meme magic, memetic magic, is definitely real.

I guess the main difference between spells and posting on the one hand, and writing on the other, is that writing doesn't get you an immediate reaction; there's no real feedback. Well, I write to find out what'll happen in a story. And for a long time, the reaction I was getting from posting – being replied to or, now, "remixed" – felt like finding out the next part of the story. I sound like a Boomer, but that's it: we were telling a story together. You remember that summer [of the vibe shift]; you remember the Beauty! But then, the Story just ended, with posting. Everything on my feed started looking the same. Yeah. Because everything started looking like what you were doing? Maybe. It's like Rene Girard: the things that look most similar to us are the things we have the biggest beef with. But really, we were all just channeling. What did we used to say? "I'm just a vessel."

Well, you're channeling better than most. Do you feel like a Zoomer?

The actual Zoomers are going to come at me for this, but yeah. And look, not that I'm F. Scott Fitzgerald, but he wrote *Tales of the Jazz Age*, and he was part of the Lost Generation. I didn't have MySpace. I didn't have Facebook or AIM. But I also don't have Roblox.

Has "newness," or the contemporary, always been something you were fascinated by?

Yes. I think it's a terrible instinct. I wish I was super curious about the Fertile Crescent. I do listen to the *Golden Bough* now before bed, so I'm trying to see the eternal things. But yeah, I've always been obsessed with what's up. When I learned the word *Zeitgeist* in ninth grade – mind blown.

Sorry, but I think you are the "Voice of Our Generation," and it's not because you're using internet speak; it's because your book is so self-reflexively grappling with its time period – with the world at large, and your place within it.

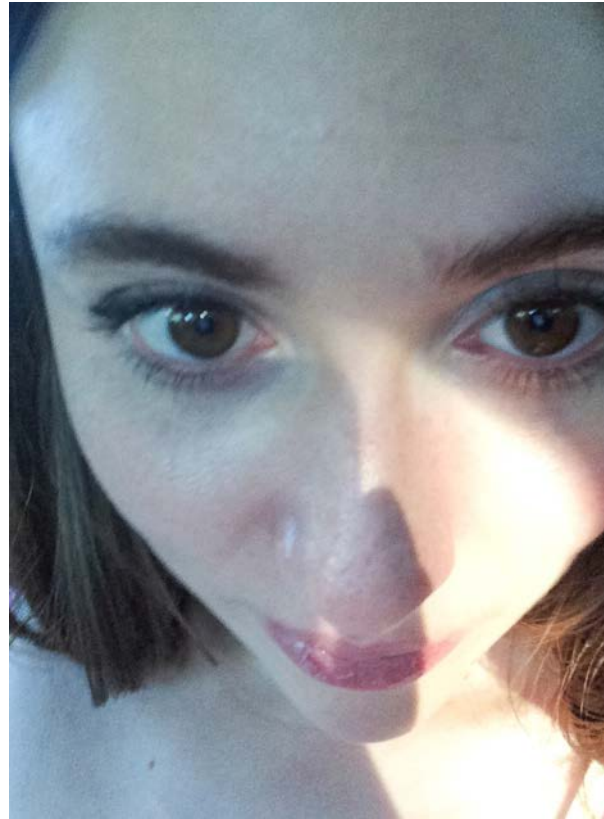
Yup, V.O.G. It's such a joke. It's great to be branded. I'll take it for a second. But it's a curse. Like being Hanna Horvath. And eventually, I think my writing does sound like a lot of other people's writing nowadays, and I think that's a good thing.

But I think your prose has a distinct rhythm, one that's really unique and compelling. Do you have a sense of where that comes from?

Maybe from studying playwriting in college. I'm a theater kid. Plays are still interesting to me because they're so cringe. Certain people just can't watch them because they're not open enough to being embarrassed or vulnerable.

Is it easier to be vulnerable, or honest, in writing than in real life?

Well, originally, when I was working on the book with Gian[carlo diTrapano of *Tyrant Books*], I was going to call the book *Here Lies*, after one of Dorothy



Parker's books. Conceptually, it was supposed to be cultural criticism and personal essays that were actually just lies. I wrote three of the stories ["Cancel Me," "Good Boys," and "Internet Girl"] from the perspective of an alter ego. It's easier to tell the truth when you're telling the truth as an evil bad girl. I mean, I'm not Nicki Minaj or anything: the character is me, but she's what I imagine people see when they don't like me. So that was freeing. You can just make everything more dramatic. You're already a character when you're typing. You're already performing.

What was the first stuff you ever wrote, as a kid?

I went to a hippie school where they believed that you learn how to read "when you're ready." So my nice parents read to me every night, and I would dictate stories which they'd write them down for me. When I was 10, I learned how to read and write in two weeks. I wrote a lot of poetry, then. Most of it was bad, but this poem from fourth grade has some bars in it:



"I used to be caught in a tangled web of wishes, not knowing what I wanted. Maybe I wanted to be a unicorn. Or princess Diana. Then I learned she died. That dream fell with a boom."

Wow.

It's so performative! Of course I didn't want to be a unicorn when I was in fourth grade. I just thought, this is what people want to hear. I want to make a collection of all of our friends' early writing. Wouldn't that be amazing?

Yeah. I go back and read teenage fanfic all the time for inspo. Those writers are so uninhibited.

It's the best. Even just the tagging system on Archive of Our Own! Those tags, read in order, are poetry. I love the section "20th Century Real Life Figures." There's crazy beautiful fanfic about Theodore Roosevelt in there...

Who are your influences in literature?

I'm not sure I can claim them as "influences," but: Bret Easton Ellis, of course; I went to college because of him. Dorothy Parker: I think she's



funny, and I try to be funny. One of my favorite books is Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*. My favorite short story ever is *The Valley of the Girls* by Kelly Link. But I guess everything is my influence, because I'm very impressionable.

What about non-literary influences? You're obviously a "multimedia artist."

There are certain songs that just make me so happy that I was born in the 21st century. Like Nicki Minaj's *Roman Holiday*. I would love to emulate that. And just being in online spaces has influenced me: random Neocities pages, stuff related to *Serial Experiments Lain*. I wish I could say *Death Note* influenced me, but I could never write something that genius, that dynamic. I would love to make a video game or music videos or a hyperlinked scavenger hunt game. *Doki Doki Literature Club!* is amazing. It's such a fun and interactive piece of art, and it subverts the form. Have you played *AI Dungeon*? It's a text-based multi-user game that uses AI.

People were constantly complaining that it was making their characters pedophiles, because that's what other people were doing on it. But it's incredible.

What was your AI Dungeon character?

I think I was Hunter Biden and Tiger King. That sounds so dated now, but that's what was funny back then.

What are your favorite websites?

I love tvtropes.org. That one's a classic. Ambitious and gorgeous. I love Know Your Meme because it's such a good reference; they're doing great work over there. And then Internet Archive is the ultimate. I've found music on there that blew my mind. There's this one Australian artist from the early 2000s whose music is all samples and mashups of different songs. It makes me think how many crazy things are archived on Internet Archive; how many words or trends we think are new actually already existed.

I just get into staying up really late at night on stimulants looking at these websites, like something's guiding me. Did you ever play the Wikipedia speed run game? We used to play it in history class all the time when we weren't paying attention. I thought I made it up but turns out, everyone plays this.

You think you make up a lot of things... Five people invented the telephone... But anyways, the game is like: How can you get from Banana to Hitler in the least number of link clicks? And you try to find "Lusitania" and go from there.

That game seems like another good prompt for writing.

That's my dream. "Being generative." And that's what Chat GPT is really fun for. You can teach it games to play. I like to use it for anagrams. And it lies a lot.

Do you still write those ChatGPT poems?

I'm trying, but the current version isn't as collaborative as it was with Playground, where you'd just be sending sentences back and forth with the AI.

Now I'm mainly having it do limericks. I like the prompt "Give me an Edward Gorey-style rhyming limerick about — or a cautionary tale about — X person." To give them a roast. GPT is mainly good for gossiping. I live in LA, and everybody lives in New York, and if I want to gossip, I have to gossip over text. Writing out gossip feels lame unless it's in the form of a limerick.

Most of contemporary literature is basically just gossip because people in publishing just want to read about their colleagues having open relationships.

Yeah, an industry that runs on itself can't be good. No one is going to be reading this stuff in 100 years. Although, who knows? I like reading those French salon people with their little roman à clef gossip books. That's why I think it is important to hang out, go to parties.

Yeah. Do you ever want to move back to New York for that reason? Your prose feels very LA — the Bret Easton Ellis influence is very clear.

I love New York, but really, I want to live in London now. British people are so cute and smart. They all have "hobbies" and they want to know about yours.

What's your hobby, then?

I guess my hobby is going on Internet Archive and looking for things that I think are interesting and organizing them. If any coders are reading this, I want to have a personal webpage where I can post all my favorite links... For example, another favorite website is Open Source Psychometrics, the site with all the personality tests, where they give you really in-depth "What Character am I?" quizzes.

Have your character quiz results changed over time?

Yes, but only because Euphoria came out. I used to always be Audrey from Twin Peaks, which I don't relate to at all... I'm not a little adventuress... But now I'm just Jules from Euphoria no matter how hard I try. 😊

