

# Guide to **idEAL CiTiES**

by erika meitner

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## Author Asks:

- 1) I took my title for this book—*Ideal Cities*—from visual artist Kim Beck’s project of the same name (which can be seen [here](#)). Can you find any connections between the poems in the book, and Beck’s project?
- 2) There are two epigraphs that open the book—one from Robert Smithson and one from *The Song of Songs*. Are these merely ornamental, or do they speak to issues addresses in the book? If so, how?
- 3) This book is broken into two sections: “Rental Towns” and “Ideal Cities.” How do the sections differ from one another, if at all?
- 4) Poems are often identified as belonging to either the “narrative” or “lyric” poetry traditions. A narrative poem is loosely defined as a poem that tells a story, whereas a lyric poem generally relies more on descriptions of feelings and a musical quality of language. In which category would you be most inclined to place the poems in *Ideal Cities*? Why?
- 5) The poems in *Ideal Cities* contain pop culture references (song titles, cartoon characters, celebrity names, TV show titles) and product names (Peeps, Cadillac, Miracle Blanket, Pyrex), as well as specific retail chain store names (7-Eleven, Food Lion, Waffle House, Burger King, etc.). In a 1999 interview in the *Literary Review*, poet David Trinidad says the following about the use of pop culture in poems: “I suppose there’s still, in some quarters, this attitude that poetry has to be above all that, that it has to be this serious, highbrow thing, that the rest is passing garbage and won’t last. But it doesn’t feel like that for me.” Do you agree or disagree with Trinidad on pop culture in poetry? How would the poems in *Ideal Cities* change if, for example, in “Interstate Cities,” the 7-Eleven became a generic ‘convenience store’?

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## Writing Exercises:

- 1) The poem “In Dispraise of Heat” was written in a way that combined two different writing exercises. The first was a challenge my friend Mary Biddinger had given me, which was to write a poem where every single line was end-stopped (which is way harder than it sounds). The second was one that I had come up with, which was to watch an old movie from the Prelinger Archives to see if I could use some phrases from it in a poem. I ended up choosing this film, “[More Dangerous than Dynamite](#),” made in the 1940’s to warn housewives about the effects of cleaning clothes with gasoline. I also wove two more personal mini-narratives into the poem—one about my son’s fever, and another about a friend who had recently killed himself.

The [Prelinger Archives](#) are an online goldmine of ‘ephemeral’ films (films sponsored by corporations and organizations, educational films, and amateur and home movies, produced to fulfill specific purposes at specific times). Find a film from the Prelinger Archives and watch it while taking notes of memorable phrases or images from the movie. See if you can weave one personal experience into the poem, and try end-stopping all your lines.

- 2) “January Towns” was written in response to an ekphrastic assignment given to me by my friend Oliver de la Paz—to write a poem based, somehow, on the snowglobes of artists Walter Martin and Paola Munoz. You can see these [here](#). “Poem With/out a Face” was written in response to Nina Berman’s photo series “Marine Wedding,” found [here](#).

Your assignment: to use a series of photos or interconnected pieces of art to generate material for a poem. First, view at least ten images in a row, jotting down anything that strikes you on first run-through; then pick at least four of these images, and free-write (timed) for ~3-5 minutes on each photo or art piece. Look over your free writes, and see if you can pull out a thread or emotion that feels pressing to you. Do any of these remind you of a recent feeling, a personal experience, or memory? Follow the visual threads wherever they may lead you!

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### *Recommended Reading:*

#### Non-fiction:

*The Song of Songs*, Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch  
*Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, Robert Smithson  
*The Hands Feel It*, Edith Turner  
*Map is Not Territory*, Jonathan Z. Smith  
*The Pregnancy Book*, William Sears and Martha Sears  
*Skateboarding, Space and the City*, Iain Borden  
*Adventures in Yiddishland*, Jeffrey Shandler

#### Poetry:

*Blessing the Boats*, Lucille Clifton  
*Selected Levis*, Larry Levis  
*The Incognito Lounge*, Denis Johnson  
*Ariel*, Sylvia Plath  
*Tar*, C.K. Williams  
*Steal Away*, C.D. Wright  
*Museum of Accidents*, Rachel Zucker

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### *If This Book Had a Soundtrack:*

"Loose Booty" – Sly & The Family Stone  
"Holy Ghost" – The Bar-Kays  
"Do It ('Til You're Satisfied)" – B.T. Express  
"Block Party" – Chuck Brown (featuring D.J. Kool)  
"Start Wearing Purple" – Gogol Bordello  
"Hey, Tsigelekh" – Mandy Patinkin  
"California Dreamin'" – The Mamas & The Papas  
"Cecilia" – Simon & Garfunkel  
"The Midnight Special" – Credence Clearwater Revival  
"The Midnight Special" – Leadbelly  
"Hallelujah" – Jeff Buckley  
"Tin Cans & Twine" – Tortoise  
"Between the Bars" – Elliott Smith  
"Waltz #2 (XO)" – Elliott Smith  
"Wave of Mutilation" – Pixies  
[Pharaoh's Daughter](#)

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### *Artistic/Visual Influences:*

[Kim Beck](#) - [Nina Berman](#) - [Rachel Harrison](#) - [Walter Martin & Paola Munoz](#) - [Rachel Whiteread](#)