

## HERE ARE WE AS LONG AS

as long as we are here

*Antigone Sr./Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at the Judson Church  
(L);  
el GAM, 8 enero 2014*

We are el chico en la fila B  
we are going to dance  
by watching our work  
track forward from Pinochet  
SIDA Cassandra's scream  
we are every neuron  
in Rob Fordeyn's  
cocky swing we are  
mothers to each other  
in one fierce dream we  
are going from Harlem  
to Paris in Santiago  
de Chile we are not  
going to stop coming  
home a matter of vindication  
for every man who couldn't  
get up and say  
this is who I am  
this is what we are

Kathleen Heil

As a writer and dancer, writing poems to document dance allows me to integrate these seemingly separate practices, though not necessarily in a straightforward manner. The challenge lies in finding the right terms with which to translate the elements of a dance or movement experience onto the page. I want to avoid merely describing the experience, since in my mind that is akin to (and no more useful than) providing a literal translation of a foreign language, and instead find some essence of the performance that I can organize the poem's energy around, so that the poem, ideally, stands on its own as a work of art — not as a definitive document, but as one that resonates back to the dance work for those familiar with the piece, with openings into new meanings (and perhaps a burgeoning curiosity to seek out the performance) for those who are not.

As with literary translation from one language to another, “translating” a performance into a poem takes a different form according to the nature of the dance being documented, and the nature of my own relationship to the piece. In documenting Trajal Harrell's *Antigone Sr./Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at the Judson Church (L)*, which I saw in the GAM in Santiago, Chile, in January 2014, it took me a good while to find a way into the poem that became “as long as we are here” for a number of reasons. For one, I initially resisted the dense-with-references, language-heavy nature of the piece; I didn't want the poem to be a simple mash-up of the text spoken by the performers, as that seemed to be getting *around*, and not *into*, the essence of the piece.

Another difficulty was that, as a viewer, I found myself most captivated by the solos performed at the piece's beginning, especially Rob Fordeyn's dancing and its lush, abandoned quality; and yet these dances were not the essence of the performance and its energy, but simply a highly salient feature. Furthermore (and not surprisingly), I couldn't separate the performance from my memories of viewing Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning*, or from the knowledge that many of the people depicted in the film were no longer alive. It was also impossible to divorce my experience of the performance from the country in which I viewed it, Chile, with its complicated past and still-conservative social attitudes toward queerness and homosexuality. Finally, my memories of the performance were inseparable from my experience of watching someone else watch the piece, which I could not help but do that evening, as there was a young man sitting two seats away who captivated me (and my friends and I were so close to the stage it was only natural for me to angle my head toward him when there was something happening center stage or stage left). He wore a look of total absorption as he watched, and there was something ineffably moving and joyful about his experience of the performance, both very private and very public. Ultimately, rather than resist these myriad elements or try to reconcile them in a false hierarchy, I let the poem be what it wanted to be, a record of all of these contradictions and concordances, and a tribute to the man sitting two seats away: his exuberant engagement. A beauty.

Kathleen Heil (Fayetteville, Arkansas)

**Kathleen Heil** is a writer and dancer. Her poems, stories, essays, and translations have appeared in *Diagram*, *Guernica*, *New Delta Review*, *The Barcelona Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Quarterly West*, and elsewhere. More information at [kathleenheil.net](http://kathleenheil.net)