

The Rebuttal

A Protactile Poem

JOHN LEE CLARK

Background

Protactile encompasses movement (a philosophy that emerges from the literal connection and touch centered in DeafBlind lives), practices (the application of those knowledges of touch and connection), and language. Distinct from visual ASL (and growing more so each day), Protactile has its own lexicon and grammatical features. The essence of *protactile* as an adjective is “dynamic, proprioceptive perception. . . . Not merely feeling something but both feeling it and feeling being felt by it” (Clark 2023).

“The Rebuttal” is a Protactile poem, with an English counterpart, that responds to an 1835 poem by Lydia Huntley Sigourney about a DeafBlind girl, Julia Brace. The publishing industry is set up to support English, but how best to publish and archive Protactile?

Description of the Protactile Poem “The Rebuttal”

The video shows me sitting in the classic Protactile three-way formation with Heather Holmes sitting to my left and Jelica Nuccio sitting to my right (figure 28.1). Our right knees are pressed against each other, and our left knees give warmth and presence by touching the next person’s flank.

Throughout the performance, Heather’s right hand is on my left hand and Jelica’s left hand is on my right hand. My hands do the exact same things, in symmetry, so that they receive the same message. Their other hands rest together on my knee. From time to time, they react to my poem by squeezing my leg.

I note to them the title of the poem, “The Rebuttal.” Before beginning, I draw their hands to my chest as I take a deep breath and blow on their hands.

The poem begins. I touch their upper bodies and settle both my closed hands on their chests near where their hearts would be. My knuckles begin to rhythmically press against their chests. It is a pumping cadence. I shift my hands, where each one now has two fingers extended. Those two fingers slide and press across their chests toward their arms, leading down to my knee.



Figure 28.1. Screenshot from John Lee Clark's "The Rebuttal."

Tactile description of Clark: Short hair of feline softness. Warm and smooth hands. A scent of patchouli. Flutters betray his exhilaration.

Video available at DeafBlind Interpreting National Training and Resource Center, "#PTSTOMPS: The Rebuttal," February 1, 2020, <https://www.dbinterpreting.com/news/ptstomps-the-rebuttal>.

After a few slide presses, my hands scoot back to their hearts to do more closed-hand pumping. They fly back to where I left off the sliding presses. Back and forth, my hands pump their hearts and push the slide presses down their arms, down, down, down. Pressure builds up.

When the pumping has pushed the slide presses all the way down to their hands on my knee, my fingers hook between their fingers, fumbling.

The pumping force now pulls up along their arms. Back and forth, my hands pump their hearts and tug-press against their arms, up, up, up.

When the pumping has pulled the tugging all the way back to their chests, the pulling continues past their hearts, up, up, up. The tug presses wrap around behind their necks. There, my fingers spread over the backs of their heads and begin to vibrate.

The pumping is abandoned, and my vibrating hands roar back down their necks, across their chests, past their hearts, and down their arms to their hands on my knee. My vibrating hands clasp their hands, and all six hands are lifted up, vibrating, high above our heads. A pause; the vibrating ceases. I slowly bring all six hands back down to my knee. A pause. The poem is finished.

A Counterpart Poem in English

The Protactile poem has an English counterpart. This is not a translation but rather a parallel poem. The English parallel itself is an erasure of a problematic

poem written in 1835 about Julia Brace. The erasure inspired the composition of the Protactile poem.

THE REBUTTAL

An erasure of Lydia Huntley Sigourney's "On Seeing the Deaf, Dumb, and Blind Girl, Sitting for Her Portrait"

Guide, passion, catch what
 Hath no speech. Unknown
 Joys, power, and meditation's
 Unfolding sky. Feeling draws
 Heart and wildering language
 Still without speech to
 Mind. Philosophy fails to
 Sway this future child.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Clark, John Lee. 2023. *Touch the Future: A Manifesto in Essays*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

