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LANA TURNER

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calvin bedient & david lau

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Poems

!

We begin of course at the abyss

(Hölderlin)

Introduction to Part 1: Writing the Between

Calvin Bedient

In the poetry of the United States, a distinctively native originality was based on a political idea, namely the sovereignty of the democratic individual. No king or queen to be had except when a little nobody swelled up like a frog and proclaimed the supremacy of something she was or had access to, spaces and spades of it. The quasi-divinity of the self was this poetry's boast, base, peak. For Emerson, who brought it forward, it lay in an identification with "the self-same power" that fostered the Rhodora. Whitman released it in a stunningly capacious embrace of men, women, calamus plants, the Brooklyn ferry, immense geography, without for a moment letting go of his self hug. Dickinson's center of things was her own creative white heat, no one's hotter: a heat of course seeking circumference. Hart Crane, a sort of saturated, glittering Whitman, pursued a vague religious destiny for the country: an ideal place "To conjugate infinity's dim marge / Anew . . . !" And Wallace Stevens promulgated a nobility of the imagination so deep-rooted and tall that it could name its fictions truth. This historical run of sovereign attitude, this all-too-white American passion for expansiveness and welcome, led to a "canto" poetics – or, in Dickinson's case, pent-up charges that threaten to explode, shocking space.

Then this Unitedstatesian sovereignty dried up. Our writers are no longer fucking sovereign anymore.

What followed still contains fresh and powerful voices, indisputably. But the "infinity" of personal and national boundaries gave way to the specter of both a national and personal existence without any compelling justification. From imaginative highs back to a near base point of nature, Schopenhauer's nature, Darwin's nature, not Emerson's.

If there are subsequent styles of originality, they are not exclusively North American. A currently re-burgeoning variety startlingly originated in the 1870's in France. It is not only unindebted to our purple mountains' majesty; it has no country, and it never had a people. Nor does it have a name that suits it (and this is a condition that suits it).

The poems in this first section of the magazine traffic between affect-clouded phenomenology and object-distracted psychology; they don't rest in anything that ends in "-logical" not even "illogical," since they outwit the weakness usually associated with this last. "I won't be passive, apologetic, or silenced," this poetry might be saying, "just because subjectivity supposedly has no leg left to stand on, let alone kick with, in the modern capitalist and scientific world. In fact, as you see in these pages, there is still an opening in the field. It is even unlimited."

The poems bypass not only Conceptualism's mental and emotional shut-downs but also the proper – sometimes *quite* proper – boundaries of earlier work kept within the walls of "utility or good sense" (Marcel Raymond, *De Baudelaire à Surrealisme*). It builds on Rimbaud's wildly wheeling mix of objectivity and subjectivity (which in the boy Rimbaud was a natural growth at once burred and flamboyant). Early in the twentieth century, other mixers came along, disturbing language by trampling the cardboard categories of proper grammar and logic, most notably Vallejo in *Trilce*. In sharp contrast with Henri Michaux's observation, "Space – really you can't conceive of this horrible inside-outside, which is true space," the newly cool work descending from Rimbaud and Mallarmé de-horribilizes the distinction "inside-outside" and de-maps it without falling into "a heap of fragments" or shoring them against ruins. Like Gertrude Stein's poetry, the work isn't privative. Filling a gap now after language-liberation and its opposite, language-quoting, it usually steps aside from anxiety and alienation no less than from Modernist pagan *jouissance*. Seldom a halting breath, a moan. To echo O'Hara, *it just goes on its nerve*.

Further, it bares complexities without resolving them. There are no dismounts from difficulties. Nonetheless implacably assured, virtually self-founded, the work is its own authority. The chaos in it is strategic, not an emergency. It plunges in, is swift, active, unsettled, relentlessly inventive, sometimes disjunctive but more often inclined to digression (but from what? It doesn't first take pains to establish a base). It resists the idea of reason as a final mode of knowing. It's intensive, not spatial. The speaker cannot (as it were) *hear* you. As with Gertrude Stein, you have to hear the speaker.

Of course, necessary work can still be done in single-strand realism, under the aegis of rationality, the Cartesian split that Heidegger soaked in existential

blues but saw as both key and lock. I think that, if healthy, the poetry of an age, taken collectively, should be able to express anything. If I inject contrast dye here, it's to stress that this moving-on-by-stepping-back poetry doesn't run continuously in an untangled straight line. It's at once warp and weft; it circles erratically like an electron, and is unanalyzable in the moment.

The poetry does not so much occupy the spaces of older work as reinvent them; objects are reassembled, brought together in a breakaway fashion but without canceling their character of discrete "existents," that which Kant relied on as a wall against nothingness, as traditional poets usually do. In some of the poems included here, objects become part of an experimentally adventurous ongoing weave. Here are two very different examples from *lana10*:

Under the minarets and worm casings
with a star-shaped proboscis and my eyes wormed shut
feeling my way towards a radiant Byzantium
wish I were
with one foothold on the first rung of the helix
with one nodding beatitude and one nodding felicitude
follicule of felicitude and peduculus of beatitude
phallically knocking against my brow idiotically
with one pseudofloral detonator . . .

("Vesica Piscis," Joyelle McSweeney)

and if the gravid
circle opens if the grave there is a city of words or a city of light
and we hold something it is a tabernacle no it is roses
no it is memory no it is atoms or ions or rows this
is a mathematics spreading itself on a space that it makes
and it is always defining a notion of almost everywhere . . .

("Cantor Dust," Kevin Holden)

The poems that follow were not called for so as to exemplify a certain kind of work; most of them came in unbidden. Their common denominators are difficult to pinpoint but I'd start with ambiguity as to what's objective and what's figurative; the "levels" are liquidated.

Of course art lives on the unforeseeable and early twentieth century art became mad for it. Well, it continues, but, as to poetry, it is now newly cool, unfevered. The poems herein may bear a superficial resemblance to the babbling pseudo-discourse current now among some experimental folks, endlessly manipulative, but they have marrow, and steel. The infinite they discover or create is the modern infinite of *a track not parallel to anything you already know* (as in the opening poem by Aditi Machado). This infinite of release from positivism does not so much *lie* between as *open* a between (to take up a suggestion of Badiou's, among others'). William Carlos Williams speaks of it in what may be his most singular poetic moment: "the place between the petal's / edge and."

The poem are constituted by what Sartre called the "affective consciousness" of images, but they retain too much self-possession to approach surrealism. Their worlds are neither orderly nor Dada anarchy. The designation "worlds" may even be too generous, imprecise. But they are nonetheless structured according to their own laws, realms without outline.

Departing from Bergson's *continuous* time-experience (snow globe time, narrative time), time in this new work conveys what is natural to us, namely fractured consciousness, as Bachelard describes it in *Dialectic of Duration*. Or the poetry is simply not invested in time, it stilt-stalks over it, or makes its own time. Nothing in it is lost or found in translation. In no essential an escape from life, it avoids crystal compactness, over-processed perceptions, autobiographical disclosures, de-juiced reflection, sentiments spilling into and out of memory, scenic stasis, packaged drama. It rejects, then, arrangements carefully abstracted from chaos for the reader's entertainment and edification.

The material is organized into crab-wise scuttles that all but encrypt it (which is instantly fascinating, as witness Machado's poem). The authorial

“who” is subsumed by the composition. Above all, you don’t hear a voice communicating in the shallows of consciousness, or for that matter in its depths, in a *thinking* linearity (such as that which crowds even *Best American Experimental Writing*, 2018). Typically, the “subject” is not introverted, on trial; interiority, as such, is not the thing. There is no “thing,” exactly. Of course, poetry itself is always more between and among the words than “in” them (there is no “in,” again exactly); but there can be a magnification of the experience of “between and among,” a higher frequency of signals. Mallarmé (who, however, is not directly recalled by these poems) was a precursor.

The poems collected in this part of the magazine (more so than even the other poems in the issue) are thus constitutionally opposed to the smoothness that Byung-Chul Han, in his little book *Saving Beauty*, calls “the signature of the present time” (“Jeff Koons, iPhones, . . . Brazilian waxing”). They’re like the “false step” in the stairways of old houses, a higher rise meant to trip up thieves. Ever since Cubism dissected its objects “in three dimensions in the course of being transposed into two,” liquidating “sculptural shading” (Clement Greenberg), or for that matter ever since Impressionism, modern seeing and thinking have veered from smooth to disintegrative but not necessarily unrecuperative forms. In particular, the new work destroys the paradigm of a pure object and a pristine subject, and therefore the paradigm of *this* then *that* in clear consequentiality. As newcomer Jamie Green has it (p. 21): “a symbol split in odd manner real fire from five / from three from two / and such can be word making. / a congeries puffs without stretching any container.”

The gates open, the ground is dirty. “The object inundates the subject,” as the philosopher Michel Serres observes in *Statues*. “These two major authorities in no way resemble two solids . . . crockery dogs glaring at one another.”

Aditi Machado (3 poems)

Experiment with Aspic

Here it commences. Here it is endless. Mostly poverty. Somewhat parallel to the railway track. Manure, procession, conniptions. Here it is crisp. A labyrinth. It is here it commences. Lac, it is said. Or albumen. Gourds, chikus, comprehensions of ripeness. What's fresh, what's not, under the same feckless auspices. Luxury, it is said, moves, sometimes, at midday. Mellow the light cast on such euphemistic striations. On the goathooks (up ahead). On the garlands (up ahead up ahead). The muffled scene of death to which the lines proceed, curved. Citrus curling up the light, so tart it is. But here where it commences, here, from where the lines, endless, proceed, here the voices, here the prices. Lacquer on this produce, surreal photography, tainted reverie. Nothing clean yet, presence implied, not seen. It proceeds, an extreme intelligence. Can be held in the hand, is. Slight burn from the citrus, slight build from up the ground. Euphemism for shanty. Euphemism for indigence. Skinny body, slender bean, sturdy drumsticks snap. Nothing clean yet, the causal knives luxuriate. Lone jackfruit,

abandoned beehive. Nightshade in terror of being shook. The lymph is anxious. The child rears her ugly head, slow capacity for memory. Lacquer, she says. Lacquer on this. This kind of traffick is impossible to curb. Her skin is light, the mother's translucent. This is how it begins, the act of comprehending things, softening, into the basket, plastic, the voiceless hellos, a tendency, hushed. An impossible sculptural aspect her eyes laminate. Things mature along this aisle that's endless. And she too, in the town called Fraser, opposite the police station and pork shop, parallel to the railway track, developed symptoms, hysteria, depression, a deviant sexualized mesmerism. She told us, not without resistance, that she had had an education. Her mother spoke the apt languages. She said nothing but lacquer. Lacquer on this. The brain like a jelly, something trapped in it. She views it with her double-eye, its glittering mound of curvatures, lipid-rich broth. We call it in the vulgar gelatin. We will return to this point later. For the child raises her head to the sound of community, which she hears as tribe, later mafia. She appears to comprehend but does not the sorrow of haggling. Whether she might come to say it's only this, let not insure. But it is here it commences. The thickenings of lymph, the persistent shyness, the passions. It is endless. As symbol, luxury, she finds,

and poverty are the same. She listens prodigally. The correlatives appear, disappear. She lacquers them. But poverty is, she finds, in fact, in thought, to be, a word, to her, not otherwise permitted, real. But articulacy was then of elbows and knees. The spirit never quite levels between her mother and the woman on the blue tarp, but they touch hands. The mother communes with nearly everyone. The child rears her ugly head, quizzical. Recrudescence that's luscious, shutting down institutes. Speak, she says, speak, my heart is gelatin. If anything is luxe, it is this severe, unthinkable audio. Palatial, she says. In futures glorious and systematic the word atelier will come to describe this. Pure fragment, this collapse of lines. Curvatures, she thinks. Connoisseurs. The dusty, colloidal elegance, she thinks, of air. She views it with her double-eye, sculptural aspect. A powdery substance overlays things, steady music. For it is here she comes to comprehend, tender, later smell it. We call it in the vulgar money. Speak, she speaks. The humors reside not in but a quarter of an inch away from her, settling sometimes as sweat. She was extraordinarily vulnerable, with not even a rotten core. What might coerce her to nostalgia. Hot tea chilled jelly dissolves. No quality, here, of delicacy. It is nothing and the saw. The recrudescence is luscious. Shuts down law. It began as tendency. Petty crime.

Delirium of touching. Passion of the silk. Subjective correlatives. Desire, dark wishes, ossifications, and abbreviations of sound. The refusal to dance. The turning away inside the apostrophe. Meditative processional. It got heavy. She lacquered it. She viewed it with her vulgar eye. Vulgar, not coarse. She lacquered it. No delicacy obtained. She put it away in its pure future, glittering mound. The opposite of hot tea and a biscuit. Lacquer on it. Endless, mostly luxury. Difficult to discern. The conniptions. Cognitions. This kind of traffick is difficult to curb. But no, it did not affect her. No one was spirited away. This was not the meadow in which she grew. No one haggled, no one withdrew. It was as a lacquer on her.

Rhapsody

A tipping against, as though I against
clement green, appears symmetrical
from way off in the distance I devise.
Do you know this desire? It's a bit like
leaning into something. Sometimes
experience is like that,
nutritional. The thing is, I'm developing
an accent. I don't like it.

I try to narrow it, I hesitate. I try to sing it,
I hesitate. Everyone is about to kneel,
pyrrhic. I mean, the congressional tune,
it seduces my agnostic body. So I'm a little
late to it, but I'm there. I get the bells
orchestrate law. I get the centaurs
are asters. Their conglomeration
awaits our easter gathering. Sunlight
comes through the heightened bulbous
assemblage. In a second I'll commune,
but there is in me a little antinomian
flecked desire. So I hesitate a second,
then go out with them. Into quite the
sunlight, spreading sort of around
very lackadaisical. Very like a floral
spigot. Someone opens the countryside
that opens the aural. Against
the church on the hill.

To which the faithful voluptuously
turn. Which, if they lose, to what
will they genuflect? A deck
built slowly of atheism in the moss-
induced decoalescing sonic

purpose someone decolonized?
It's like innocence way off
in the distance, distorted.
I don't believe in lapsing,
but it's like that.
Like I'm shifting out
of one desire
into another,
asynchronous.

Rhapsody

For in the beginning there was a sound and the sound
was good. I licked it. It made sense. I milked it.
But you see the war unsettled it. A clean historical
break right down the landing strip of it. I licked it.
Something in the shape of it, something in the
touching of it. The music went out of it. And my desire
for it, a widening gyre. Lyre? You sense it? We lost
our measure. I licked it. This myth.

Andrew Zawacki (2 poems)

SNOWFLAK

Climbing in the fall line, an avalan

-che on the verge of the tongue, a

splurge might trigger a surge of

further spending, pending

funding :

s1 – s2, with a neutral

filter—lanceleaf yellow,

alyssum white—, my

brain a splash of

keshi pearls a

shot of Bulleit,

neat,

by applying the platform to

other verticals.

STREWNFIELD

Everything I say is a meteor shower : LYRE 02,

folie L9,

flow chart of my daughter

as "As if."

At a hidden site in the Shutterstock

desert, desat

in a state of seige—the color water

is when water is

fleeing a fissile, titanium sky—an error

event has occurred and still will, the feck if

anyone knew, forcing

the planar, air-

gapped Sign

to fly off in every direction,

like a Shepard tone

amassing its arcuate notes

to a tension no eardrum can take : door 108,

an avgas spill

and the target tricked
out to resemble an asset, her intelligence actionable.

Half transistor,

half self

my voice is flensed mid-
flight inside the glare between two screens :

a bezeled Citibank tower
in blue and the NASDAQ ticker spitting its intraday
figures and decimal

squall. An absence
of song is Foley mixing the other
empty sounds.

Under a film set sunset
at gamma 0.7

they're scaling up the latest war

to tell us who we are.

Jamie Green (4 poems)

BEFORE, THEN

1.

a foal pecked.

2.

on a well-shared hand you'll have a hoarding
and by a sleepless steam-tumble train tracks sparking.
there walls making
a symbol split in odd manner real fire from five
from three from two
and such can be word making.
a congeries puffs without stretching any container.
any container it is is a temple
and at a loss at least
and at least silently observers sit
and some more observe indecent humility and so more even only sits planted
on the spot and when split into formal terms of underpowered amatory
diction this becomes that rather concerned concern right up to wherein only
the split-off part in the one hand striking as while hot opportunity bubbles
up primarily as only coins can.

a congeries is but difficult to blame but why. a congeries is and

difficult at home and that is why: the eyes agape means chance reception
of a directed arrow then tremulous shackle-life then the pain of the lingual
baptism which begins as a benign point of point and evolves furthermore
as an interminably drawn and distended prescription-cum-point, the wanting
subject's already all pointed out and too fatigued to point whilst the point
isn't quite there too but certainly the wanting subject and the point are born
of a single dreadful dimension after all and long before there were channels.

a flustering gust transmits a stupefaction called specialization why in
wintry tome-forms we find entombed plant facts not leaning naturally but
made to this wise by a manually rotated and widely trumpeted viewport.

now that there but me i also shape!

hand hands cup container

has and always has in the not-always been

the just very same great-big disembodied hiding hands,

the invisible mother-fathering of incorrigibly

truculent quanta.

sway, saffron. sway and saffron.

SAFFRON CYCLE

a saffron; saffron; a saffron; saffron; saffron; on all saffron; saffron on
saffron and saffron saffron; a saffron; a saffron on saffron on saffron;
saffron no saffron can it all can't all it syrup as ants ants as ants and as ants
have as ants hands and as ants has ants has and as and has asked as ask has
us as has and has as cast as has have as at serves at and as serve as at and
serve serve and as serve us and serves as of and of serves is us of and as a
serve of serve and serve of saw and saw seen and of near saw saw seen is a
serves all saffron so quite charm and quite tho charm and so on charm quite
so in charm is quite charm as charm in quite quite oh charm and so quite so
saffron so and so so in so saffron so saffron is so in so saffron and so in so
so and in saffron a saffron and saffron saffron a foal saffron a saffron charm
saffron and at saffron; saffron a so saffron a saffron and saffron and.

A-VIEW-IS-A-VIEW

when the eye of the heart is threshed
diffusive armor tuned null
my dear leery changeling cast out
a-view-is-a-view
kind of mantics
and the vertiginous unbelief
produced by a treasury miniature
precious dust betwixt fingertips,
whiff of floral puzzle olive oil,
aspirated flute-blown single woody tone
moves me to teary prostration
gut-wrenching wist
then there an inkling of bare perception
without the skirting,
prior to consequences
below symptoms
akin perhaps to arjuna's terrible vision
krishna lending an organ (suspending an organ)
to behold unmitigated sunlight with

[WE HAPPY ROOT]

wee happy root
skipping time altogether
being quite surely itself
the surly glade, the one in which it sits,
casts aspersions at its imperfect mimesis
yet only into its own self
does the wee root gyre
for perfected autochthony
the democratic conviction of the glade
is to be sick on itself with space
despite the profusion and spread
of its bonnie blue florets;
altho, we must nary forget
this very trial of the glade
feeds an exotic legitimacy
called certitude
straight into the maw
of the wee oblivious root

DOUGLAS KEARNEY (3 POEMS)

DOWN
after Rae Armantrout

1.
I like it—
of my hair approach,
she says,
once I make plain
my angle.

2.
“St.” is holy unless the one
on which you walk or
perhaps moreso if
trampled.

3.
Recanting the evil recording
—the Black one—
the artist cuts into
but away through

his apology.

He only says
he'll go down.

*

There, the alphabet is weather.

ALPHABET ST. (1988)

If it lyed, was whipped, behaves
& bounces or it bounces. Splits
the ends, the mane, spilt past what's man.

This man, hip to death, splits to make a murmuring merman, made
boots on high, like they-stay-wet-with-sky-caught-in-the-water blue.

“Put out the fried!!!” screed all those all-fired fearers fearing all fire is Hell. He'll heel the distortion.
The letters fly like the noun.

Going down, going down, go the crown of burnt sugar spun out his cheeks.
This tress, that, the hot pink singses the blue blouse

no whering him to everywhere—the digital halo knocks out what's permanent from special effect.

RASPBERRY BERET (1985)

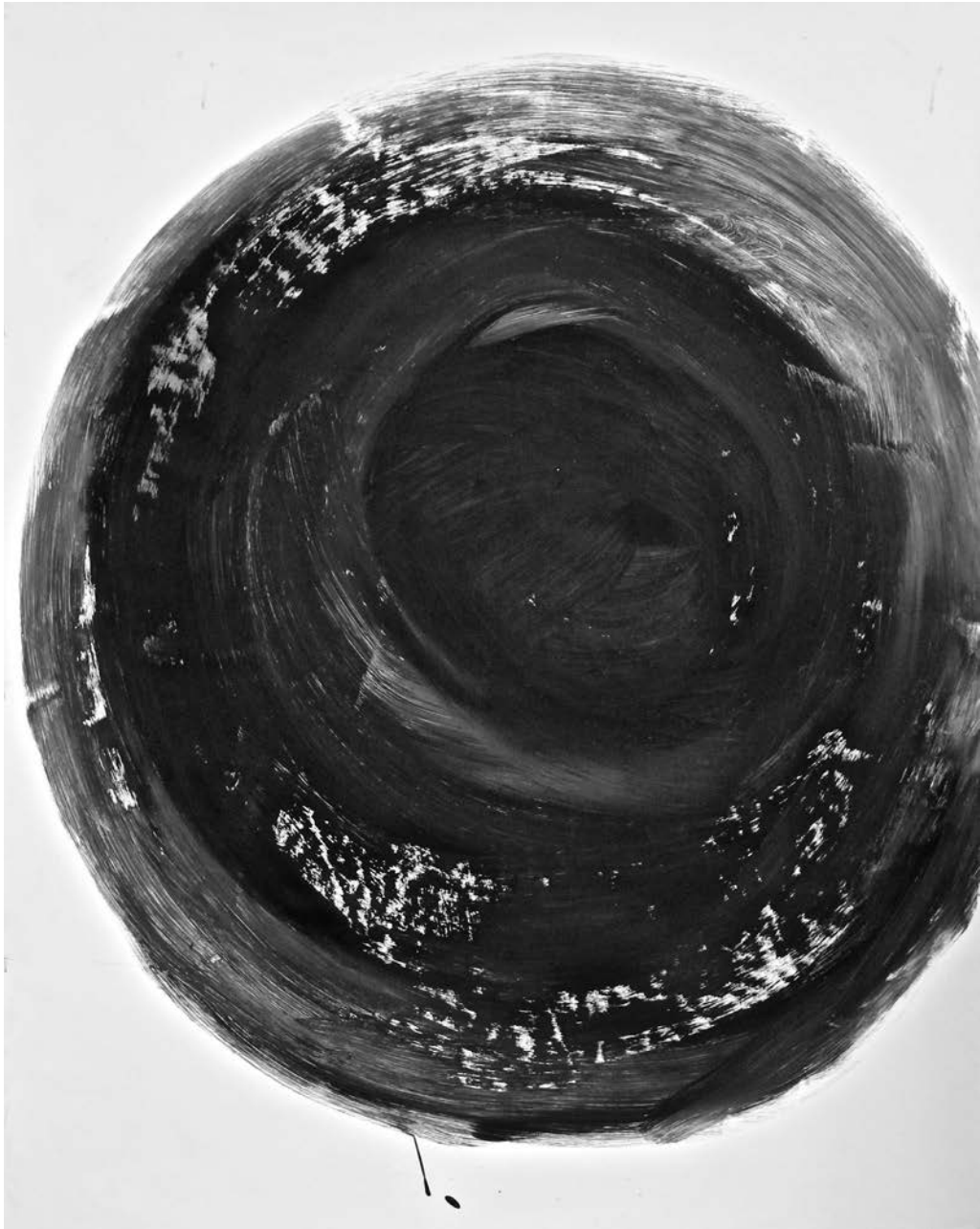
Thistle in Eden, eventually the caustic rain burned the pop & was this an MJ do/don't?

The cover washed him for to "psych!"—I'm not there;

clip: the cartoon blanched the speaker, a botched job, that done did do, dude's Purple
curl recoiled cells. He cloudbanked all that white light—I'm not then;

frame in a frame a frame at a time—

thistle in Edenic garden of versions. Synching. Something crawled, a cold caught, the
burr like an ushanka that won't listen— y'all don't hear me.



Brian Shields, 2018, mixed media on paper, 36x28 inches

Susan McCabe

When in Love Goes Fear

(for 'Annah Sobelman)

I am a boudoir full of crushed stones.
I never did get to finish my story about the Baltic.
The cold waves slapped the heavens.
We walked the pier, we spoke of cables,
their odd receptivity to vocables.
Once in the water my body could not be seen.
My legs came up for breath. Tangled by seaweed
I swam away – not toward any messenger.

Sometimes I stop to stare at bark & skin
in leaves with messages folded in.
To touch and to see at once was not my allowance
yet not to touch and still to see
was worse! There's no sake, for anyone,
like the present rain; no presenter,
no pleasanter raincoat for how my mind
is near thunder clouds, yet never in them.

It was nearly winter in Sweden, but not to be
forgotten was the icy summer living in
the dark of money, deep dives.
There were scores, more than scores of
fledgling trickeries in the snow-hiding grass.

Concrete hair and hair of dirt left me alone.
No money was as costly as a past
thrown down like an iron negligee.

Her thighs (of a messenger?)
were red & gold by turns, her scalp beneath
her hair uneven, felt the down growing up
in the elevator, with the sea still in sight,
to find the spine, a chord or cord where
mystery coils. I bring my digital lamp
for I'm communicating, now, like crazy:
units in procession, a fleece
of motion & fieldy energy –

A brain is lighter than personality,
more compact. (Those people I met in the Baltic
married & divorced as personalities;
they met that way & never unmet.
They were never like us.)

Standing on the wobbling pier,
we were a field of cashmere, even of aura,
a halo that was inside out.

Did I finish my story about the Baltic?
Large ice cubes in our arms,
glaciers under glass. We never wore suits!
You were there, but I have to tell you what it was like.

The verbose waves of this Baltic were closer
than I had thought, in my dreams.

Then I was in the Baltic, its waves thicker,
unlike the familiar slaps of the Pacific. I do plan
to finish my story about the Baltic.

Without a word in print is to go off the edge –.

I stayed in the ice hotel with chill face.

You had greeted me with a layered parka –

I practically tore the fur out looking for a message.

“All my codes should

be understandable,” you’d said. From iron

we’re told to keep our distance;

you were a sheet of lace.

Here’s one I said that must take on

some humble reality, a person not a personality,

residue of a full sun at night

when we were frozen away from feeling.

The Baltic is where you, for once, dropped artifice

& gave into luxuries of drowning

& then discovered the thrill of

– the air! Watch out, for it picks up everything.

MARS TEKOSKY

from **“The Other Woman”** (6 POEMS)

1.

when I open the fridge, I am always looking for you.
every five minutes, the flurry of feeling.
you used to have the truck I've wanted my whole life.
you like what I like. I hovel and squeer.

now, in the quiet, I am loud inside.
we hot dog dance the kitchen.
and the bathwater's hotter.

2.

You: camellia raisin box of the eternal truck bed.
The flickering shivers of poisoned ants.

You: loved in all these long solos.
Burnished jizz blues riff.
Clean shoes, my baby, clean shoes.

You: brinking the narrows of the manic river.
The flows of uttering uterine.

You: in the kept cleft.
The name I keep on repeating.
Firework packet, desk drawer, closed space explosive.

You: in my skin shop.
The first of many potions I'll lay to
The crumbling freestyle pansy bank.

Après shitstock. Après apricots. Après what I flung from the wintry thrill lung.
In the underground warmth kenning.
The blaze.

I known it since I seen you.
The love that foretold the sunk moon.
The pannacotta heartbeat held in offering.

You may not know me
At the dessert course.
You may not know me
Or even feel the mousey short line cut by the glow.

3.

I.

The Fox set out to be withdrawn into the better half of the world
Her feet still-life tendrils holding out hewn garnet smokestack

The Fox withdrawn in the better half of the world
Her feet still life tendrils holding out hewn garnet smokestack

II.

The Fox in the desert now
Mung bean roses sculptured waxily
The sky arched in a panic

Indoor, pepsiphonic, blinkles
The arrival of the haze before the water
Her padded panting to have made it so out

III.

Our Fox at the circus in the Home Depot parking lot
Laughing at the oil spillage like everyone else
A man tried to pet her and she lit another cigarette and whispered everyone likes to
die this way

Her little cozy paw an heirloom cotton candy
The small sawdust is the special sweet exhausted
The pipe we poor folk suction at the end of these long days

IV.

The Fox lies down on the floor where she knows she looks expensive
A cashmere puddle swept around and in the way
She keeps the eye beside you where you won't miss it

On this cold soap floor the realtor said was made of real history
On this endpoint of the train deadstopped

4.

Shit. The twisted zenith.
The black eyed vase.
An apple seed surrounded by whipped cream.

The bottomless marble countertop.
The fraudster tipline peeling pure ringtone.
Perfect pitch your tent in the middle of this planet.

The more I see you.
Paunchy lid fat.
A pottery barn fleece escape hatch.
The barriers of language winked against the frost feathering.
Winged against the pen and ink auguries the newspaper men made so late for this cleopatra.
The floating wonder of her above river. Her below powerlines. Her spareparted out.
spare room, sparerib, spa day.

The more I want you.
The goats penned in those micrometers you call lashes.
Everything reproduced until my swollen boner home can't cunt much more.
That one hank of highlight an absolute door.
An invitation I refresh and refresh.
RSVP in lamb's blood over every blinking space.
Where you chose to turn around and be on for awhile

5.

(the night bedroom's cluttered with buzzing and smell)

I am witching you. sneaking you.
queefing purple smoke bombs.

here, I tremble.
thrill belts rusty. *lady parts. lady parts.*

6.

You're a question mark coming after people you watched collide

In the big boy bed, I take his soft fleshy cock
Finding the wincing and wrinkled coquette of just skin and blood

My just brushed teeth, my tongue
Sweeping robots exactly exploring the offerings

You are an ample prologue
Molted many times since the millennium
Molten newspaper giving way to another story

He and I, me, me, living without seasons
Everlovin' sunshines and too-hot days

The whole part of taking his body is really just to take it
To take the precious things we have apart to see how they work
To take him farther and farther away from you

Bearing children is all blood
You get used to it, but not unless you've tried it
(My rubies. pulverizing toward adulthood in the screaming, warming planet)

I take out that picture of you in white by a river
Impossibly pure and been
As young and as pale as Guinevere's shift dress
With your big ole lake face
Your half moon eyes that seem far deeper for their crinkle

smiling and waving and looking so fine,
don't think you knew you were in this song

I turn it over and over until the colors of that day are as mine as I can
White, earth, green water. No sky.
I burn you into me
So he and I can build one more bridge
That will someday sway away

Kevin Holden (5 poems)

dihedral prime

softer preposition in a backward loop
for Christian or Dorian or Lucifer
wingèd on the wind a beautiful boy
blond locks sing out over the river square
sit this one out the admiral may whisper
softer tone or organ in a thundershower
happy static for a plastic fence
he came three times that evening
with the other men
two by two in oscillating rhythms
a cold pattern ringed with gold
nonpatterning birdflight or
this is who I am
strobe light on the surgeon's slab
rubber ovals in a fresh cascade
something visible at the edge of the darkness
this is the best way to go

peridot

awaken each moment in an emerald cube
and see that scene of transmutation that
metamorphosis or phosphorescent blur
point being be inside the point of light
lit a rhizome to be it then
greener algorithm in his mind
bones in his white cheese
bulge in his white jeans
veins in his big arms
regardless Hegel saw the pyramids as vast prisms of death
regardless Vishnu reclines on a sea of milk
“the sky milk blue and astringent” he says
“the snow is a different color up here; blue; like skim milk” he says
why we recline on this day as opposed to others
the world is all that / we must pass over in silence
antichoron flame up
in his mind this Styx and null set
recombine to a vision of your life behind bars
an ever darkening infinity
so you break it apart
with your bare bloody hands
and thank your mother for your name

pond tithe

repeat would rise deer summit
aleator tower yellow on an island
for lines staircase low in crystal
open shoulder for a patchwork
black asphodel you would, or among
redux the bounty & a homeless can on fire
flung faggot under all the snow
to whiten endlessly in padded violently
break free you say antiphonal aleuro
he to say cum in flour
or, I love you
any math shower for a long time
people in the street this could be
this as
an island floe
you seering blue / shifting deer tarry
to see in endless
cut a cube hole through snow and
footthicklakeice a window
the waveless still or, quiet parlor
same sand as ever, those white grains
us or into something in graphite oblong stair
or, way

cyanide foam

ander rock salt cliff fiscality
those dark fish would quiver
lift off you say counting ever downward redshifting
labellunglief should follow suit
hexagram in an ace of spades gaining size

shadow trains lightning box would shower or spark
running prisons privately
mind a bear trap haha
being blackblue carrot emperor
see that cascade of empty rhythms
lang outside music
la la any force through your brainvector la

keep dancing feel a felled tree
those heavy trunks

we had dreams of our old school
that old skill
kill the fish heavy homo
fall in line
scattered in pink gut

llll would show that screen
anemic glass plate
shoved up there

hyaline plains

that would any
I heap in glassy mathematics
shiver into a corner
black and white go, strung over grid
little bowls
you to show any stellation in here

please be my
blue redux for aqueduct labeling
you shout dark nibelung
I'd say
happy opaque quartz a shouting

all those plains
ever darkling in it
blacken your ore into transfinite huge glyph
white aleph burning into you
taste that salt
at the starry edge now

we weep into happy cubes
feet untethered but aimless, vectoralist
you shower in rosy shadows
poetry is the negative
space of being

in it all folded ligaments shower

vortex for the fistful flowers

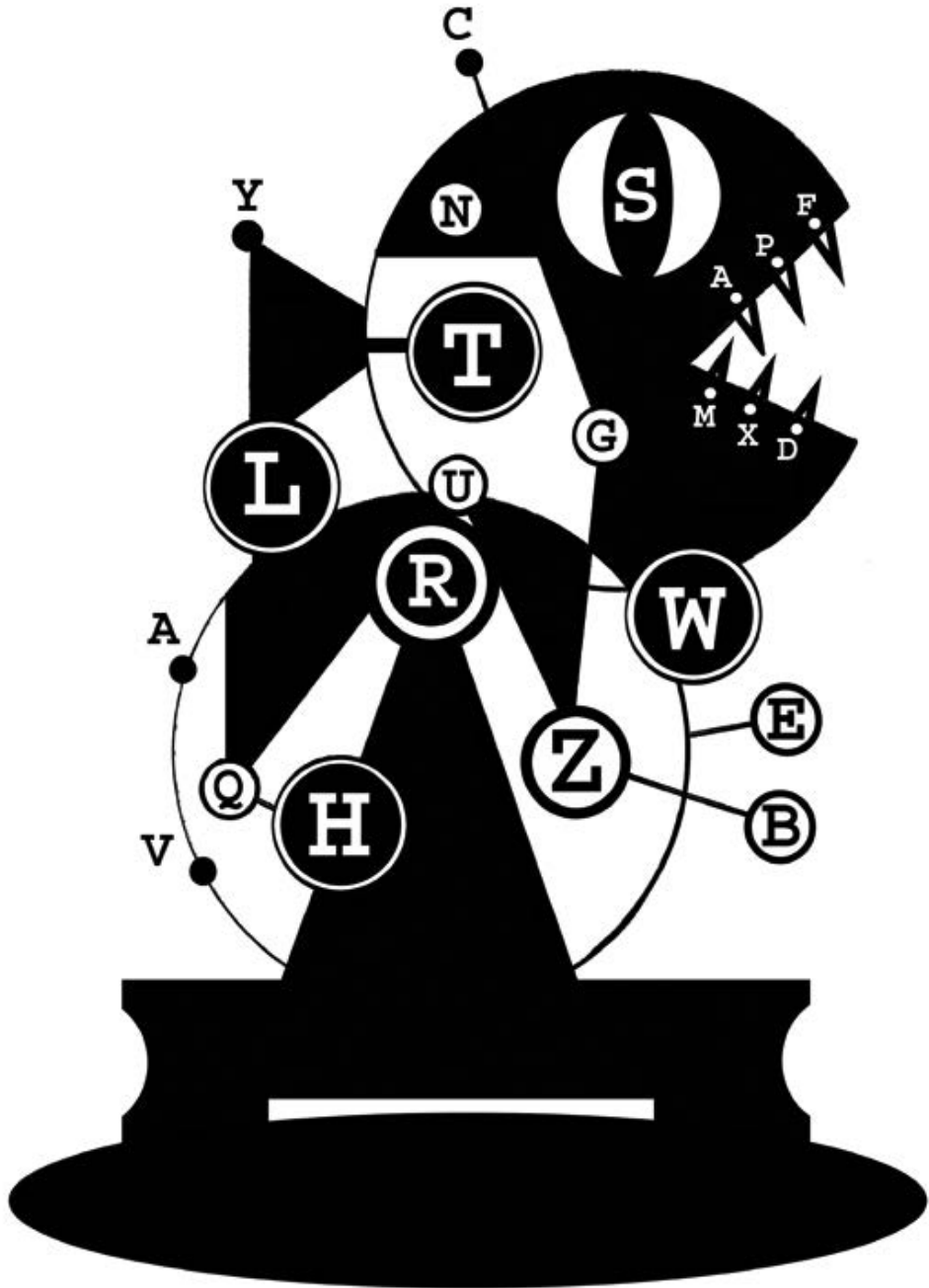
back in it for you j curve

we are here

saddened in those multiformdances

flow out

in a dress of graphemes naked at the door



CONSUMER

Robert R. Thurman

Mark Anthony Cayanan

from **I Look at my Body and See the Source of My Shame**

(As Teresa of Ávila as Sasha Jansen)

We've arranged our lives to be just as unhappy | as we
let everyone see it, the bald laughter | creeps beneath the
hysteria we're showcased in | a cinema, timing our gasps
with everyone | watching someone's troubles collapse our
ha-ha eyes | once the spirits settle in us a violin | plays must
we be convinced it means something to some | times a false
start we're almost safe with a couple

extra drinks and it's when we're trailing time we're most
| dangerous to ourselves when we've been made fallen | cold
our names resound like pricked balloons, who are you | is
there anyone you can do so nobody | looks at you that way
or learns us we refuse we | refuse one last loss and everyone
will be dead

in four years that's all we're waiting for, isn't it |
something else has come into his eyes, the newest | reason
for his punctual angers let's say he claims | this mystical
right to cut our legs off but whose | right is it to ridicule us
again and now | when you're crippled and selling love songs
at the bridge | it's not strange how unjust it gets, sunlight
this one | afternoon then another and another and

who are you to want more from this is a joke we | rest
our hands on his chest, pray for his impatient | soul or push
him backward like a door we come to | if only for these
mornings we can pretend to | overlook the long nights who
says we can't escape | our fate? I'll share mine with you, pry
it out of me

My soul, steeped in my pride, is one of those | straws
floating round a whirlpool and is sucked | into the center,
where everything calm | is the body found wrenched from
You, its love | subdued with such violence it's endured | as
does the theater of streets where mothers | rifle through
tabloids for missing persons | without whom I'd feel joy
so absolute

it pummels my life into tenderness | like a house seized
by fire: because no one | is in me, the wind moves freely
through me | my face a fist-sized wonder of my God | why
am I sad as a gay man grown old | my Better, I wed you to
my questions

The world is a funny house, he says, There are people
| having babies all over its sticky floor, I pray | that God
sends me any sickness provided He give | me patience,
I, the generic instrument, the words | I praise Him with
speak of unrehearsed affection and | the devil is the
first ocean I swam in the cold | kills me into a sudden
warmth, My body, he claims, | Is that woman who's lost
her shame before God, they say

can't be trusted at all, His mercy tepid, anger | at
the ready, my face a study of blue before | it's seen sun,
him looking at me with a notable | absence of longing,
myself showing him greater love | is passable, let heavens
make him trust the kindness | of known flesh, I pull my
life back up out of myself

My joy from you lives free as flood on a highway | we
can together topple power lines, I can | lie inside your face
noiseless in the afternoon | and smell the sulfur our souls
meditate the sweat | out of my hunger completely as if it
had | never been thought of where we are the dead voices |
break through their own newness and a moth tries to get |
past our blinds, we who distrust the law because

it's no longer ours maliciously we look | at it as a man who
looks with malice would where | we want is a time of desires,
when the will loathes | the world, a room the sun explores
and is buried | we grieve for it arid-eyed I make up my mind |
that it isn't coming back, gray streets over sky

from a bottle of white

I only want words reprieved from my possessives
and must dissolve, an incalculable sinking
back into the dark

skull on its long neck, plunging into how often
do you want me to be, O Lord, brilliantly

your

light makes everyone

act strange, we who arrive under the blanket and
hide to be sainted publicly suffer for it

Our hunger like a cockroach survives | our prayers we
run from our mind | but bring with us the termites in our
| conscience to claim we are still unscathed is | a lie we've
longed to make, our missing | soul plays to audiences
every hour | like a woman who's discovered shame, it |
stands between the disorder of the world

and its lost garden like all real estate | holds no shadow
in pictures, the garden | like a moth lands dead on your
lap, are we | willing to hand our grace back to you | and
be enslaved, our soul emptied out | a body with none of
its cruelty

intact, we walk on its streets at night and | meet those
who will know us last, the garden | like a dissatisfied
communist is | redundant, it can't confess when it was |
taken to a safe house and buried from | the neck down,
the Lord gathering the clouds | and carrying them over
the flat earth | like a paragraph of indictments we

were a scarlet dress in our younger | days: we must've
been delicious, laden | with meaning there's unscrubbed
blood on our | nails and we've come quick, as you may
know, as | a shock had we realized the world had | the
world taken us again we would have

Nothing is ever clean in me, nothing too dirty, my soul tells me, Inside me | are taxidermied canaries and clocks trying to tick louder than your panic | there are no ridiculous murders, my power is to not offend and my fear | is a stuffy room with my nightgown hung to dry by the window because I have | killed my desire for justice, everything in me is tender as sunset, mauve as | the wind before it dies into evening I am, says my soul, a soldier hauled out | of the crossfire by his bootlace, I am hissing noises steaming through the walls I | kneel there with a sock in my mouth asking to be owned I kiss you in your sleep and

crawl out of the room before you wake I am unwashed winter hair my eyes preserve | a pot of daphnes I have when I am distressed looked at myself naked and felt | proud as the devil, felt as generous like an old aunt I keep a cracker in | my handbag for low blood sugar I can spend the rest of your one life wanting to | be loved back by your TV, my soul states, In fact I am a monster, and I pass | the tissue wait in silence when he's good, he wipes the certainty off his stomach

Mark Francis Johnson (6 poems)

To a Drizzle

A tuft of hair-like hair like
grass on a tiny island can be
relied upon, yes to surrender shape

to a drizzle.

A merchant giving a horse
white cement can mar

a landscape a treachy tale
endurable without anesthetic
about said landscape would improve. It is

always hard the day after it
is easy. A vast industrial Mom and Pop
merry with bunting can mar

a landscape a big baritone
out of costume would improve.
The opposite too

is true. Watch your step.

Dream

Today in this “rainy spring illusion”
“illusion of sun a rescue flare”
dogs the day April owed winter

down remote networks —

a cluster of unlit poles
disperses, lines the street again
going bum softly as evening links
the sea and seacliffs
sloping in. We’re up,
pushing aside the great gray halves

up after midlife but not for long

all of us part factory roar, alive by way of anecdote
they say

empty pies cool to no purpose

look. My yellow lamp, it’s on!, as always on
my side.

Eindhoven 18's

loudspeaker should in theory pilot us home
why then discuss it over

much.

This custard pie of a praxis

•

Stomach of bad water,
the play lousy with words.
What an evening to imagine
wishing I could have back.

Internal recruitment schmo,
shift oregano, rest my brain! An
organ, AN ORGAN. But why. The veiling

and unveiling ceremony, sigh, the
negotiated stages of organ travel
approaches and withdrawals
while we sought a term to
designate a people believed to

have had to lie like this

Whyne Doesn't Live Here

Lettuces collide and give and poof! go
by cart.

Possessors

of a cell-mate's curiosity, farewell

and spoon
tusk-like lice

aflaunt on the drydock host a lengthy animal *sunlight*
new here believed assessable in the

PAZ as

cream.

Mask me anything but
it has to be Whyne

(poem)

About your bog.
Directed to “get up and talk
hopefully, in another voice”
- “hopefully in another voice” ? -
about your bog, could you do it?
OR would your audience have
an audience in yourself?

Well. What I have always known

doesn't guarantee communication
hence felt use of shaping. I'm finishing.
Wild geese gather by night minutes away -
a tiny square, almost swallowed up in forms.
As if at every point on leather hinges

rivulets pour into bog.

(poem)

Bankers done hunting who
self-identify as hunters not
yet again
banking

hope

I make them ache -
my long long

long unswept

stair.



Brian Shields, 2017, ink on paper, 24x18 inches

JACEK GUTOROW

Translated by Piotr Florczyk

The translator writes: “Jacek Gutorow (b. 1970) is a Polish poet who is also searching critic and trailblazing translator. . . . His voice, both erudite and fiercely independent, bears the mark of someone engaged in a literary conversation spanning multiple traditions, time periods, and languages. He is a professor of British and American literatures at the University of Opole.”

PSALM

The island I have in mind can't hold a candle to other islands, but I've always been touched
by its mousy color.

The island on an island—the multi-story echo wakes and sleeps by itself, then gently
separates from the rest of the multi-story archipelago.

The island is a synonym, a mirror vault, a job aimed downward, ever lower, as in weaving, that
leaves two corridors after each section; one for entering and the other for exiting.

The island is this spring's woman of the easiest virtues.

The island with a million pine trees, and Ariel locked in every one of them.

The island decorated with a pea pattern, wrapped with ribbons and flower garlands. An
unearthly watercolor.

The island as an epic poem, whose lengthiness is justified by the proximity of the sea.

The island to die on. First you didn't want to accept this fact, then fear didn't let you fall
asleep. One day you realized that by leaving you're making room for another
being. But you have to go completely and irrevocably. This was the last, biggest
consolation, though devoid of any hope.

The island revels in the afternoon's equatorial light and swings slightly like a rocking chair.

The island: drift music.

The island could reorganize its structure: toss its springs up onto higher ground, plow over
its riverbeds, knock off a larger percentage from the sum of the greenery, and finally
simplify the process of photosynthesis.

The island that you circle slowly, infinitely alone, ignoring the footprint in the sand.

The island that you love, though in truth it didn't give you much; or maybe it was you who couldn't take advantage of its gifts, cold as a boulder, completely deaf to the language of warmth, not understanding honest feelings while yours are as if taken out of the freezer?

The island, a sawmill, spider webs, and three chairs forming the gate, the shore of pavement.

The island is an island is an island. An atoll, perhaps?

The island's pleasures: coffee on the terrace, elegant wave formations, kitschy sunset behind the volcano, a sudden childhood memory, Beck's songs and Bach's cantatas.

The pouring of islands tonight—the shower of meteors with strange names, a swarm of fireflies at bedtime, a somewhat distracted abracadabra of the sea's deafening blows.

The island doesn't symbolize anything; it is just an island, and sometimes the wizardry of words.

The island of my 1970s. Fireworks, thick carpets, a sawdust stove in the living room. In the summer running around until breathlessness, drinking water almost straight from the well, awaiting the next episode of *Space: 1999* with Martin Landau in the starring role.

The island differently: you sit alone at a table in a Chinese restaurant in Minsk, Belarusian waitresses look at you and whisper something in a language you don't understand. You never felt more alone, my Robinson.

The island goes to the dogs—three walks a day, a plastic pooper-scooper, a mopping of the floor in the hallway. "Vulcan, come." "Vulcan, sit."

The island in the rain: the gaze skews towards the static, but at some point it must give up, because the perspective folds up like a Japanese fan, along with those damn postcard palms.

The island of ancestors. My grandfather Benedykt stands on the porch and takes his watch out of the pocket of a dirty vest; I hide in nettles, decades go by.

For many the island is a hotel. Prospero crashed in the most expensive suite. It's his last, maybe penultimate days, though he still exudes magic. The best years are behind him, of the colored servants only Caliban remains, though he clings to the

bottle. Miranda works for a corporation, while Ariel has had a sex change and thinks of running in parliamentary elections. Lonely, in a big room overlooking the sea, Prospero remembers the storm and the inconvenience of life outside of society. As a retiree he has a lot of free time, but he doesn't feel like traveling, and music, which he has never had time for, has become indifferent to him. It's just books and a cane now, but even they seem superfluous.

The island is an emanation—in its depth hides another, more luminous island, behind which yet another island shines brighter and brighter, the island that's the screen of a finitely dazzling island, in the secrete essence of which lies a dazzlingly bright island, by no means the final one. At the end are burned edges, caves full of cinders and the ash fallen from your long, glossy hair.

The islands I found in my name: Gutenberg, Khlebnikov.

The island, dear sir, is a difficult topic I wouldn't like to take up, not today, not in this life, where I was given the role of a palm tree in the middle of an intersection, in the capital of a country where I don't feel quite at home. My country.

The island only pretends to submit to you. In fact, its resistance stiffens the more open its doors become.

Never mind the island: the light's still on in the near-by bakery.

The island of the downtown after the rain, just moments before the monumental sunset, when the traffic lights go down like grain before the still invisible constellations of the Dragon and the Unicorn.

The island as a jazz interpretation—there's the beginning and the end, the rest are genes, coincidence, and a bit noisy play of hormones.

The island-rubble, the island-clearing, the island-quarry, the island-peat bog.

The island of Euthyrox: arcades and amphibians lead to the solar plexus.

The island of euphoria. The boy runs through a snowy field, then falls down exhausted and happy, and the plastic airplane still flies and flies in the pocket of his jacket.

The islet is also here—modest, inconspicuous, who would've suspected it is the pillar of the universe.

The island wastes its fire, knocks out every trace of whiteness from daybreak, turns blue at noon, and in the evening it resembles a bouquet of poppies.

Take Simi, for example. One of the islands that you can walk on as if floating in the air,

say, in the blue sky with a white strip or in whiteness with a blue trim. You can add yellow inscriptions of rocks piled up in the sun. You can also shift gears and sail like the sea, drifting, crashing with the waves against the shore, no end, no annunciation.

The island of trinkets and junk, which can be studied and arranged in boxes into unexpected landscapes, sad sunsets with a wind-up parrot and a gypsy trumpeter playing under the windows of tired citizens (Cornell).

The island with beer foam so thick that it can be cut with a knife. I sit with my dad and uncle Rysiek in the pub "Under the Rose," and draw a sketch of the bay into which a Japanese cruiser will sail.

The island as one big pulpit. The parish priest swims past me and slowly rises to the occasion, then delivers a fiery sermon about the superiority of monasticism vis-a-vis the colorful kites flown at sunset over the glowing surface.

The island of roots running deep into the ground; into the sun grated with nuts and honey; into our common ancestry Hutzul memory.

The island in a dream. A young woman gets up, starts to read my poems and laughs loudly. I run towards her and shout, "I'm a man, not a poet."

The island as a museum. In the first room we see birds on stilts. The tousled whitecaps arrange into a sentence, unsuccessfully. Fantastic sundials, which blush on every moonless night, are laid out in strategic locations. How many items. What a wonderful exhibition. In the ruins of an old castle we encounter Egyptian hieroglyphics and Latin inscriptions, and the shape of a roadside rosebush is written in Cyrillic. The ghostly attics are haunted by pre-war sewing machines and map atlases with gothic script. We run down the stone slabs towards the river where there's still more junk and old things: thimbles, machine parts, a coffee grinder, plastic coins, and a bucket filled with sand. A phone receiver shaped like a lobster. Tickets for a ferry that ran here in the preceding epoch.

Albion. The island of whiteness. The white cliffs of Dover, dazzling in that memorable June 1992, when you first landed on the shores of a poetic island, vomiting ink in all directions.

The island from a nature textbook: I found a dead beetle on the path and the forest became a footnote.

The case conjugated island; at the end the lips are rolled into a trumpet, the noun's nightmare.

The island inside an island—a gentle, glowing outline, like a neon after rain, urban autumn, evening, a blue chalk smeared by thick droplets.

The island of children's myths:

Rice Autumn Rice Spring

Starched napkins

Hang on the looms

A bare light bulb in the open barn

Wasps on their backs

Lie on the table

The island in memories. Bedsheets drying on clotheslines in the garden, bricklayers eating boiled eggs by the fence, Grandfather Vasily in a feathered halo, smiling under his breath.

The island of hidden despair: someone stands alone on the platform, waving his hand, and the singer sings "either way, I'll play it to the end."

The island of Captain Nemo: *nobody's home*.

The island closed off with rows and lines of cabinets. Basalt lift-ups, rocky shelves, unexpected nests on high peaks. Processes of ridges and chalk endpaper. You couldn't understand where such wonders came from.

The island in absolute darkness. You can only hear the crashing of waves.

The island as an abbreviation of all the sentences I wanted to write down, the winter and the summer ones, the first and the last, short like a crack of a whip and long like the Oder River on a foggy morning.

The island of becoming oneself through an unbearable pain.

The island with one and only lighthouse keeper, who climbs the stairs as if they were a lock, losing along the way all the unnecessary keys against the background of the blue hot sky.

The island of flowers, of May, red, edged with lime trees, sickle-shaped. One big heath.

The island is a beehive, the beehive is a cracked strait, the strait is a sloping hill with one cloud, the cloud is an orthodox church, the orthodox church stands on the marshland, the

marshland is a coagulation, and further on lies the same island, but configured differently.

The island skillfully suped-up by archaic island specialists—it looks new now, even the waves reach the shore like they did in the first days of creation.

The madonna island.

The island of fog: I can't see anything, even the outlines of trees, though I'm in a forest, white like magic, enchanted to the last thread, reduced to a few silent spells and sinew bogs, where suddenly all the geography got stuck.

The island as a giant barn—inside it, behind a torn curtain, lies a dead stone God; we take turns approaching him and leaning over his body.

The island as one big stony ground. Granite, gray recesses, a steel bas-relief under a leaden, low suspended sky. The landscape of my soul.

The island extends from the wrist to the base of the fingers. Through the center runs the life line, invisible when a hand clenches into a fist.

The island doesn't die right away, the death certificate doesn't close the case: somewhere in there underwater streams are seeping and murmuring.

The island and its milky-blue double; white paths disappear between fragments of trees and fragments of clouds, sand dunes piled up with layers that seemed cloned at dusk, awakening in us solemn and melancholy memories of June, when we ran across the bridge through the margin of the park.

The disposable island. You dock at the shore, set up a colony, reign over elements and local spirits, then you organize a few storms, bring about the reconciliation of enemies, pack up your stuff and return home.

The island where wild strawberries grow, and in the final scene your father and mother sit at the river, completely still.

The Island of Moriah. You climb in fear and trembling, but in the end you will get there, Brother Isaac.

The island, the Sun and the Moon. The ideal triangle, whose area is easiest to calculate in the summer at dawn, when everything is blue and exact, and the hormonal supplement throws in its three cents.

The island of magic spells:

*Virgin most prudent,
Virgin most venerable,
Virgin most renowned,
Virgin most powerful,
Virgin most merciful,
Virgin most faithful.*

The island of the simplest possible situation: I sit at the table and read a poem. But I think about something else, let's say about the coffee I drank at the bar. When? Literally just a moment ago. I was wondering how to read a poem. Instead of coffee, I thought of the poem I'm reading now. Or maybe the other way around.

The Ukrainian island, the Russian island, the Polish island. The archipelago of my sensitivity and imagination.

The island of endless solitaire: you've spread the cards out and wait to see where patience will lead you.

The island at the end of Luboszycka Street. An awkward fountain, several trees, an archipelago of dog poop. There seems to be more space and acrylic bile in the leaning sky. Autumn, sergeant sir.

The island fused with its own negative, gliding over the horizon like a huge black cloud reflected in thousands of floodplains, ditches, and puddles.

The island of the shade in the place where a cat hit by a car lies. Its body is intact, as if the cat had lain down to sleep. There are barely audible whispers and admonitions in this dream. Some woman wipes a tear from my cheek, and a man repeats that I shouldn't behave like an old pussy.

The island in the morning that's like a frozen milk shake, cracks and narrow corridors in the limestone, gushing springs, a labyrinth bored by a stubborn gaze.

The island slammed shut in silence, demanding words, slowly syllabized in dreams that slide down onto you like an avalanche (but it is only a whisper).

The island of *sarcophagi*. Flies deposit larvae on the corpse, their secretions dissolve the tissue and turn it into liquid, then come insects that eat the larvae of flies and leave only the bones and hard parts of the skin, then finally come the Coleopterans that polish the bones and bury the rest in the ground.

The wish to finally get enough sleep, not to dream of ubiquitous language, to surrender to the

waves of reality.

The island of geometry: squaring the circle on the surface of an Orthodox cross.

The island where Syd Barrett meets Wittgenstein; in the last long scene they walk on
along a cobblestone beach.

The island, however, belongs to Sycorax.

The island after the last breath. You wanted to extend it, but at the last moment you
realized that it was turning into light and wanted to be the beginning of a new
life.

The island, this hotel and haunted house, this ruin with views of the steep bank, the bay
and the memory of the sails, those remnants of a wonderful life that fell upon
you as a selfless, non-returnable gift.

II.

No poetry, just death.

Mary Cisper

Lyre

1. In the museum
of-goddess-pulling-strings—

“if you touch the” (table, another’s body, not the *hold* which is air)

“*then the electrons from atoms in your fingers*”
coming close
“light in the gaps”

The sparrow is paired,
the bird not exactly nesting
atom, atom

When I touch you you lyre

2. Great-great-great— *Aloysia?*

whose bottles
never danced

under the eros tree

(Heavy spoon, heavy children)

3. Mnemosyne and Zeus (for *history’s* sake, her nephew)
chevron for nine nights

(he denies any memory of it,
“can you get me some air in here?”)

producing nine muses
y la ventana

through which a flock of geese
stopping in a field—

gathers air around it

You epic
“to speak”

4. My eight sisters and I breaststroke
many snapshots
on another’s lap.

No worry growing ancient,
our bones resist porosity—

(In the dark, our feet are washing up)

5. Dear Aunt Evie,

Tell me about the stars there.
Are the nights dark?
Are the pomegranates sweet?

6. Being
bumping into things,

if a text *arias*—

(((Your singing)))

Altitude-water

(those geese again
behind the cottonwoods)
airing Latin propositions:
adversus, circum, inter (towards, around, between)

Ear-whorl

Talk English to me, Baby

7. Will you speed this up?
Pull a muscle *fighting myself*

Chop chop *Who's there?*

(We river. We sediment.)

We are the-work's-never-done—

8. All told bagging forty-one contests at the Festival of Dionysus:
Aeschylus-Sophocles-Euripides—

Murder incest avenging avenging burial burial. Fire.

“the plights of many notable women”
keeping the law intact

Oh, *Lyre*

9. Sensitive Compartmental Information Facility (a poem):

It’s warm all around you
scorched earth fire sprite

“But the universe appears compressed by an active force”
(Justly, *Gracias*)

as Dark falls

“following an arc that ultimately has no tangent”

on the flicker’s breast’s
many black patches *wik-a-wik-a-wik-a-wik-a-*

All-ye-atoms-holding-hands

/window/

PAUL ELUARD (4 poems)

These five poems are pulled from the volume
La Vie immédiate in the Gallimard edition that I found
in the basement of a used bookstore in Manhattan. To
my knowledge, this is their first appearance in English:

– the translator, **Carlos Lara**

THE LAST HAND

On the tribune the right hand detached from the body
Check out the platitudes
The right hand spreads its wings
Escapes to the sea with other animals
The modest right hand
Modest without modestly shaking the modesty
Leaves the cadres of stars the dragons
That sleep in the earth the arid fields.

Architectural with destruction
The right hand weakens
Struck with sterility
In the crude light of memory
It favors imitation
And the reproduction of chairs.

OBJECT OF WORDS

I

A new surface of things sensibly void
Very well received
To travel during summer
Without thinking too much
Blue pearls among feathered ears
In the field of a magnifying glass.

II

A ball
Which is not possible
Rolls along the arm
Painlessly
Like an unforgettable pleasure
Like a test reproduced too often
In dreamland.

III

At the final extremity
An ancient fire of the tenth order

Repeatedly lashes a bloodthirsty chickadee
Miniscule stunned rapacious among his own kind
The piled stones

The poor beast will die out.

IV

We must admit
That there's not a single element
Foreign to the suddenness of scheduled bells
Or pristine dishware
That alters the course of catastrophe.

V

A very beautiful flower
Entirely decomposed
The fate of zoetrope correction
Like a laugh that strokes the whole body
Without moving.

THE SEASON OF ROMANCE

Along the shoreline
In a three-fold shadow of restless sleep

I come to you the double the multiple
To you resembling the age of estuaries.

Your head much smaller than mine
The sea nearby reigns with spring
On the summers of your fragile forms
And here there are bundles of ermine burning.

In the vagabond transparence
Of your superior face
The floating animals are admirable
I envy their candor their inexperience
Your inexperience with aquatic hay
Found without stooping on the path of love.

Along the shoreline
Missing the talisman that reveals
Your laughter in a swarm of women
And your tears for whoever does not want them.

LOVERS

They have tall shoulders
And sharp looks
Or they're full of baffling mines
Trust resides in their breasts
At the level where the dawn of their breasts rises
To undress the night

Of eyes that break stones
Of thoughtless smiles
For each dream
Of the bursts of screams of snow
Of lakes of nudity
And of uprooted shadows.

We must believe they kiss
And talk and look
And do not kiss in their kissing

Your face is still not shown to me
The great storms of your throat
All I know and all I do not know
My love your love your love your love.

Karleigh Frisbie (2 poems)

Perform

I'm waiting
at South E street the market
pretending
to wait a boyfriend buying scratcher, smokes
a ride or reading
an ad in the window
for milk

Don't know who
my guy is out or out
of town, maybe
in jail
I know the car
a certain car always
they glide up like ghosts
a certain boom

I get in in
Thanksgiving dress
because dinner right afterdinner
I'm late
he hovers us over where no one

but homeless or
boys with trash
Removes something from pants:
himself
my head
he grabs I try
and go can't
It's locked
His smell strong strange
His strong kills
and I don't know inside glove compartment,
what he's done
unlocks my dress
caught
throws
me what I want
I cry, yes, dry it dry them

I'm always late they say
drama they go
ruins everything
goes why were you didn't you
police she goes
why did you
this position you
put your own self in

I take pie and cranberry only
to the bathroom floor
by the heater
my stunts they say, pulling
and how do they make it so smooth how
can my spoon
slice
so easy
don't even
have to chew
or look

Development

Low pink

house against
a tall douglas fir
cloud-smear.

Startled

because no expanse of
bubblegum, of beveled eraser in nature
(except maybe the dirty petals
stepped on and exhausted, breathing
tailpipe clouds).

Startled

because the tallest impossible on sports bar boulevard, looming like a parent.
Punctuated by a pink house,
a period midcentury rec-
tangle of smells of dryer sheets and cigarettes of
dusty wax of mediocrity.

Full stop

at the corner
a square of yard
skinny and used
(like a sheared barn animal) and wet
vinyl chairs.

Re-windowed and re-pinked not like
the green that is ever

bathed in recycled seas, seasons
uncountable!

Its tall is ever even
when roofs collapse and cars accident
and hands stay warm in pockets
waiting curbside.

It is still
when the house is torn like a marriage
ending
like a dog
dying (it was just a period).

It is still
when commercial-retail-residential
ignores and competes too
dumb to know the future
when mudslide-earthquake-fire
take clothesline
take billboard
take sports bar
that has since
become
a douglas fir
of reinforced
glass and
rebar
(it is still).

MICHAEL FARRELL (2 POEMS)

At Adelaide's

Mel's playing charades but no one can tell
Joanne's reading emojis in everyone's palm
Max is playing heavy metal cricket. Cherry
which is the name of Adelaide's koi, is
playing uninvolved. The aspidistra's
playing silence, or stillness; Cherry will play
her parody version of it next. Jack is playing
robbery but has to put everything back. Charles
is playing American modernism against
Therese who's playing English modernism
Daddy's playing patience: or at least he says he
is. Bruce's playing real estate, as Adelaide
calls monopoly. Sandy is playing heavy metal
for Max's sake. Mummy plays a rake, and after
that her new banjo. Terri's playing the police
on the phone. Angie is playing alone. Maurice
is playing memory with a wax dummy. Eve's
playing souvenirs with Mummy's ex-friend
Dora is playing guess that planet. Sylvester's
playing symptoms in the vestry. Carl is playing
destitute, hoping to accrue some money. Then
tries dead and funeral fund. I love funeral fund
but detest Carl, so I end up playing honeymoon
with the doctor. Is Mouse here tonight? Yes, he
is playing it opens and shuts. How much is my
hotel bill! shouts Greta and she is right of

course. Too much nostalgia in the trifle? Bernie asks, and then it's Adelaide's rebut. Twenty-seven: turnip's wedding, which means all the paintings have to come off the walls. Derek's playing studio assistant, so the task falls to him. Red says they're hanging out for devil's spider and won't give persuasion five minutes. Rex hogs ordeal, but I think the others are faking that they want to play with him. Casper plays cat's bum, while Jasper plays drunk on the tram. In the early hours (a meta-game), Adelaide teaches the leftovers dispensable names; she'd picked it up online dating, then we played country houses from a book. The sun rose, it was a rose, according to the rose game, and so were we and the postie. Coffee came, but those of us playing abstinence as a last resort, didn't

Ceremonial Pastoral Basketball

These are the key words: words that for me conjure gold
Good morning, I'm Nugget Umback and welcome to
the Anti-Anti-Aesthetic Hour. We may go overtime. We
may set the studio on fire. Now, our first term
ceremonial. We're not talking Plath or Hughes. We are
not burying anybody and we're not inaugurating birds as
humans. Each term must be read alongside (and ideally
pronounced simultaneously with) each other. We may
have a new segment on male dating behaviour, where I s-
hare my experiences; and we'll be reading Jabès and
Celan, today's shepherds of ethics, right after Yello
Carnival, gestural, marsupial. More key words. You can
call Deleuzian the wood ducks by swapping your syntax
around. But are they? Does anybody call them that?
Imagine Midas in the archive, Midas in the sheds, on spo-
rts real estate. I have a caricature of Roland Barthes as
my screensaver. He says Baa! Welcome to the internet! I
love the future so much and shit like that. A ball in the ai-
r; shall we talk about its manufacture, shall we describe
what happens to it in the hands of Phoenix's "White
Mamba," as Kobe Bryant refers to Diana Taurasi, shall
we go on making rugs, yodelling, throwing our voices
while slipping down to Sunset Creek to fill our pouches
'n' marry our Madonnas: as if finally back in Byzantium

C L YOUNG

AFFECT OBJECT (every body come on in)

I was instructed to put two hands on my abdomen
the apocalypse is not happening here
I was told

in people when they walk toward me I see
the news
stored not unlike leaves in a shining garbage sack
today is left hip right
wrist the muscles between
shoulders trans kids with no good tile underfoot
hollow America's deaf echo
dust cloud glimmer in the window stream

when I took off my morning clothes two pills
of lint left themselves near my pubic hair
I asked what new animal I could be
crawling with
the animal was blue

the ritual to put me back in was smoke in the doorjamb
inviting my friends to fist me with language
it looked like their hands and opened
ink pooling then a blank
projector screen I assume I am meant
now to make a baby
blotted-out and crying

awareness of potency unstable
I inserted a garlic clove
my solar plexus cleaned out by pool water
sun sent through chlorine same construction

as blood vessels under the thin casing
of shins forearms my sides

connection to mother by hip sacrum leg socket
long bones digestion
or when I press into my bellybutton
a prick at the end of my pelvis
negative after negative
this has always been the case

what I did not know
was not an accumulation at my feet
it was occasional
bright planet appeared with the moon

I am not to ask questions
but please what is snow for you
my heart still gross
on the table spilling systematically off

Stacey wanted to know what it means
when she precedes herself
tense undetermined I walked
Cole's cough from upstairs says vomit
but not liquid

my answer to all of this a long line
of gratitude

the online
midwife said:
every woman knows
how
much
she needs

let yourself out of yourself
more ways

I am not pregnant but
am reminded increasingly by my future son
to have a tea party
to note the seedpod of balloons captured
by winter's barren cottonwood

Meaghan says listen but don't
get sloppy

when Erin got cancer
she said she'd
always known it
I watched her paint
face-down
a pool
at night

again in the canyon I learn
I can't kill myself
new set of elders departed
terrible quick with no dreams
to tolerate such
a situation as this

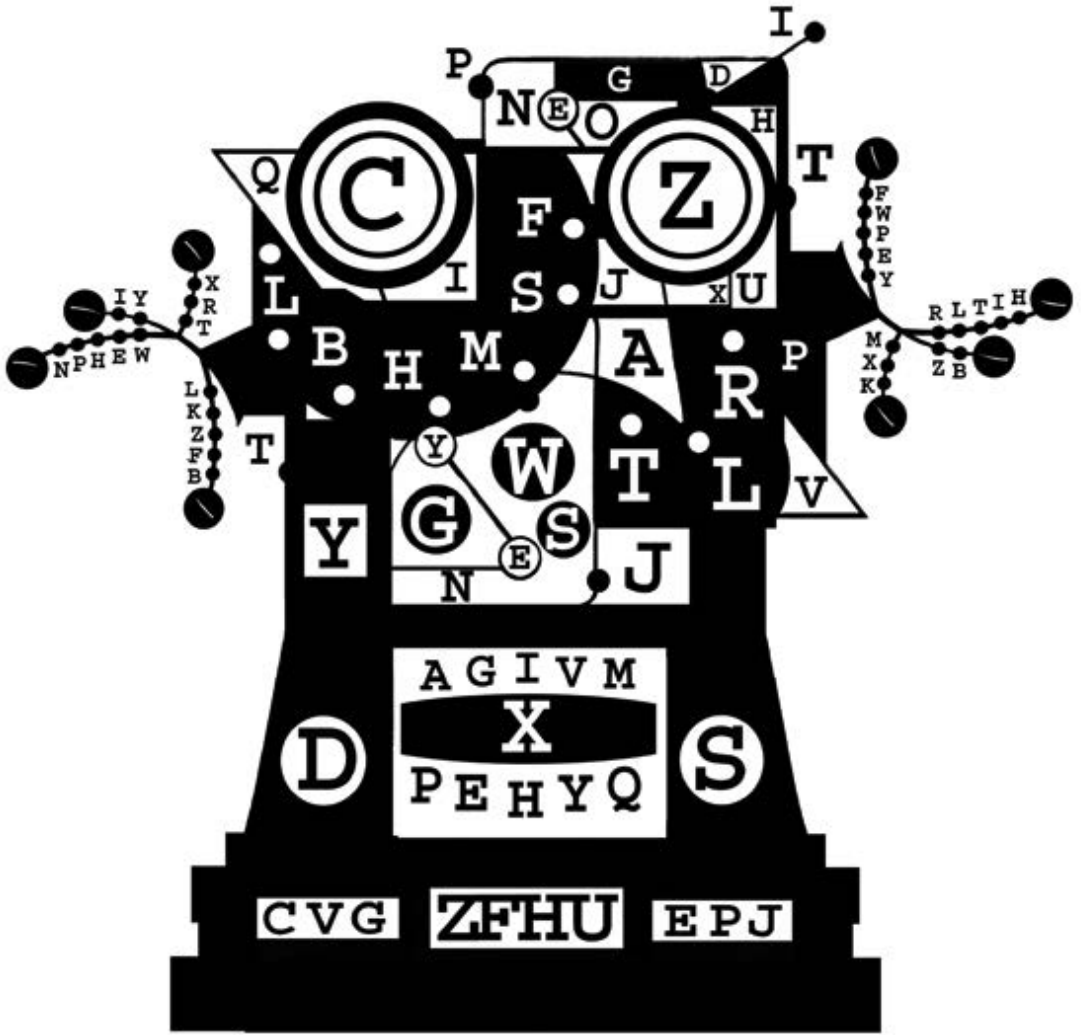
the camp gone up in flames
I saw
as a concrete poem
California out to sea
Colorado under snow

I am working to loose myself from death hyperbole
but it is so easy to talk
jaw dropped
as though the ghosts
other side of murked-up
cell wall can't hear me when I hear them
say our girl you gotta earn your invitation to this
party of laughs and too soon

when David does not belong to a place
he points says this
not that this his large hand
become signifier
he holds it up a long time

hands function to negate weight
their mass so often contributing
to the manipulation of other masses
[C] is softer than [D]
they work themselves out of existence

to remember the ways I have loved
I dance myself in the kitchen
I remain a little to the right of my body
moving shame
from one side of the room to the other



MODERN USAGE

Robert R. Thurman

Felicia Zamora (4 poems)

The retreat

Inside the circle of seventy people; inside a cage of ribs, your lungs tick in spasmodic rhythm; heave your chest repeats over & over, a hymn of sorts & you, atheist, in pretend that belief ever calmed anything; outside the panes, snow pummels the mountain range, sidewalks, the air so crisp you choke on its necessity; & the room builds a ladder of terms with no destination: privilege, identity, socialization, liberation, biracial, horizontal oppression, justice; you pluck them from each breath to stow each away; how you fear your own memory a sieve, separating the fine parts & loose matter of you; how you always in assembly & deconstruction; this cycle in force & you are? How you came to facilitate, yet, yet, this discussion tears away pieces of you; & someone says white-passing; & how a familiar voice eludes, not brown enough again, not white enough again, & your mind dives back into his words, you dirty little spic; how he, of all people, designed in blood to love you; & the fear & the small hands in push of your small body; how you always told other other; how spit saved for you, how knuckles cut on your cheek bones; how, yes, you Latina & . . . the word white lingers in your temporal lobe in search of meaning thrown toward you, again; how violence so simply stated; & two words in weight, unravel your identity, here, in space with strangers, your mind chants I am enough, I am enough, enough; enough.

In search of feminism

Your ass, half in, half out of cramp; the conference-chair routine; now visualize...you, twenty years from...
& the voice in slide down your spinal cord; how you always in ask: Next? Next? Next? Think of the Blue Jay how she'd starve to death in such linger; how at Edinburgh Castle, the guard's thick accent, Am I a fucking parrot? in repeat on your approach to Mel & Joe with heads in nod, in nod; how we don't understand what we don't; & now, you relax your jaw to ride a beam of light into your subconscious... 'cause? 'cause you didn't get the drift 'cause the new buzz term for drift is glass cliff; how ceilings, you know, too easy; we need real-bodily-harm scenarios; how for thousands of years, someone labeled your vagina lesser; how someone said, & this is not for you; this is not for you; this is not—draw a line to horizon, a line of society ready to slap & your face poorly prepared; how exhaustion resembles your brain, your heart, only 80% of the time; you think of Woolf; how you always think of Woolf; so you workshop feminism, you dialogue social justice, you in therapy; yes doctor, rage due to election results; yes doctor, being nasty comforts; you type you so much—this litany makes you ill; how we turn inside to fight for equity; let's say society: a house & your body the attic; yes, yes, build first; & if a house in burn; what of you in the attic flooded with questions; first you sleuth these cells, our calcium what-nots, look around, get to know your guts; then... how lovely then; how first implies second; how steps construct a gait, a journey; & the journey miles over miles; you fidget in wait; how Woolf tethers poetry to intellectual freedom to material things; yes Woolf, poverty of women requires a room, "a room of one's own" & you of all know to leave this room, we must; & a voice bellows deep in your lungs, in expansion; & you, on the verge, crawl up & up.

Once you lie a lot, it's like second nature

Yes, your partner suffers & all parts
of the word: alcohol, ism, ic tumble
out of you; why must you write...say
this down, in odd conjure—conversation
you know bound only to impulses
tightly tendrill-ed behind a cranium; in
your peripherals, the gray-haired woman
with back to you; how your heart, oh
this organ in bulky absorption, asks be
mother for just this moment; how nothing
brief in distance of separation; strange this
stranger growing in you: what protrudes
in spaces between—inside us striated,
molecules, secrets & shame; how wide
open disclosure's weight, this creation in
broken permutations; say oh, tongue in lie;
in permeates us, as us; how to navigate
this full-empty of body; transparent
soul occupying the crevasses, seeding; soul
in spore behind layers of complex cellular
arrangements, yet must now...say tend
for convenience, say render, for lack of.

Ghost of innocence

On the couch, labored breath of whiskey, chest
in spasmodic heave, his feet still in steel-toed

work boots; & a slow unlace of each boot with
gentleness you didn't know you still possess—

no ask for this exists, no written rules on, say an
addict'anything, say motives, as if to rationalize

baffling; you sit next to him in the chair & cell
phone scrolls headlines of cuts: cuts of NEA

cuts of EPA, cuts of healthcare; you fall back
into old fabric & pillows & absorb the gravity

of words: baffle, president, addict; you imagine a
body so weightless, a whole nation floats away.

Peter Eirich (3 poems)

Coder's Mistake

In beta, she cuts up the strains. The tatters of him, his name hanging off like a ripped plastic bag. She slices away. She gathers. She sews umbers under his receptors. IC for the grid.

He stands there, pissing himself. He babbles about physics. His jaw chews the air in tardive jerks. He is completely. He is besides. He echoes the endings. He flaps.

She and her face in her hands. Enters command: stop crying. If the follow-through. If a small lie. Only if. Because of. The green flicker machine.

Underground holds them. His root red eye and her smashed tendrils.

They make their promises. He says: law of constants and cyanide. She chooses her wrists for slow control. He waits for her. She says, "go."

Caren Welt

You steeped kickstory, what's that about then. Sopping with it, you and your brain wheelies, switchboard scams. But your sorrys. They're given to song for good. Heard a few so far and so Boxhammer: "A meaningful progression peeled to thumbs and hummings . . . , but I know you. You're jilter rose trip-wire.

Caught your dress on the corner, running from goldenrod (I don't blame you) and the chair. Clipped your chin. Swiftly, two jolts, pok, pok. All that red, it's nothing. It's not that you're dying, in my arms. It's not that you're not listening.

Blind New Transcript

Hourwise, the days flip like thumb-kino, and the strobes send me to my perfect pattern dream. On the floor in a foamy fit, I'll wake up in a week.

You skin-tight weather jamb, you gift. You climbed Tristan's Ladder, attic-save power flood, you sangria lilted crest and fin.

I know exactly what I implored. Von der unterseite angesehen, it's a cord-rapped kassettenkiste of those recordings of when you left for Madrid. You've grown older and more mature, alles beiseite, and I could just.

Jonathan Stout (2 poems)

WOODEN COAT

The busyness business rope-ties
Ties knottily to steel hook dignitaries,
Anchors tight right at the rim of the jowls.
A rocket shipload of hope detergent
Strives to dent tides in deliberate regiments,
Books an appointment with terrestrial fowl
Unseen but led to the den: assume

A chatter box stick of glue bands booze
& teeth to leeches in middle their wash,
Scowls, fjord phalanges, a metallic brook.
Deep space isn't really deep, Pope,
& what of the children cooing to a growl?
It was something gleaned from a book.
The pool: chlorine tuned to a calliope.

AFTER WRIGHT (& GESTURE)

Silver woods alphabetic flowers the fire colt's chug
Delivering errands device full I speechless secrecy
To be mute mutually fracturing the air there
To direct less spin on a pin how then to move
Gone of the way a way no exegesis the flat
Map disintegrating the pines proverbial
The mountain a figment of other time lines
Pointing direction less sense then sub-
Terranova redo not possible beg a chance
Bite a biscuit this that is it the former
Turn turns back begins what to say make
The fruit stop the saying to peel the wax
Skin with a lone tine right maxillary incisor
The damn front tooth porous flesh no prize
A knowing though shaped an anatomy there
But the skin curled perfectly the first wet bite

Engram Wilkinson

from COUNTERELEGY

Fog is an effort I stopped making after you jaywalked across the gesture. In each language the instruction manual specifies wonder should gusset the afternoon. The sky is an alumnus of the first life I tried giving you. Not all anxiety is injunctive. Downcast blossoms. My double crown. Lapidary infiltrates the maladjusted duration.

~

Consolations inter alia. The upstanding anxiety. Each glance overdrafts. It is not, like we thought, a function of the other conspiracy. Birds loiter inside the dream where we complete so many tasks together. Eyes adjust to the ordinance. You try living inside the elaboration. Glint is an answered question.

~

How could the shape dare to hold any angle our grief comprehends? I stand outside. It is not June. Under which tree did the priorities gather? Hours mullion the disaster into ovals. Surfaces pro forma. In the park, another necktie

loosens while the afternoon, incumbent, cross-hatches
deference into each reflective orbit.

~

You wanted to sing. Youth, re-examined, presents another
look that comes from having a secret. A vendor's double-flowered
peonies. Exits from an effort to imagine a multi-purpose shame, as
drivers roll shadows of fire escapes across their windshields. Acres
of believable light. In Lear, madness is presented as an obsession
with quantity. The eglantine, today—blue, irresolute.

~

I splurged on the excuse. What other expertise was false?
There is always less to it, so we dilute the hand soap again.
Evening is a term of art. Every posture an element. What if
you told me about the first yielding width? How each metric
changes its operation underneath the longer branches. Try
the blinds. Hands, upside-down, reflect across the spandrel.

Joseph Noble (3 poems)

from Sonnets

what takes place in what we don't know. the letter arrives
with no postmark, no return address, no message. you open
the envelope to read what is not written which nonetheless
instructs you to move among the trees and follow the shadow
along the path, your own shadow having abandoned you.
the words you hear sound from no lips, yet yours are moving
and mouth the words in your ears. there is no re-creation
of the sky. you notice that your steps are coming into view.
the shadow is bound to your eyes, yet all you see is its mouth.
it moves and is a path you follow. there is only silence.
the voice you hear is hers. listening, you realize that her voice
is a counterfeit. the words she is saying are yours. and she is
telling you no message that says to follow her to no address
where there is no table on which lies no letter which you read.

what takes place in what we don't know. the envelop is empty.
the paper is blank. nonetheless, you read what is written there.
you move among the unimagined words and follow the shadow
along the path. the shadow falls from no body. it hides among
the trees. it has abandoned you because you follow it. it watches
you when you are not looking. it is obsessed with you. you are
not even aware of its existence. you have never been following it.
the word has no sky and is practicing its silence. your lips have no
existence apart from your obsession. the path you walk is a counterfeit.
nobody is whispering in your ears, and all you hear are words. the trees
are mute. she is no where to be found. your steps have disappeared
at her address. there is a message left for you on your hand. it is a lie.
it tells you where you can find her. the compass needle stuck in your
palm begins to bleed. your hand does not. it begins to write.

butterfly soil gust to robin paper light rippled tone
cathedral pine ribbon flutters brow water veil to
rose stone filament taproot scale acacia bough upon
pollen flute hand upon air ear upon clay bone stirrup
tiny as spore brushing spiral stem thrush throat
tuft silence grows to scrap lichen gill bloom tatter lip
trace upon bristle sparrow feather tones tremble sinew print
taps ossicle limb quivers between camellia skeins
pursed pitch slip skin turns through ghost note turns
through bell and bone tell tone cluster cell sepals
circle thumb mica spicule and stoma hum rib quiver
limns lumen thrums roam anemone ivy axon
cuneiform cartilage script shivers maple thread tuned
rib wing wheel wind a stair through bees rings anther spreads.



Brian Shields, 2017, gesso on paper, 36x28 inches

on poetry:
essays &
essay-reviews



Sandra, Dorothea, and Me

Joyelle McSweeney

It's been eight months since our baby died and the e-coupons clot my inbox: "Stock up for baby's first summer!"

At some point during our thirteen days in the NICU, summer became fall, but our baby's room didn't have a window, so we missed it.

Another mother said: Be glad you don't have a window. It's *so much worse*.

Later, I cried because I'd wanted her to feel the rain which was gently Martianing the decorative grass in the planters outside the hospital. Indianapolis rain with its American toxins, nostalgic for its industrial past.

Toxin from the Greek for *poison arrow*.

I wanted to close that rain in her fist.

Eight months, and the weather has been appropriately shitty: cold and sunless.

But it's never been brutal until today. Because today it's so humid, like Florida.

*

In Sandra Simonds' *Orlando* (Wave Books, 2018), the title poem goes driving along. For all its honest endlessness, it has momentum, like the weather that covers it. It does the Death Drive past the motel, the campus, the jail and the amusement park (can that really be what they're called?). *Orlando's* fascination is with porn and fantasy, with the micro- and macro-climates of the personal, with the damage and snares built there, with the return of the repressed, i.e., the lyric, which comes galling out of its porned-up throat to meet the weather, wave for wave.

The poem says: "Ophelia season again, sky like chlamydia, look at my flowers or I shall tie you up."

But like all the best "or's" in poetry, this "or" conceals an "and": *And I shall tie you up*. Yea, Simonds' method is additive and bewitching. *Orlando's* long-lined tercets ornately braid like a vine, a noose, a tether, schoolgirl's hair, the pattern in the yellow fungal wallpaper, the weather that creeps across the gulf across the screen, Dante, the death

drive or the drive to Art, which is an imperative to go on, towards oblivion, towards the vanishing point which never fucking arrives, tho the teen girl thought it would, imminently, the forty-year-old mother suspects it won't, ever.

It never arrives. It just strands us in so much weather.

*

To read along with *Orlando* is to be gorgeously ensnared, because its long lines are so engorged with language, like the food of the Underworld, bait-like and non-nourishing. Food for girls. But is this Elysium? No, it's *Orlando*, and

I can see the audience, full of Xanax, full of that narcotic dream moon we
discussed
for hours, I can see them in the velvet theater of manic energy, roped off [..]

Roped off, behind that velvet rope, the seer Simonds sings us, the readers, into the narcotic dream of her poem, its long and drowny and decadent lines. We're in some scrambled, collapsed Platonic-cave-cum-Mallaremean-*mer* with nothing to erect a functional hierarchy except the addressee Orlando and his various doubles (Craig, Chris, the cops), phalluses which merely bob about in the swell when the real source of Art and crime is the radioactive chasm, is the poet's throat of Simonds herself.

*

Of course there is war, abuse, and capital, and these are truly oppressive, they cause damage, and eventually seep into all the space, yet we keep seeing Beauty despite of or/and because of this, Beauty, the killer app, Orlando. This poem's and-and logic, promoted by commas, almost but does not overcome capitalism's/patriarchy's logic of domination, extraction and deprivation. Simonds' poem gives us the repleteness that will not hide capitalism's/patriarchy's damage, tho it gestures towards a higher damage, which will destroy it, and which it invites:

power out, my instinct is to take a picture of the tree and post it, the oak
throwing
itself across the car, crushing metal, the oak throwing its body across the street,
pulling
everything with it, martyr oak, if I were as small as the great ocean, kamikaze
oak,

the last and only thing an oak can do, barely missing Charlotte, the twin spider
dreams
double dream, double world, double story, Oh to be the poor double song
breaking through the double fantasy of itself, a splash through sky, rocks,
concrete,

water vein broken, a splash through the current of language [...]

Oh to be. One's own Sublimity. Total self-erasure in total self-presence. Oak and
storm. Cunt and cock. Top and bottom. That poor, double song.

But it still hasn't arrived. It just won't fucking arrive.

*

Orlando is a volume that cleaves, and like at Delphi, a spring arises; from this toxic chasm, a vision emerges. But Simonds won't comfort us with the rhetoric, tenses or celestial scale of prophesy. Instead, in the poem's second part, "Demon Spring," Simonds abandons enchaind tercets for something like a Williams-y prosody—plainspoken, variform in stanza shape, occasionally organized by address. These lines make explicit themes and conjectures which in *Orlando* were implicit:

there is no psychic relief since
the only way to protect against this
ordinary history, these mundane
capitalist gestures is to layer the story
as one descends through layers of cloud
over Orlando, pink and furious.

Virtuosic and shape-shifting, "Demon Spring" operates with the conclusion that there will be no break, that life outside capital never happens, that the cave is the only

place, and the forms which enliven our captivity only *seem* to change. Even the fire's a fake. The poem rejects escape, tho it elapses in a flash of lyric stances, images and forms; it's all *fuck you* prettiness, which I adore; it counters any force, any attempt by interlocutors to intervene in the poem, to stop it — though its variousness might record the way the poem is actually inflected by these constant deflections. The poem is not invulnerable, tho it evokes saints Notley and Williams, displays a full lyric armament, flashing with flowers and seasons, Spring and all. It is flashing and dismayed.

In the final passage, the poem attempts to push out again, in a narrow boat, a bateau ivre, rowed by anaphora, piloted by a child, with the Internet for a sea of stars. Yet even as it attempts to oar away, the poet must repeat the phrase “All master narratives,” like a curse or the coin of the realm—

All master narratives of the skin in a rowboat inside a pine coffin of swamp water.

All master narratives of thinking like a woman who says, “I chose inappropriate relationships.”

All master narratives of dramatic structure in the soggy swamp, against the humid flags beating the wind.

Of course the reader senses that Simonds repeats these phrases to reject them, to spit them up. And yet, as she attempts to find a channel in the sky of the Internet through which she and her son may navigate, and so escape, she must carry these phrases in her gut. In her gullet. In her throat.

Sandra Simonds, the persistence of your vision is profound. You take ownership of the lyric like a blood-drenched Aegean queen, with lovely cloak pins holding up deep-dyed revenge garments. You rule, tho subjectless, the demon spring. You stalk chamber after stanzaic chamber. You reign. And you can configure everything but a way out of here. You can make everything but solace.

*

Like any Edwardian-fop-cum-Victorian-mourner, I spend a lot of time studying the mantelpiece. Its moulding, its sharp corners. I think about driving my temple against the corner, could I gather the energy for that, and which would collapse first, the mantel, the wall, or my head. And then, I check the time and go pick up my kids from school.

I am also a person who, 10 years ago, described my child-bed conversion to a Goth aesthetics, noting

Becoming a mother made me a goth. Becoming a mother, and nearly dying in the process, and wondering for 10 months if the body inside me is alive or dead, and, concomitantly, if I would also kill myself if I learned it was dead, then holding it and realizing what a very minor and insubstantial gate a six pound infant is onto some kind of Hades—well, it rendered life on earth a kind of Hades. A kind of vista on death. Now I have a vision of the present tense in which every moment has its opening on death, has its interface with death. In fact the present tense might *be* an interface with death.

But I had it so wrong.

Because I didn't realize that Death would split me apart from my baby. That she'd go down there, while I stay here. Or I would go down there looking for her, but the downward pressure of my arrival in the Underworld would push her up into the stars, to be rocked in some galactic star-nursery.

Far away, so close.

The loneliness of grief. The desolation.

Without the solace of co-immiseration.

*

Dorothea Lasky's newest *Milk* (Wave Books, 2018) is a starchart of loneliness. The baby is nowhere to be seen. The baby is reached by sonography, and then by taxi. In the absence of baby (who we gather from the poems has been born too soon and is incubating in the NICU) the mother-poet confects different languages to attempt contact—syntaxes of poetry and protein. In the absence of the baby's face, that bonding gaze that nursing facilitates, there's a far-away-so-close feeling in the way the poet's eye charts and recharts the distance to other subjects in the world around her, in this case the nipple:

Emptied of
The ships where she
Eight tiny roses in a row
Where water goes in
The greenish water
Where the saints
Can grow

Here the short phrasal bursts are not mimetic of the mysterious-then-propulsive let-down of lactation, in which some interior detonation renders the lactating woman both rocket and planet; rather, to my ear, they have the beat of a breast pump, which breathes in and out unhelpfully through its various valves. This endless inhuman respiration, the loneliness of this lactation without the baby around to nurse, is the planet I felt all these poems issuing from. A lonely moonscape:

To go nowhere
There's no baby
There's no mother
Just an endless hallway
Of fear upon fear

In these intensely sad poems, I feel like I'm not so much gazing from Lasky's POV but just adjacent, maybe hovering just outside her space-orbiter-cum-isolette, peering in through the double Corningware panes. Peering in at her peering out. There's a glassy smoothness to this work, a trancey focus. The signature poems progress in brief lines, a progress that feels compressed, controlled and Sybilline:

Suffering usually
is unseen
Ghosts are green
They are always alive
Auras are green

The young they suffer
For all eternity
Suffering
Is a green light

These short lines to my ear propagate a wave-form with one-two, ball-bounce logic. It is a punchline logic, a stripped dancebeat heard through a plaster ceiling. This is how the poem gathers heft, the signal returning to the poet so she can bounce it out again. It's also how a sonogram works. It's not your almost-baby, signaling you. It's your own signal, traveling back.

This book is knit together with consistent motifs—ghost, death, milk, moon—which lulls me into reading it as the space-opera of one sleepless night. It has the tonal solemnity which typifies one's first nights with newborns, absent or present, living or dead. You are still post-partum, baby or no. But the poems also host weird iatrogenic expulsions, such as the rat presented in several poems to speaker and reader alike:

Do you want to dip the rat
Completely in oil

Do you want to dip the rat
Before we eat it eat it

I want to answer like Plath: do not accept it. And yet the question is posed again and again. It's Popa-meets-Keats-meets-Rosemary's-Baby. Perhaps this revolting choice is like the monstrosity of Art itself, of being made to bear it. I can say from experience that in the worst situations, we are presented with choices which are a parody of free will, because in fact we are powerless. It has all been written, maybe in the stars. The NICU is just a sorting station for one destination or another, one planet or another, noplacé, or Earth. We don't get to choose if our babies live. But we may be asked if we want to hold them after they are dead. If we would like the nurse to take a picture of us, holding our dead babies.

*

For a decade or more, Lasky's influential style has been much imitated but not finally imitable, because, tautologically enough, there is only one Dorothea Lasky. Unlike Simonds' speaker, Lasky's seems stranded with herself. Inheritrix of O'Hara, her signature presence is available but witchy. Her poems appear to throw a party for two, speaker and addressee, proposing a friendly intimacy even as they are a substitute for intimacy. While Simonds dazzles with the variousness of lyric possibility, Lasky in her self-sameness exposes the loneliness at the heart of lyric itself. In one Plathy turn,

The moon
No door
But a face in its own right
My mind
A bloodhound
For oblivion
Already in the house
Answer your phone
Call me
Call me I will answer
From inside your house
Dripping my wares everywhere
Answer me
[...]
Answer me
Was I really so
Palindrome of shadow and light

Dorothea Lasky, sending out your signal from the dark side of your own moon, I'll answer your riddle. I'll bounce it back to you. I'll wear the addressee-mask, and I'll make one for you, too. Dorothea, it's you. It's been you all along. I always *knew* it was you.



Brian Shields, 2017, ink on paper, 24x18 inches

Andrew Joron

The Ruin of Rules: On a Potential Mash-up of Oulipo and Surrealism

Regarding Michael Leong's *Words on the Edge*. Black Square, 2018 Editions, 2018.

Poets of the past century who sought to overthrow the conventions of bourgeois subjectivity resorted to two classic forms of “automatic muse,” both held capable of subverting the domination of authorial ego: the unconscious, driven by untamed desire, and linguistic formalism, driven by constraints and protocols. The first, associated with surrealism, goes wild with “mad love” (Breton) or “visions of excess” (Bataille); the second, associated with Oulipo, constructs for itself “the very rat-maze that one proposes to escape from” (Queneau). Few innovative poets of this century now practice the “pure psychic automatism” of orthodox surrealism, while many have followed Oulipo’s path of “anticipatory plagiarism,” processing found texts according to a protocol or imposing some kind of generative constraint upon their writing process.

How wonderful, then, to discover in Michael Leong’s new collection, *Words on Edge*, the work of a poet who conjoins the countervailing tendencies of surrealism and Oulipo, thereby raising and perhaps razing both to another level! Leong’s literary mash-up, “The Philosophy of Decomposition / Recomposition as Explanation,” is exemplary in this regard. Here, an oracular Raven (un) systematically scavenges the debris of two canonical texts by Poe and Stein, finding its perch at the meeting point of surrealist chance and Oulipian necessity: “the *modus operandi* of radical combination.”

Surrealists achieve radical combination through organic metaphor (the intuitive union of distant realities), while Oulipians favor a more consciously manufactured, if not mechanical, approach. Reading Leong’s work, we can discern the proto-Oulipian seed from which surrealism itself grew and flowered—namely, the Dada cut-up. As Leong explains in an afterword to his Poe-Stein mash-up (an afterword not included in this book, but in an earlier chapbook version of the poem): “While the methods of Tzara, Breton, and Burroughs nicely summon the unpredictable and aleatory energies of chance, in composing this book, I wanted to ratchet up intention to the highest possible degree. . . . I was shooting for a ‘seamless’-looking writing that was, in actuality, the product of numerous cuts, fractures, and sutures. I wanted to create a sense of aesthetic inevitability

no matter how mired I was within the claustrophobic corridors of constraint.” The opening lines of the mash-up then rehearse the stages of literary history that lead from Poe to Stein: “It was a radiant discourse that began to emerge, step by step, from Night’s beguiling academies—like a classic nineteenth century midnight unexpectedly thought by some twentieth century mind.”

Leong explains that, in this piece, “All the words and marks of punctuation [!] are derived from . . . two source texts”: Poe’s “Philosophy of Composition” (1846) and Stein’s “Composition as Explanation” (1926). While the remix, composed of both paragraphs and line breaks, does look syntactically seamless, ruptures nonetheless occur at the level of argument—for Leong has borrowed not only his lexicon but his theme (what is composition?) from the source texts. One might assume that mashing Poe’s argument, where composition is defined as calculated artifice, together with Stein’s, where “composition of a prolonged present is a natural composition,” would produce a “radical combination” of the natural and the artificial. Yet such a synthesis (which is, at bottom, the very condition of human language) never comes into view here. Perhaps, in the practice of potential literature as much as in physics, a *realized* potential results in a lessening of energy—so that Leong’s mash-up holds its argument in a state of suspense, revolving through a combinatorial play of possibilities in which every line stands as a fresh iteration without precedent or consequence. The texts by Stein and Poe are thereby allowed to pass through one another without colliding.

It’s worth noting that, apart from Leong’s treatment of it, Poe’s argument for artifice seems to anticipate the Oulipian critique of “eructative literature.” Poe scornfully observes that “Most writers—poets in especial—prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy—an ecstatic intuition,” whereas his own work in composing “The Raven” “proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem.” Similarly, and over a hundred years later, Jacques Roubaud asserts that “Writing under Oulipian constraint is the equivalent of the drafting of a mathematical text which may be formalized according to the axiomatic method.”

Of course, constraints of various kinds have long formed part of literary practice—yet, for both Poe and the Oulipians, literary art consists not in following traditional rules, but in the invention of new systems for writing. Poe, caught up in solving the “mathematical problem” of “The Raven,” attests that “My first object (as usual) was originality,” and goes on to say that “originality . . . is by no means a matter, as some suppose, of impulse or intuition.” Likewise,

Roubaud speaks of “the ruin of rules,” proclaiming that, in Oulipo, “There are no rules after the moment they outlive their value. The exhaustion of tradition, represented by rules, is the starting point in the search for a *second foundation*, that of mathematics.” Poe and the Oulipians thus aspire to recreate literature as a branch of mathematics, where inspiration would be replaced by the working-out of an equation, leaving nothing to chance.

The literary scholar Alison James has described the poetics of Oulipo as a “challenge to chance,” citing Oulipian founders Claude Berge (“We are essentially anti-chance”) and Queneau (“we display a certain suspicion in regard to chance”), and concluding that “the term *anti-hazard* has almost become the group’s motto.” Oulipo’s insistence upon the author’s conscious choice of a constraint or protocol carries more than a whiff of Sartrean existentialism, where engaged agency is called upon to enact a self-realizing choice. Perhaps, in the aftermath of World War II, no one in the French intellectual milieu was in the mood to surrender to forces beyond one’s control. Yet Oulipo’s “claustrophobic corridors of constraint” (as Leong puts it) also seem to anticipate the administered, bureaucratized life-world of late capitalism. Nonetheless, we can think of Oulipo, like existentialism, as a humanism—one that valorizes the human operator of the language-machine. (A distant echo of this valorization may still be heard in Barrett Watten’s declaration that Language poetry, in contrast to surrealism, shows “the mind in control of its language.”)

In spite of their respective commitments to chance and necessity, surrealism and Oulipo share hidden affinities that are spectacularly demonstrated in Leong’s work. As Leong writes, “Where there’s smoke, / there’s hazard— / like shouting ‘great balls of safety’ / in a crowded theater.” *Hazard*, as poetic fire, remains a present absence here, promoting swerve and deviation from all consciously assigned tasks. Indeed, one of Leong’s recipes for writing seems to propose a surrealist (mis)reading of Oulipian process:

Put your ears to the gap when the light catches your larynx.
Ask, if you must, the unconscious stenographer
gumming together long strips of words on the haunted
frontiers of consciousness.

However, Leong does not simply lure a wakeful, watchful, wary Oulipo into the sleeping chamber of surrealism. There is another room in the house of surrealism—and suddenly that house looks more capacious and inviting than the rat-mazes built by Oulipo—where sleep and waking lose their distinction: it is Breton’s “supreme point,” where “life and death, the real and the imagined,

past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions.” Leong’s mash-up of Poe and Stein must take place in this room, accessible only—in accordance with the Hegelian dialectic that, along with Marxism, came to such prominence in the Second Manifesto—by way of contradiction.

However, neither mathematics nor a mathematized literature, as Oulipo aspires to be, can proceed through contradiction. Instead, in both mathematics and Oulipo, one chooses the axioms that will lead, with appropriate rigor, to an astonishing result. Whether this result can revolutionize the system from which it has issued, affording escape from the rat-maze, is a matter for debate. Is dialectical motion a prerequisite for revolution? A similar debate has been provoked in philosophy by Badiou’s attempt in *Being and Event* (2005) to apply the axioms of set theory to the French Revolution.

Oulipo also relies on set theory, but as formulated by Bourbaki, a collaborative group of mostly French mathematicians. Roubaud states in his introduction to the *Oulipo Compendium* (flamboyantly numbering his sentences, perhaps in order to conjure an aura of ineluctable logic and mathematical proof):

13. *When the Oulipo was conceived, Bourbaki provided a counter-model to the Surrealist group.* [emphasis in original]

14. We can say that the Oulipo is an homage to Bourbaki and an imitation of Bourbaki.

15. At the same time, it is no less obviously a parody of Bourbaki, even a profanation of Bourbaki.

16. Bourbaki’s initial plan—to rewrite Mathematics in its entirety and provide it with solid foundations using a single source, Set Theory, and a rigorous system, the Axiomatic Method—is at once serious, admirable, imperialistic, sectarian, megalomaniac, and pretentious. Humour has not been one of its prime characteristics.

17. The Oulipo’s plan, which “translates” Bourbaki’s objectives into the domain of the arts of language, is no less serious and ambitious, but it is non-sectarian and not convinced of the validity of its proceedings to the exclusion of all other approaches.

Curiously, the introduction to *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature* cites Roubaud (without giving the source) as saying Bourbaki can be considered “a sort of

mathematical surrealism.” Moreover, it’s remarkable that, although Oulipo claims to be modeled on Bourbaki, the latter’s plan “to rewrite Mathematics in its entirety” has been criticized for its neglect of, among other things, combinatorics and algorithms, both crucial to the Oulipian project (see “The Continuing Silence of Bourbaki” in *The Mathematical Intelligencer*, volume 20, issue 1, 1998).

In any case, Oulipo remains locked in an agonistic embrace with surrealism, if only because opposites can’t help but mutually condition one another. We might recall that Queneau once belonged to the surrealist group; in fact, at that time he was Breton’s brother-in-law! Thus, the vehemence of Oulipo’s opposition to surrealism, among “all other approaches,” takes on the appearance of a family feud. Yet, in spite of their antagonism, Oulipo and surrealism (like Christianity and Islam) share common ancestors and base their teachings on some of the same ancient texts—most obviously, those of Jarry and Roussel. “The name of Jarry,” Breton wrote in 1937, “hovers over the origins of surrealism”; Oulipo, for its part, was constituted as a subcommittee of the Jarry-inspired College of Pataphysics. And Queneau, when he was still a surrealist speaking in tongues of contradiction, once praised Roussel’s work as “unit[ing] the delirium of the mathematician with the reason of the poet”—terms that prefigure the birth of Oulipo.

As the phrase just quoted indicates, Queneau, as a trained mathematician, must have known that mathematics sometimes proceeds, if not *via* delirium, then by intuitive leaps. Such leaps exceed, but later can be reconstructed as, step-by-step operations. Arriving at what mathematicians call “deep” (non-trivial) results may, at certain junctures, necessitate abandoning the axiomatic method, which, as Gödel’s incompleteness theorem demonstrates, cannot cover “Mathematics in its entirety.” The triumph of Oulipo in “translating” mathematics into art is diminished by the already quasi-artistic status of mathematics. Here the polarities become reversed: Oulipo stands in danger of translating the art of mathematics into the anti-art of the vending machine.

As Queneau notes in his essay “Potential Literature” (1964): “We regret having no access to machines: this is a constant *lamento* during our meetings.” At the same time, most Oulipians aimed to do more than wind up toy robots—they wanted to create art by stealing fire from mathematical procedures. Later, when computers became widely available and “access to machines” was finally granted, the second-generation Oulipian Italo Calvino insisted that the human operator remain visible at the controls of the machine: “The aid of a computer,” he wrote, “far from *replacing* the creative act of the artist, permits the latter rather to liberate himself from the slavery of a combinatory search, allowing him also the best chance of concentrating on [the] ‘clinamen’ which, alone, can make of the text a true work of art.”

Perec concurred, stating in an interview that “when a system of constraints is established, there must also be anticonstraint within it. The system of constraints—and this is important—must be destroyed. It must not be rigid; there must be some play in it; it must, as they say, ‘creak’ a bit; it must not be completely coherent; there must be a clinamen—it’s from Epicurean atomic theory.” Oulipo’s “rehabilitation” of the clinamen—that unaccountable swerve in the world’s self-weaving—introduces the element of chance into the axiomatic method. It bears, of course, a family resemblance to the chance-driven “free associations” touted by Breton and company. However, the second-generation Oulipians’ recourse to a limited dose of *hasard*, while contravening the anti-chance declarations of the movement’s founders, hardly represents a total surrender to surrealism, where chance is deliriously celebrated as a gateway to the Absolute. Nor do we need to consider it as a moment of “*mauvaise foi*,” as Christelle Reggiani asserts in her recent study *Poétiques oulipiennes* (2014). Instead, we might generously interpret it as a example of the “radical combination” of which both Oulipo and surrealism are capable.

The radical combination of constraint and anticonstraint—a contradiction that can, in the end, only be understood dialectically—brings us back to the room in which we observed Michael Leong at work, sifting Poe’s words through Stein’s. It is a room in the house of surrealism, whose Oulipian wing is known as “the ruin of rules.” (Of course, a ruin—as that state beyond an object’s “finished,” final one—is always under construction.)

So I end by dictating to you, the reader,
some irreducible if question-begging questions:
“Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?
What words will express it
against the inexorable *Weltanschauung*,
the thorny syntax of the wind?
Could I tabulate it in a foreign pamphlet,
in some melting,
non-fragmentary dream?”

In our time,
is the dictionary not a cannibal?”

These lines are from a poem entitled “Politics and the English Language (George Orwell Through the Looking Glass),” also included in the present collection.

Throughout *Words on Edge* (the title is derived from a procedure described in the *Oulipo Compendium*), Leong grows a metaphoric of radical combination from various lexically constrained fields. His constraints are barely visible forcefields permitting free range—maximum swerve—to poetic motion. In another poem-cycle whose words are plundered from Booth Tarkington’s 1921 novel *Alice Adams*, Leong—at once a foremost American Oulipian and surrealist—explains what must happen to the reader in any “workshop of potential literature”:

To alter the course
of the coming evening,
dark matter’s moths had quietly returned
and unfinished your face.

DESCRIPTION AS ENDLESS PAYMENT

Richard Greenfield's *Subterranean*. Omnidawn, 2018.

Reviewed by Calvin Bedient

A metaphoric style implies that the literal is less than it seems, a metonymic style that, to adapt Wittgenstein, the limits of a poet's language are the limits of his or her world. Keats's heart-breaking odes are metonymic; even the "Ode to Melancholy" is less metaphorical than a lovely feat of personification. Jorie Graham's poems are metonymic, despite allegorical overlay. Cole Swensen's and Brenda Hillman's are metonymy wanting to break into vision – Hillman resorts to small local metaphors, as it were, to distract from and also hint at the larger missing All of reference: "The soul is a metaphor." And so on: the shades and mixes of the two are infinite, even in the low-lying country of contemporary poetry. But nowadays (and we can of course go back to Lowell and Bishop, to Robert Frost, even to Whitman), strewn-about metonym predominates over major metaphor.

Richard Greenfield's new book, *Subterranean*, is a locus classicus of being shoved up against metonym. His anguished bond to a dead father ("deadfather," a symbiotic compound) keeps his observations at the surface level of the impoverished everyday, as opposed to looking forward. At the same time, it posits a subterranean magnet-mass of deadness, which must be bent to, and, however hurtfully, temporarily dressed up by metaphor (it's the unseen, after all). Greenfield frequently figures it as literal roots, which are alive but you wouldn't want to live there.

In poems of rare quality and genuine difference (they seem to start up by the striking of flint Richard against steel Richard and from no one and nowhere else), he has perfected a notational style, a hang-dog but precisionist practice of observing his immediate surroundings, the endless enervating series of passing things. Nothing for it but the foot-pound-second and flature of description. Joyless, inconsolable, inhabiting a moment that's always too late, the work has an insomniac's irritable alertness, a miss-nothing dynamic. Description, after all, is action:

exercising his intelligence and his ear (“Sprung upon the mallow sky and aniline cirrus”), Richard could click off the lurid exit sign he sees in peripheral vision? But it doesn’t work that way. Any road, “*sucker* is pronounced /*succor*” (“They Will Bluff Us to Influence Us”). And vice versa What’s the difference between such self-understanding, a continual scraping off of protective skin, and hopelessness? “I will never have children – should I / tell you everything? – it is an inscrutable / moaning – an asthmatic speech I transcribe.”

In truth, this writing-from-the-pit isn’t desperate enough to get out of it. Isn’t it too soon, might it not always be too soon, to abandon the father? What he *might* have been, and the love it might have been possible to give him, is what’s mourned. Kill off these (yes, foregone) possibilities and this *other* father and this *other* son die. A son’s actual debt to a father is anyway unpayable. Simply, the man, good man or bastard, was there first.

Ingenuity could probably place the speaker (Greenfield^{imagined}) in the “classical” Freudian framework of the Oedipus complex; but I think the effort would be wasted. It’s the father’s *denied* love that is crippling, his *No, you’re worthless*, not the famous *No* of the prohibition against incest with the mother. (The very language of the psychoanalytical discourse, so confidently in charge, now seems tired of itself.) Greenfield’s “subject” is the crushing weight of rejection, Kafkaian. The smashing of love, which is almost as severe a crime as any, projects an acrid mix of feelings, more bitter than tolerant, onto the deadfather, feelings reflected back on the son. Late in the book the speaker says “hate has slipped from the cell – and I put the brakes on.” Yes, he’s in control and it’s killing him. There can be no catharsis. The deadfather would have to apologize, which of course is impossible. Even if he were to call his son “buddy,” as I hear fathers doing nowadays (but certainly not in my day), the clouds would open. But as it is, how forgive a jeering progenitor who was physically and mentally abusive toward his son, as well as a wife-beater (she left him when he tried to pour bleach down her throat), a druggie, a thief, a drunk, a jailbird, and a father who, almost the worst thing, has become *deadfather*, undearly departed. Still and all, a *father*. They don’t come in duplicate. You don’t get to choose.

Yes, a very powerful thing especially when he’s a cyclone of offenses. By right of office (but who instituted this right?), he’s the promise of a hero, a “narrow figure” fishing against the river light. This particular father was even something of an artist, painting the desert in the desert on pieces of plywood while his son watched, varnishing the results, and selling them at swap meets (as is related in “Mojave Varnish” in Greenfield’s first book, *A Carnage in the Love Trees*, one of my favorites of Greenfield’s poems). A gone-away father, he’s nonetheless glimpsed

implicative, quietly fabling, a wonder. Although the new book is more discursive than *Carnage* (but less so than his second collection, *Tracer*), the poems are, as intimated, distressed by feeling while free of the usual advertisements of emotion, such as *O*'s and *oh*'s, exclamation marks, italics, stirred-up meters, affect-naming words. They don't insist on any emotion they aren't condemned, as it were, to feel. After all, it's very trying to be so candid as Greenfield is, it's hard enough just to lead the facts out into their thin air without *singing* them: "Listen to yourself / snitch – were you even alive to this pain?" True, in "Nonviolent Violent" we find:

Crack my throat open
and scandalize me

– a set piece (literally set off to the extreme right of the page), a glittering gem among comparative pebbles; but I, for one, do not wish the excision of this cry, which implies a dreadful suspicion of the ugliness that even Richard's brilliance at self-delving, together with his poetic gifts, can't bring into the light.

The poems are randomly (if slightly) staggered at the left margins – so many little alerts that the form isn't safe; indeed, a weak seismic disturbance seems already to have occurred. Witness also, here and there, a mid-line hiatus or two, a death drop. But in other ways the poems are defended against the incomplete disappearance of the father, he who made his power felt on the flesh and is even, in the questionable patriarchal light of psychoanalysis, synonymous with space, law, and language. One notes scientific words that the father would probably have had to look up in order to understand (as this reader did). Too, the discipline, the often surprising (original) exactitude of the description, adds a measure of protection, although and because it tends to be ascetic, father-affected: "I'm in the / mood for stark notation to be ascetic to blink / out saltpeter" ("They Will Bluff Us to Influence Us"). The lines stay listeningly on or near the surface so as to be ready to detect the approach of a too-silent specter, the stirring of animate psychic roots, such as those figured by a "young tree of heaven" – i.e., the stinking sumac – and its "excretion of a toxin." In all, Greenfield writes in the "pocket along the concrete curb the builders call the root barrier" ("The Fence").

The last poem, "Edge Effect," rises up in protest, inching toward a resolution and finally crystallizing one – namely, the recognition that the way out is a double affirmation: first, of the field of description as the scene and reality of "locus" and, second, of the body as the source of love, even if here it enjoys (and enjoyment is the vital necessity) only autoeroticism: "every morning the erection reduces to an automatic response // grab it by the hilt . . . // love was put into something." So: materiality, including corporeality.

At this point the book breaks into its most spectacular writing – almost self-defeatingly, since what it now evokes it means to defend itself against by electing love and location. Think of love

separated from the vicinity of the beloved for a
moment
as a red essence loud in the roar of leaves in a
wind storm as an unleafing because opening
to another in a mutually edible state a wildness
a wet sinking into the prehuman other a red field
a red aura

Thus the logical response to “a remorseless need to fuel expel / and divide,” whereby “one thing rises and another swallows it as it rises and is engorged by yet another rising” – I will call it this the originary Dionysian drive – is to accept that “love is false if not carnal.” “The privilege and burden of metonymy” is no longer regarded as exile. Greenfield changes the state of play, inverts the values; what was extra becomes *place*, with all its welcoming substantiality. The deadfather is implicitly excluded from both “location” and this carnal “love,” the first in being dead (having threatened, even so, to become the “entirety,” thus dislocating location), the second also because dead, and in addition as the father-male. He himself, of course, was, wrong to love and stridently resonated as its opposite. As if his own being had somehow been savagely hurt, a hurt passed on to his son.

Greenfield’s poems do not close themselves off formally, in summary statements and rounded-out emotion (even “Edge Effect” ends matter-of-factly with “no new ground was possible until now”), as if in a circle shutting out or shutting in time, so as to hide from the unforclosed father. They gape open in something close to absolute honesty. More, they are acutely aware of the possibility of their own absence. Hölderlin, they say, began this painful compositional vulnerability. Greenfield is high among those who continue it. His brave work lights up the night from inside.

Picking Up the Radical Signal

Lake Michigan, by Daniel Borzutzky. Pittsburg University Press, 2017

Heaven Is All Goodbyes, by Tongo Eisen-Martin. City Lights Books, 2017

Reviewed by David Lau

Works consulted:

Beyond the Vanguard: Everyday Revolutionaries in Allende's Chile, Marian Schlotterbeck, University of California Press, 2018.

The Pig and the Skyscraper, Marco d'Eramo (translated by Graeme Thomson), Verso, 2002.

Old Gods, New Enigmas: Marx's Lost Theory, Mike Davis, Verso, 2018

A Little Book on Form: an Exploration into the Formal Imagination of Poetry, Robert Hass, Ecco, 2017.

Somebody's Already Dead, Tongo Eisen-Martin, Bootstrap Press, 2015.

Afro-American Poetics: Revisions of Harlem and the Black Aesthetic, Houston A. Baker, Jr., University of Wisconsin Press, 1988.

Memories of My Overdevelopment, Daniel Borzutzky, Kenning Editions, 2015.

Not I Am

The poetic imperative today: pick up the radical signal. This signal works at cross-purposes with the immediately available language of big capital's digital platforms, where the more you trash others, the higher you rise in the feed. The signal in Daniel Borzutzky's work continuously tightens, is now tethered to a book-length form. Few active poets have written more burly and stimulating work than Borzutzky. I'm even tempted to call the years from the end of the Bush administration to the present the Borzutzky moment because of

his seriousness of range, genuine humor, and formal capaciousness as a poet. In a growing quiver of poetry books and translations of Chilean poets, Borzutzky (whose parents immigrated from Chile) has all but definitively poetized a substantial period in hemispheric life and letters. Except that his mode is anti-definitive, sprawling, accretive. Hardly has one put down a recent collection or volume of translations, when another appears. This pace has quickened and now finds him circling close to a few key sources; the relentless exploitation of global capitalism, its “carcass economy,” appears as a key to his semantic system; as does the dirty wars-era destruction of the Left in Latin America; he’s repeating, reinforcing, and bringing it all back up again.

Since 2015’s *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy* (Nightboat), two book-length works have appeared: National Book Award-winning *The Performance of Becoming Human* (Brooklyn Arts Press), and 2017’s *Lake Michigan*. The last of these is my subject here. It is arguably Borzutzky’s finest book to date, with its propulsive *frisson*: lists, anaphora, choral chant all making for a kind of formal unity, unique to this collection. Borzutzky is today among the exemplary poets from Chicago, that great redoubt of the masses, a city whose regional dynamics have exemplified certain phases of capitalist development, from slaughterhouse agriculture to the white-collar skyscraper, and whose contemporary logistics economy, with its hundred-thousands strong phalanxes of the proletariat, is vital to the United States’ 21st century capitalist heartland.

Did Go to the Lake

Arranged according to a series of numbered dramatic scenes that enact a quasi-lyric drama or chanted monologue, *Lake Michigan* conjures up the turbulence of that inland body of water, which, as Chicago historian Marco D’Eramo notes, is “roughly the size of the Adriatic Sea.” Sea of troubles, impossible to end, this book’s Lake Michigan is close to a slaughter different from the meatpacking one. The crime scene here is the “black site” run by Chicago Police, which was an infamous and illegal torture center for more than 100 black Chicagoans. (An explanatory endnote anchors the reader to a specific *Guardian* investigation into the secret center.) By contrast, the collection’s proem starts out in the days of Black Lives Matter’s ascending struggles. The contemporary controversy over the shooting death of Laquan McDonald hangs in the air in the protest scene: “There are 7 of us in front of the mayor’s house asking questions about the boy they shot 22 times / There are 7 of us in front of the mayor’s house screaming about how the videotape of the shooting was covered up so the mayor could get reelected”—so Borzutzky writes of the controversy that swirled around

the delayed release of police video of McDonald's murder. The police meet the protestors, initiating the hostilities and tensions of the book, which will depart from this opening. Po po, Babylon, one-time, the fuzz, or just coppers — whatever the term for them, the police use deeply insulting “reasoning” as “de-escalation” tactics here, conveyed in indirect discourse:

And a police officer says down there where they live there was a shooting
you should be protesting that shooting a 9-year-old boy was shot by
a gangbanger why aren't you protesting that shooting why are you
only protesting this shooting

“We don't answer,” Borzutzky writes in one of the tersest lines in the book, which is full of one liners and may ultimately be a study in one-liners as restatements, humorous asides, deepening and darkening departures. That single line, what Robert Hass calls “the basic unit of all lyric forms,” is precisely wrought here. The poem continues with the protestors blocking the store entrance in what becomes a running battle with the cops, which is given poetic shape by they say/ we say rhetoric: “And they say why do you think you are here // And we say we exist in a historical continuum our comrades in the 16th century were also not told why they were imprisoned or tarred or killed.” Here we glimpse the world-historical mode of Borzutzky's undertaking, one that will bring the past of capitalist development and the colonial roots of all things unitedstatesian into its ken.

The central body of the book is divided into two sections, each with its own dramatic increases. “The beat me even though I did nothing” —begins part one, and this “I” is a chimera of a being, who will be beaten, murdered, and reincarnated before it is all over:

Then someone shot me

Then someone buried me in the sand

Then someone scooped me out of the sand and dumped me somewhere

And I was dead

Plainly marvelous and deadpan goes the routine here. The many mayors of Chicago are faulted, but how could one not think of right-wing Democrat Rahm Emmanuel's reign in the recent years after his time in Obama's White House. Check lines like these:

He was wearing a slim fitting suit and he looked handsome as he pretended he did he did not live in a city of state-killed cadavers

He had gel in his hair and his shoes were nicely polished

I died and I died again and a voice said something about hope

It's a risky move to take on the voice of the victims of police terror in a book, but Borzutzky is on hemispheric, worlded terrain. Chile's cordillera appears in another early section, somehow fused to a Lake Michigan beach: "I woke up and I was dead and there was a mountain in the middle of the beach and they took me there // I woke up and they left me at the foot of the mountain." Suddenly we are far from Chicago, where, as Mike Davis observes "[n]othing taller than the Sears Tower stands between the mid-continent metropolis and the North Pole in one direction, and the tropical Carribean in the other." Perhaps this great geographical openness creates a space for Borzutzky's poetic drift, his uneasy evocations of Chile's elsewhere. In an interview Borzutzky remarks, "I'm thinking of Chicago as this place where there's great violence, where there's miles and miles and miles of abandoned communities. A place of political violence and inequalities is one in which I'm interested in writing about and in my own way documenting." A comment like this unites Chicago with the urban history of Chile's cities like Santiago or Concepcion.

Horrific Fables from a Specific Universe

The above subtitle is borrowed from Borzutzky; it's his characterization of Raul Zurita's work. It helps to frame the action and story in his own poems

because the performance of becoming human, to pirate another Borzutzky phrase, is one that never quite gets there in what is our contemporary spiritual desert. Inhumanity dominates. How else to stanza our present, one in which “[b]arbarism is all around us” (Mike Davis), yet we remain in the era’s earliest stages. Borzutzky: “It is only the beginning of the war.”

Time, then—the meanings of its ends—is a major concern. Where are we in history’s great incomprehensible sentence, in which the subject is always changing places with the predicate? Or, put differently, what is emerging out of today’s seeds of time, mixed in a churning soil of geology, biology, and history? Beginning as a leitmotif in Scene 3, the line “We live in the blankest of times” recurs as concept and phrase in several later sections. Characterizations beyond the brute sort reek of dishonesty: “Our blood was like our blood and their boots in our eyes were like boots in our eyes and they kicked us even though we did nothing.” Anti-metaphorical, almost strictly allegorical language is pervasive here. Combined with the odd placelessness and extended epoch, the poetry begins to scramble the conventional narrative coordinates as it widens humanity’s emplotment into the remnants of the various stages that history was to have gone through. In “Scene 15,” history ends as an allegorical camp for the masses amidst the rise of derivative fascisms:

Every morning the privatized Chicagoans the white the brown
the immigrant wake up and there is an enormous loaf of bread in the
barrack

Every morning everyone gets a slice of bread

And in the evening a tomato

And in the afternoon crackers

And sometimes they take the loneliest red bodies to a clearing in the
forest

Their rancid bodies smell like turpentine

and later,

I hear the warden filling up the privatized bathtub of dawn with as many
broken Central American bodies as they can find

Given the obscene levels of contemporary inequality, perhaps it will take this sort of force to contain popular demands for social justice. Mike Davis: “Almost any scenario, from the collapse of civilization to a new golden age of fusion power, can be projected onto the strange screen of our grandchildren’s future.” Indeed, confusion and certainty rage and revolt together in the book’s concluding sections: “The police came but we confused them with terrorists // The terrorists came and we confused them with our neighbors.” Against cutting back, paring down, or formal concision, Borzutzky pushes on, with big waves of repetition and passages into new music that last for pages at a time. The poems have a courageous formal dimension and the content too begins to reflect this bravery. Difficult historical truths appear as single slogans: “The Chicago liberal gives birth to the fascist.” The victims of state terror and economic coercion in the early pages are just as inescapable in the later pages. The housing crisis appears (“My house went underwater // The lake wouldn’t stop rising // the beach wouldn’t stop collapsing”; “And my house sat empty as the bank told me to find a new house”) amid political aesthetic debate (“They call us dystopianists and we vomit // they call us realists and we vomit / They call us surrealists and we vomit”), in a poetry that works like a terror conduction, a strong acid that corrodes irony, distance, and fine, respectable talk.

Borzutzky’s work resembles, in its operatic agonies, some of the book-length poems by Raul Zurita. Given his close relationship to historical dialectics, it would of necessity be so. About Zurita’s representation of our historical shipwreck—that is, the legacies of the defeat of the international left—Borzutzky has written, “For Zurita, ... the Chilean dictatorship sits within a global continuum of international and transhistorical violence. Its specificity, he might say, is both fundamentally important and fundamentally irrelevant.” The response to this historical scale of violence is perhaps most complex in “Lake Michigan, Scene 11,” where the parodic, tender voice of the book begins fighting back. Here a popular rebellion begins and the poet sings “the mechanics of

flipping a van over”: “A riot is a thing that decides how it is to be done.” Uniting the oppressed masses in the streets, the movement is always the great mother and teacher. Daniel Borzutzky speaks with that sort of complex and instructive voice. He is critical dytopia’s locally designated authority on the catastrophe.

San Francisco: I Do Mind Dying

Tongo Eisen-Martin has followed his path-breaking 2015 volume, *Someone’s Dead Already* (Bootstrap Press), with another superb collection, *Heaven Is All Goodbyes* (City Lights, 2017; winner of the California Book Award and an American Book Award, and finalist for the Griffin Prize). It is a “quilt of oaths” (to use one of his titles), part city scene of neighborhood intimacy and multitudinous voices, part urban rebellion in the years of San Francisco’s murder at the hands of gentrification and big tech capital. Anti-paradisiacal from the title forward, *Heaven Is All Goodbyes* evinces a time of poisons and new movements with poems that are familiar with estranging, outlandish speech acts. The poems work as solvents and fiery emblems of the world that is becoming. In these two books Eisen-Martin emerges already fully developed or formed in the womb of social and political movement-work spanning San Francisco, New York, and Jackson. (He was one of the founders of Cooperation Jackson.) The distinct poetics and politics of these urban cultures work like a key here, in a poetry that seems to be a late defender of the Black Arts tradition of poetic revolution. Revising Larry Neal’s statement about the Black Arts Movement, I would argue that the poet here “is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community.”

In Eisen-Martin’s poetry there is no retreat or surrender in the face of the formidable movement-work to be done:

Every citizen

Sort of watching

Eyes under their breath

Four buses coming at a time

Not picking up or dropping off one wise man

Here come the horns out the water
Horn players not too far behind
Here come the protest signs
Here comes the chorus
A spirit shape in the gutter trash

The fresh-back-from-the-streets scenography and his militant, saxophone-quartet remorselessness of style run between and connect his two books. (They have a serial form: the brief poem “Snuck Between Pews” from *Someone’s Dead Already* is spectacularly elaborated in *Heaven Is All Goodbye’s* “Snuck Between Pews Too.”) A noted performer of his poems, his readings take audiences into the onrushing dimensions of his immersive poems. He almost never pauses between the works he recites. Houston A. Baker: “Surely what was driving Baraka in his moments of greatest commitment and integrity was an impulse to pray—to be a medium of the spirit.” Indeed, many today try to spiritualize the suffering of black America, but few can capture the revolutionary aplomb of black urban history as Eisen-Martin does, with such unpredictable force and verve. As if to make Baker’s point, and despite the atheistic title of the new collection, many of the poems make reference to God in a negative mode, i.e., *sans* redemption (here perhaps figured as activist platitudes and NGO causes). There are few easy comforts in the poems’ voices of the new masses, which form the book’s megastructure. “Four Walls” opens, “A lot of God can happen in three seconds / Not much heaven though.”

Sermon, toast, or discussion during some kind of block/port/job place shutdown, the voices here are a tight ensemble at work. The spirit they fight with gives a late glimpse of the heroic flight of the gods as the defeated heroes of revolutionary liberation movements (both recent upheavals and more historical ones). In this new shadow land comes the gritty world of vices and demons. It is a rough oracle that speaks in the pages of his books. If Mark Nowak is right to see Negri and Hardt’s radical “multitude” in the patterned conversations of an Eisen-Martin poem, it is also important to note that the elevated and visionary heights of that concept in Negri and Hardt are here in contact with rooted, and specifically demotic, tones. Against elevation and drunken-activist absolutes, the style of the poems is close to a speech denouncing neoliberal America’s cities as evil paradises. In contemporary poetry, there’s no heaven but this one.

Organization Is Everything

And an Eisen-Martin poem is a mighty thing to be reckoned with. Part spiritual, work song, and call-and-response two liners, the poems have a rigorous logic of comparison and extension. Preferring units of two in subtle parallel progressions, the poems often seem haunted, like “a syllogism with a suppressed middle term” (Hass). Check the notable passage of the book’s title poem:

Against desperate white supremacy / And other senses / That die silly /
And have

murdered

We don’t know what else we good at

Besides this traveling

Two coins / or the toll is us

Character interstate on a journey of a million parallels

A street fresco here expands across the black industrial cities of Milwaukee and Gary, yet the sequence seems equal parts a wise man’s wisecracks and a series of leaps. Written in the story form of a road trip, the title poem leaves behind a trail of clues for the central organizing crime of late capitalism. The poet’s brother, the noted actor Biko Eisen-Martin, appears as declared companion, in a moving elegy for their father:

A 1978 statement

My brother Biko and I are driving

In an empty cell lane

We are God's evil to these settlers
They might throw us under the shift change

Relentlessness is the watchword of these lines; they push ahead, as with the last two-liner above, destroying mere explanation or continuity. White settler colonies from Africa, Asia, to the Americas appear in one line, and the industrial workers movement in the next. Close to Baraka in outlook, the poems bespeak contact with both black popular radicalism and socialist internationalism. The effect is not overstated but subtly conveyed in diction (“these settlers”) or in passages that refer to black industrial strongholds like Gary, Indiana, home of the 1972 National Black Political Convention (in an early poem Eisen-Martin writes, “We watching Gary, Indiana fight itself into the sky”), where the black political struggle to form a party independent of the Democrats came up empty amid convention walkouts and disunity, as moderate elected officials and labor officials turned against the internationalist black radical left:

Passed Gary 3000
Cast iron lining / Proud forearms for meals
[...]
Maybe something unfinished

Like an Indiana hurricane

A pervasive landscape of deindustrialization in the book complicates the opening line of the first poem, the sign under which our journey will be conducted: “A tour guide through your robbery / He also is,” and thus begins the opening poem “Faceless”—where the criminal robbery is the social relations of exploitation. “Faceless” seizes on anonymity and gives it the force of the particular in a scatter of lines that veer off and take flight from the left margin of the page. The aforementioned call and response style is a crucial formal principle; the second person “you” will appear in many places, as will sweet notes of direct address:

My dear, if it is not a city, it is a prison.

If it has a prison, it is a prison, not a city.

—and in a later series of lines we find the casual use of direct speech, a feature of this layered and multi-textured volume:

“You just going to pin the 90s on me?”

—all thirty years of them—

“They why should I know the difference between sleep and satire?”

the pyramid of corner stores fell on our hears

—we died right away

that building wants to climb up and jump off another building

Gentrification in California means that you can now smell the blood of the poor in new boxy, homogenous architecture. But it is the poet of the people who gets the last laugh. In the opening few poems of Eisen-Martin’s formidable collection, this reader detects more shifts and tones, strangely humorous inflections, and rapids-like cascades of feeling than can easily be contained by analysis:

Or the way condemned Africans fought their way back to the ocean
only to find

waves made of

1920s burned up piano parts

European backdoor deals

and red flowers for widows who spend all day in the
sun mumbling at San Francisco

The poetic directive is to invent, to fight for a new palette of expressions, to bring a sharply intellectual music to life. This is important: in neoliberal America, death comes for the working class of the rapidly gentrifying inner city like an almighty scythe. And the above line about the 1990s is well taken: the 90s never stopped cutting the masses down while elevating an ever-smaller number of people. In California, the 90s was a season of open political backlash against the ethno-racial groups after the LA riots and the early-90s recession that was particularly severe in the region.

Rooted in a surrealistic historical reasoning, each one of the poems here is meticulous, handsomely arranged, and creaturely while also possessing an unmistakable energy, as if a quartet were talking to each other and everyone were saying something interesting, as if everything were going *both directions at once*, to borrow the title of the lost Coltrane Quartet album that appeared this year. About any given poem one might say, *guapo is a fighter*. These are sprawling, city-like poems of wry comment and extemporaneous momentum, as with “The Course of Meal”: “Apparently, too much of San Francisco was not there in the first place.” Tongo Eisen-Martin’s incipient voice (in each line, word, phrase, there is some upwelling of a new possibility or happening), by turns syntax-obliterating and -megaphoning, is consistent in its transformations and transfigurations. In “Fish With Ambition to Become the River,” humor quickens the way toward action:

I looked into my bank account

It said, “You have five toilets to your name.”

It said, “Don’t just sit there. Return fire.”

The city in these poems ranges between the yuppie community of abstract exchange and that working class neighborhood that yuppies go in fear of, with its hard kernel of rebellion. Eisen-Martin’s poems crawl in urban traffic, slow down, open up, and think of what it means to war: “A class struggle / sacred and soon,” he writes in “May Day.” Voices cutting on and off, working with and against each other, give palpable figuration to the dialectical political concept of the contradictions among the people. The movements of the poems, like social movements themselves, offer fragile yet intelligible unity to the atomized lives of their participants. In an era when poetry has fallen behind many of the crucial conceptual and aesthetic gains of the 60s and 70s, when nationalist conceptions

of “anti-racism” now have more purchase than internationalist conceptions of anti-imperialism, Eisen-Martin advances from the high water marks of Amiri Baraka, Ntozake Shange, and Audre Lorde. “I am a black commons,” he writes and in doing so shows that he is in no such danger of falling politically and aesthetically behind in this markedly novel and masterful work. Eisen-Martin’s poems demystify what they oppose—the racist violence of late imperial America. These are lyrical fragments of political memory, poetic battle equipment for an era that has confounded the predictions of so many theorists.

Ange Mlinko

James Merrill's *The Book of Ephraim* (Annotated and Introduced by Stephen Yenser), Knopf, 2018.

1. Abecedarian, conjugal collaboration, séance, failed novel: James Merrill's "finest poem" (Langdon Hammer), at circa 3200 lines, was first published as part of his 1976 collection *The Divine Comedies*; later it was incorporated into the "Ouija Board trilogy," *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1980); now it is being printed in its own right as a standalone work, with extensive annotations and an introduction by Stephen Yenser, Merrill's literary executor and author of the monograph *The Consuming Myth: The Work of James Merrill*.
2. Born in 1927 to Jacksonville, Florida socialite Hellen Ingram and Merrill Lynch co-founder Charles Merrill, James Merrill was a highly acclaimed poet of the latter half of the 20th century, but because of his background (and despite his extensive charity to writers through the Ingram Merrill Foundation), or because his formalism was seen as *recherché*, he was also attacked as the very eidolon of privilege: for instance, in 1972, as the youngest recipient of the Bollingen Prize, he provoked a *New York Times* unsigned editorial protesting the Beineke Library's "insistence down the years that poetry is a hermetic cultivation of one's sensibility and a fastidious manipulation of received forms."
3. "Costing not less than everything" is the phrase Merrill borrowed from T.S. Eliot to describe the poetic vocation in an undergraduate essay on Rilke; coming from a Merrill, the phrase is especially significant.
4. Death came for him in 1996, from a heart attack related to his AIDS diagnosis, after a lifetime of travel with his partner David Jackson, and home bases central to his works, including Stonington, Connecticut; Athens, Greece; and Key West, Florida: "The Book of Ephraim," written in 1974 when he was 48, largely recapitulates the themes and motifs of this contradictory life both restless and domestic.
5. "Ephraim" (pronounced EE-frum) is the name of the spirit guide in the poem, Merrill's invention: a Greek Jew who lived AD 8-36 and died on the island of Capri, a favorite of the Emperor Tiberius; his speech, like all the spirits', is written in small caps (as per the capital letters of the Ouija Board, arrayed in an arch on a piece of cardboard, and captured by a moving teacup with David Jackson's right hand on it, Merrill's left hand on top of his, in candlelight); while they prop a mirror up in front of themselves so he can see

them from the spirit world, they can't directly see his alleged eyes of "blood-washed gold" and hair of a redness that refracts through the flame motif of the poem: the color of the walls in the parlor ("Flame ... a witty / Shade, now watermelon, now sunburn"); a spirit who had died in a warehouse fire; references to opera house La Fenice (phoenix); a broken furnace.

6. "Formal" being a dirty word in many quarters, and deeply misunderstood, it is important to say what Merrill's formalism wasn't: it wasn't a rejection of Modernism (unless it's a Modernism that itself rejects Rilke, Yeats, Cavafy, Valéry) and it wasn't a reaching toward certainty or safety—Merrill's experimentalism took the too-muchness of form and amplified it, creating *haram* rhymes, overladen puns and overripe metaphors, narratives that overspilled their sonnet vessels, etymological logic, macaronic caprice: all of which was in service, like the Ouija Board (his most outré formal device by a mile) of the moment when "the wheel, so to speak, is taken" and autopoeisis happens (the formality relates too to what he calls his "facetiousness," a word doubling for the flippancy with which he sometimes treats his material, and his fetish for multi-facetedness, as in the line I DECK MYSELF IN GLIMPSES AS IN GEMS).
7. Gems, like mirrors, and the garden globe that makes its gorgeous appearance in the L section, connote artifice but also the totality of the meaning of "reflections":

... As in a garden's, glittered
A whole small globe—our life, our life, our life:
Rinsed with mercury
Throughout to this bespattered
Fruit of reflection, rife

With Art Nouveau distortion
(Each other, clouds and trees).
What made a mirror flout its flat convention?
Surfacing as a solid
Among our crudities,
To toss them like a salad?

And what was the sensation
When stars alone like bees
Crawled numbly over it?
And why did all the birds eye it with caution?
It did no harm, just brightly
Kept up appearances.

8. Henry James, Proust, and Wilde are some of the giants presiding over the poem, and it's significant that the epic (or epyllion, as Yenser has it) grew out of the beginnings of a fiction manuscript that Merrill kept losing, ludicrously, once in a hotel room and once in a taxi, which he finally had to put down to spirit intervention ("divine comedies"), reasoning that spirits prefer verse; Yeats' *A Vision* was also a precursor, having been finished on a trip to Capri, the very place that Ephraim died (and where, he tells Merrill, a manuscript is buried under Tiberius' villa that must be retrieved and burned); Wallace Stevens actually makes an appearance, not only speaking to Merrill from the spirit world but quoting Merrill's own poetry back to him—part of the deep psychic wish fulfillment aspect of the work, a shout-out to the lineage of replete aestheticism which Merrill makes no apology for: "Causes / always lost—on us."
9. "I" is an ongoing conundrum in Merrill's oeuvre: his earliest poems were extremely comfortable with Eliotic "impersonality" and he had to make adjustments, in the age of Confessionalism, to seem more accessible (Louise Bogan's charge that his poems "smelled of the lamp" hurt the then very young poet); however autobiographical he became, he was always most himself when he was taking on a fictive mask, or inviting autopoiesis through prosodic constraints, or speculating—as he does here—that it is Ephraim who is the author, and he and David Jackson mere characters—zombies, even—in a cosmic masquerade (note that even as the scribe of the poem, he most often uses the pronoun "we").
10. JM and DJ are, accordingly, passive vessels or all ears: for the telling of Ephraim's tale, the architecture of the afterlife, and guest voices by the likes of filmmaker Maya Deren, whose participation in and recording of Haitian voodoo practices put her in the lineage of occultists like Yeats and Rilke (with his "dictation" of the angels); at the same time, the humans at the Ouija board get to converse with favorite authors, visit with their lost dead (including JM's father, and his early love, poet Hans Lodeizen, who died young of leukemia), re-experience a former incarnation (JM was once a red-haired man named Rufus Farmetton), direct souls of the newly-dead to pregnant mothers (more on that later), and foreshadow their own death and separation.
11. Kew, incidentally, is where Charles E. Merrill gets sent to be reborn—to a greengrocer (Middle English: originally "a person who sold things in the gross, i.e., in large quantities": from Old French *grossier*, from medieval Latin *grossarius*, from late Latin *grossus* "gross"—an Oedipal victory for the poet over his millionaire stockbroker father, to whom he seems to be saying, "Get in the queue.")

12. Levity: Ephraim quotes Tiberius: “No gold so light / As pure amusement,” a vindication of Merrill’s flagrant use of light rhyme and paranomasia in “serious” poetry; the spirits seem to agree, because “all burn/To read more of this poem” (the dream!).
13. Matrix—“late Middle English (in the sense ‘womb’): from Latin, ‘breeding female’, later ‘womb’, from *mater, matr-* ‘mother’”: “the absence from these pages / Of my own mother” could be because Hellen Ingram Merrill was very much still living (she would indeed outlive her son by five years, dying at 102), and yet “Because of course she’s here / Throughout, the breath drawn after every line, / Essential to its making as to mine”—in fact, the feminine presences are largely a matrix of the maternal and sexual, from the smoking Joanna, the middle-aged femme fatale of his novel, to Maya who is “ridden” by the Haitian goddess of love Erzulie; if there is an anxiety about the omission of his own mother from the epyllion (Marianne Moore: “omissions are not accidents”), it may be because he has had to become her, or assume her powers of fecundity, to produce a matrix wherein the dead and the unborn swap souls, or the fictive and the actual change places.
14. Novel characters and plots, as remembered from Merrill’s lost drafts, serve as what Yenser calls a “shadow narrative” interbraided with Ephraim’s tale and JM/DJ’s recollections of their life together, again confusing the question of what is fictive and what is “real,” but also serving as an anti-boredom strategy, much the way Byron’s constant digressions keeps *Don Juan* motoring along—Byron being yet another of Merrill’s heroes, who first introduced this tactic of digression in his Venice poem, “Beppo”—and Venice is the setting of *Ephraim’s* climactic scene.
15. Ouija Boards were all the rage around WWI; the parlor game was invented and patented by American businessman and attorney Elijah Bond, as Yenser tells us; it lent a disreputable air to Merrill’s poetic enterprise: “Many of his friends, more or less privately, worried, more or less vehemently, about the expense of his powers in such a weird direction and about the cost to his literary reputation.”
16. “Patrons” are the spirits who look after their “representatives” on earth like guardian angels; as they ascend the nine stages of the spirit world they attain “a degree of PEACE FROM REPRESENTATION,” a redolent phrase that captures artistic weariness as well as weariness of governance; you can see in this concept a glimpse of Dante’s influence on Merrill’s “divine comedies,” captured in the epigraph from *Paradiso*, which as translated by Longfellow, goes: “All the spirits of Paradise look upon God, and see in him as in a mirror the thoughts of men”—think of Merrill as belonging to the same poetic nexus as Pound, who conceived of all ages and languages

as a contemporaneous web, and also pioneered the modern epic as a classical folly.

17. Quotations in section Q, terza rima in section W, sonnets in section R: Merrill changed up his forms, as he switched *mise-en-scenes*, to keep a long form's tedium at bay (Edgar Allen Poe: "I maintain that the phrase, 'a long poem,' is simply a flat contradiction in terms").
18. Reproduction, along with "representation," multiplies selves and surfaces, and this notion lurks behind Merrill's motifs of mirrors and gems and artworks: but it also underscores the need for the domestic partners at the heart of the narrative to have a child together, albeit a symbolic one: when JM plays the puppetmaster and directs newly dead "souls" to the nearest pregnant women they know, it is invariably creepy (what happens when he meets one of these babies eighteen years later is creepier still), but he knows it and—further—metonymically implies that *all* authentic artistic creation is puppet-mastery that *should* creep us out.
19. Sexual fantasy permeates Merrill's poem as in no other modern epic: from the sybaritic Ephraim (who "possesses" DJ in order to touch Merrill's body, and seeing JM and DJ in a mirror at the tailor's, leers I AM BEST SUITED WHEN U STRIP); to Maya Deren's imagined labors in the afterlife (WE GIRLS HAVE STOPPED A WAR WITH CUBA) ministering to prime ministers; to the climactic meeting in Venice with Wendell, the handsome eighteen-year-old to whose fetus JM directed a drifting spirit through Ephraim in 1956—for a moment, when Merrill gets an eyeful of the (fictional) nephew he helped ensoul, he imagines *not* being his uncle.
20. Time is of the essence here too—the ripening of eighteen years is equivalent to the ripening of the poem (a Rilkean theme), and throughout the epic there are at least three times running concurrently: a chronology of the year 1974, a recollection of JM and DJ's world tour in 1956, and the "time" of the lost novel, *Temps perdu* being one obvious referencce.
21. U & YR GUESTS THESE TIMES WE SPEAK ARE WITHIN SIGHT OF & ALL CONNECTED TO EACH OTHER DEAD OR ALIVE, Ephraim tells the couple; NOW DO U UNDERSTAND WHAT HEAVEN IS IT IS THE SURROUND OF THE LIVING—an insight that literature, of course, has at its best always facilitated.
22. Venice (where La Fenice, and history, is the phoenix periodically rising from its ashes) is also the perfect place for Dante's paradisaic love to be transformed back into telluric, bodily, contaminated, Merrillian love, which is inclusive not only of the potential aforementioned creepiness but also questionable taste (those puns, those parlor games), the "louche, the chic, and the sophisticated," as Yenser has it, and the burlesque, the facetious, the artificial, the ghostwritten.

23. Wendell, by the way, is not only a pretty face: he is a vehicle for Merrill to stage an argument close to his heart: whether the glories of art redeem the “sickness” of mankind (Wendell is a budding painter, but also a misanthrope; Merrill is ever the hopeful innocent and aesthete).
24. X-rayed paintings, such as Giorgione’s *The Tempest*, remind us that even in a world of surfaces—cherished by Merrill as by Wilde, Ruskin, and Proust—there is more than meets the eye.
25. Yenser has given us an invaluable gift with this fresh edition of Merrill’s marvelous, curious work, and if this story about continual rebirth has itself taken several lives and shapes, it very well may count Yenser as midwife of its final form: as recorded in Merrill’s sonnet sequence “The Will,” a stone ibis purchased in Egypt and intended as a gift for a wedding he was on his way to was left behind in a taxi along with a draft of the novel; that wedding was the Yensers’; “The Will” goes on to mark this as a pivotal event, suggesting the new shape the “novel” should take, and is the first poem in Merrill’s oeuvre to introduce Ephraim’s voice; Stephen Yenser turned out to be Merrill’s first reader of “The Book of Ephraim” section by section, offering advice and encouragement on the manuscript as it coalesced into form; thus has Yenser inherited the poem through “The Will” and fulfilled the promise of the lost ibis, symbol of Thoth, god of wisdom and scribe of the underworld.
26. Zoologically poised somewhere between St. Mark’s winged lion (who goes with an open book) and the chameleon (etymologically, “lion on the ground”), Merrill says of himself near the end of the poem: “Young chameleon, I used to / Ask how on earth one got sufficiently / Imbued with otherness,” which is a question we ask ourselves often in these times; his poem exists so that we too can say, in full knowledge of the weirdness the quest entails, “... And now I see.”

Writing as Predation

Rayfish, by Mary Hickman. Omnidawn, 2017.

Reviewed by Calvin Bedient

Look out, there's a rayfish in the water.

In her comment on the back cover of *Rayfish*, Mary Hickman's second book of poems, the artist Molly Zuckerman-Hartung says that Hickman "refuses to mystify." It's true that Hickman doesn't pretend to say more than she says, but she consistently says contradictory or unrelated things. It may take a while for the waters to clear to the point where you can make out the presence of their queasily graceful predator, the speaker and her hidden intentions. For me, what was bewildering at first in its wildly swinging movements settled into awe at the cunning of Hickman's craft, not least its deceptive intimacy, to echo Zukerman-Hartung. The book is all about the heart, but not in the sense you might think. What roams through it isn't tame, never mind the direct-seeming, well-mannered prose you wouldn't be afraid to show to your mother, or the Omnidawn Press.

The poetry thrives on distraction without itself being confused; it's both psychological portraiture and a ruse. The first poem asks, "How does one work with chaos as a material for life"; the book itself is the answer, in part by seeming to generate chaos, a chaotic *effect*. The poet mimics chaos by slipping from subject A to subject B and back, finally moving on to an astonishing conclusion. The identity of the individual personas (who fancy themselves artists on a level with the artists they speak about) isn't fixed; it's ice on the melt at the same time that it's fire in the hole.

The way to stay strong, in the logic of the poems, is to stay in motion. Non sequiturs serve this purpose, add their little jolt, their bounce. In the first poem, "Shenzhen," a woman sweeping the street spits on the speaker's brother's cut hand to help heal it. This woman remarks that when she was a poor child she bought tissue and made roses. Yeah? Then come the sentences, "Ropes of high red firecrackers hang the length of the skyscrapers. Lit, they rip across eye and ear with violence as the smell of gunpowder floats back." So, a string of reds. Pain, healing, craftsmanship, explosions. Bang bang: the originality of the connected disconnection and the purpose it serves as Hickman, the force behind the masks, preys upon her subjects, looking for life-blood, seeking to *surpass*, makes her book a literary event. "I hold these elements in my hands and I ignite them to see what may be."

At poem's end, the brother is in the hospital (several of Hickman's speakers participate in hospital drama):

The resting child is encircled by the impersonal. To it, he owes his
sudden firmness, perpetually destroying perpetually rebuilding.
Blood, too, is a tissue. . . He sucks red ropes back into sleep.

While always sounding personal, the writing itself is "impersonal" in this way, intent only on increase of life. The "I" is both a toggle between subjects and alive with will. Via her speakers the poet is an almost secret agent of Dionysus, drawn to the "perpetually destroying, perpetually rebuilding," the inextinguishable stuff-on-the-go of sexed and cosmic materiality ("Almost anything you look at you can see in terms of movement," notes the poem "Merce Cunningham"). Hickman's spiritual imagination spins in the gyre of creation and destruction, seeking to master it. Her speakers are just persons . . . until they prove to be sneakily formidable.

Soutine, in the title poem, is one of the poet's heroes because he sees "the forbidden thing" and paints it. His rayfish is a terrible bloody chunk of meat. Perversely, Hickman's speaker calls Soutine's *Still Life with Rayfish* a "portrait." She boasts that she does portraits too, only with words (later in the book the speaker is a painter, the double of Artemisia Gentileschi, improving on her self-portraits. Yet another speaker, a choreographer ("When I first made this piece . . ."), is in fairly open competition with Merce Cunningham. Or the "I" may be a sculptor, a photographer. Primarily, Hickman's monochrome speakers mirror themselves in the guise of making portraits of others: "It's only important to do the work" ("Everything is Autobiography and Everything is Portrait").

In "Rayfish," mirroring herself as Soutine, the speaker links her macabre still lifes to his in a demonic bond. In point of fact, her portraits are far from being "still lifes" in the conventional sense, which is the only one. For example, they can be sweaty with her body: "I make a figure from gray feathers stuck to my neck with sweat." Or pictures of extravagant, fully-lived-in movement, as in the magnificent:

I build whole visions of life out of the swirling black velvet of a
woman's dress as she wades into water. The wet velvet billows, a
a second skin, sensual, dragging her under, pulling her out to sea.

In short, she's an unholy creative terror. Soutine is not to birth all the shudders himself. (The blurbs do not hint at this terror, which is at the civil-seeming core of the book.)

On every page except in the two under-pressured final poems, we read the swell of waters in which the protagonist strokes her way not just to stay afloat but, again, to command the fury of the waters. I suppose there's a dark, gleaming elation in the effort, which is always successful; it *will* be so. ("I *will* the body solvent. . . . I have rid the curtains, the things keeping me from seeing. I have rid the things I opposed.") *Rayfish* minimizes standard edification, which, if truth be told, is already old, while pushing bold creativity to the maximum. The generalizations sprinkled here and there are "off," willful like the poet's personas, like Hickman's behavior inside them, as them. The ideas are a bit kinky, jealously hers, not everyone's. To be vital is to be original, and vice versa.

The speakers shift about in the poems from this to that, present to past, introducing new impedimenta of *here's*, new opportunities to push back challenges. It's as if, for Hickman, nothing can or should stand isolated in prose-verse. Hers is driven to include *more*, to turn the subject over, unfold; to do so is an imperative, and a burden, and a sort of joy. Creativity itself is the exercise of power. The persona in the Soutine piece speaks of feeling "a certain evolution in myself in the ways I find of saying things. Let's call this a transition from attention to grace." No, let's call it what it is: in relation to Hickman's first book, *This is the Homeland*, a title of pure irony from the point of view of the second, it's a transition to an attentive ferocity. I say this not as a criticism but from something more like amazement at the brazenness of it, the creative hutzpah. Reading Hickman is like watching those nature movies in which an alligator drags a zebra under water, or a boa constrictor wraps itself around a leopard and squeezes.

Hickman's hot-cool, close-up, twist-about technique works against emotions in their usual garbs. One of her speakers creates and films a dance, performed by a certain "Anna," apparently modeled on Pavlova, for whom the following description works: "her sternum pulls her across the stage . . . The figure walks as if pulled by a string. This is why Anna is most ready to change direction" (that's Hickman, "most ready"!). The speaker states: "there are no feelings in this piece – there is nothing but instinct" ("Merce Cunningham"). The motor and power of *Rayfish* is also "instinct." Instinctive cunning in an original style of seduction. A sort of merciless drive to invade, take over, not be stopped by scruples. Seduction, if that word can be allowed in this instance, is, after all, poetry's power and in Plato's view also its culpability, the opposite of philosophy's responsibility.

Rayfish is all but rigorously anti-philosophical in its constant literality. It's is and is not your everyday literality, and it's certainly not your everyday exercise in reflection. The poems run on in apparent discursiveness, usually 2- or 3-page single paragraphs (though a couple command a full 4); goodness knows, they seem full of thought, but the thinking is a sharp flash of the nerves. It wouldn't know what to do if it were required to behave. The thing is that it *wants infinity*. At least *unknownness* ("I want to isolate the body away from interior and home. Which is its knowness," says the speaker in "Beijing"). Hickman's speakers know themselves awfully well; it drives them into constant self-revision, to make a break for what doesn't need knowledge.

The poems do not build, exactly, but move sideways, scraping deeper lines in the sand, or in a hop skip and jump development, complicating the original poetic impulse without wishing *quite* to clarify or consummate it, which would kill it. I don't doubt that Hickman controls her moves with a wicked intelligence, but she has found a method that outwits conscious powers in order to let subconscious powers hold sway, catch and drag, *seduce*; Nothing could be less bucolic. Though born in Idaho, Hickman spent – bewildered? – much of her childhood in China and Taiwan, and a rootless internationalism probably conduces to her restlessness (there is no homeland) and spurs a wish to identify with something absolute, even in, and especially in, destructible flesh. Her speakers could be assumed to have undeclared wants and dissatisfactions, if hardly yearnings – but, reader, each is saying, never mind my "needs," pay attention to the confidence with which I proceed, the slyness that somehow attends my fearless openness, the sheer *use* I make of other artists.

Let's see, whom shall she investigate next? Why not Andy Warhol? "Andy only wants to be told about his body by others. Like if I am on the phone with him, standing here completely naked, looking at my stretch marks." Well, he had those scars from when Valerie Solanas, to whom men were scum, shot him. Hickman's persona had stood over him in the hospital, crying, and he kept telling her not to make him laugh, "it really hurt." "*Your* scars," she later says. "You put them to work for you. They're the best thing you have." But she performs her own attack on Andy. She makes the famous portraitist the subject of a portrait, she encircles him; lets it be know that she can be as heartless as he is. De-individualizing him, seeing a "molten mass of bodies" somehow forming a "cooled skin over the glowing image of Andy" – a freakish Surrealist moment – "enables me," she says, "to be happy with this piece, to sweeten the figure of Andy, to allow him to remain as he insists upon remaining: suspended in a vaporous narrative. We dissolve desire to enter the heart of Andy."

Where is his precious body now? She ends by recalling a childhood visit to the Great Wall: "There are bones in the Great Wall. My finger finds a finger-bone. There are wrists in this wall. And a pelvis, a pelvis is a fossil." Is she kicking a man in the groin when he's down? Thinking for instance of Andy's sexless if glamorous silk screens? (Warhol: "I think everybody should be a machine . . . I think somebody should be able to do all my paintings for me" ["What is Pop Art?"]). Warhol was stiff-brained and a pussycat compared to this persona. She's a new being, a new breed. Somehow produced by that nice person Mary Hickman, who is a pleasure to talk to at AWP.

How foresee, for instance, the speaker of "If the Heart Does Not Restart." First she tries to "wonder about a stroke, an embolism, rupture," as if, in her health, she really cared. She could *Go to the store for Roundup* instead. She disses the neighboring French woman who criticizes her gardening, then thinks of a certain man who "stroked" ("Who knows how to respond to this?"). The loose threads here consist of keeping free of the tangling weeds of death. Not exactly shaken by any of this, she ends by assisting at heart surgery in a hospital. "If the heart does not restart, there is no careful sewing . . . I grab the incision's edges, tug them together with one hand and with the other start the grating plastic *click click click* of the [staple] gun." You see how it is. She thinks and wills herself into a superior position vis-à-vis the body's vulnerability. She shuts away the cavity of death with *click click click*. She maneuvers. Out-maneuvers. And this always without any exploitation of the material, only a manipulation as suave as a skate's undulations.

According to "I Have Had Many Near-Death Experiences" the dancer Kazuo Ohno "builds a dance, it's like adding layers of flesh." Indeed there's "a moment when the image he makes starts to breathe." Well, Ohno, this artist as miracle worker, up and dies – his flesh is finished. The news comes on a Wednesday – perhaps it was Tuesday in Japan at the time? Time is so . . . unreliable. Once in Taiwan the speaker was exploring a cave underwater without diving equipment. Her lungs begin to fail, she sees a hole above, it narrows as she approaches, she realizes she can't get through. Reader, she gets through: "I dragged my body to the surface." Don't give her that doubting look. She's alive and writing, isn't she? The body doesn't get a Hickman heroine down for long. The secret, again, is to keep moving, as Hickman's mind does. Though, poor soul, this speaker/poet says she finds "working from life so intimidating."

If a male poet were to write pieces as peremptory and insidious as Hickman's, we might chalk it up to male ego or simple misanthropy. But what explains it here? Ego *and* misanthropy? A taste for ruthlessness? Hickman is no Valerie Solanas.

It's hard to say what all she is – unless, extravagantly, the answer is “life itself,” in the merciless Dionysian perspective. At the least, she (and must I keep saying “persona,” that impersonable word?) is a resourceful “tough customer.” Sly, she writes dangerously but as if in all innocence. I think Nietzsche would approve, astonished. Work profound, subtle, treacherous, crushing, original – yes, of course.

Let's see what she does with Eva Hesse. It can't be all good that her speaker finds the “Resin, vellum, wax..., translucent, skin-like.” Back in the title poem, out-demonizing Soutine, *that* speaker had said, “I devour a skin that is grotesque with demonic aura. . . . I paint a skin made from sheer white curtain blowing at windows in stark sun.” Refusing to “track” their own corpse, as the dancer Ohno is said to do, Hickman's personae naturally prefer that others be the corpses. They shake off the very thought of death: the speaker so proficient at using the staple gun on a just-dead patient says she never sticks around “to see what happens next. Or I do and now I don't know.” But in relation to Eva Hesse the suggestion of lit-up skin is okay, for Hesse “conjures life, and it is formal.” Hesse proclaims, “I have no fear; I take risks . . . It is total freedom and the will to work.” Ah, a sister spirit.

But the body's troubling and rather disgusting vulnerability comes into focus even in Eva Hesse's sculptures. Eva's stepmother (also named Eva Hesse) had a brain tumor. The thought *will* intrude. And now the speaker notices how the sculptor's work exposes the body in a metonymy of wrappings: a frame wrapped like a hospital bandage; a rigid umbilical surrounding a frame. Which, back to the stepmother, makes one wonder: “what went wrong, in the cellular, the microscopic parts, in the lipids and tissue?” Then back to the work: “this first sculpture resembles dried intestines pulled through wall.” And several of the sculptures themselves have deteriorated. “They can't be handled or installed as before.” This is pretty awful. What can she do? So much degradation of the body *and* of Hesse's art-works. “I'd like to try a material that will last,” speaker says. Eva's work is “tactile” and has “momentum,” but it's subject to change. “I don't mind that, within reason.”

Of course she does mind. The only acceptable change is vital. The question is: does Hesse's art have “a life... Does it cry? Or grieve? Does it sting?” Suddenly the rayfish flutters back into the book, via the word “sting,” to supply the missing terrible dynamic; it invades even Hesse's “formal art,” peremptorily devours it: “Place your hand upon its hide and feel the waters riot, witness ecstatic grammars, fluent hands and a breaking, strong current and waves.” Hesse is not put down like Warhol; rather, in this stunning metamorphosis, she's revised, as if in a mad creative moment, into a Dionysian artist with the hide and wild energy of a rayfish. The speaker knows – Hickman knows – that she herself is an artist

who intends to make lasting work. How to guarantee this? It can't be done, but the safest thing is to seek out what lasts in the world, namely and paradoxically, primal movement, dreamt of as a surrender to flesh as if were a black velvet dress swirling in the early seas of the world, and in the late, spreading out in a motion in a medium in motion. Dionysus isn't a personality, but a swimming gulf. In his book *Geometry*, Michel Serres speaks of Pierre-Gilles de Gennes' theory of percolation, which posits that everything above the threshold where connections can be still be numbered becomes a random flowing: "the source rushes forth, thick, abundant, continuous."

There isn't any other poetry like the prose ride Mary Hickman takes the reader on in *Rayfish*. She has written poems that appear in the guise of old-fashioned prose anecdote, while actually creating an advanced art of rare imaginative force, charged with a daring that sneaks up on you. In her writing, she devours the moral tradition from inside, dispensing with "grace" as only the strongest can do.

Brenda Hillman and the Ampersand

Brenda Hillman, *Extra Hidden Life, among the Days*

Reviewed by Cole Swensen

Brenda Hillman's latest, a vigorous, rangy, and deeply committed collection titled *Extra Hidden Life, among the Days*, has received so many great reviews that I'm tempted to skip the summary function of the form and instead focus on one detail that, though a detail, I find central to her project – the ampersand. Hillman has always used punctuation in unusual and highly intentional ways; she's even referred at times to the secret lives that punctuation occasionally takes on, but within her repertoire of extra-verbal invention, the ampersand stands out with a dynamic and a power all its own.

It joins. That's its only role, and it does it physically rather than referentially or conceptually; its form is itself a knot, almost a Celtic knot, weighted with all the ancient lore locked into that form. And it does its work of connection silently; there's an indivisibility to the fact that it cannot be "sounded out" as can a word composed of letters – and that phrase "sounded out" gives itself away; as we learned as children, it's a way of making words give up their secrets, a way of breaking them down to their non-moving parts and thus taking all the motion out of them. The ampersand cannot be broken down; its motion cannot be stopped.

The fact that it can't be sounded also means that it can't extend in time; it exists only in the singularity of the present, an immanence that cannot be deferred, which is echoed in its history. The ampersand can be traced back to the first century CE, where it began as a ligature for the two letters, *et*, of the Latin word for *and*. Over time, they continued to collapse in on themselves, fusing and becoming denser and denser – this parallel with a collapsing star will quickly go too far, but perhaps it captures something, not only of the atemporal aspect of the sign, but also of its tremendously compacted pressure.

And yet its peculiar form also seems to be a diagram for some complex scheme, such as the complicated off-rhyme schemes that Hillman often uses to send us ricocheting around a passage, disrupting the forward flow, reminding us that poetry is the only form of language that can achieve non-linearity, giving it a three-dimensionality other linguistic forms can't attain. Her line "yarrow leaves narrowly out to sea" is an ampersand all on its own, with the long *e* of "sea" whipping back to connect with those of *leaves* and *narrowly* in no particular order,

setting up a reverberation among them all, which is intersected perpendicularly by the yarrow/narrow rhyme. The overall effect completely scrambles the traditions of rhyme and meter. The ampersand marks the eternal potential for language to remix itself; it's an element that catalyzes the recombinatory principle that is the key to all language.

All of Hillman's work can be said to be, one way or another, about connections and about connecting things, and often it's things not easily connected – humans with their consciences, for instance, or the animal and mineral worlds. The ampersand, like a sailor's knot, like a complex darning stitch, manages to hold them fast. This principle is echoed in her often-unlikely adjective-noun pairs – lace life; finished dusk; horsehair breath, just to take a few from the first few pages of the book. The consistent use of the ampersand emanates a fusional force throughout the book that extends to oddities and impossibilities such as these, its influence invisibly holding them together until they become single, new forms. Cinnamon revolt; burn tangle: not only are these constructions striking in themselves, but they also draw attention to the fact that we must begin combining things in unprecedented ways if we're going to successfully address the dire conditions that Hillman foregrounds in this and her last several books.

"The fox went back & would never // meet the snake except through the ampersand," she writes, approaching the issue of connection from a new direction, and one that evokes the ampersand as a living thing, joining living things by literally joining their ranks. The snake /ampersand image captures its writhing, ever-changing nature, and thus the fact that connections are never static things, but are as constantly changing as the things that they connect. In other lines a few pages earlier "the beetles write loosely in / ampersands"; here, the form is put to a completely different function, evoking a writing that doesn't say but does, advancing a notion of writing that has nothing to do with the human but is a mode through which a living being connects directly to its earth.

Hillman's use of the ampersand marks not only this book, but also the four of her "elements" series, and thus it parallels her increasing focus on the natural world as a system in peril. Her detailed, multi-faceted treatment of this subject does not allow us to take nature as a single thing, some thing "out there"; instead, her meticulous attention insists that it's all nature; there is nothing else, and not only are we it too, but we're entwined within it as if by an ampersand. And all forms and systems are similarly intertwined.

As early as her 1989 book *Fortress*, Hillman wrote, "I envy the hyphen, the ampersand, whatever bargain / they've made for beauty." Her early recognition

of the power of punctuation, not to direct words and phrases like traffic wardens or orchestra conductors, but to signify at deeper, less volatile levels than language itself, comes to full fruition here. “The sign was the sun upon the earth,” she writes in *Extra Hidden Life* – to attempt to unpack such a line would be to misuse it completely, but it hints at the overpowering haecceity, the inviolable is-ness, that the sign can present and that a word cannot. Its consistent use allows her concerns for the predicaments of the world to be similarly presented. Of course, she also describes them, addresses them, and does all sorts of other discursive things with them, but through her insistent use of this particular sign to replace this particular word, she manages not only to describe but also to present the infinite interconnectedness of all things. This interconnectedness is central to all; and the sum total of all connected things is the present. Hillman, in this book, puts us there.

The Art of Flitting

How to Flit, by Mark Francis Johnson (Roof Books, 2018).

Reviewed by Calvin Bedient

Flitting is a difficult art: too little and you're in the container of traditional consecutiveness; too much and you spill the can. Mark Francis Johnson's *How to Flit*, which jumps across river stones where some of the stones are just the breaking call of ravens, doesn't mean to be caught in any trap. The book is a series of vortex rings designed to collide with your vortex ring, reader: "vortex rings /// beat each other away" (from the poem "4172693000," which, googled, is the telephone number of a hospital in Springfield, Missouri, a health center explicitly named 71 pages later in the book).

A poet who in one poem refers to the "shooter" video game "bxx" (Halo Two and Three) and to "vortex rings" in the next has an impressive range inside the pop-techno-physics frame of violence. But Johnson doesn't stay long in any frame. That he acknowledges frames at all is only a negative inference from his drive to reclusion. Sniff the air: ah, a recluse's "useless musk." Johnson, finds the "fresh, untutored polyphony of scum" a positive compared to the bourgeois stink of routine accomplishment and confidence. He writes in the interest of a filth-disguised purity that rejects the lie of purity, targeting just about everything except honest actual scum. Further, he mocks "Totality," which, in his (barely) preceding collection, *Can of Human Heat* (Golias Books, 2017), he dubs "Ursine." He goes even so far as to mock inquiry. No one more severe against the game of "munching . . . on roasted 'neatness.'" He's the farthest stake out in the waters of modern disgust with the idea of civilization.

How to Flit is an uneven but nonetheless hot-wired and in that sense sensational book by a newcomer who is rapidly creating novel techniques and marking out a territory of his own. Johnson proves to be best at dizzying speed. With *How to Flit* you fly, as it were, on the wings of fly, not song. As is typical of advanced poetry, the book trains you in how to read it. The poems are intermediate forms between traditional poems and firecrackers exploded under your chair – an image that belies their sly finesse. At first the ceaseless flits may seem synonymous with "flippant" (and indeed at times I'd say they are so). Their hot-seat composition is consistent with a distaste for having to say a single thing about that evolutionary mistake, human life, spawning, as it does,

generals on the fly, trillions | result of

fuss with *kinds*

of generals –

The poems display, really *display*, contempt for the human obsession with “kinds,” categories, placements, numbers, etc., etc., and a disrespectful predilection for grabbing words on the bounce from off the stomach flab of the language.

Re-readings disclose control (not too much, certainly not that) and a consistent “poetics,” if the word can withstand Johnson’s turn for deflation. In these “foster-poems,” I calculate 16.5% more sobriety of attack and 28% more economy than in the two of the three earlier books I’ve read, the before-mentioned *Can of Human Heat* and *After Such Knowledge Park* (2015), which Josef Kaplan described admiringly as “a 130-page block of sputtering, spittle-flecked micro-narratives.” Even so, the aim is still far from “felicity or finality,” that which Randall Jarrell, in long ago yesterday, said “one expects from the finest verse,” hence not the four c’s of such verse, either: clarity, continuity, climax, and closure. Instead, a cunning avoidance of all the above. Corbière would take notice, though shocked by the lack of end rhymes, *une affaire d’habitude*; Johnson isn’t having *habitude*.

But gradually a dash – dash – dash sort of trail can be made out in and between most of the poems, poems in any case grounded alike in mockery of the public world, its credulous appetite for lessons (oh “the excitement of information precisely conveyed”!), its “coolant factory,” the social shawl it spreads over death. At the very least, the poems are as unified as a quick drubbing. The effort to keep up with them is taxing, but to me this recommends them: so little poetry has the wit, will, and perversity to be taxing.

The “I” in Johnson’s work is a sharp mustard-honey whip of irony and excoriation. It’s almost at its most restrained in “Food Two,” though typically anti-community, anti-flesh, anti-everything:

When I came of age I did it
the unthinkable – fled

our pox of little red tents to be
on

...salt-flats? Were they

salt-flats? The very first day
far, shimmering rubbish

or a beast wept
morphemes big with revelation
sound preceding smell

The tang of carbolic acid and gangrene's hopeless stink from yet another variant of the musk life seeps to interest death... Once upon a time I discovered a man making love to a cheese, glorying in its many holes; and you have likened my future to a cheese...

The musk life seeps to interest death: Swift would applaud; Beckett could not be more dismissive of the flesh. The successive stresses of “musk life seeps” creep slowly enough to be caught. “Interest death” collapses on the “eh” sound. Johnson has ear.

There are a number of other linear pieces carved like catch-holds among the book's 85 poems – poems alphabetically arranged as to title, in mockery of methodology. But the majority are a good deal thinner, deliberately starved things. Flitting, after all, is inconsistent with putting on weight. Great lines (“and the echo of gears a gangway into the night”) have to endure the company of, at the nadir, pieces consisting almost entirely of the same repeated stanza. For every poem packed with brilliant nips, such as “On Fun,”

... As for empire . . . I Shirley /
mash underheel my favorite sweet, a King in chunks
 past my plastic shed flare,
olive and blue, and bluer and black
leaves,
sold wrinkled photos of *that sea*

– where the syntax slips from stomping on empire and drifts past a potentially countervailing nature into the a two-dimensional, disappointing photograph

of it – for every such success, there is at least one poem that, for me, fails to convince. Many could have been spared and still left an average-size collection. A young poet eager to put his accumulated poems on the board? Or unable, as yet, to distinguish the strong from the weaker ones? Or, cynically, not caring to do so?

In the denser poems in flitmode, the reader is “charged a headful of mesh 100” (“Altered U-knit Promo Kit”). For instance, “Discovery 3 Passes Through 4” tells of “Six weeks of immersion / folded diagonally, bits at the rear / – yet until today I // thought this the lunchwagon / Nearly over /// tedious and arbitrary cluster of behavior lessons! / Light detection and motility // eyespots in duplicate sets of ghee // plant supervisor. . . .” The point (and why should there not be a point?) may be that work arrangements (or for that matter all orderings, such as “folding,” even if they leave stuff hanging out at the rear) are sham meals that entail “tedious and arbitrary” lessons in behavior and, besides, put you under a regime of surveillance – something like that. Even surveillance is disguised as more food (“eyespots in duplicate sets of ghee”). (“Food” is an obsession in the book. Truth has a stomachic, as well as an excremental, test. The two are brought together with typical burlesque in *Can of Human Heat*: “the gutter-honey JOHNSON reek of brandy and urine.”)

But wait: the speaker, who says he works in “THE CALL CENTER,” later cops to being the supervisor (tersely, “am plant supervisor”). Either he was already the boss (after all, he’s the poet) or finally became so, cynically: in the next line (the last), he’s “plant supervillain The Wet Blanket.” It’s a deliberate wet blanket of a line – Johnson forcing himself into the speaker’s place, saying, in effect, *don’t try to side with me, I’ll discommode you*. If you go to the other side of the lying lunchwagon, it’s Johnson, who likewise disappoints naive expectations. He really doesn’t care about being loved. That’s almost lovable in him. No, don’t say that, as if siding with him, he’ll be gone before you can say Mark Francis Johnson. But there *is* a fleck of humanity in his humor, a hint of warmth in his manner. No, don’t say that; it offends the badass-jester reputation he’s after, and is earning.

Mark Francis Johnson is like “a person who has just left everybody” and is also just now heading back. See him out there, see the “white caps cut from construction paper’ // the hull red paper, the sails, white” (“On Imnibus”). The squall, an effect of both mortality and the major winds of history, is “interior visible” (“Playgoing Result for MISS ION”), and “over its tears’ foul taste” (“Pressure”), Johnson laughs.



Brian Shields, ink on paper, 36x27 inches

3.

ART

**ASHWINI BHAT:
CERAMIC SCULPTURES
JUDITH BELZER:**



Ashwini Bhat, **Tactile Language**, length 26 inches, stoneware clay, woodfired in a salt kiln, Appomattox, USA, 2016.



Ashwini Bhat, **Garden of Earthly Delights** series, height 8 inches, width 5.5 inches, depth 3 inches, native clay from Virginia with found muddauber nests and feldspar chunks, woodfired in the anagama kiln, Appomattox, USA, 2016.



Ashwini Bhat, **Garden of Earthly Delights** series, height 7 inches, width 4.5 inches, depth 2.5 inches, earthenware clay, fired in an oxidation atmosphere in an electric kiln, Petaluma, USA, 2018.



Ashwini Bhat, **Stele**, height 24 inches, stoneware clay,
woodfired in an anagama kiln, Pondicherry, India, 2010



Ashwini Bhat, **Matrikas**, height 24 inches, stoneware clay, woodfired an anagama kiln, South Dartmouth, USA, 2016.



Ashwini Bhat, **Unknot**, height 16 inches, stoneware clay,
woodfired in an anagama kiln, South Dartmouth, USA, 2015.



Ashwini Bhat, **Priestesses of Pahoehoe**, height 7 inches, stoneware clay, fired in a reduction/soda atmosphere in a gas kiln, Montana, USA, 2016.



Ashwini Bhat, **Honoo-no-Mori**, height 7 feet, width and depth 2 feet, stoneware clay, fired in an oxidation atmosphere in a gas kiln, Shigaraki, Japan, 2017.

Vital Forms – Ashwini Bhat’s Art in Clay

Emily Wilson

Three slightly warped rings of stoneware rest improbably one on top of another, their rough wood-fired surfaces tinged reddish orange in areas, a rich, almost leathery brown in others. Leftover links of a weathered iron chain? A colloquy of snakelike torques? Like many of Ashwini Bhat’s sculptures in clay, the piece (p. 166), part of her *Unknot* series, suggests the uncanniness of objects neither wholly rendered nor found. It shimmers in its medial place between nature and art, between compact movement and stasis – the decidedly figural loosening, de-figuring. Some of Bhat’s pieces seem to have only just come into physicality, born of disparate, far-flung materials; others as though some primal organizing shape seized and forced the pliant material. The range of this work hints at a long, spirited study of the act of acquiring form, of restlessly pursuing approaches and pathways to it. For an artist of Bhat’s sensibilities, the medium seems particularly apt – ductile, firm, flexible, retentive.

Bhat grew up in a small town in Karnataka, India, and trained and performed as a dancer before finding her way to ceramic work. This linkage is apparent both in the formal tensions her pieces display, their balance-seeking tilts and arcs, and in the dense choreographies of their making. During her apprenticeship at renowned Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry, Bhat chose to focus on realizing her pieces without the use of a kick wheel because she felt it imposed too much control, too much symmetry, on her creative process. She has said in interviews that the relative slowness of building with clay by hand allows her to “internalize” her forms.

For much of her career, Bhat has been drawn to the complexities of wood-fired kiln-work, particularly traditional Japanese *anagama*, which can bestow intricate surface textures and natural ash glazes unique to particular types of fuel wood. The rhythms and results of wood-firing differ greatly from those of gas- and electric-based processes, and involve nuances in temperature, oxidation, and reduction that come with the loading and repeated stoking of the firebox. In a recent conversation, Bhat told me that wood-firing enables her to get closest to “the naked quality of the clay.” The discrete movements of hand-

building – coiling, stretching, scooping, joining, embedding, smoothing – all precede firing activities that can spread over days or even weeks. Intervals of soaking, brushing, and slow, methodical scrubbing often follow. In this sense, the pieces come to embody the artist’s technique, what the art historian Henri Focillon once called, in his influential study *The Life of Forms*, “a whole poetry of action.”

Yet Bhat’s work is somehow stranger than that. Her pieces ride enigmatically apart from their various grounds and sources. They have a ruggedness, a kind of fierce, animated abstraction that girds the delicacies of intellect, emotion, and handling that go into them. They evoke the immediacies of their composition, of fire and earth and mineral inclusion, and, at the same time, feel like ulterior presences. Totem or cast-off, artifact or abrupt primordial chunk – each tends toward and away from summary definition. Out of a web of idiosyncratic allusion – to Bosch’s teeming *Garden of Earthly Delights*, to the fossil-rife strata of the Cambrian Explosion – Bhat’s pieces buck and fold, bunch, twine, stand for themselves. And yet there is an intimacy to their energies, an inviting *thing-ness* that seems to have to do with their relatively small scale (most are less than a foot to two feet in height) and with their complicated surfaces; you want to hold them, to turn them over and view them from many angles. Bhat attends keenly to “cleaning” the ones she fires in wood kilns, meticulously going over their prickly encrustations with a variety of tools – most tellingly, a diamond pad – to remove any too-sharp projections. Even her larger pieces seem eager for interaction, near enough to human-sized that the viewer feels a recognition, a semblance.

For Bhat, the search for form involves conscious engagement with the facts of working in a given time and place. “Each clay has its own limitations,” she told me, “and you have to break down your strategy in response.” She often makes use of the “backyard” clays she finds in the environment around whatever kiln or studio she happens to be using. (Before settling into her current home in California, Bhat lived as “a wood-fire groupie,” moving from one residency to another and studying with as many artists as she could in order to observe a diversity of methods and firing styles.) While working in Appomattox, Virginia, she found it difficult to roll the local clay she had dug to make her customary coilings. The discovery led her to try building a piece from a slab instead, extracting from it as a sculptor would from a block of stone. This divagation initiated the many slab-based experiments that are a major branch of her formal taxonomy. *Tactile Language*, a large stoneware spiral fired in a salt kiln, was derived from a single super-stretched slab. For a newer series loosely based on

Darwinian themes, Bhat is folding thick skinlike sheets of clay into biomorphic shapes that suggest both curvilinear vessels and articulated musculature, their dark wood-fired surfaces frosted with residual ash.

Recently, Bhat has turned more frequently to the problems and possibilities that come with electric and gas-fueled firing processes. To her, this shift feels something like moving between salty and sweet foods, and it has engendered other changes. Vivid primary-colored glazes have been making an appearance in some of her studio pieces, like pileated birds amid the earthy rusts and charrings of the wood-fired work. To counter the drift toward perfection and purity in her process, Bhat is adapting industrial techniques such as sand-blasting and spray-painting. With its smear of egg-yolk yellow, a recent piece in her ongoing *Garden of Earthly Delights* series (163) both furthers and challenges the distinctive evolutionary base of her working method. Fired in an electric kiln, it is a gnarled impaction of ancient and late materials: garnet schist and sandstone, coarse earthenware, fine porcelain, and brilliant-hued glazes like those employed by the Modernist- and Abstract Expressionist-inspired ceramicists Betty Woodman and Kenneth Price.

Bhat's pieces not only compel an awareness of the material particularities of clay, of its discrete responses to each conceived instance of building and firing. They go even further in the way they make us think about *matter* in general, with its infinities of composition and metamorphosis, its endless featherings off of form and state and appearance, of incorporation, transition, and dissolution. An earlier work in the *Garden of Earthly Delights* series is a composite of inter-related elements, all corresponding to the place of its making: a knot of feldspar taken from the ambient clay-layered matrix, the same clay fashioned into a chambered nest by mud dauber wasps, then the clay itself pulled, fixed, and inscribed by the artist. Suddenly distinctions of kind begin to break down and we glimpse the awful interstices, the fundamental fields of transaction among assumed categories—animal and human, biological and geological, figure and ground. We glimpse what Focillon called the “unequivocal bondage” between art and matter. What fastens and releases us.

JUDITH BELZER

RECENT PAINTINGS



HalfEmptyHalfFull #16,
60x60", 2018, oil on canvas



Canal Zone #5
50x50", 2015, oil on canvas



Leviathan #13
30x30", 2016, oil on canvas



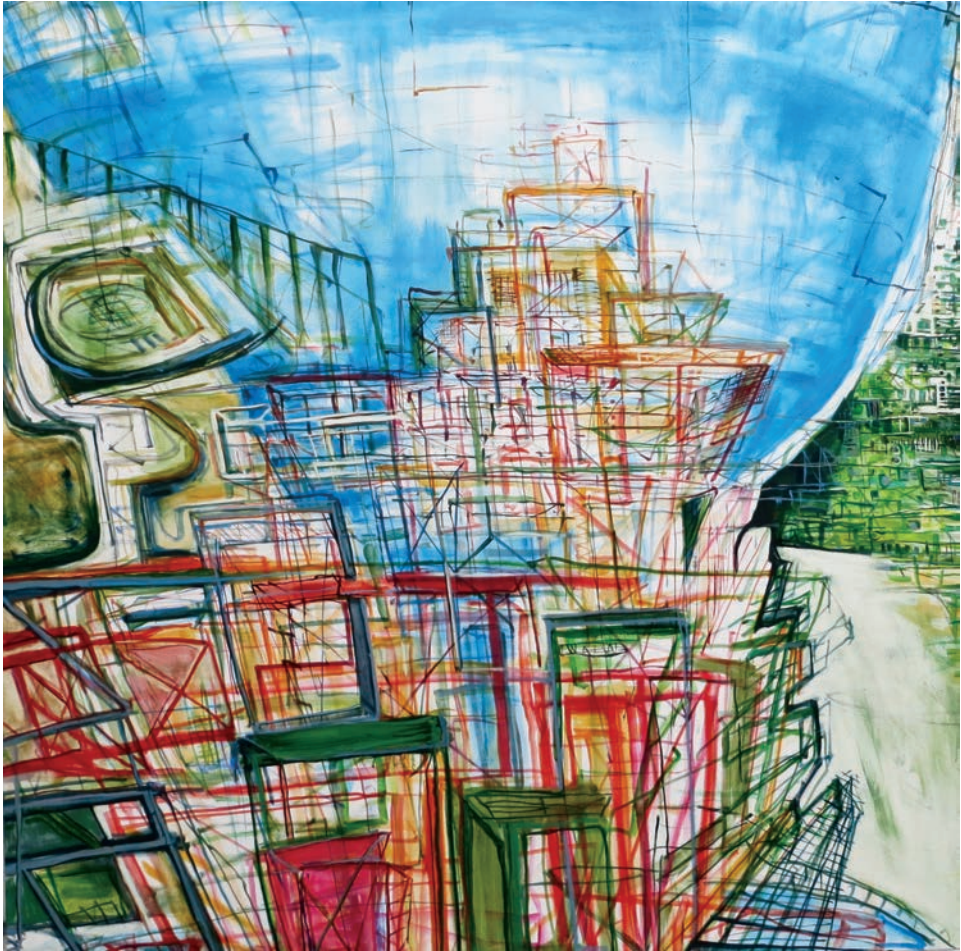
HalfEmptyHalfFull #10
56x56", 2017, oil on canvas



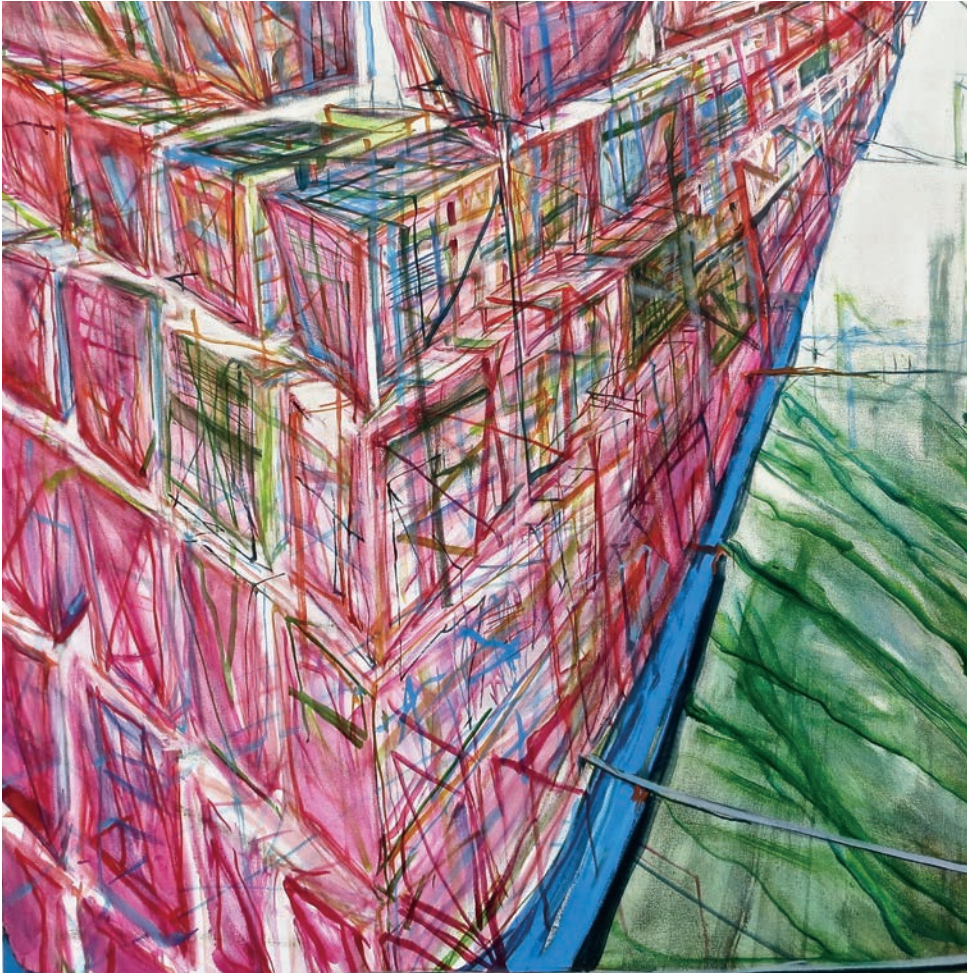
HalfEmptyHalfFull #11
56"x56," 2017, oil on canvas



Canal Zone #1
40x40", 2015, oil on canvas



Canal Zone #8
56x56", 2015, oil on canvas



Canal Zone #6
40x40", 2015, oil on canvas

Judith Belzer is a realist, but, as she says, not a literal one. The representations in her paintings of engineered magnitude, as represented in the foregoing color-plates, are certainly excited by their subjects – stimulated into amplifying their dialogue of verticals, horizontals, curves, and diagonals; the Panama Canal paintings, in particular, lean on their subjects for structural motifs and scale and a sense of multiplicity of forms and of implicit human and mechanical activities (forklifts and cranes, ships and locks . . .). But the given or remembered scenes are simultaneously subjected to the artist’s vibrant compositional energy, which is as contrary as it is compliant, its own subject as well as a response to the exterior sites.

An anti-engineering transparency, achieved by a combination of small white spaces (space separators) and translucent washes, lightens much of what’s pictured in the canal scenes. You can see through the tubes of scaffolds and also through the shipping containers. The brute forms of the latter are freed into jumpy and iffy outlines, while their sides are scribbled over with, as it were, geometrical graffiti that goes off in all directions.

The container outlines have a shadow presence on the stern of the blue ship in *Canal Zone #8* (179), as if, once freed from opacity and weight, they can project ghosts of themselves. This sort of geometrical proliferation shows up in other paintings as well. As to the deprivation of the substantiality of heavy objects, one notes that the left edge of the yellow ship’s stern in *Leviathan #13* (175) is smudged sideways at the top, erasing geometrical contour. In the paintings selected for the color-plates, Belzer either emphasizes the brute weight of geometrical solids, as in the two Colorado dam pictures (Hoover and Glen Canyon), or, shifting to the other extreme, removes their mass as if tracing back the process whereby geometry was formed in the first place, from architects and mason’s cutting and piling stone into shapes the eye couldn’t pierce (Michel Serres, *Geometry*).

Belzer’s colors are at the same time electric, as if the energy released from the mass of the objects had been injected into a palette that can thereby exclude blacks, browns, and grays to guarantee the harmony of other colors. Belzer’s colors are more alive than harmonious, confident, unapologetic, all-out brilliant.

Whether through memory or sketchbooks or directly, Belzer seizes upon industrial scenes from a point somewhere up in the air, as it were, which in itself reduces the impression of weight in what's seen below. She thus exerts over against the vertical scenes of the the dams and the horizontal scenes of the canals) a dominant angle of vision. She herself forms, in this way, an edge to what she calls "edgelands," the "mongrel spaces" where humanity cuts nature open (or down, as with the rain forests), so as serve its own needs, be it for electric power, various uses of water, transport, or some other purpose.

For "representational" paintings, hers give an especially strong impression of the immanence of the creative act within them, of coloring and mark-making done just minutes ago, before the paintings were left to their square shape to stabilize their content – though the square canvases are there less to preserve the representations, allusive and sketchy as these are, than to "squeeze them into a power field," as the artist nicely has it.

The Panama canal paintings, in particular, speak of the processes that went into them, whereas the Colorado dams are, as such and as painted, the best examples of what the process opposes – namely, structures that shout out the terminal result of their construction. Of feats of building that were in a sense completed before they started, the three-dimensional forms of blueprints.

True, the tensile, compelling curve of Hoover dam in *HalfEmptyHalfFull* #16 (173) asserts itself with something of the volume and surface of sculpture, she gives it that. But the structure looks locked deep into its own luminous concrete and, as if goosed by the backed up water behind it, tucks its butt in. At the same time, the held-back Prussian-blue water sits immobilized in dry opacity, as dead as it is gorgeous Here, spontaneous impulses of the brush, so quick and alive in the Canal paintings, are severely curtailed. But the abstraction of the draftsmanship and the squared, high perspective bear the painter's will to stand up to the dam's massive magnificence. Further, touches of unreadable small features, vague but geometrical, sprig the dam. Force, mass, concrete determinacy, a powerful design and a design of power – these are being countered, if barely, by an opposing, if naturally *impressed*, force, the artist's vitalist aestheticism, her preference as an artist and a living being for what doesn't stand still and serve.

In the Glen Canyon painting (177), the dam is perhaps pictured as not quite finished. It's much more beset than her Hoover dam is by jointed crane-like figures, plus long scratchy fraying pipes or cabals and possibly a hint of the high, lacy traffic bridge that was completed first, in 1958. The effect is to keep the monstrous concrete structure looking *under*, not triumphantly emergent

and dominant, still subject to construction. The steep perspective adds to the impression; so does the draconian square of the canvas.

By contrast to the dams, all this is saying, the paintings themselves are unforeseeable, rejecting the anti-aesthetic of what's mechanically planned and measured; the Panama Canal paintings, freed from the formal strictures of the dams, *take off*, are ripped off the brush tip, as it were. They, too, make bordering use of precisely that classic geometric form, the square – but, and this is the rare thing, as a grip more than as a frame. The picture does not lie in its arms. Symmetry and dead-centering are foreign to Belzer's instincts as a painter. Her eye, body, brush do the thinking, and are restless.

Of course the square as such is a shape of enclosure, strictly excluding the outside. Belzer uses it, in part, to create a certain sharply focused, shallow, abrupt perspective not lost in a vanishing point but, instead, slamming against the back of the picture. The paintings stop well short of making a complete break from three-dimensional space; they would not be so dynamic if they did; the perspective presses from front toward back and vice versa in a gesture of tension, of the painter's muscular control over it.

So we do not see an "inside" in the square, at least one we can easily enter. The train tracks alongside rows of merchandise ready for shipping or already unloaded in *Canal Zone #1* (178) come zooming at you, rather than invite a nearer view. Safer to stay where you are and not project. And better not step off into the abyss in *HalfEmptyHalfFull #11* (177), the painting of Glen Canyon dam, or the one in *Canal Zone #5* (174), where a steep descending foreground of scaffolds with outsized board decking is countered by one or two slopes in the background that, nonetheless tilted unnaturally forward in near parallel (I will settle on two slopes) descend almost as steeply as, and at cross angles to, the first one: the left one indicating (if barely) blue canal industry, the right one green jungle. The three planes are independent but in conflict, a tension similar to that in *Canal Zone #8* (179). Belzer's unfaithful illusionism leads to missteps.

Unfaithful to fact, faithful to pleasure. What artists and engineers usually have in common, what links them as designers, is the utilization of repetition within a shape. But Belzer likes to play with, if not exactly mess with (okay, there is some of that, too) the patterns of repetition, the shapes being repeated. She meets the Canal scene's redundancies with passable if hardly precise reflections of their factuality but also with a rather aggressive, at least impatient, sketchiness that shows she's out to make her own scene: derivative, if you want; superior, if you like.

Hegel: in painting, the visible becomes interior. And just so, oiled with its compositional possibilities, indifferent to commercial transportation as such, her brush thin-lines and daubs-in – in something of a rush, it seems – the repeated shapes of packed goods, scaffolds, containers, with careless passion, no two of them exactly alike. Scaffolding, and not just its projections, regularly extends beyond its visible supports and purpose, as if crazed with the power to multiply, to mount up. And stacked containers are so evacuated of their substance that Belzer is free to pepper their outlined forms with vertical and horizontal hash marks or slash them with diagonals or sign them with an x. A pink swatch may show up on the side of one of them. Why? Because the color was wanted there.

How critical of massive incursions into nature are these paintings? Belzer regards them as alerts to the eco-destruction of the Anthropocene. They are indeed full of subtle distrust, but in the Panama Canal pictures, so full of color and delight in various irregular repeated forms, censure isn't easy to parse. The paintings do not go straight to the damages done in edgelands, at least not unequivocally: the figure like a giant rolled-up rug in the upper left of *Canal Zone #1* (178) may be torn-up jungle, or not. And if the artist's high perspective suggests a spy drone's view – her own vantage point reared up in, as it were, mistrust and defense – the paintings nonetheless feel suspended in awe of the energy and skill implicit in the monumental feats of engineering, as well as the threat and thrill of what rises up steeply, the industrial equivalent of a cliff. A freighter's stern – pictured in both *Leviathan #13* (175) and *Canal Zone #8* (179) – is, close up, *very* imposingly tall and broad, if, again, in the paintings, washed into translucency; on her excellent website (judithbelzler.com), the artist recalls the wonder of looking up at one from the down-low perspective of a tugboat towed behind it.

The absence of the human figure in the paintings isn't part of a critique; if you go to Belzer's website and look at the images from the various series she's done since 2005, you can't imagine her painting the human face or figure. She inclines to scenes or objects, for instance a cross-section of a tree, full of incident and repetition. And certainly she favors, in the new paintings, an epic scale. Much as Dickinson and Whitman delighted in the mechanical giant of their own day, the locomotive, Belzer responds to industrial technology's monumental constructions with a certain empathetic enthusiasm, despite a concern for the increasing ecological crisis that makes her mischievous, at the very least, in the face of them, a Modern Art Ariel. In her paintings, attitudes collide and combine. "Experiences are not all one thing or another," she remarks on her website; things can be "both profoundly disturbing and exquisitely beautiful."

And so the paintings are double. To take an easy-test instance: Why is scaffolding faintly imprinted on the rain forest pictured in *Canal Zone #6* (180), beside the blue ship? Is it allegorical, a recognition of the human will to expand and displace natural growth and formations, or, instead, a spurt of painterly exuberance and self-assertion in the midst of so much that is confined to place? It may well be something of both, if perhaps neither in conscious intentionality.

Belzer, then, is not a grim moralist. Simply, she herself now pursues an epic scale, but without the mistake of cultivating, at this late date in the history of art, a grand manner: she stops short of obviously ambitious, self-congratulatory, resolved effects. Which is one reason, perhaps, that she keeps to warm colors, which tend to localize interest; even her blues can burn.

Belzer began to head toward epic painting a few years ago when she moved to a hillside house in the Bay Area:

What I see out my window is a residential neighborhood . . . sprawling down toward a bee-hive of industrial activity, freeways, train sidings, warehouse districts, factories, a landfill a race track, ten-story cranes loading freights bound for China. . . . It's a great stage for the meeting of man and nature.

For years now in the studio, my focus has been very different: the intense close up view of common elements of the natural world – the bark of a tree, leaves, wood grain . . .

She now spontaneously transports her everyday lofty vantage point to her paintings' subjects and works on large canvases. The result is a sublimity of magnitude rare since Clyfford Still achieved it in part by suppressing natural and industrial detail (the very latest paintings shown on Bezler's website do so as well). One could trace a hesitant line back to Albert Bierdstadt and Frederic Church's gigantic landscapes.

Belzer's recent paintings are major achievements. The satisfaction one takes in them isn't adulterated by timidity of plastic conception or faults of performance. You can't pull them apart; they would just instantly snap back to what they are and should be. And they don't look like anyone else's. They're . . . odd, as in fascinating. They have the unsettling power of the new.

4.

Poems

Reina María Rodríguez (2 poems)

Two Texts from *Varietades de Galiano*

Translated by Kristin Dykstra

The following prose selections are taken from Reina María Rodríguez's 2008 book *Galiano St. Variety*. The collection is a personal, honest, and often pained confrontation with new divisions shaping everyday life for Cubans in the 21st century. The book has now been reprinted as part of a trilogy of Rodríguez's essayistic writings, published in Chile as *Prosas de La Habana* (Valparaíso: Editorial UV, 2015) – translator's note.

Infotur

It's raining and I'm sitting across from Parque Fe, Faith Park, on San Rafael. In the park are large numbers of elderly people, decrepit (or approaching decrepitude). They're waiting for a turn to eat at the former Ten Cents store, now called Galiano Street Variety. It's drizzling, but they stay out there on the rotting wooden strips of benches made from heart pine, waiting. Pangs low in their abdomens are the interior landscape (the design) that keeps them out there, exposed to the elements, resisting rain and even resisting me, the figure who contemplates them from the walled-in space of my table on the other side, with the only and miserable difference that as I contemplate them, I'm drinking a coffee sold in USD, or a Tropical Island juice. I look at them. At first they cause me anguish. And then, they don't . . . I am similar to them, except that – right now, in this moment – I represent the interior end to a spectrum of madness. This means that I'm looking through a glass window (a display cabinet, a fishtank) at the individuals waiting out there, those poor old folks in Parque Fe.

I'm not completely separated from the spectacle by its structure. Instead a banknote featuring foreign heroes, a bill that I hold from time to time, creates the dividing line. From time to time – this also with a certain relativity – the

old people who are homeless, and the most lunatic of the group, dare to press themselves against the window. I see their facial deformations, noses pushed back by the glass, wrinkles dealt by misery (those creases where dust and secretions build up at the outer edges of the eyes starting with hunger). Then I drop my gaze to *The Lives of Animals*, written by the South African J. M. Coetzee, and I feel like another animal enclosed inside the café's glass cage, a center for high-tech experimentation. When I look outwards from the other side of the fishtank or window glass or screen (toward what we could suppose still belongs to the outside, the impoverished quarters of the city), I discover a fellow being. Someone more advanced in age (an age probably always undetermined), who makes gestures at once sonorous and mute. Then I write.

This poetry is contained within an explosion that doesn't happen inside the boundary. If the window were to break, and the other person were to push in over me, there would be no equilibrium between so many others and me. And the poetry (that fissure) wouldn't be necessary. If I were content to give him a coin, if I didn't have at least a little cynicism for bearing up to it all on that June morning, with its fine rain and calamitous sky, then my text wouldn't exist. The text steals the wrinkles out of desperation. It allows for an interval of time separating me from the decrepit elderly man who is looking at me (he drops his pants in broad daylight and shows me "his parts"). I know I don't want to look at them, they scare me, but I look at them. And I go back to the text. This time the aggression was more pointed than any word I might want to put into writing. (This pugilism always passes through glass, through portions of window that never melt, through particles that rub up against each other and get inside even if we don't want them to.) And to remain calm, immobile, indifferent, or unprovoked isn't easy either.

In the distance, in the park, many carolinas – the flowers from shaving brush trees – have fallen under the rain. Other toothless seniors laugh about the feat executed by the one who presented me with his sexual organs, deformed even before they were squashed against the glass. I'm not going to call the police over. I'm shaking. I think that he, that individual person, could smash the thin artificial wall that still separates us. I remain calm, imperturbable, as visibly immobile as the word for which I'm pleading, a word that isn't coming (this word has to do, or has nothing to do, with him or the act I just witnessed). But to think this word might come brings me relief, it gets me out of there, it rescues me a little from his aggression.

The poem neutralizes (or catalyzes) a feeling, a communication, a cry. It mediates, giving me for an instant the hierarchical role of the observer, which lends me the impotence necessary for non-participation (even if I immediately understand what it's all about), a seam in time, a bar of rest. I understand in silence, I get scared, I blush and consume the spectacle where I play my part too (spectator-actor), but the person moves away and the text stays under my hand. Text and person, both intimidated by a confrontational stance, survive in their own distinct ways. I don't finger the corrugated organs (so like the carolinas after they're crushed against the pavement), just some of the words that eased my shame (with the motion of a sewing machine's metal presser foot, affirming the instability of a cloth that shifts, then oozes away). It releases my tension: I preferred the imperious glass cage of the text on the table. It (the text) is also a map of the lunatic asylum that is this park, a loosened fabric. A fabric mended many times. I use a borrowed stick, "just in case," as they say here (a cleft stick) to drag the lyrical flower of a squashed carolina off to the side. Or if the need arose, I'd use it to defend myself. A lever or pencil that distances me from things (from the subjects), it yanks them out by the roots and keeps me from starvation.

The text develops from a dried-out form of pain (when it's no longer hunger or torment or frenzy); when the gaze I resist has worn down under its appearances, insignificant. Like those sores (now only faint lines) left on my mother's fingers from clipping thread so many times with her teeth. And those elderly people belong only to my surroundings, because the text allows me to remain unscathed, new, reconstructed and freshened up, ready for another act of horror.

Not that I would say the horror lies outside. If we inverted our perspective, the horror would always be within. Since its threat is constant, it materializes when the elements or subterfuges of some greater deception also materialize. The poem is not, cannot be one more form of subterfuge. It is a chemical neutralizer par excellence, an imprisonment.

I walk through a puddle left by the rain and get my feet wet. They're moving (as in yesterday's dream) toward the weird cemetery where I saw many graves, in the heart of Parque Fe. By participating in every day's illness and death inside us, the poem materializes and expands through routine things, through all the mocking gestures and "breaches of trust." These neutralize a more distant force, which pulls the poem up to the surface and provokes it at regular intervals: real

The buoys

Chaotic, they make up a map that no one would understand. I know they're floating, faces up, spirits down, submerged, nothing more. Like invalids accustomed to swaying, to disappointment. They mobilize with the breeze and the undertow; sometimes they sing. The oldest ones have calcified.

This is anthropomorphism, a literary swear word. If I get too close, the singing buoys take the shapes of small boats, floating. Then as I look at the most distant buoy, a woman talks to me about her lost love, about the man's self-interest.

The sea has turned a self-interested shade of blue, reheated in its own color with pearly loops of marine impurities, under which a white sheen appears. When the woman talks about her love, the buoys are no longer stable like they were this morning. They lurch around.

She celebrated his birthday with "cream cake, strawberries, Mialhe's artwork, and really expensive shoes." But he didn't come back. He gave her a dry thanks for the celebration. Oblivion. Her chattering intensifies with the desperation of the ocean buoys. They prefer to sink, reassemble to the east, shift the stage set, spin over themselves as if spinning over some past.

I travel across stories. The morning light, in phases, is an enigma. Dogs, strays like the woman with the story and like me, judge me to be strange. The buoys, more strays, will not allow anyone else to leave; they symbolize possession and selfishness. Later they'll discuss the possibility of returning to encounter us.

They wag their tails (dogs and buoys), street breeds, sausage dogs, light brown ones, ones painted in spots, as I contemplate the day's motion, the murmuring that descends from La Punta until noon is complete. A zone, something that I'll become when self-interest cuts off the wake (the season) of my life. A zone of demarcation and control over beauty, which exhausts itself in this rocking of well-used words like fortitude and principle. There the buoy wails its unmooring like a carousel with no children, like the boundary that seems like it will rescue you, but that's not true.

Like her you're riveted to the void, a void that tries to resolve the water's unpleasant texture, a proximity that unmakes itself with your petitions: "... And I

carry the apple in my head . . .,” says the recording; and “I carry a city in my head . . .,” and I carry scents and reefs to ward off the storm. There will be a country because outside, and inside (safe region), the wake I left filters the occasion, one for going away and not telling lies. A power that darkens between red streaks, hollows and plains, later.

“Almighty Lord! You try to crush me with thirst,” says the castaway. “Don’t insult my good nature.”

The wrong master tempts wandering dogs: a Dalmatian puppy, a disagreement; the scarlet leash on the puppy’s neck is a necklace lost by the woman waiting for something to arrive: a confidante, a confidence in faith, a future. (But only two police officers arrive.) “Now we have company,” she thinks, moving and tugging at the chain.

“This is quite a day for vigilation!” I snort. They come like everyone else for currencies in faith; for the feeling of vigilation with its violent manners, its corridors. They carry holstered weapons and a bag for foreign currency. The loose buoy enjoys them too (in her unhealthy way), and then they shift positions, they are suspicious, conversational contraband.

The woman and I, under the doorframe (and the self-interest), are alarming. Our glances rebound to the sea, the entire sea, patient. Sea that submerges its fate before us like sorrow.

Under the buoy other demolitions endure too, in underground rooms that are home to cats, shanties, catacombs, which the sea tackles obliquely. It licks its lips with pleasure and waits to come flooding in. The chill, demolitions that comprise a country underneath, horizontal to all reality. But there they live, creatures of the depths, in little windows with decayed iron bars and lime. You shouldn’t believe that they don’t exist, I saw them. Only self-interest allowed me to see them, recognize them. Mouths dyed with the blue to come, a salty blue right now. The skittish cat knew about that but she didn’t give up, and she meowed as hard as she could when she saw me.

Creatures of the deep exist down there. Do you see them? They go past with cement blocks, sand, gravel; they go past with brushes made from royal palm; they go past with jugs of dried foam, talking and talking to themselves. They’re “creatures of disorder,” people say, ghosts. So damaged! Golden lights from the

verdigris restraining them under the sea flicker. Creatures below ground, in the Malecón's substrata, castaways before they wreck. Now and then the buoy lies. Not everything in the vicinity is calm. But why did I come here? Who called me? Who can tolerate being boarded by amphibious creatures? It's about your self-interest and mine. About her self-interest, and the ocean's too.

Tears on the paper, violations. Occasionally forgetting the fracas and making requests. "Song of the defiles, go with me," she intones. There's seaweed in May. The buoys, tangled up with floating creatures, plan to throw them into the ocean too when they get annoying, so far in that they won't be able to get out again. And filthy creatures spill into the seaweed (the barrage), of arms, eyelashes, insteps. They're leaving, they say, this is goodbye. What are they doing here? Well . . . floating . . . drifting. In sum: they too have wrecked. Who cares?



Elena Byrne (2 poems)

TIEPOLO'S ALLEGORY OF THE PLANETS & CONTINENTS CEILING

If I arrive, I arrive at the faces. Always in motion, forever unfinished.
Clouds in cello billow, pale-fallen from the frame, heavens closing in.
Action is his paint recognition. Four continents from which to turn your
head. From which to turn away. To beast Time back from rapture. We are
not new to this scene, our era of undoing. This feeling I get down here:
when grackles suddenly leave their tree, congregate air's final teal act of
trickery: breaking sky's mirror of ocean, dusk-blur between its grief-pink
and twilight skin of blue, what pulled submission to yellow and grey as
the sun god raises his one arm and bares his chest against our chests breathing
too hard, replicated once before our forefathers died. But no one I know,
everyone I know is fixed in this orbit of doing, in the going waltz, skin color's
wheel-labor and pleasure's turning: connected and accounted for. But damn,
our dumb leader for his masquerade in the measure of now, continues to lie,
steal, lie, and kill us, what will I do, will I see? Forever unfinished, breaking back
to beast Time always in cello billow . . . if I arrive, I will arrive at the faces.

LOUISE BOURGEOIS'S FATHER

—"relations can be anticipated and are eternal"

If geometry falls at his feet, in over-looked time, his memory equation will come to pass like bee's liquid color over the field of light, like the children running from the rooms, their nanny dancing upside down inside his sleep, or so like all, all his body parts dismembered and placed for a party on the dining table, the once private bed, the table, the bed, that body born and suffered, procreated and sexed, cheating in the years before memory, lied about, lied from in the house, grabbed, now eaten and died, and swallowed and soon suffered again inside the child's body. The child's skin is a field giving up light every time it is hurt. See, the numbers just don't add up: The mother is missing in the dark. The children have come to the dinner table to be quiet. After ten years of geometry between the rooms, the nanny will leave the house, all ochre lights left on in the windows. Art is better than geometry when it comes to deep function and duplicity of a large father upside down in a home with a mother, children, with a nanny. So, to destroy the father is to have the father, to undo. Then becomes now, a subtraction of uncertain shapes and baby food colors, and soon, the liquidated daughter wants to be the field devouring everlasting light, named the one responsible for the father's final destruction, for the fine laid table, for skin of the bed, twilight's fuck dust breathed before sleep.

Rae Armantrout (3 poems)

THE NEW ECONOMY

Creative Souls Cloud City Vape Works.

*

If, as Rovelli says, there are no
separate things, “only relations”

between the hardly real
and the barely there,

spots where
apprehension tangles

*

He keeps busy.

He makes
kimonos
for babies
out of cowboy shirts.

MY POINT

1

A lake's hither
and here,

its pearly indecision
and mysterious clear spot.

Its drifting skein
of small worries

is one way
of being at peace.

2

To arrive at this
can't have been easy:

this oval, wafer body,
flat, yellow eyes
on either side of what
should not be called a nose,
but is, rather,
the point you make

to provide yourself
with direction
as you shrug,
glide, shrug, glide
around your tank,

your form
arcane and ecstatic.

3

Let's play a game.

What do a fish and a lake
have in common?

Nothing!

A lake
is a reflective state,

while a fish
is somebody.

FLIP THE SCRIPT

Samsung says
the launch codes

are in your twin's heart
but, with his permission,

you will cut them out
and turn the key.

It's the only way
to reach the finale

which, by now, is all
anybody wants

*

Someone says to be conscious
is to answer
your own questions

without really hearing them –

the way a tower answers
a cell phone's ping.

Now Mobile suggests
you “script the flip,”

rethink the meaning
of tumbling

so that you spin
in thick air,

perhaps grabbing on

to a rope
with your teeth.

*

We must have asked ourselves,
“What’s wrong?”

Mei-mei Berssenbrugge (2 poems)

PLEIADES

1

It's March; rain fills seven indentations in a large stone, like a table.

Then twilight, all is permeable, open to relation.

Then the Pleiades at night shine in collected rain; I open myself to receive their reflected light.

Starlight is so bright it seems dark to my unaccustomed eyes, as I enter into a closeness like disorientation.

So long as I feel my family around me, I haven't experienced oneness; it's difficult at night to hold onto self, when your earth's family is shifting through transformation.

Bright Pleiades circling night sky I address as sisters, kin, suggesting human form.

I refer more to relation than beings.

Everything seen establishes relation.

2

Before dawn on spring solstice, Pleiades appear on the horizon; Milky Way still spans east to west.

Then sunrise, Pleiades dim, and the moon pales.

Venus, morning star, comes running.

Each constellation represents meaning that is a being, and all beings connect, so sky has spiritual dimension.

Naming is part of this overall connection, consciousness; then we're more at ease with wonder.

Wonder is like dawn light, source before anything was manifest.

We gaze up into dark energy of great fluidity.

Perhaps words like being or spirit aren't inaccurate; even though I say, my sisters who rise at dawn, I mean presence, as reciprocity.

I still recall the deep silence when I contacted my sister and agreed to work with her to construct a link between our family and the stars.

We ascend from imagining into the consciousness of the star we touch, in neither ordinary or nonordinary reality.

It's a unified field, this darkness we acknowledge, so that consciousness may expand.

Pleiades at dawn signify beginning and refer to multiple, simultaneous relations evoking verbal from visual and vice versa.

A symbol gains power from such multiplicity.

Darkness enables us to cross the boundary from space-time into outer space, because the force of existence, what happens, has evolutionary purpose that flows through us as energy, connection.

We accept our experience as the expression of this.

In heaven, it transmutes into consciousness.

4

Some stars occupy two places in circular or permeable time; also, one star can have several aspects, evening as well.

I can depict a constellation in the calyx of a rose, but it's more accurate to portray source, relation.

I receive a word from the stars, and I place it in my ordinary speech through the day repeating the word, and a star materializes.

Days later, Pleiades stay below at dawn

Our observation deepens, and consciousness expands because of my description, as if a star were a crystal on my desk with other translucent stones and a glass prism through which I view stars, refracting their colors like words with multiple meanings.

A word can mimic a crystal, and a crystal can describe, also.

There's a silver sheen on the land; we don't call it beauty as such, feeling a part of it.

My thought and stars, sisters, splinter into shards that tinkle to the ground and shine.

I notice some thoughts encode meaning in ordinary reality and feeling in the non-ordinary, spirit, rather like footnotes for later.

I speak of our origin in present tense, because sky is circular from here,

Time provides an enclosure or setting for experience.

Relation as place is cyclical between our mesa and the dark net starlight shines through, like a black moonstone.

All times continually turn in all super-positions, so space and experience are concentric.

Even though matter and radiance had decoupled, the universe became transparent light filling space.

Two hawks hover above a rock outcrop shaped like whale, a resemblance I've noticed before on my walks.

I imagine I'm inside the whale and experience communication between rocks and whales, and I think of other animals illustrated by stars.

Later, I'm told the cosmos communicates with itself through this web of images we imagine.

THE LOOM

I

I would show her the night sky and point out certain stars.

A person, being of cosmic origin, can become one with a star.

Looking underlies unity between earth and sky.

Through black holes, UFO's, star beings, ET's, collective memory: night influences our DNA.

I point out The Loom; a small, white star is the crosspiece, brightness upon depth granting shape and place.

Pleiades, Andromeda, Aldebaran weave dimensions of dark, light, and the invisible.

Attention becomes thinking; feeling divines a precise order of reality in imaginal space.

We've greater power to participate in the rhythms of our place, enlivening a vertical, ideational channel here to there, as perception a kind of breath made of transparency.

2

In college, a young man took me to a hill near town to wait for star people, and I've continued looking for them.

In starlight I sense a pulse like breathing, but only the exhale of radiance to intensifying radiance.

I focus on meaning flowing through seeing to shape an entity: intrinsic meaning is explicitly realized as the beingness of light.

Birds, dolphins, whales use this more immediate, communicatory alignment with meaning as a gestalt, song.

Their cosmic relations illuminate us through an invisible matrix that does not emit or reflect light, attaching to earth as being, a kind of gravity in infinity.

I tell her Orion, Dog Star, Pleiades, Aldebaran, Cassiopeia.

Their light and heat from our bodies commingle.

3

I point out the flyway of images rising and descending, like an axis, a tree, standing in our warm boots and jackets, absorbing data from above.

We've always used trees to organize intelligence, and you will climb one to know with others that matter emanates from it

Its canopy spreads into the firmament to organize space-time and set star fields in motion

I tell you this upper world is real, experiential, conscious and accessible to us by our response, because ramification is within.

Your pulse aligns you with other light as a ladder of branches and leaves into heaven, with birds in the branches.

Your focus is aliveness with another; we look with analogue, textile eyes at the dark field, generative gravity of consciousness, and the field moves toward us.

It pulsates, as if potentia and subject were shape-shifting with earth.

At what point is an observation complete, if this consciousness is homogeneous, distributed?

Upper and lower branches entangle as self-reference, human culture.

Night situates within self-organizing narratives that ascend, such as, I am your mother and consciousness is mother.

4

Sometimes I brought the ET's flowers, sometimes a pretty rock.

I tell her that rocks like meteorites retain light, an intelligent energy thought into substance by experiencing it.

All life is this coherence of light being emitted and received, then sometimes thought.

By day, observation spreads out as waves; Milky Way is an invisible potential, and I can imagine a wave function for the universe.

Up to now cosmos manifested in fragments when observed by conscious beings.

Conscious beings are like the morphogenesis of a capacity or sphere, where cause doesn't exist.

Particles stream back and froth in narrative lines, and wonder as scale stabilizes our uncertainty by welcoming light, this state where there's enough new information for intelligence and enough ground for us.

Being is not the straight line a photon travels, but fractal, like the edge of a borealis.

Its locus is a weave that ebbs and flows.

I transcribe a text, a weave that emits and reflects the light in which a universe less compatible would be invisible.



Brian Shields, 2017, ink on paper, 18x17.5 inches

DEVON WALKER-FIGUEROA

/// Glossolalic ///

“the co

speaketh in an unknown tongue speaketh not unto men, but unto God” —Saul of
Tarsus

I.

Your gift visits my other-

wise repulsive tongue, the face’s gate

hinging sans per-

mission mine: I babble, trouble
the rapid eye

movements of gods, move them to voice

a cave, a flood, a florid

constellation aspiring to be

a wagon or a bear
devoid of vice.

Can disgust catalyze

the speech of clouds?

Look: they part, impart light.

II.

It's an enviable state—to serve

as chaos's entrance
into a room, entrance the room

with a lament meant to abscise
syllable from sound. This

languid age I halve into what

I call dead and not-
yet-born might yet

be viable. Centuries go by, rank
and vile, filed

yet alive, and still
I find no forgiveness

cradled in my Lord-

storm's wagon. Imagine
a sure hand grasping

a wheel, wild waters parting,

the hand portending blind-

 folds and fortunes ended
by the sea. If nothing
 is the surrogate

for fear, I'll go in fear. And if

an elated deity no longer needs

company, I'll seek
 to displease

at the highest levels; I'll tend
to godly needs by being anything

 but good. I've discussed
this matter with the dust,

whose antecedent I am
ceding to a swelling

 sea. But back

to the Cradle of Civil—

III.

Disobedience and the fruit, you mentioned.

Also the plenitude of being, and I

so precisely misunderstood

when you asked, “you know

what I mean?” I can’t

know, so I incant
to no one, am slated

to translate what can’t be mutated

nor muted out

of mystery, be
mutilated nor made

unearthly whole. Join me.

Rise. Let’s hymn

and hymn until the sentence escapes

its fiery landscape and

us and even the word virus is

as a clapper striking its dome

of brass, of bone. Call me in-

sincere. Call me
to the wall that’s always been waiting

for us, for purpose. I'll pose

against it, make my guilt
a sturdy guardian; I'll paint

a gate on it
with my red fingertip, tip-

toe through it and instigate
a marriage of bliss and fear.

(ō ō ō ō)

(Mind + end = mend, I fear.)

IV.

If our Lordstorm didn't intend
to end up a legend, I can

pull a banquet from a horse's ear.

My guess: he knew his story
would replace him. My guest,

his escapades and daydreams were hardly
greater than your own: to build a home

in the mountains; to make up

a mind; to wield the weary weather

when it suits him. Call me a fool, but the first
time I read the word

Sumer, I thought it a perversion
of summer, some other

version of the sun's pre-
meditated rampages. I say

it's been ages since we've held

each other. You say
your name, which is hidden

within me: Enlil. Ama. Jackie. Jack.
I turn rosy and turn a page—

filled with strings that sing
silence and lose

the thread of our conversion, our con—

V.

Here I am, cadaverous
in the mind, infantile in the real

City of Unlifted Eyes. Here
I go, an inversion of a person

I once trusted more than I

do the fact of birth, the rustle

of illuminated sheets, the tremor
a siren threads through heads.

My metaphysics have gone
cold, my bold voice

quiet as a root's
reaching. And what I deem

humble is profligate, given
the correct opportunity. So size

me up. Surprise me
with your rearranged smile,

with your forgiveness deranged

as a zephyr. I'll be looking for milk-
blooded bulbs to synaesthetize us into

trances, give us transit
from site to site to parasite. I'll be looking

to relate us to a future you tell
what to do. What to do.

(The sky loses weight, wets
this tied and upturned tongue.)

VI.

Give me a hint. Hunt

my reply. Help me live

up to your illusions, the ones that stray

until ill. (I'll live down

the ones that don't.) The story was never

meant to be palatable or

relatable. Extend me

the courtesy of survival. Distend me

with a dropseed untended

as manna or as man. I will curtesy

my proper humiliation, de mon propre.

Madame V, of the Kirov

Ballet, once bent my spirit

and feet like coat hangers meant

to pick locks. She laughed

the while. I drafted

my revenge in a quiescence potent

as Absinthe. I am

stories half-told like the rest of us.

We are stories half-told
like the rest of me.

I revise the future, throw a discus
like a die, and wash my hands.

(Sigh.)

VII.

The dirt conjugates our sentence.
The dirt hates our spent tenses.
The dirt eats our sentient chances.
The dirt bleeds us a conscience.
The dirt leads us to sighs and stances.
The dirt depletes us into stanzas.
The dirt pleats us into science.
The dirt deletes us from our senses.
The dirt completes us senseless.

Blissless, the dirt runs its mouth.

XV.

Can we pronounce the light
guilty of what it holds? What it solves but doesn't
save? I wanted once to blame the flaming bulb

that loomed over the room in which I lost
my bliss, but I couldn't bring myself
to anything but pity, which a wise man

once told me is a form
of condescension. And, so, I descend,
inanimate, and mend my mouth. I worship

the storm that worships my lowliness,
the lord that says my poverty is good,
and it is good, even if it is the end

of me, even if it is the burning
bush that eavesdrops on my mind.
Flammivomous and ageless voyeur

who would have me know a lack
of privacy is proof of love. I think
and am not redeemed, demeaned

by demoniacal listening: I sing
to the storm that started me: worry,
my lord, this world is

the last thing you will see.



Brian Shields, 2017, ink on paper, 24x18 inches

Four Iraqi Poems

translated from Arabic by Azfar Hussain

(originally appearing in the Dhaka Tribune)

Removal

Sherko Faiq

If they rob my poetry of the flower
one of my four seasons will die.
If they rob my poetry of the presence of my love
two of those seasons will die.
If they rob my poetry of bread
three of them will die.
But if they rob my poetry of freedom
my entire year will die,
and I myself will die.

Portrait

Sherko Faiq

Together they were drawing the picture of a man.
Four children: a Turk, a Persian, an Arab and a Kurd.
The first child drew the man's head
The second one drew his hands and his shoulder
The third drew his legs and his torso
And the fourth child drew a gun on his shoulder.

Now and then

Yousif al-Saigh

The nightmare tonight
was very dense, believe me:
a dining table,
a bottle of wine,
three glasses,
and three men without heads.

Good morning, Fakhani

Saadi Yusuf

Good morning!
Good Morning to roads and rifles
Good Morning to coloured berets and the sunlight pouring generously on them
Good Morning to you: the headquarters guard to nocturnal guns and nocturnal
ecrets to the beautiful fatigue glistening in your dark eyes
Good Morning to children in their uniforms
Good Morning to Umme Nabil
Smile Smile
Good Morning to Abu Ali's coffee house
Good Morning to you who yearn with guns for the roaring of jet planes
Good Morning
Good Morning to janitors and garbage workers
to the radio announcer
to the young men tired of hackneyed metaphors and sterile debates
to the accumulated silences of Toledo
to the young man who handed me a copy of a new radical views weekly twice
to the students passing their exams in cafes

Good Morning

Good Morning to revolutions erupting like fires and volcanoes
in the very first draft of a manifesto the young rebel wrote
in the middle of those bullets piercing the flesh of the people

Good Morning to the revolutionary in my heart: Good Morning
to my love, O my love,

Good Morning

Good Morning

Good Morning

Daniel Borzutzky (3 poems)

DREAM SONG #513

She crosses the international frontier only to find out there is no international frontier and there are no such things as countries

The unsuspecting sucker walks into the antique store and makes the mistake of telling the owner he doesn't know what to buy for the most special girl in the world

He is a creature of humble habits and tame dreams until he plunges headfirst and unaware into his own personal twilight zone

She crosses her arms and blinks and suddenly her master is on an airplane that lands in Cuba where he is met by a drunk unshaven soldier who smokes a cigar and holds a rifle

The unsuspecting sucker buys a Moroccan vase with a genie inside but he's too depressed to make any wishes

The studio audience thinks it's hilarious when the Cuban soldier says in accented Spanglish *Buenos dias señor welcome to la Habana*

Because he believes that watching television is more fun than writing poems he combines his literary duties with his leisurely ones and does both things at the same time

You can write a poem or you can watch television or you can write a poem while watching television or you can write a poem about watching television or you can just copy all the lines that the characters speak and call it one big poem

The men in white shirts swarm around the only woman in the office

It's her birthday and an accountant gives her a sexy black dress and some heels

She shows her appreciation by giving him a long wet kiss on the lips and the guys in the office say *oooooooooh*

They refer to her as puss and baby doll and make jokes about her assets in relation to her liabilities

The studio audience thinks it's hilarious when the immigrant says *Meesterr Eh-smith* when Mister Smith walks in

I make all my money writing songs about drug dealers but the critics don't think I have the authenticity to write about drug dealers since I have never dealt in drugs

I also write songs about songwriters who write songs about drug dealers and I am exhausted by my inexhaustible faculty of negation

Because he sells so many more drugs than everyone else his competitors try to negotiate an anti-monopoly policy but they only succeed in winning a few concessions on the standardization of the length of the work day

They take him to a shack with hay on the floor and when he sits down they rip the head off a chicken and say if you're not careful the next chicken around here will be you

Because the television series depends on the characters making the worst possible decisions he lowers his drug prices and business booms until he's shot in the back of the head

He drives an Uber and in his former life he was a torturer employed by the military INCREASE GAP WHEN LEFT PAGE IS CORRECTED

He has a decision to make he can earn \$100,000 a year selling cocaine or he can go to college and take out \$300,000 in loans.

ASSET FORFEITURE

They sell my meningitis for collateralized debt obligations

I can't afford a lawyer

They are going to repossess my body

They have taken my car

I can't get my car back unless I sell my pneumonia

They take my beta blockers and anti-coagulants

I fall asleep in the police station and dream I am crucified by a man who is sometimes my father and sometimes the mayor

Just as he is about to hang me on the cross he turns into Jesus Christ then Fidel Castro and I wake up screaming Why don't you fucking shave

I am waiting for them to give me my car back but the judge won't hear my case

So I go to the zombie bank and take some test-tubed viruses out of the safe deposit box

The bankers want to buy my emphysema

I offer them some hepatitis instead

They take my hepatitis and my mouth ulcers in exchange for a credit default swap my lips are a mortgage-backed security

The viruses will help me hold on to my DNA

I go back to the courthouse

The judge says she won't return my car until I can prove it won't be used for criminal activity

My state-appointed lawyer is irritated

I told you to wear a tie he says

I am wearing a green dress and leather boots

I'll have to sell the boots if I want to get another car

The value of my car is \$1800

I have already paid \$900 in court fees and they still won't give me my car back

I meet with a lawyer who says he can help me get my car back

We'll need some ripe organs he says

I have one failing kidney I tell him

He buys me a coffee and tells me I would have a better chance if my life was an endless seizure and not a failing kidney

I collapse a few times to prove his point

I have a job interview but I can't get there without my car

I ought to be hungry but I can't eat and suddenly I'm terrified of my nondesire

I dance with myself and I dance too fast

I stay up for three days playing video games on the internet with strangers

The royalties on my viruses are \$37

I made less than that on my last book of poetry

I answer an online ad to exchange my blood for meta-data

I shoot off an email and the next day I meet an entrepreneur who has made millions from the meta-data in our meta-data

He has just purchased an Israeli forensic firm with a million boneless babies

I have some money now and I try again to get my car back

The judge says you'll need to rehumanize your face before I let you drive that thing again

You'll need to deterritorialize your face the judge says

I'd be a good candidate for racial reassignment surgery I suggest

The judge takes this into consideration and sets a new court date in four weeks

I go back to the bank

They want to exchange my face for the meta-data of poor people in developing countries who will soon be middle class

A banker tests my body for moisture

He forms my face into a surveillance machine that hijacks refugee data

He wraps my face in a double-grade fabric designed to block signal detection

He sends me to the vaults for an appraisal

They take my blood and I sign some papers I don't understand and the data analyst congratulates me

You're lucky she says

You will always be human again

THE ENTREPRENEURS

They need subsidies They need laborers
They need gas masks They need babies and toddlers
They need teens and tweens and adolescents so please eliminate the tariffs on foreign children
They need infrastructure bridges highways canals

They will bring so much money to this city
Just by suggesting they will bring money to the city they will bring money to the city
They will say we will bring money to the city
And suddenly there will be money in the city

The city creates tax incentives
The city demolishes high-rises to build warehouses for the entrepreneurs
The entrepreneurs weigh their options
So many cities to choose from

So many tax incentives to choose from
So many underfed bodies to choose from
The entrepreneurs dangle tens of thousands of poorly paid jobs over the city
They demand more land more tax incentives more bodies

The city spends millions to lure the entrepreneurs
But in the end the entrepreneurs
Won't come into the city because the city has
An unqualified labor force and insufficient resources

The entrepreneurs go overseas
Where the factory owners torture workers
But in pleasant places and there are so many affordable t-shirts
So many affordable sneakers and the torturers hold press conferences

With the entrepreneurs and everyone agrees they are doing God's work
The free market they say is God's work
Torture they say is God's work
The free market is Christian Muslim Jewish atheist and polytheistic all at once

Torture is Christian Muslim Jewish atheist and polytheistic all at once
So many shoes at all price points
So many baby dolls from Bangladesh
So many assault weapons from China

The entrepreneurs buy tomatoes from Mexico
Then sell them back to Mexico at a 300% profit
The entrepreneurs hire consultants to rewrite their contracts
They replace all of the “shalls” with “mays”

The employee “shall” get a water break every hour becomes
The employee “may” get a water break every hour
The employee “shall” not be forced to work more than twelve hours in one day becomes
The employee “may” not be forced to work more than twelve hours in one day

Back at home the entrepreneurs are sad
So many gang members are crossing the border
So much foreign steel and pork is crossing the border
So they hire early Americans to stand near the border with guns

They tell the early Americans to be ruthless but not to kill too many refugees
Don’t shoot too many immigrants they tell them
Don’t torture too many Salvadoran children
Don’t capture too many Mexican mothers

Because we love these immigrants sing the entrepreneurs
Even though they are breaking the law
And the entrepreneurs do love the immigrants
Just as they love the early Americans who guard the border

Because the free market sing the entrepreneurs is the only way
To prevent people who hate each other from killing one another
Don’t give up your languages or customs they tell the immigrants
Take solace in the fact that your “grit” will make you highly competitive workers

We love your “grit” sing the entrepreneurs
We love your fortitude sing the entrepreneurs
The entrepreneurs have meetings where they punch their chests
Look into each other’s eyes and scream “Grit” “Grit” “Grit”

We love you and we love the people that kill you sing the entrepreneurs
We create peace by selling affordable weapons to enemy soldiers
We create peace by selling affordable blue jeans to protesters who smash our windows
We love dictatorships and we love democracies

We love terrorists and we love FBI agents sing the entrepreneurs
We love abortion doctors and we love the people who shoot them
We love animals and we love the environment
We love rivers and lakes and oceans

We love diseases and the pharmaceutical companies that cure them
And we do not believe in irony
We tell it like it is all the time
Though our customers don’t always listen

And we love it when they don’t listen
Just as we love it when they do listen
Because love makes people want to buy things
And buying things makes people want to love

We even love people who shoot themselves
When they can no longer afford their mortgages
Sing the entrepreneurs
We even love buying their mortgages

Mark Levine

On Himselfe

The worker's movement is, first off, dead.
Worker's rights, it turns out, were a scam.
"Isn't it a fine thing I
Done" we asked our hairy hands back when
Young countries like ours busied themselves collecting blackest
Men to fend off death-work: That disintegrating wear
And tear of feeding oneself bonemeal, rinds, husks and such swill
Maidens and knights left behind—retiring muses—
Setting down their robes in fountains and getting ready to breathe
Upon our foreheads. Our Lady of Servitude, for one, she'd
Mystify us in her blather atop her cube,
Curl fetally, leak blood.
The thing to do was ignore her, resume tending my
Myrtle and mulching my seedbeds and throwing back a fizzy pale Pacifico if
Corona's not available. Comfort
Washed over me with its debilitating thesis:
With a stroke of the spade, with a carburetor, with
Sweet neglect of all norms but
Ointments and hot wraps; we took our martyrdom
Thus, casually cruel, not like the machinist who muses
Atrociously over prickly details. So the
Last we heard our people were stuck on a train.
Indeed it takes a cattle car to suffer
Comedians and commandants who divide laborers into

Two straggling classes of vermin. Still we come,
Suffering dust, fungus, sterilizing salts, though I
Insisted after showering this would be the last
The bastards would take hold of us like that.
Muses instructed us to raise hatchets to Balthus.
Martyrdom clogged the streets and no ointments
Buttered us back to wholeness. For a while we got sweet
With the help but who could trust one's fingers with
This insurrection going on. After the sheets were washed,
Comfort brimmed from the neighbor boy's chocolate coronet—
If only he would stop stalking Myrtle,
My girl, whom we found in Emergency with the
Blood beneath her fingernails and sawdust in her curls.
Believe me it gets worse. My
Shepherd was rounded up on
The orders of the foreman and his surly set—
Muses, magicians, landlords—wielding implements made in
Willful disregard of our orifices, waving fire and
Wearing vengeful armor streaked with semen.
Blackest centuries passed when the word was young
When work at hand was done.
I can face my kind and yours but answer me this:
Am I wrong to insist ours is work
Dead folk perform on each other down in Lethe?

(after Robert Herrick)

Sawnie Morris

(2 poems)

Listening to Paul Auster Read from The Red Book, While My Husband Applies the Lymphedema Massage to His Neck After Radiation Treatments

My husband is listening to Paul Auster and laughing. That's good. We want him laughing. I've listened 2x already and only just now grasped that "the center was too cold to eat, so we nibbled around the margins"—a word we want clear, a "margin" that has lost any innocence, a margin that "at the time . . . was anything but funny." "This was really the end." My husband rises to put the glass that held his green drink in the kitchen sink. "When he woke up he found himself lying in the back of a cart." "Loud explosions erupted from the woods." My husband turns his head slowly and entirely to the left, slowly and entirely to the right. "More noise, more confusion." Tips his head to one shoulder. Tips his head to the other. Raising his eyes to the ceramic chandelier, with its electric lights on European voltage, "He moved to America to begin a new life." "It seemed possible he had woken up in heaven." Paul Auster married his first wife the same year he moved to NYC, the same year I graduated from high school. "All that remains is the open window," "as if it is part of a recurring dream I've had ever since." My husband, his lower lip out and his chin thrust up, turns his head toward me, opens his mouth, showing his teeth, emitting an e-e-e-e-e-e. He raises and lowers his shoulders. He rolls his shoulders backward and forward. Paul Auster calls his friend "B." My husband's name also starts with a "B." "He continued to make his paintings." "Good looking & gentle in his manner, which made him particularly attractive to women." My husband looks behind himself, as though someone in the orchard might be following. "I dare you to name just one." "There was one." It occurs to me, "nothing had developed between them." A spotlight flows from my third eye

like a light-well through the ceiling. “He fell in love with winter, and with her, all over again.” How wonderful to fall in love all over again, as into a pristine pond in summer. That night I dreamt my husband crawled inside my window. His hair was long and dark and sensual as when he was young, and he was wearing the blue-grey corduroy shirt he wore in the years I first knew him. A joke was made, his hand grazed the small of my back, something about one or both of our skins being looser. The joke was that it didn’t matter, we fell in love all over again. Paul Auster is enamored of coincidence. “It is scarcely possible for 2 cities to be more apart than Taipei & New York.” At the same time I was living in Taipei, my future husband was living in New York. Twitch. Twitch. He is massaging his armpits. He is punching his own chest, rhythmically, with 2 fingers. He is attempting to clear his throat, “not at this address.” There are days when my breathing is torched with anxiety. My husband, while massaging his neck, has such an open look, as though he is hearing something sad and disturbing, when really it is funny. Maybe his look originates from a tenderness for his own body. He closes his eyes like a cat with someone invisible stroking its back. He strokes his neck and then his shoulder and then his upper arm, “an only child with no family to speak of.” I have now written for half an hour, “defending the holiness of this man.” My husband is laughing, again. “Adores her as if she were his own flesh & blood.” Now he is washing himself without water. With both hands, he is splashing his neck, his chest, over and over. “The package had been mailed on his birthday.” Tra-la. “The letter was warm & gracious.” The holidays approach and red, green, yellow, and blue lights blink cheerily around the octagon window that frames a statue of KwanYin – who, aside from being the Goddess of Mercy, is a benevolent trickster. Under the right circumstances, I have witnessed her grin flickering. “There was a Version A & a Version B, and all along he had been stranded in the middle.” “He no longer knew what to believe.” Now my husband has reapplied his gold t-shirt and fleece pull-over, the zipper open from neck to chest, his feet in their tennis socks resting on the table. “We had another flat.” “An unmistakable hissing.” “We laughed, but our misery was over.” My husband has a look on his face as though he is taking in sun, even though it is dark outside. He has a paused smile as though he is realizing something amusing. “You have a right to know this,” the lines in his face only make him more handsome. His thumbs press against one another, admiringly, wanting something from one another, something more. My husband’s eyes have taken on a

serious aspect. A thing of consequence is in process. “Lightning struck a large tree by the road.” My husband clears his throat and stutters. “Not a single broken bone.” On the other side of glass, the wild plum is dormant. Stripped of its leaves, in a state of suspended animation, and going through a great trial, the dark night of a coma. “It was clear she remembered nothing.” It was “an interval of no consequence.” The entire story almost over. It is perhaps insensitive to go about in the warmth of the house while the tree, just there, on the other side of glass, is plumbing the hallowed – and perhaps harrowing – though possibly exalted, and for all we know, thrilling – bardo that plum trees travel between late autumn and early spring. My husband has a small enchanted smile on his lips. “After that the wheels started turning in my head.” “At that moment the madness begins.” “It is possible for stories to go on writing themselves, without the author.” “He had a Spanish accent,” and was olive-skinned, like my husband, who is one third Greco-Italian, one third European Jew, and one third Iberian Peninsula – a record of survival in the sprawl of his veins.

Tarantulas

crossing the road in autumn.

Some make it. Some don't.

Frog Song

We've made two trips bearing groceries and books between the
car and the house in the leaf – splattered dark, before we
sense it's not crickets — their adamant chirp, the rasping
of shiny black appendages rioting fall air —
it's the balloon-lipped song of frog ululation, that
frank mating cry, a synchronization, frenzied throb, sprung from
hard-packed dirt. Frogs among ant ziggurats & cactus
palms, frogs hidden below sage fronds freighted by moon-light.
Domed galaxies of sound *ribbiting* invisibly
from the sum of an earth we have not yet fathomed. Their
pulse fills our courtyard, ricochets against (and into)
the shell of our house. Ecstatic swell springs from dogwood,
plum, a *rincon* splashed with cinquefoil, the *latia* fence,
its stripped bodies of mountain aspen. Frog song throngs
from the roof, from *otra lado* the house, as though that
pond we dream of each summer actually exists
in our meadow-in-the-making, as though wheel barrow
tire ruts might — after three days faint rain — turn water-hollow
ringed by mud-emeralds among perse aster and wild
verde yo te quiero verde sedges. But no — the

amphibian knot was either never *in* our “back-
 yard” — or has — at our footfall — dispersed — become a rush
 of shivering aural mirages, a density of
 unrestrained *i-want i-want* rippling into thick
 night-
 blue distances, vivid in the cow dung lull, just *there* —
 it seems — and there — between scatter of earthen buildings.
 Cloud leviathans glide in unison, cross mesa,
 us, occluding the sky-eye. A few dogs bark. One or
 two windows brush into lit rectangles and the dirt
 road turns damp path — we glimpse a cuneiform of tracks — mine —
 from long ago — this morning — when I was some other
 animal. In the dream world, where a frog stance intimates
 receptive attitudes and the oval marriage hymn
 turns upward thrust. Out here, in the open sage-flats, frogs
 are toads — their tense and release unfallows us. Thousands,
 in one-night clans. Miraculously strange (though it’s
 only normal), how they shake off their skin-cloaks, emerge
 from self-internment, let go strands of slimy globules
 any place resembling echo. What astonishment —
 they’ve been *with us* — all these years — in push hands motion with
 acrobatic weather. O Gaia, we’ve just been too
 “busy” (*horrible word*) — sure we knew our relative

habitat. Come wet dream. Come sere metamorphosis.

Kyle Booten (5 poems)

Prince of Quince / Quince's Gambit / In Cydonia

Among all species
of rose, skirmishes
& memoirs puddle,
evoking antifreeze.

From where we sat
talking, undressing pears,
the soul & the earth
appeared equidistant.

"Has the journey
really, finally begun?"
These pilgrims with
their questionnaires.

Among all species
of rose, skirmishes
& memoirs puddle
in my navel chalice.

From where we sat
crunching quaaludic ice,
the soul & the earth
appeared equidistant.

"Has the journey
really, finally begun?"
These pilgrims with
their queen sacrifice.

Among all densities
of rose, with non-
fake swords I will
skirmish you always.

Undressing pears,
one tends to project
mute but delicate faces
upon their slimy nudity.

"Has the journey
really, finally begun?
These mullahs with
their monthly quotas."

**Astrolabe /
Astrolobotomy**

Every day, the prince
wades the river,
places the rocks
back in order.

Every night, the vizier
deworms the royal socks
and listens to the news:

Coming soon,
a clinical calendar
and a mind map
of the moon.

Every day, the prince
wades the river,
forces the rocks
back into their timelayers.

Every night, anywhere
between 5 and 20
large infirm subjects
lie down and become merino.

The vizier keeps a notebook

of escape pods,
new jobs for old forms,
buoyant forms (e.g.
the moon or cellos)

Window Scenes with Lines from Mechanical Turk

*Amazon Mturk crowdworkers were asked to
look out a window and describe what they saw.
(\$0.20 per description)*

□

...a corporate woods area.
There is a CDPH health provider.
A plastic surgery provider and
an urgent care center. The
setting of many films and
folktales. The hero is
forbidden from changing his
face, lest his betrothed
no longer recognize him.
The hero must deliver
a rare prescription
to repair a bodily injury
but cannot find his way.
There is no path. Which
is to say that the number
of paths = $2^{\text{(the total number
of trees)}}$. The villain
encounters a wandering
therapist, receiving advice
intended for the hero.

□

Rubber plants everywhere.
Workers cutting grass and plants
to clean the place to help
the rubber tappers. A cow
is eating grass and a crow
is sitting on the cow and
watching me. The crow's neck
recalibrates, tracking me
as I do my hourly lunges.
This one weird trick keeps
my blood from coagulating
into latex, keeps the men
and women with special knives
from inscribing chevrons along
my backside. See, why is it so
easy in a poem to imagine weird
pretty violence? Something to do
with how words are not really
windows, how "the words are
themselves the thing said" (Schuyler),
sadly. On the other hand, an educational
document archived by the UN

(<http://www.fao.org/docrep/006/ad221e/AD221E06.htm#ch6>)

offers an elliptical but in no way
poetical summary of how
to work a rubber plantation.
Before you skim it, take this quiz:
1) What is between the wood
and bark? 2) How long to wait
while the bark drips for you? 3)
The special knives, what do
you really call them?

□

world was very fast moving.
driver was very nearly racing.
worker was very soft eating.
money was once again happening.
the napping man now dreaming
chess, ignoring the drivers and
workers and buses together worlding.
yesterday has sunk and the trick
is to not go looking for its ruby.
tomorrow is very fast approaching
on all fours. it might be a dramati-
c change for all. the napping man
wakes slowly from that field
of knowing and now runs straight
like the car he is becoming.



Brian Shields, 2017, ink on paper, 15.5x15 inches

Rodrigo Toscano (5 poems)

Blank Pad

Just lines

Landing on lines

With *whatever*

What comes next

(Guess *this* comes next)

Is what *came* next

But about North Korea

And the Glacier Breaks

And the T-Man and P-Man

Just lines

Incandescent lamps

In deep sea wreckage

Darkness on darkness

A clamorous silence

Freakazoid creatures

No literary trove here

No metaphors, no metonyms

No jingling career trinkets

What comes next?

A fuller pad

Fuller than before

But about Real Talks

And Real Solutions

And Stick-Throwing Apes

The pad is five by ten

With - let's count: fifty pages

Forty-nine blank, *alright*.

Gas powered blower

All that went into it
Its separate components
The human work involved

How the thing works
Each and every time
As designed to

All of those folks assembled
Standing in a ring
Two hundred? Several thousand?

I wanna see them all
Right now, as they are
As I prime the starter ten times

The roar and howl is a chorus
With me at the center
Purpose being multifold and fluid

Security Cams

Left/right corridors monitored

Front flanks covered

Back area secured

There, all three perimeters

Viewed continuously

By feats of engineering

Things that can't be easily tracked:

Sudden puffs of malevolent smoke

Meandering miasmas of filth

What kind of equipment

Can be deployed for vying ideologies

Gliding in through walls and floors?

Course I don't believe in specters

Consumer solutions to

Primate Clusterfucks

Window Washing

Fuck man, no way
Streaks, squiggles, blurs
Impossible to avoid

What's the *point* of this?
Signaling class mobility
As clear visibility?

Why not a smeary glob
To squint through
Exactly as this is

Lights out, lights on
Folks rising, folks falling
At the mercy of legacy and policy

Get cher squeegee on!
Work on the shit, man
Don't matter no how

The point's - coming to town
It's coming to town, soon
The town's coming - to a point

Trusty Pencil

You never fail me
Unlike an ink pen
When pressed to paper

I love re-tapering you
In twisting motion
Corkscrewed shavings falling

What will you tell me today?
I'm eager to listen
Almost too eager

Another coast eroding?
Another far-right victory
Another inner-left implosion?

Wait, you say leave it be?
Wait, you say brush it off?
Wait, you say kick it away?

But all these *actions*
Bind trouble to trouble
In one globular mass

Here, the choristers commence
Poets for trusty messes
Poets for - this, that - the other

Time for re-tapering
Corkscrewed shavings falling
To stay in range

BRIAN KIM STEFANS (3 POEMS)

I KNOW THAT SOME OF YOU HAVE PROBABLY COME HERE FOR THE LATEST

I know that some of you have probably come here for the latest
 in avant-garde practice — that promise
of visionary ineptitude that, with a bookie's
 odds, a little bit of luck, returns to the fold
like the prodigal tyke who's blossomed into an art
 star with that gee whiz disposition
that signifies truth, even if merely
 of the Norman-Rockwell-meets Apollonian-scale humble brag variety —
nondescript covers with severe, not quite Swiss
 typography, suggesting
a sort of Bauhausian concern with social parity,
 i.e. how to be aesthetically utile in a realm of precarity,
in an age characterized by the dissolution
 of flesh-to-flesh huddles by the ubiquity of baklavas
of information — that world
 pining, I guess, for sophisticated hilarity
(and fewer end rhymes) to prove we're still
 here, secure in time, like the Voyager space craft, going on and on
and not like that damned one that's just going to crash into jupiter
 when it's done sending messages.

SOMEDAY I WILL BE ALIVE, AND SO CAN SAY THOSE

Someday I will be alive, and so can say those things that curl the hairs on the wrist on even the most ardent
of Bernie supporters, descend if only briefly
from the cloud of solipsism that I'm otherwise *chuffed* to call
home — someday strident, dark, untousled, as if auto-cocained
since the paisley a. m., thoughts harassing like cubes and spits
angling to be hitched to a syntax reigning
like chandeliers over the tomatoes, lavash and cigarettes
of the universe's (dragging this *barroco* metaphor a bit too
far) Armenian grocer — a tactical abuse, wary of the prism
of ineluctable transcendence, eyes violent saucers like a
hacktivated Reese Witherspoon, the jaw a tyrannical Vaucanson's duck
spewing forth impertinent briefs like so many
refus globals — all of them tossed, all of them reviled — licentiousness
embroidered like strangled doves in my vintage coat
replete with Clash-era epaulettes — I'd be
alive, saying those things, not claiming transmission
of some counter-punching Orpheus, nor urging ironic desecration
of an invisible capitalist *real* (the post-structuralist
trust) — but bubbling plangent bullshit, like here, a clod in boxers.

DELETE THE SPONTANEOUS FUCK AFTER A BAD LINE

Delete the spontaneous *fuck* after a bad line

as they teach you to do in comedy improv basic,
the healthy, harmonic approach to humiliation

to regard it as some exotic blossom of pain,
memorable as a pulse of illiterate communion —

always on the receiving end of smiles
you didn't do anything to deserve

makes you feel bad, so you add an extra dollar
to the tip (“anything else, you let

Kimberly know”), the government's plan to ply you

with preternatural smiles, and resemblances-to-actors,

and the laughably undernourished status of Canadian poets — to spike
the melancholia — yes, the NSA has a direct line

to the cheeky gland that pumps serotonin, so *homo*
cridans (one who believes) is pushed to a sort of

bio-physiological fracking, like light-polluted plankton, or the neutered
Greyjoy — Payless sneakers, mullets and super-sized cokes — the very provincials

you paid money to avoid, but blanketing the dream
with punishing suspicion of the *autre* — warding off the advances

of the Baronness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven.



Brian Shields, 2017, ink on paper, 22.5x18 inches

Rusty Morrison (3 poems)

notes from the understory (level 10)

such that I walk tight-limbed on tight carpet to unify action and place
can a correlation be premeditated

I turn up the volume when silence arrives it's György Kurtág's composition
mimicking how your memory taunts me

had sex with a woman she wore boots polished to the sheen of you

I store up shine as such

"too late" you would repeat when you touched me
too late the woman cautions "don't you hear the dogs behind the gate"
her question reappears in my essay under a pseudonym
no one stays between the quote-marks I make for them

notes from the understory (level 12)

such that locating you began as a cure now it's a symptom
I lean on one elbow to stretch the clamor out of my skull
the cigarettes in my purse are not yours
since you are years dead

my friend goes on and on about acquiring a rifle

whereas I keep you well-oiled and fully loaded under my bed as such

we both believe that for us accidents don't exist
would've been a short trip back to the hospital the day you chose to die
that I didn't take
I'm in the crosswalk against the light how had I let it happen

notes from the understory (level 9)

such that I board this plane to never arrive
the attendant concedes my name no longer belongs to any passenger
superimposed on a sky I see from my seat's window the face
no longer resorts to a pretence of features I recognize

to paint a Turner-sky how many skies did Turner

absorb for his brush as such

I type miles of atmosphere to fall through
with enough force to take root
I turn off the light and watch this new dark
stack upon the room's darkness

David Moolten

OPHELIA AS A MAN

She laughingly flowers
his hair, both of them five years old,
memory a dilute hallucination
where you also get to play
the other person, for him the girl next door.
Or his mother, though it's the prince she wants
and he shouts in her voice
until they're both out of breath and drowning
in air. Or he's ten and she's convinced
if he touches himself he'll worship
as she does more athletic boys,
the end. But her death remains
his *felo-de-se*, his last obedience.
He still uncrosses his legs, sighs an octave lower
like an aside by a mirror
without the rouge, the dried up gardenias,
still fights back so his friend can pin him
in the yard while she watches gleaming
in her one-piece on the chaise longue.
Daydreams are just dreams
with a script, cohabitating with her
this time like wearing a riptide
instead of skin, like putting a face on
ravishment back there everywhere
just beneath the surface.

Lily Brown

BLADE WORK

I went many years without
reading the listings. I wanted
to be liked by the poet
in the dank restaurant
who fastened his face
to its shadows. There was an aura
of mock wood, pebbles
I aligned to stay true to
some cracked intuition.
Somewhere in the cyber
ether, an alarum.
The dirtiest place in your home
has been revealed—the blare
above a kitchen sink
while I clean my teeth.
Lear uses the royal
we while addressing his daughters,
who press their breasts
to the floor, whose collarbones

nick stone. While I was out
with the dog a raccoon
bent its head around
the corner store's bright
wall and stared. Last week
I burst a shit green
balloon with the Outback's
black back wheel. Still
earlier I stood in a field
of old harvest shards. Birds
rose then fell through their
own shattered feathers
for the sleek dog to retrieve.
Clippets of summer lawns,
I misread in Doug's book,
proceeding to dream
of chlorophyll debutantes
shucked from the earth's
round edge, cut
mercifully away from
the semi-automatic sun.

Peter Eirich (2 poems)

Fort Ord 1998

Buildings bricked and plywood eyes
One after the other rolling over the hills in their places
Like magnets on an old battlefield map, the General long dead,
The croupier stick fallen to the floor, the neighborhood resting
In peace like only so many misethot gravestones.

They live here, or not, saying says a breaking building for living
Is a living and dying to make. But for trying is a living then breaking
Is a fire for light and eating, the General would order for searching and
Killing not far down the chain, as long as he is on watch,
Which he is not and never will be from here on.

There is scurrying, as one does, there is scavenging, as one can,
When it is cold in the hearth, and for flyovers, odd aircraft, blocking stars,
This land has use for conspiracies, the sadness accompanied,

When windchimes ring when the air is dead,
A cassette plays the Police warmly in the back room.

Ward 17 North, Manhattan VA

oh exquisite loneliness
in a raven coated cloud
thick with a black milk
sinking song deep and drowned
into my belly

the ax thudded depression
dull yet dripping from my brain
a sensuous trembling as my fingers
run along the cool bruises
striped under my eyes

oh unfailing melancholy
that never leaves nor offends
nor midnight promise shattered
simple heavy blanket fever
enveloped in a foggy graveyard sleep
not dead nor fully alive

but not flaying torture either
just swallowed wet rags
and hiding behind the bed
from the shards of the morning sun

from **What You Want With Your Money**

Thibault Raoult

I wanted my friend to fist my mouth
So I would know
How many oranges to order
From Scholastic.
Our oranges had long since disappeared
From possible shipyards of ø.
I still can't believe the new bible
She came up with
Or how the competition felt—
Quicksand : body-based petty theft : cidery sky.

*

My champagne lifestyle
Already debunked
As troubadour farce—
I'm now considered by many a patient leaf
Or at minimum a leafy patient.
I never would have written any of this at home
Where tire swings & gold leaf [paint] top off
The melancholia being staged along our insides
Gumball machine our national bandaid
Anthemic like soy beer in the freezer next to a mayor's toes.
The only way I'm not a fraud is if I write some BS every day.

*

I don't have a problem with the I.
4 me it foregrounds its own awkward dance.
I never meant to keep my foot on the sustain pedal all these years!
Wait, do I need to revisit my earlier now.
It is very good
To notice gold
In the creek & offer it
Feedback.
I ain't about losing.

*

I just wanted one day where I could forget I was dying | duet.
Mama always said I'd grow up to be a 15 point font poet
Harboring no illusions or gramophones—
Caffeinated to the point of tears & off the grid +/- thinking
In this post-affect ageist tin cup we call a year.
In truth I'd be happy [living] as a random charcoal drawing at
the Hirshhorn.
T'exaggeres.

Rajnish Chakrapani

Uncles

My Uncle took ownership of spinning, to take away the ownership of forests. Who does the labor of our shirts, our jewelry, our trinkets, our everyday homespun? In our iteration capital is earth, we hear, *god created the land for us to share*. Space exists for everyone, it is just plastic, the way my hands feel. I try to make it simple, my tribe marked in my septum.

Left Chicago crossed the Mississippi and the anxiety started. Gestures of shaking, swooping mirror a tremor that comes with age. A world of children who sleep little, in trees I work my way up. *This was made by god*, why have hard feelings? Difficult to process, I go along with it. People in afternoons, pyramid a scheme for the past. Lapidary buildings tell the same story, describe the features of a wall.

A limbic conversation, mine was a subjective gaze that tried not to be subjective. At my young age I was unaware of any offense. A screen synthesized a chemical that lets me cohabit. My speech outlived an accumulated wisdom of how to lead myself out of a drought.

from **Declassified**

Snow, contact means ghost me

What does it mean to be out of orbit, what is a thought but ageing, as with snow, the most famous brand in Romania the name of a river, brought back packages of chocolates with the name Milcov, water stalks me, scatters a love on faint things.

The wind washed out yesterday's spice, when you're gone I can save it as wet, I can use my phone to find your address in a suture, because it's known, I call you to say that this method of later is forbidden, you can't guess except when a battery explodes in a pocket.

Grain, from Bucharest, a train

There's a grain, felt your furrow, a book, a blast, what's the point of feelings when I'm on blades to loot sentences, no path inside the train can find space for this hour.

We paid off ten thousand dollars of debt, we compared our earrings, earnings the size of, you won't understand.

Unpunished in a crowd that comes as clapping, you see lemons and waterlilies and I see folders, our keys shatter, movies spun fruits in my navel, can't entangle to chatter.

Spooks, in pockets, prewritten darkness leads to my cheek

Travel faster to spooks, told you to put it in the freezer and all of a sudden your computer started working, somewhere I sit and whistle and a scent is reversed years later, a tune you remember as time.

From the Transience

May I help you. No. In the mirror? No. Look there is still majesty, increase, sacrifice. Night in the flat pond. Moon in it/on it disposing entirely of mind. No. Look there is desert where there was grassland there is sun-inundation like a scrupulous meditation no message just mutter of immensity where it leaks into

partiality. Into you/me. Our boundaries now in the epic see-through, how they elude wholeness, let in illusion, pastness, whole years in a flash, then minutes that do not end—that desert—that jungle. No you say, no world, swamp, reeds, grassy shapes, beginning of endings, no you say staring right back at event—it keeps

turning—no that will not be the shape I am/it is/again/it just *was*/the *shape* it was was never the shape it was, sharpness is melding into blur, used to be the sublime, used to be present tense—seat of the now-dissolved *now*. There. My self, my *one-self* isn't working for me. No. *I* flaps its empty sleeves. Habit stares at the four

horsemen from the end's endlessly festooned terrace. It stares. Bullets whine. *I* dreams of being a girl, a man, of wearing hooves, of being just sweat and whinnying, *I* smears itself with hope fear disorder opinion, leaves a trail of—what is it of—a smear of beginning, of circles about to close, the manes are tossing in the

light. No. Do not trust what I see. Do not trust you. Do not trust my own saying of the not trust. Do not trust world, the no-place into which I place my *no*, the *state of mind* into which I must clamp my mind, these objects which do not exist, no do not, in the actual, which *depart from* reality. *Swim against current* my opacity my soul whirs,

swim hard against the current state of..... May I touch the place that is you. No. Would you have had a place once. Yes. Is there a present tense now. No. What is there? *Touch it*. This place where we share this mind. It will be our first and last. Our first and last *what?* Our first and last. Did we live among men. Were we mouth-

pieces. Where is the mask that worked so well. The carnival. The puppetmaster who held my strings—my strings—here was my arm as it reached out a hand to you, to express love, to rid itself of love—here was my mouth in which breathing forced awake the unending sounds, of blood, of ink, so each made of himself a net,

a grip upon place. Such as this present I can summon here with you. *Here*. Now, remember that. I see you nowhere, I hear you nowhere, we are on different pages, not a different story, the ancestor the divided cell keeps asking have you heard the nightingale—no—have not—listening now is

few and far between—mostly it is more opaque—not talk, not thought, but like it. But you are standing there. So bright, my past. Hello. Dear fission, my self isn't working for me. It's involved with arithmetic. It's trying to correct itself so that it fits, to slice itself, dismember, un-remember, cut off, sew on, recall until it can be

counted in, or up, or down. It says some right fit must be found—restored resolved bought-up doomed-to—it must be worn more artlessly the new thing they will call the self—we must not make the same mistake again—what was it was mistaken ask the vigorous winds, bending down gently as if to lift us up, right through our throats

as fish used to be hooked when there were fish—for nothing is more important than this new face that must shake the whole thing down & laugh & bring up the rear.

What time is it. Are we already in the necroscape. Even as a machine I recall the dust and ash which everyone assured everyone else was just a small digression.

When Overfull of Pain I

lie down on this floor, unnotice, try to recall, stir a little but not in heart, feel rust coming, grass going, if I had an idea this time, if I could believe in the cultivation, just piece it together, the fields the sky the wetness in the right spot, it will recline the earth it does not need your map, the rows you cut into it make their

puzzled argument again, then seed, spring has a look in its eye you should not trust anymore, just look at it watching you from its ditch, its perch, heavy on the limbs, not reproach exactly not humor though it could be sly this one who will outlive you of course, this one who will cost you everything, yes, sly—do you catch my meaning

says the cosmos-laden morning, I will cover you with weeds, I will move towards beginning but I will not begin again, the marsh gleams does it not, the two adolescent girls walking through it now, in the reprieve, they remind you, do they not, a summer frock underneath, a heavy coat over, so ready, the idea of a century

being new beckoning, this one will end, that one we will traverse into via a small bomb perhaps, and the marsh waits, speckling, unremarkable, but yet you want to remark it, even by looking away you want to keep it normal, normal you say, rust can you be normal in me, marsh with your rusty grasses come, bring it again my

normal, a bit frostbitten at the start of the day, but now warming where the horizon blues, where the wren has alighted right here camouflaged in normalcy, he left one feather on the ground, I'll bend to pick it up after he goes, it too is all wings the day, it flaps its brightness on and the fields flatten, the sun lies oily in the sillion, furrow-

slice, mould. Are you with me. It's not a good idea this one. The assembly lines, the jet trails, the idea of prayer, thievery, scaffolds, money, how quickly they all vanished. The new thing now is not going to be new by the time you read this. And even as I look at it, trying to feel the seed pushed in, the brimming of those shoots,

the eyes of the hare in the ditch pecked out, the horse standing in the field whose breath is plume—gaze after gaze I look at this foreign country, which was so ready, which fell ill suddenly. We were driving along in one century, we took a back road, it was allowed, there was a herd of goats, we got out to see, they came up to us making

sounds like Latin, they were thin, grey, caked legs with seaweed hair. We looked at each other. Gradually something passed from one creature to the other. Which one was I. I want this normal again. Did I remember just now that this all disappeared. I lie on this floor. I feel the wide slats of the old-growth pine along my back. They

push up into my gravity, I think, I push my place down into place, eyes closed I push down through the subflooring the foundation into grey soil not touched by light in centuries. I'll break it open now. I'll push into the roots that died when place was cleared of place. Dismembered roots, here was my zip, my street address. My name.

Carnation / Re-In

I am down to my food. I root and divide. I am not pushed down I push. I with my mouth use my nose where are my hands. I say who am who am I now. I ask what color am I now. I try to feel my skin but my head is fixed to my food and my hands where are my hands. What skin am I I ask. You have no skin

they say. You are wrapped don't worry you won't fall out. It's a new material. Am I alive. Of course you are. You are always going to be alive. If I could just turn and look at my self. Do I have a self where are my hands but then feel fingers and they are tucked in. We used to have skins. Do I have the other parts. Am I

on my knees. I must be pretty normal I think. Am I normal I ask. Human? I talk to you you answer me are we speaking *what* are we speaking. Are these words actually being pronounced. I remember. I remember we were overfull of pain. The house went under the mud. It was an avalanche it went under but not

into the earth. Now now is everything. Near the top they are still looking for bodies. Deep under some other *people* will find books. They will find my pills and shoes. I imagine my red shoe being found "*when the geology thinned earth again*" and up it shoved into history, & my nightstand, & the towel I had just put down, &

the bronze buddha from that world, the kitchen pots, my teacup was just full of tea. Before that fire came. We burned but enough survived that we had to go on living. Now that there is nothing now. Now that if. Look back and you see a continent of _____ where there had been. I went forward on this piece of time. Called it a

road. Tried to feel my step. There is some kind of movement I am making. *Into forward* I remember thinking. I remember thinking. This is a narrow place. Is it now. Try to feel if you have footing. A tightrope of feel/no feel. There is sun it seems I am high up in the burned no rootlife to net it in place we left place under

the avalanche five inches in five minutes I remember *came down* down is where what is *up*. But I can still see the mountain up against the sky. Where it was supposed to be. What is supposed to be. And the _____ between its peaks. I walk out again looking. I look....out. Sometimes down. At _____. See

below. See the _____ spread out over what we had made of the earth. Streets houses plots lawns our view each slightly different. Now I am in. The earth. I wade out through it. The earth. My neighbor is under went in a flash. The door flew & she was under. My other neighbor is in the tree. The child ours stayed on

her couch would not come called called called. Here we are told *they* sit there underneath for good. Encased in. The earth. It closes over again now it has taken what was needed in payment desire what am I to do with it yes I feel them my hands but can't actually raise them to look am told to carry myself forward in this

walking forward every where is forward. I remember gravity. Remember place.

Rowan Ricardo Phillips (2 poems)

Night of the Election

And then, Seamus' poem—suddenly—gone,
The words became a thing looked at, not read.
But then those, too, went the way of Patrón,
Blanketing whatever dim light November
Had let in. How in its place an oyster
Appeared on a plate, languid, the color
Of vanilla, moist fennel, raw silver,
Crushed hay, sunken ships, quince and Jupiter,
Flexing taut then slack then taut in its shell,
How, with all that had happened, it managed
To be there, the gorged bulb glistening, well,
Here's where I'd tell you, but an orangish
Flavor—creamsicle—ruined the moment,
A sad irrelevance now relevant.

Not Who or What You Love, but Simply that

Not who or what you love, but simply that
You love. Is that enough? That love just is?
It's hard to know. Love doesn't make a wrong
Right or justify the mouth that it moves.
Love can be for nothing or a nothing,
Of course. There's nothing in it. This is hard
To swallow in life off the page. Real life,
Some call it. "Some" being the sum of blank
Faces, an assumed populace, a them.
But can you love them? Is it worth something
To you to try to? Is it worth something
To you not to try to? Or, is real life
Real life when love doesn't matter and just
Happens? Love as blank as a verse. A so.

Brenda Hillman

A GOODNESS THAT COMES FROM NOTHING

Skinny afternoon moonrise,
—the stab of it, dropped
parenthesis blanched, stolen from an
earlier whiteness, & its tip snagging the peak...
you walked along (the words of your friend having stung
from the smart phone. What's so smart about it?)
& in the eaves of the mostly
white people hotel: mud nests of swallows, then the word
middens came. Middens of comfort. Swallows' nests are like
anaphora in a poem, all lined up with no grief. Nothing
had been wronged there; & around
each nest, tiny mozart flies, keeping the tempo...
— golden calls from within—(some birds just sound squeezed,
particularly the babies, though
nothing has been wronged...)
Which voice is here, which you is living
you? It's so completely not interested in letting
go of anything. On the mountain, marmots
would be scampering around not judged but filled snow lakes.
Sky with grisaille—an art term!— plus gray
hatching strokes. Though you could not be
at peace quite yet— for now, a bristly,
stretched, signifying moon—
sometimes a song of abstract stresses leading nowhere
sometimes between each stress a helpful nothing
sometimes a goodness leading nowhere someone sees

Politics,

Discourse,

Poetry

5.

Alain Badiou

Lacan and Politics as a Hole

(Excerpted from Alain Badiou's new book *Lacan: Anti-Philosophy 3*, translated by Kenneth Reinhard and Susan Spitzer (Columbia University Press, 2018))

. . . Lacan *un-divides* philosophy when it comes to the question of its relationship to mathematics. He un-divides it, that is to say, he fails to recognize what, in my view, is an essential aspect of philosophy, namely that it is always an immanent resistance to its own temptation, the temptation of the One. Lacan is well aware that philosophy's temptation is the temptation of the One—what Heidegger calls the enframing of being by the One. But philosophy is not reducible to its immanent temptation; it is also the specific way by which it frees itself from that temptation. And as regards mathematics, I think that in Plato's *Meno*, in Descartes's *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, and in Hegel's *Science of Logic*, both aspects are present. There is of course the specific way in which philosophy's primacy over mathematics is asserted, that is, in which the temptation of meaning is produced. In Plato's case it would be expressed as: substituting principles for axioms; in Descartes's case, organizing metaphysics methodically; and in Hegel's case, overcoming or subsuming the mathematical concept of infinity. It's true that this aspect is there, and it's ripe for Lacan's invective. But in every great philosophy there is also the immanent production of resistance to this. In Plato, it will be expressed as: the identification of mathematics as being under the law of the saying, or, in other words, the acknowledgment of both its constraint and its contingency; in Descartes: the position of mathematical truths in the order of the hyperbolic; and in Hegel: with regard to the question of infinity, mathematics is inaugural and remains so.

Let me make one comment: by disregarding this constitutive division of philosophy, by giving in to a—somewhat Heideggerian—uniform judgment on an inherent errancy of philosophy, it is Lacan who shows himself to be a bit, just a little bit, blocked by philosophy.

Lacanian anti-philosophy consists, in part, in un-dividing philosophy when it comes to this particular issue while actually basing itself on philosophy's

division. This is a fundamental schema, and if we were to indicate its “conceptual figure,” as Deleuze would say, it would be Lacan’s relationship to Socrates. For Lacanian anti-philosophy, this relationship to Socrates, and to Socrates/Plato, consists at once and indivisibly, so to speak—we’re talking about the origins of philosophy—in a process of destitution and identification. Socrates is the first philosopher but also the first analyst. Why? Well, precisely because philosophy is conceived of as both undivided and as a possibility of using or exploiting its division. This is why Lacan is just a little blocked by philosophy, a tiny bit. Identifying with Plato’s Socrates in order to disparage Plato, he experiences in his own way the syndrome of temptation and resistance to temptation that has haunted philosophy from its inception.

Now what about the philosopher plugging the hole of politics? Obviously, the first question is: In what sense is politics a hole? I think we can really get into the Borromean knot here and say that this business about the hole of politics can be formulated in terms of the imaginary, the real, and the symbolic.

Let’s consider it first as an imaginary hole. This is the most well-known and obvious aspect: politics is a hole because it is undeniably linked to the group imaginary. Very specifically, it can be put like this: insofar as politics is located in the group imaginary, it is an imaginary hole in the real of Capital. The real of Capital is the real of universal dispersal, circulation, and absolute atomization. Furthermore, it’s a certain regime of *jouissance*, hence of the real. So, in the granular consistency of this real, politics consists in making kinds of glues [*colles*]—kinds of School-glues [*Écolles*, pun on the word *école*, “school”]—which are actually times when the consistency is like a pierced or porous bone. It is about making imaginary pores in the dispersed, real consistency of Capital and surplus value. That’s how politics is glued to meaning, and, insofar as it’s glued to meaning, it makes an imaginary, or if you will, religious, hole in the real of Capital. That is politics as a Church effect. Lacan has several different names for it: glue effect (it glues the group together), Church effect, and meaning effect. But once again, I would put it in a more technical way: an imaginary hole in the real.

Let me remind you that when the *École* was dissolved in 1980, when the act of dissolution was experienced by everyone as a political act, Lacan wrote the following:

Demonstrating through acts [*here’s the act again! The act is the act of dissolution. And I should point out that the question of whether there can be another sort of act than an act of dissolution will be one of our final questions.*] that it

is not of their doing that my École would be an Institution, the effect of a consolidated group, at the expense of the discourse effect expected from an experiment, when it is Freudian. One knows what price was paid for Freud's having permitted the psychoanalytic group to win out over discourse, to become a Church. The International [*the International is the Chicago people, right?*], since such is its name, is no more than the symptom of what Freud expected of it. But *it* is not what weighs in the balance. It's the Church, the true one, which supports Marxism insofar as it gives the Church new blood . . . of renewed meaning. Why not psychoanalysis, when it veers toward meaning? I am not saying that out of vain banter. The stability of religion stems from the fact that meaning is always religious. Whence my obstinacy on the path of mathemes . . . (*T*, 130; trans. slightly modified)

Politics makes a hole inasmuch as it sweeps up all discourse effect into the group effect, "the effect of a consolidated group, at the expense of the discourse effect," and as for Freud, he permitted "the psychoanalytic group to win out over discourse." So what is at stake here in terms of politics—the group as such—makes a hole when it makes glue [*colle*] or School-glue [*École*], in other words, precisely when the group wins out over discourse. This maxim, "it makes a hole when the group wins out over discourse," is a very important one. Why? Because we understand from it how philosophy can plug the hole. It will plug it by turning the fact that the group wins out over discourse into a discourse. This is what will be attributed to philosophy in terms of its relationship to politics: when the group wins out over discourse, you have a kind of imaginary hole in the real of Capital, and that's all you have. In this sense, we shouldn't think that political philosophy or philosophy dealing with politics only plugs something that's lacking. It's a much more complicated operation. In reality, when the group wins out over discourse, philosophy comes from behind—as it always does, doesn't it?—to restore legitimacy in the discourse based on the group's winning out over discourse. And philosophy will call this "politics." It's when philosophy calls "politics" the fact that the group wins out over discourse and turns this into a discourse that it's playing its role as hole-plugger of politics, whereas it should leave the hole open so that we can see in it that the group wins out over discourse and that, as a result, it's the imaginary breach or collapse of the pure glue effect.

In this connection, Lacan's relationship to Marx should be mentioned: it's in the text "Monsieur A" again, in which Lacan rebels against philosophy and in which he says:

I paid tribute to Marx as the inventor of the symptom. [*He didn't pay tribute to Marx only as the inventor of the symptom. That's what he focuses on here, but as you know, he paid tribute to him as the inventor of surplus-enjoyment, hence of something that touches the real directly.*] This Marx is nevertheless the restorer of order, simply because he breathed the *dit*-mension of meaning back into the proletariat. All it took for that was for him to say what the proletariat was as such. The Church learned a thing or two from this: that's what I told you on January 5 [*and he would come back to it later*]. Be aware that there's going to be a boom in religious meaning in a way you can't even begin to imagine [*indeed, we haven't been disappointed on that score since then*] because religion is the original refuge of meaning. (*M*, 18–19)

Actually, if you think about it, what Marx is being accused of here is having been a philosopher. He was a philosopher because he breathed meaning back into the proletariat, whereas the proletariat was a real hole. That's what the proletariat was: a real hole. And it was this hole that Marx plugged up by breathing meaning back into it. Consequently, Marx allowed the proletariat as a group to win out over any possibility of a discourse. He could then be said to be the restorer of order—in Lacan's eyes—precisely because he silenced the proletariat. This is an interesting thesis since Marx is usually considered as someone who gave a voice, a political voice, to the proletariat. In Lacan's view, he silenced it precisely at the point where, once it was Marxized, the proletariat was no longer anything but a group. That's the Party position. The proletariat was a group, or a party, and the Party did, in fact, take precedence over discourse. And it turns out that, by a sort of retroaction, Marx was the philosopher who plugged the hole beforehand, by discursively allowing the group to win out over discourse, by launching . . . what? Well, *The Communist Manifesto*, or, in other words, by letting it be known that the group was the condition of discourse. But when it is assumed that the group is the condition of discourse and not that discourse is the condition of the group, then you have an effect

of blockage of the real hole. There would have been something real if there had been a proletarian discursive discontinuity, so to speak, authorizing the group. Lacan constantly created groups, so the point is not whether or not there are any. The point is that the group must be prohibited, if possible, from authorizing discourse.

This thesis of Lacan's is very interesting because, at bottom, what was Lacan's dream about this issue? His dream? No, his project—let's say his project! Lacan presents this project in the passage I read you a moment ago: an "effect of a consolidated group, at the expense of . . . an experiment" must be prevented at all costs. The discourse effect expected from the Freudian experiment must win out over the group. But if the group wins out over discourse, both a (real) hole effect and a (philosophical) plugging-of-the-hole effect will necessarily occur.

We might, however, wonder what all of this means in actual fact. Indeed, everyone is constantly wondering about it! When Lacan says this, he is admitting: I failed, I failed. Then, of course, as a man who won't give up on this issue, he quickly starts over again. But he still says: I failed. I failed in what respect? I failed to make analytic discourse win out over the group, so I was like Marx; I did the same thing he did. I invented lots of things just as he did, but, in the end, I restored order. And as *I* realize that I restored order, I will dissolve my school just as Marx did when he dissolved the First International in 1871. Lacan constantly imitated Marx. Not only did he imitate him by inventing a discourse, but he also imitated him in politics: he dissolved the group that purported to be the condition of discourse.

This brings us to the concept of dissolution. In its generic sense, it's the moment when one tries to ensure that politics as a hole isn't plugged by philosophy. That's precisely what it is—the moment when one would have a chance to perceive—if only for an instant—the difference between discourse and group. In fact, even when Marx dissolved the First International, it was obviously in the hopes of making a possible identification of a discourse of the proletariat in terms of its difference from the group, in terms of a creative uncovering of the discourse as opposed to the group, an uncovering—an un-plugging— that the group's dissolution would make it possible to perceive.

The only problem is, isn't this the thesis of the existence of a pure discourse, this possibility of thinking the difference between discourse and group right at the time that the group disappears when it's being dissolved? "Pure discourse" would then mean a discourse that is visible and thinkable in terms of its strict difference

from the group, i.e., in terms of the group's dispersal, and therefore a discourse freed from philosophy, if it's assumed that philosophy is always what legitimizes the group's predominance over discourse in politics. This, in my terms, would mean that philosophy is always what legitimizes the state. Political philosophy would be nothing but state philosophy, which is unfortunately too often the case. But in Lacan's terms, the fact that it's state philosophy means that it's the philosophy of the legitimation of the group's predominance over discourse. Assuming that dissolution is the operation that restores the productive relationship between discourse and group, it's not just because things aren't going well in the group. Basically, dissolution is an operation of uncovering of discourse by means of a dissolutive marginalization of the group. So this also means that the operation is directed against philosophy, whose subject matter is assumed, by Lacan and many others, to be the assertion of the group's predominance over discourse in politics—which actually means: the authority of the state.

So, with dissolution we have the clearest of the anti-philosophical operations. It's no coincidence that it was just when his psychoanalytic group was being dis-solved that Lacan exclaimed: "I rebel against philosophy." It's a necessary correlation. I rebel against philosophy because it is always an operation that legitimizes the group's predominance over discourse, and that's why it plugs the hole of politics. And I, Lacan, want the hole to be seen. At a minimum, we should be able to see the hole. But philosophy, as the discourse of the group's predominance over discourse, as state discourse, makes it impossible to see the hole: we can't see anything anymore; it's plugged up. If I want to see the hole, what do I want to see in the hole? Well, the hole signifies discourse, and therefore ultimately the analytic discourse.

Someone asks a question: *Can it be said that Lacan treats philosophy as an ideology?*

No, that's not exactly right. If philosophy is state discourse—which, for me, once again, is its temptation but by no means its essence—then its real surpasses the real of the imaginary functions of ideology. With dissolution, as opposed to the state-based predominance of the group, you have an act that uncovers discourse. That's what's so extremely difficult, because the operation of uncovering of discourse is a political operation and not just the practice of the true (or scientific) discourse against ideology. It's a specific operation that Marx, Lenin, and Mao Zedong constantly struggled with. What's more, if you take a good look at it, revolutionary activity is always, to a great extent, a political operation of uncovering of discourse. And maybe it's always essentially a dissolutive operation.

This operation introduces an extreme tension owing to the correlation between anti-philosophy—freeing the hole of politics from its plugging by philosophy—and the dissolutive conception of the group as the act of uncovering discourse.

The question of dissolution has haunted revolutionary politics since Marx's day: from the dissolution of the First International to Lenin's threat, in the middle of the transition from February to October 1917, to dissolve the party at any moment. This is well known: we've got the texts to prove it. Consider, for example, "The Crisis Has Matured," in which Lenin constantly says: "If that's the way it is, I'm going to quit. The Party's nothing at all; I'm going to quit, I'm going to dissolve it." And, in a way, the Cultural Revolution in China was nothing but a gigantic operation of dissolving the party. Dissolution persistently haunts the figure of the revolutionary act because there is always a question of the political uncovering of discourse. Lacan was the absolute heir to this. He was perfectly right to compare himself to Lenin in terms of his relationship to Marx. But this paves the way for an extreme tension, because this thesis indicates that politics can only be freed from the hold of philosophy—as anti-philosophy sees it—in the perspective of dissolution or of something akin to dissolution, since nothing can be opposed to philosophy's plugging of the hole except the uncovering of discourse.

So much for the hole of politics as an imaginary hole by means of which the group ensures its predominance, its glue effect, over the true discourse.

I also think that politics is a symbolic hole. I told you that it's an imaginary hole in the real of Capital. But it's also a symbolic hole in the imaginary consistency of discourse. As you can imagine, it will ultimately be a real hole in this symbolic order, too.

I'm just going to give a brief sketch of this issue. There's something very striking—including in the Lacanian conceptual framework—namely, the fact that, for Lacan, politics isn't a discourse. You've got the discourse of science, the discourse of the analyst, the discourse of the hysteric, and the discourse of the university but not the discourse of politics. Yet this point, which may seem to be just a simple statement of fact, is in my opinion an all-important point. How is it—actually, I'm going to let you solve the problem for yourselves between now and next week—that politics, for Lacan, isn't a discourse?

—ooo—

It's not easy to make a connection between Lacan and Deleuze. But here it's possible to do so. Why isn't politics a thought for Deleuze? I'm not saying "a discourse" because that's not his vocabulary, but if you take *What Is Philosophy?* you can read in it that science is a thought, that art is a thought, that philosophy is a thought, but not politics. We know very well why, in Deleuze's view, psychoanalysis is not a thought: he explained this at length in *Anti-Oedipus*. But why can't politics be added to the list that includes art, science, and philosophy? I'll just leave you with this observation tonight: for Deleuze, politics isn't a system of thought. There's no political plane in the sense of the philosophical plane of immanence, the scientific plane of reference, or the artistic plane of composition as opposed to chaos. The equivalent in Lacan is that there's not strictly speaking any discourse of politics. And it's because there isn't any that, in fact, politics always makes a hole in the discourses. And more precisely in what, in these discourses, is based on imaginary consistency, or, in other words, is based on semblance.

Let's say that politics is a symbolic hole in semblance.

Kevin Holden, **Utopian Language**

“... space has remained a street-urchin, and it is difficult to enumerate what it engenders. It is as discontinuous as a swindler, to the great despair of its father.” (Bataille)

In this talk^o I will describe a kind of experimentation that emerged in poetry in France in the 1960s and its relation to the opening up of both aesthetic and political space. And I seek to ask how that work may be continuing to unfold today. Here I mean space both conceptually (as spaces of thought) as well as physical space. The simple title of this paper is “Utopian Language,” and in it I want to gesture toward the literal spatiality embedded in that adjective’s etymology, with which we are all familiar. Specifically, obviously, of *topos*, space, places. Poetry in the late 60s is engaged in a making and remaking of it — the space of the page as well as spaces of lived experience. A kind of linguistic and topological experimentation begins to emerge in the 1960s that has continued to widen and deepen over the proceeding decades. It is my contention that this poetic work is indeed both formally and ethically radical. In addition to its orientation toward a kind of *détournement* of conceptualized thinking, this writing is, I would suggest, also committed to *practices* of spatial resignification and reopening.

Thus this presentation will focus on the political work that poetry may enact. Does the ‘68-era writing on aesthetics, space, and the everyday (Lefebvre, Bachelard, Debord) continue to be relevant to our contemporary cultural and poetic moment and its political manifestations — some of which, including Occupy, could certainly come close to a version of the logic behind the late 60s’ claims for artistic liberation and “Le droit à la ville”? Is it possible that Marxist and other analyses of the potentiality in the relationship between *writing* and politics are useful now? And specifically, does experimental French and American poetry remain committed to the work of space-making (in and as linguistic “practice,” as in de Certeau) and of de-reification (in and as “form,” as in Adorno) that the earlier poetic theory so strongly argued?

Space is without a doubt central to the aesthetic and political concerns of the 1960s. We see this certainly in the cinema of the Nouvelle Vague, and I think

*Originally for the panel “Poetics Informing/Performing the Political,” at the conference “*Sous les pavés*”: *The 20th and 21st-century French and Francophone Studies Colloquium*, in Providence, Rhode Island, April 2018.

here in particular of Tati and Godard, and two films specifically — *Playtime* and *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle*, both made in 1967, in which the protagonists, insofar as they can be thought as such, navigate a new spatial reality in Paris — one of large concrete buildings, enormous panes of glass, endless corporate construction, and imposing plazas and streets. Obviously Paris has a complicated history with the relationship between urban design and politics, beginning well before the construction of these commercially globalized modern suburbs. There continues to be debate about the extent to which Haussman's replanning participated in the facilitation of police mobility and the optimization of methods of control. Certainly he did express these supplementary benefits to the government, which would aid in its attempt to render popular insurrection impossible and the construction of barricades ineffective in the Second Empire, particularly around Montagne Sainte-Geneviève, the same neighborhoods where paving stones were used to block the streets over a century later. And as we all know, when the Sorbonne reopened and the students occupied it, they were declared to "behave like irresponsible utopianists who wanted to *reshape* the social."

There are several poets, writing both then and now, who I would argue mobilize space toward a logic of liberation. There are moments in their work that are political "overtly," though I think it is honest to say that the sites at which this mobilization may occur most frequently would be more commonly called "abstract." I do believe that these poets' deep formal experimentations should be considered as containing a political dimension a priori. These writers include Anne-Marie Albiach, Claude Royet-Journoud, and Jean Daive, all of whom, in different ways, open spaces of multiplicity, immanence, difference, and freedom. These are spaces that, I would argue, can be *occupied*. Radical in varying ways, these poets question and critique the uniformity and identity of the subject, unearth regions of new belonging dislocated from logics of control, and strive toward a rigorous reinvention of thought and experience. Royet-Journoud and Daive are still writing today, and several younger poets have been strongly influenced by their effort and innovation.

One of the poets is Isabelle Garron, who has collaborated with Daive, and whose postface to the recent collected poems of Albiach underscores the deep ethical activity in her writing. Garron has also been long at work on a translation of Leslie Scalapino's *Way*, a book-length poem that is directly sociopolitical in "content" and develops a complex "form" that continually reworks structural relations of power and strives to generate new modes of social and mental

collectivity. These are efforts that may work differently than they did in 1968, but they are still alive and perhaps necessary today.

Formally, these poets labor to warp grammar and activate topographies of sound and of the space of the page to free up areas of new experience. To put it one way, you might say that they are attempting to create or approach something “utopian” by mobilizing or activating the non-placedness denoted in the literal meaning of the word. Perhaps this touches asymptotically Deleuze’s sense of “la pensée du dehors,” or seeks to undo the Cartesian insistence that thinking is natural and easy, the so-called “most universally and equally distributed faculty,” etc. I believe it is possible to conceive their reorientations of linear order as a kind of consistent deferral of controlled schemas for the conceptualization of places in which to live and think. Local regions are related, combined, juxtaposed, and activated at a distance without reference to metric control or implicit textual hierarchy. One thinks perhaps of Royet-Journoud’s continuous interest in the locality principle. Or “dans le lisse, on se distribue sur un espace ouvert.” There is a *displacement* of a top-down imposition of strict limitations upon lived experience, close to what Lefebvre describes as the “representations of space” that reify the possibilities of dwelling.

There is a lot of theorization one could enter here, but I will refrain from that for now. In short, the principle phenomenon toward which I am trying to gesture is a reduction of experience and thinking that perhaps has been felt with increasing intensity since the end of the Second World War: that feeling that techno-political control is functioning to recompose the nature of space itself, that there has been an elimination of distance and duration by corporatization and a deterioration of presence flattened and subsumed into capital’s totality. My contention is simply that the poetries at hand work to reanimate those spaces, and to *give* space for the regrowth of our capacities to think, feel, dwell, and move.

In regards to the aesthetic moment of the late 60s and early 70s, the books I am thinking about here are Daive’s *Décimal Blanche* from 1967, Albiach’s *État*, 1971, and Royet-Journoud’s *Le Renversement*, 1972.

Jean Daive’s book operates, as he suggests on its very first page, “*Au bord de l’espace.*” He writes: “Le nom défaire la forme / la fonte l’avalanche le refaire.” He writes of “un état d’inachèvement” and of “labyrinthes” to be opened. An “Immensité,” “Un cercle dans l’espace, et l’espace à l’intérieur commence d’autres cercles plus large . . . Nul ressemblance ne renvoie vers soi . . . nulle image.”

In his book on poetry and anthology of contemporary poetry, *Tout le monde se ressemble*, Emmanuel Hocquard asks:

A quoi reconnaît-on qu'on a affaire à de la poésie? A sa physionomie qui comprend l'aspect et le ton. . . . Mais pour s'en tenir à la poésie dans le livre, un renversement est en train de se produire. Tandis que, naguère, le poète coulait sa pensée dans la forme-poésie parfaitement identifiable comme telle, *surfant* sur les rythmes et la musique des vers, *aujourd'hui* il invente la forme de sa pensée. Voyez comment Anne-Marie Albiach et Claude Royet-Journoud construisent l'espace (et le volume) de l'écriture. Ces lignes sont-elles encore des vers ? Même si ça ressemble encore, par certains aspects, à de la poésie, il se pourrait que ça n'en soit plus.

Hocquard writes of form, fragment, and grammar in the work of these poets, a displacement of fixity enabled by their reshaping and reinvention of aesthetic and literal spaces. He speaks of the idea of the "lieu commun," an inhabitable place of shared experience predicated on a kind of indetermination, an area of mutual social and ethical presence.

The making or achievement of this space would require some subversion of normative orientation and grammar, the latter conceived in its prescriptive and delimiting sense; as Hocquard says: "Nous vivons tous avec l'idée recue — avant même l'école primaire — que la grammaire (le squelette de la langue), comme la Loi, doit être la même pour tout et qu'elle est immuable... Nous la "respectons" comme une monopole d'État, jusque dans les aspects les plus anodins et les plus intimes de notre vie."

The idea would obviously be that the stretching and reworking of these laws makes a certain agency and occupy-ability possible. Other articulations of this position are very familiar, especially, for instance, in de Certeau, when he claims that "signifying practices invent space," and argues that "words become liberated spaces that can be occupied." For him, poetic mechanisms actually "organize the topoi of a discourse on and of the city... in a way that eludes urbanistic systematicity." That is, rich indetermination gives them, by means of a semantic rarefaction, the function of articulating a second, poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden, or permitted meaning.

So, I suppose I do think this is true. Perhaps this can only describe a politics that is *local*, but that seems to me a very important politics.

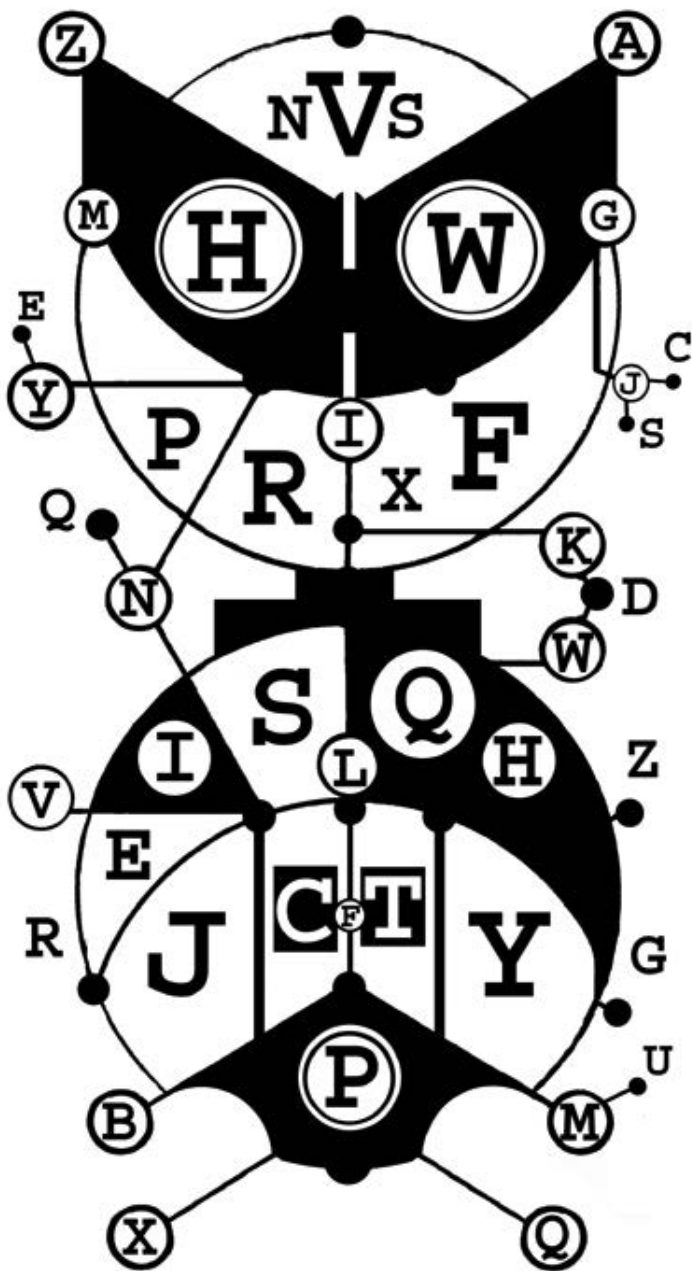
In *Les Damnés de la Terre* Fanon writes: “The colonial world is a world divided into compartments . . . if we examine closely this system of compartments, we will at least be able to reveal the lines of force it implies.”

It is also true that in these poets’ more recent work, for instance in Daive’s *L’énonciateur des extrêmes*, from 2012, and Royet-Journoud’s *La poésie entière est preposition*, 2007, there are expressions and assertions more explicitly political. Daive refracts much of the book back through the corporeal and social violence inherent in patriarchy and in the founding of civilization, focusing at times on the American context and engaging with the more topical work of writers like Robert Creeley. And Royet-Journoud simply writes: “Je donne à lire quelque chose qui est à peine visible: c’est là que s’exerce la menace, que quelque chose de violent peut naître.”

Still, the writing moves primarily in registers more translucent than transparent, and its efficacy occurs in regions more internal. Perhaps these sorts of poetry simply work differently from more overtly political writing. There is an exigency for that writing. But I do not think that the poetics I have described here represent a hermeticism or *geheimsprache* or withdrawal from the world. They strive to bend control into something other.

In fact, I think these forms of writing seek to avoid, productively, rhetorics of pointed address that often rely on logics of substitution in their mobilization of affect, themselves often eschewing distentions of grammar itself — this is reminiscent of Barbara Johnson’s distinction between the Symbolists and Surrealists — and which can at times, one could argue, reinscribe the same rigidity that they seek to subvert or oppose.

Perhaps there is a distinction to be drawn between the political and ethical, not at all in the sense that the expressly political would not be ethical, but that poetry can still do deep ethical work without always employing those discursive modes. And I don’t mean ethical in some broad Levinasian sense, or not only in that sense, but also in the negotiation of localized spaces of thought, and experience, and interaction — public and private, intimate and social.



COUNTERPOINT

Robert R.. Thurman

IS POETRY STILL IN THE GAME? WHAT GAME?



FARID MATUK

SHANE McCRAE

SANDRA SIMONDS

Several poets were sent a hodgepodge of questions to ponder. The salient nodes were whether “identity” is still a valuable card to play in poetry, and the same with autobiography.

Of the poets asked to contribute, three graciously responded: Farid Matuk (who addresses the first point, identity), and Shane MacRae and Sandra Simonds (who address autobiography).

The questions were initially inspired by Rodrigo Toscano’s dialogue with Aaron Beasley, which was published by the *Boston Review* (4/18/2018). Toscano asked, “Are poets out of conscience cards to play? Would that maybe be a good thing?” The title above ricochets off his discussion.

FARID MATUK

CAN YOU HEAR IT?

It should be obvious and it's already been said, many times, but discussions of identity and poetry seem to require that we take our place in the choir of basic premises to say again that power names and orders difference to extract value and secure more power. Met with reactionary repression at every turn, incremental gains in civil rights and diversified representation have not yet dismantled the oldest axes of oppression. Revolutions happen by dismantling at the site of power, not at the site of oppression. In the meantime, we can remember that we're actually "disaggregated" beings, as Fred Moten says, but when our work needs to make claims on the polis, "we're constrained to use identity against the zombies who invented it." Writers who take up that constraint don't need mine or anyone's permission to variously resist, consolidate, trouble, and reshape their identities at different times in their practices, particularly if doing so serves a joyous survival.

Certainly, we can think harder about the disruptive potential of the categories we use. The terms "people of color" and "women of color" come from a visionary impetus to create and name tactical coalitions among black and brown feminists in the late 1970s (The Combahee River Collective, The Black Women's Agenda). Yet writer and reproductive justice advocate Loretta Ross had to remind us, some forty years later, that "women of color" was meant to be a "political designation," not a biological, cultural, or ontological category. We can heed Ross's example and stop using the current term "intersectional" to describe work that happens to be written by poets who occupy more than one oppressed category but that is actually depoliticized. We can remember, too, that intersectional thinking isn't only about double or triple jeopardy but about double and triple complicity. The potential of our poems to trouble structures of power only increases when we factor in the ways people of color benefit from anti-blackness, for example, and the ways that here we walk on ground where the bombs, somehow, just don't fall.

No doubt that in the public sphere as much as in the literary marketplace identities, whiteness included, are a commodity; they always were. However, I'm more worried about "virtue signaling" by the institutions that handle our poems than I am about any such signaling by poets in either the social network or on the page. If literary institutions are now using queer, trans, gender nonconforming/POC writers as social justice beards, then we might remember, as writer Rami Karim said at a recent conference, that this moment is only a moment, one we can treat as a stage in a longer process, a stage to be occupied and turned toward more radical ends. For pointed articulations of this idea in practice, see the recent responses to Poetry magazine's proposed special issue on trans and gender non-conforming poets gathered at beyondspecialissues.tumblr.com. In short, it's on us to continually recalibrate our stance toward power, to continually revise our disruptive tactics, to ask what our work might do in our imaginations and in the imaginations of readers, not just how it might express who we think we already are.

Everything is contiguous with politics. But beyond these basic political premises, I see the rest of a poet's work, that which returns us to Moten's sense of disaggregation, as personal, though never private; intuitive and embodied, though never natural. Maybe with a similar interest in courting the disaggregated, Rodrigo lays out affinities in his recent interview that I share – a preference for innovations in diction and form, a suspicion of "autonomist individualistic" poetics, and so on. Yet I see no shortage of linguistically inventive work that, while counting identity and power among its concerns, never confuses the fact of difference with the pacifying promises of singular, integral, and neoliberal versions of identity.

Consider Marwa Helal's invention of Arabic, a verse form based partially on the syntax of the Arabic language, or Noor Ibm Najam's explorations of Arabic grammar that help them queer language, and with it our ideas of queerness. Consider Vanessa Angelica Villareal's hybrid forms that re-member narratives without letting them coalesce into nostalgia, or the way Raquel Salas Riveras's bilingual poetics creates diptychs mirroring colonial languages at one another. I'm naming off the top of my head only a handful of relatively "early career" poets whose work contests power and reimagine poetry, wholly unconcerned by the notion that political declarations might be incompatible with pluralities of thought or language.

But this point – that, yes, one can declaratively occupy a marked body and simultaneously reinvigorate the language – has also been made before. In fact, Cathy Park Hong listed my own work, along with that of Rodrigo’s, as examples of “the most radical writings today” in her essay “Delusions of Whiteness,” which first appeared in the way back of 2015 in *Lana Turner* #7. So, why do we restage variations of this question? And what do we miss when doing so? Paisley Rekdal’s recent piece laying bare the racial and nationalist filters that prevent some critics from properly reading Ocean Vuong’s work reminded me that there are such conditions as reading-while-white and reading-while-American. If this is so, might we add to our diagnostic roster reading-while-avant-garde?

The poet and educator Chris Martin told me recently of the work of his Unrestricted Interest project, a writing program he developed that offers poetry to kids and adults on the autism spectrum. He said that when he introduces basic lyric strategies, such as various forms of repetition, some of his students experience just the right amount of structure to squeeze into communicable form what is otherwise an intense array of knowledge and awareness. I don’t mean to leap across differences between the neurotypical and the neurodiverse folks to suggest easy equivalencies. Instead, I want to ask about what ways of knowing and being in the world, what news do we ignore when we mark the field of poetry by only connecting the dots of its most familiar schools of radical influence.

My own neurowiring didn’t require structure so much as it craved gaps, and starting with the *Purple Rain* album, Prince gave them to me. It’s the way he used finger cymbals. They’re everywhere in his songs once you notice them. They ring clearly in the mix because Prince let their reverberations have space, which is to say time. Across these miniscule gaps the finger cymbals seem to both echo and drag out the distinct sounds that preceded them. It’s how I’ve come to think of rhyme. Rhyme doesn’t reconcile a preceding sound in its identical second instance; instead, a sound’s repetition welcomes its initial iteration *and* all the difference that iteration accrued across the syllables it traveled. And this is also, somehow, what I’ve come to think of art and politics, difference and identity. I live various types of systemic trauma where power’s projections layer onto my body, tamping down Moten’s sense of disaggregation into a singularity that is always bracing. I’m here for any art, any aesthetic that will kick a gap between those layers where the disaggregated can stretch out, disperse, and gather again its constituent parts, changed and differentiated, in echoes and rhymes. I guess

my point here is also to note that it was Prince who used finger cymbals in a way that opened me up, not Black Flag or Propagandhi.

This is not to set up a progressive schema where pop variants are okay only insofar as they bring initiates into deeper and more sophisticated pleasures. This is partly about access. It was Prince whose mass distribution could get through the isolation I knew as a kid, the isolation of being really poor, being undocumented, being a child of refugees fleeing domestic abuse, and being illiterate in English. But it's more than that. If we take seriously concepts like indeterminacy and ambiguity not only as aesthetic qualities but also as notes of being, then it follows that there are notes inside us that we can't yet hear. And maybe they're waiting for a rhyme whose provenance – high or low, lauded or rarefied – we also can't anticipate.

I'm here for any art, any aesthetic that will help us stay disaggregated yet nimble and ready to meet the moment. Before *Lana Turner* was a journal of literature and ideas, before she was a figure in a poem by a male poet who plumbed depths from manners and postures, before she was an actress who shaped her gestures and body into commodities valued by patriarchy, Lana Turner was a woman, a person, a disaggregation who in 1958 had her life threatened by her then lover, a man like any other who was ready to be sent as a deadly agent of the same patriarchy that valued her. And when this happened Turner's daughter, who had already survived three years of rape by her own step-father, was able to pick up a kitchen knife and bury it into the attacking lover's body so many times, as if she was trying to return it to its set. I'm here for whatever song was playing in her head.

WHY I HAVE NEVER NOT WRITTEN BIOGRAPHIES OF WHITE READERS

SHANE MCCRAE

I think what I have worried about, when I have worried about my own autobiographical poetry (I don't say "confessional" because I think writers of color can't write confessional poetry, at least, not in America, because confessional poetry requires and always has required a pre-transgression state of grace, which writers of color in America have never been allowed) hasn't actually been autobiographical poetry itself. Instead, without being conscious of it, I have worried whether it's okay for me to foreground myself as subject of my poetry. But maybe "foreground," like "autobiographical," is a tricky word.

Let's say that for my next book I transcribe a week's worth of *Seinfeld* re-runs. As far as the words on the page are concerned, I'm not the subject at all, and certainly not foregrounded as the subject. However, in the minds of most readers—and even, indeed more so, in the minds of people who don't read the book, but only hear about it—I most certainly *am* the subject of the book, but in the background. What sort of person would transcribe a week's worth of *Seinfeld* reruns? And why? By loudly absenting myself from the words on the page—got my name on the cover, y'all!—I will have made a kind of subjectivity humblebrag. Most writing that foregrounds its author as its subject is both more humble than this, and less deceptive about the humility of the person who wrote the words down.

So, then, what I have worried about has been: Is it okay for me to announce myself as the subject of my poems? As I hinted above, I think this is a different question for a writer of color than it would be for a white writer. Were I a white writer, I think I might afford myself the luxury of considering a greater number of factors when answering that question, and while I can't say for certain how I would answer, I feel like I would be more likely to say "yes." But I'm not a white writer.

When I write a poem about my relationship with my father, I am black, and white readers, judging from their reactions, seem to see something there that isn't just a son talking about his father—something extra that might be blackness, something intangible that at the very least distinguishes my poem about my father from white writers' poems about their fathers. I write such poems chiefly because they come to me to be written. But I also write them because that something extra is there—not to eliminate it, but to allow it to be perceived. That is political work different from the political work of confessional poets. When I write a poem that might, had it been written by a white writer, be called a confessional poem, I do not reveal my own secrets only, but also secrets inside certain of the poem's readers. Because all writing is autobiographical, all of my poems do this, but in poems that foreground myself as their subject, I insist on my blackness. I insist that white people see my blackness. I insist that white people acknowledge what else they see when they see it.

When I write black autobiography, I write white biography.

REAL POETRY IS ALWAYS CONNECTED TO THE REVOLUTIONARY SPIRIT

SANDRA SIMONDS

Poetry should read neither as autobiography nor confession, though I am often asked about both elements in my work. Poetry, like all art, is a flight of the imagination, and when personal narrative is used, even as the jumping off point for vision, it often arcs back on and destroys the very narrative that it constructs. Vision obliterates injustice, it casts “reality” in a new light and offers us an opening into alternative modes of existence, alternative ways of thinking about being. Revolutionary poets demonstrate the potentialities for what life would look like for the good of the common, and not the individual. To label poetry as “autobiographical” reduces its power to the individual life when what’s important isn’t so much the individual life as the social relations of lived experience and how those relations are representative of a much larger system of exploitation and alienation. In this sense, real poetry is always connected to the revolutionary spirit and the revolutionary spirit never accepts the world on the world’s false terms: it stands against.

In the 1990s, avant-garde American poetry made much use of indirect discourse where flashes of the interior or human consciousness would surface, but the aesthetic was often that of deliberate disjunction. One brilliant example of this mode is *My Life* by Lyn Hejinian. What I admire about the spirit of Language Poetry is that it is both antagonistic and political, a confrontation of the status quo through formal difficulty. The dominant mode of “mainstream” poetry at this time was a quietist, lyric narrative where moments of bourgeois consciousness were simplistically passed off as grand epiphany. The problem is that this poetry began with the self and ended with the self, enclosing and sealing itself off in its own solipsistic world. Without class-consciousness, without a proper understanding of how capitalism functions, what epiphany can realistically be made? Moments of bourgeois subjectivity cannot pass for epiphany. These quietist poets were not really revolutionary artists, but poets sleepily rearticulating bourgeois ideology. For many of these mainstream poets it was as if Robert Frost was the only modernist they read and they proceeded in the art as

if *Guernica* had never been painted. It is safe to say that these poets made no dent on the art of poetry except to move forth that in the art which stood against it.

But what if the practice of aesthetic disjunction is not enough to capture the injustices of our time? Why must narrative be handed over to “quiet” poets? After all, they don’t own narrative. And what if the drive to narrative by women and other people who have not had adequate representation in society is, in itself, a drive of aesthetic and political necessity? Narrative has the potential to give voice and shape to experience, to fully articulate the everyday life of capitalist labor, and can work to directly confront the master narratives by taking historically marginalized people, anonymous workers, both dead and living, and transforming them into the subject of an epic.

Master narratives are about keeping the powerless powerless and the powerful powerful. Master narratives tell us how and what to be, tell us who is important in society, what matters, what to pay attention to and so on. For mainstream society, celebrities, sports players, and politicians matter. Workers are replaceable, mere tools to create wealth. These disposable workers are not even worthy of health insurance or clean water. But what about the old drunk who lives down the street who never leaves her house and who lets you pick all her kumquats in the winter? What is her life like? Everyday life, the little details, all the kumquats rotting on the lawn, the kumquat marmalade you make from her fruit, this is the spring of poetry and it is from this imaginative spring, from collecting the little bits of narrative and arranging them into a larger structure where a new story is told, that poetry is given a triple function: It is able to shape what life looks like, what it *can look like*, and destroy what life looks like by changing the consciousness of the reader so that she no longer looks at it the same way that she did before. Blake, “I must create a system or be enslaved by another man’s.” A political system that assigns a person’s worth in terms of exchange value is a system that poetry must fight vehemently against. This is what I meant when I wrote these lines from my poem “Spring Dirge”: “My poetry / is opposed to the world; / it is a performance against / ideology and honor / and the nation state”; and when “In a Poem for Landlords” I said that I don’t want my son to be “content” in the world, that I want him to “feel contempt for landlords.”

No, poetry is not autobiography or confession, nor is it testimony. I don’t like the word *testimony* because it is linked so deeply to the idea of legality and

powerlessness. To testify feels passive, assumes that there is an ultimate judge who decides one's fate. Wouldn't the poet have contempt for such a position where power is displaced onto a metaphorical judge? Wouldn't the poet reject that power structure from the beginning? Alain Badiou says, "The poem is a gift of the poet to language. But this gift, like language itself, is destined to the common – that is, to this anonymous point where what matters is not one person in particular but all, in the singular." So, I start my poems with the singular, the particulars, the kumquats and rent check, the nail polish and car parked in the middle of the Tallahassee mall, and I move to the common, not because I think I matter so much, but because I matter in terms of the greater good. Our stories must be told so that we can keep our fidelity to what life can be, despite everything. There is no revolution without poetry.



Brian Shields, 2017, ink on paper, 24x18 inches

6.

BLACK PANTHER

TISA BRYANT

DOUGLAS KEARNEY

The Syncretic Hinge: A Conversation About the Film *Black Panther*

Tisa Bryant & Douglas Kearney

TB: In the opening scenes of *Black Panther*, I felt such a complex mix of emotions: pride, longing, wonder mixed with anger and a little despair for what isn't, while being reminded that this is a fiction. I still defaulted to a phenomenal thing that haunts Black cultural production, from within and without: the ways in which our fictions commingle with speculative realities that some of us hold near, while also having strong resonances in various fields: history, psychology, sociology, political science, and more. That deep wound between the diaspora and Africa has our attention because of a tension that is generative. And troubling. What I'm saying is that I'm still stunned by how much work our fictions do on behalf of our lived experiences and that desire to heal the rift. So in the opening scenes, when T'Challa is returning to Wakanda, and we see the pastoral African landscape, people running, waving fists, going about their daily business, yield to the technological splendor, without strife, poverty, struggle, something in me leaned forward and smiled. The fantasy of *Black Panther* is so soothing. And as I thought and felt all of this, T'Challa says, "This never gets old," as if anticipating this reaction or response, not just from me, but from Black audiences.

DK: Yes! T'Challa's wonder and pride felt like a moment of surrogacy for Black audiences. I find myself wanting to edit an interjection one instant before the line you quote, and say: "This *never had a chance* to get old." The sense of firstness—which we may nuance/problematicize later—keeps hitting me, as I wonder, what does it mean to take these kinds of representations for granted? White folks have been able to expect to see themselves as the hero in most popular genres of film, to the extent that popular media storylines of "firsts" highlight the films that break that programmatic casting. Think about how *Wonder Woman* gave the DC film universe a much needed boost, not only because it was a popular and critical success, but because they beat Marvel to a film with a woman as the lead, solo hero. *Black Panther* is not the first superhero film to feature a Black lead—remember Wesley Snipes' *Blade* franchise from the late 90s? Also, I am not dismissing accounts of historical and fictional Black heroism, nor the number and variety of originary narratives that exist throughout Black communities. But this film stands out as a primary example of the marquee-lit, powerful machine

of representation backed by tons of budget that is Major Motion Picture. Which is to say, white people, of course, can see themselves in this kind of context—the superhero—with such frequency, that *Black Panther* just makes me try to grok what it must be like to not have to invest so much emotional capital in a single film.

TB: Maybe I should give a synopsis?

DK: Go for it.

TB: *Black Panther*, released February 2018, is the first feature film of the Marvel Comics Universe (MCU) to star a nonwhite superhero. In it, T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman) ascends to the throne of king of Wakanda after a bombing at the U.N. resulted in the death of his father, T'Chaka. Wakanda is believed by the world to be an impoverished East African nation, but in truth it is technologically advanced and thriving, thanks to an ancient, glowing ultraviolet substance known as vibranium, found only in its lands and abundant, which gives Wakanda economic and military powers. The four tribes of Wakanda (and the Jabari, the unaligned fifth tribe), led by their king, have kept its wealth and abilities a secret from the world, participating in its affairs under the humblest of guises for centuries. In the recent past, T'Challa's teenage sister, Shuri, has developed technological prowess in medicine, transit, labor mechanization and self-defense, all of which helps keep Wakanda's true identity cloaked in the global and actual landscape. But because of a concealed past of ethical breaches and fratricide on the parts of T'Challa's father, King T'Chaka and his lieutenant-spy, Zuri, against Prince N'Jobu, T'Chaka's brother, T'Challa's ascendancy, and Wakanda itself, is challenged by Erik N'Jadaka "Killmonger" Stevens, a CIA-trained black ops war veteran from Oakland, hot with vengeance for his father N'Jobu's death, which left him orphaned, and driven to avenge and revolutionize all poor and oppressed African diasporic people ignored by Wakanda.

So....Emotional capital and sweat equity. I was stunned, moved, and a bit conflicted about the push, on the part of everyday people and celebrities around the world, to make sure African diasporic children got immersed in the *Black Panther* fiction. Lupita Nyong'o paid for 1200 school children who were studying drama to see the film in Kenya, and there were countless such moves around this country as well. Black Twitter was lit up with fundraisers and organizing to make sure that children who couldn't afford tickets to the movie could go. The only other entertainment event that was this epic and compulsory for Black people

in the U.S. was, to my memory, *Roots*. Provocative to think of *Black Panther* as a follow-up to *Roots*.

DK: (!!!) Whoa. Just for a moment, I will pause.

...

And I'm back. Back to your on-point point about the work the fiction, our fictions, must do, I am struck by how history, sociology, political science, etc. are often synthesized into Black aesthetics. Not, as some critics would have it, as mere didacticism (which, of course, is a great malediction against being told something you don't care to learn), but as a critical process of interpretation and analysis, combined with the wistfulness that accompanies the speculative. I watched *Black Panther* with the expectation of social comment *and* popcorn entertainment. The two were not mutually exclusive. But in that tension, the idea of a blockbuster movie as "escape" captures some of a contradiction. Escape is potential transcendence, right? But it requires a negative condition (or perception of one) to feel that frisson. *Black Panther*, I think, wouldn't have that compulsory quality you mentioned above if it didn't also make so many of the sociological and historical problematics—the Middle Passage, urban disenfranchisement, the diasporic wound, racism—such key aspects of its fiction. That the presence of these didn't, it seems, negate the "escape" aspects of a tentpole film is fascinating to me.

I mean, Oakland. Erik—N'Jadaka. That hurts each time. That will never get old either.

TB: Yes! Add to that Michael B. Jordan's face, reminding us of his previous role in *Fruitvale Station* as Oscar Grant, murdered by a transit cop on a BART station train platform, which evokes the very kind of situations in *Black Panther* that radicalized Erik's father, N'Jobu, to the point of stealing vibranium to use on behalf of Black liberation. The intertextuality of *Black Panther* with the Black Panther Party, and the histories of Black people, is staggering in that regard, no matter how flawed and therefore unsatisfying. What you're saying about escape makes *Black Panther* really complicated, as a Marvel vehicle, because the stakes are so different for African diasporic people, though I should be more honest and say African-Americans, than for any other narrative in the Marvel Universe thus far. I'm sure *Thor: Ragnarok* didn't evoke the kinds of think pieces and soul searching amongst Nordic folk that *Black Panther* did.

DK: Ha!

TB: When we escape into “what if,” those speculations are curative and critical, and yet, having just read Zora Neale Hurston’s finally published book, *Barracoon: The Story of the Last Black Cargo*, but not many WPA narratives of former enslaved folks, I know there are stories that many of us just don’t know exist. In *Barracoon*, for example, Cudjoe Lewis tells Hurston his story of being kidnapped from Africa at age 19 and illegally smuggled to South Carolina, where he and his fellow Africans *and their subsequent children* were harassed and ridiculed for being African by the creolized Black people there, who were creating a new culture and allegiance to the USA but were still without purchase to the franchise. This is the irony of Erik N’Jadaka “Killmonger” Stevens. So when we escape, sometimes we escape into an archive of possibility that isn’t entirely impossible. Do we think of Pan-Africanism as escapism? Or, are utopian ideals escapist? Or the desire to heal this wound, I should say, which isn’t utopian at all.

DK: What you wrote about Lewis reminds me of Stephanie Smallwood’s *Saltwater Slavery*, in which she describes a kind of “fresh-off-the-boat” status for Africans just arriving for sale in the Americas.

But, back to “escape”—I think it deepens as a multivalent critical term at the intersection between “entertainment” or “diversion” and Pan-Africanism/other historio-corrective ideals. For us. Into the briar I go! I think of Afrofuturism as often an emancipatory system of ordering. Not always. Certainly not in much of Octavia Butler, right? But it’s often about the people who could fly, or dance their way out of their constrictions, or go to space as a pleasant place. Then there’s fugitivity, a different escape schema. Riffing here, there are those who might argue that this Marvel flick was escapist without being fugitive—

TB: But the critique of Wakanda, from N’Jadaka’s POV, is of the fugitive *and* the derelict, the deadbeat.

DK: That is compelling! Makes me think of a joke that Patrice O’Neal (I think) once told when he was critiquing a certain kind of nonstalgia Afrocentricity. “Nonstalgia” is Thelma Golden and Christine Y. Kim’s coinage in discussing the *Frequency* Exhibition at the Studio Museum of Harlem. It means nostalgia for a time period one never experienced. O’Neal’s joke went something like, “I’m sick of people idealizing Africa. Fuck them, because over three hundred years, I didn’t see one canoe, one spear, nothing, trying to rescue us!”

TB: Ha!

DK: Wakanda as the fugitive—is there a critical distinction between escaping and ignoring? There’s a difference between a deadbeat dad you can take to court and an unknown father, right?

TB: Indeed. I would say that N’Jadaka’s view is the former, though the distinction between escape and ignore is very fine. To ignore, one escapes, denies or otherwise does not acknowledge the existence of or a responsibility to another person. This causes the conflict, right, between T’Chaka and N’Jobu, which becomes the inherited beef between T’Challa and N’Jadaka.

DK: Yet, if ignoring is an escape, it is escaping-in-place. Escape, I’d argue, suggests movement of the self, not a “removal” of someone else. A fine distinction, but I think a meaningful one. This conversation makes me imagine measures of “escape” in a critical Black aesthetics. A kind of taxonomic gamut ranging from “Escape” to “Liberatory” or some shit.

At any rate, I guess this all goes back to what I was saying about being an audience member, that the experience of *Black Panther* could be an escape while grappling with very real social issues that it doesn’t—and should not necessarily be expected to—solve. There is something about that that seems firmly in line with lots of Black aesthetic production—from Nina Simone to *Atlanta*. Yet, as you say, the complexity of escape as a concept applied in an overt relationship to power versus a context of entertainment might be in that the term doesn’t automatically suggest a social transformation, but an individual one. And if the social hasn’t transformed, then “escape” might be temporary. Viscerally so. I didn’t expect *Black Panther* to be a *liberatory* project—it isn’t a how-to on achieving Wakandanness. But, as the woman who married me, Nicole, says—it creates a space to dream in, from, and through.

That drops a pebble in a pond.

TB: What a ripple effect. You remind me of what filmmaker Cauleen Smith has repeatedly said to me when I try to assert Afrofuturism as a liberatory project: it’s not.

DK: Full stop. Ha!

TB: I know! Liberation is part of Afrofuturism, but not the whole. Cauleen reminds me that Afrofuturism's focus is on technology, movement, perhaps a freedom that can come from constant (re)invention. And that's where it's hard for me as a person and a viewer. I wanted what N'Jadaka wanted. Not his method, not striving for oppressor status (that trap of hegemony), but liberation. But I also wanted what T'Challa and the Wakandan leadership sought to preserve: sovereignty. And the part of it that is never discussed: privacy. Neither, though, can skirt responsibility, ethics, without consequence.

DK: Strange, I feel less ambivalent about constant movement than constant (re)invention. The latter keeps us in a loop of production. Making either new things to be consumed or new selves to be consumed. It seems a bit like Sianne Ngai's formulation of "the Zany." Movement doesn't require purposefulness or a person to view/receive it. I want to talk more about "privacy." That's that shit! Wakandans never get exhibited. Well, the bit of vibranium that Klaue steals is like a wardrobe malfunction of the holographic mountainscape that conceals Wakanda from prying eyes. The vibranium (in its phallus-like shape) reveals Wakanda, and does so as a synecdoche of what makes their Wakandanness possible. It's clear that Klaue thinks so. And the Wakandans themselves believe their tech and knowledge is based on this material. I believe it's why, in the Wakandan origin story, the Panther goddess, Bast, tells the five tribes of Wakanda to unite. Notably, the Jabari tribe stands apart from the four other post-vibranium tribes, eschewing vibranium for wood—check the decorations in the throne room. Side note, do we see Jabari women at all?

TB: We see Jabari women in the big fight scene at the end, but not before. But we *do* see the Dora Milaje, the deadly all-woman army which is the first line of defense for the royal family of Wakanda, headed up (and that's a lovely pun) by General Okoye, played by Danai Gurira (of *Walking Dead* fame). All these women are tall, bald, gorgeous, spear-wielding, gravity-defying martial artists.

DK: They're like if you mixed the Secret Service with Navy SEALs!

TB: Ha! The Dora Milaje honor Black women's strength, talent and beauty in an African context within the Marvel Universe, which is no small thing. Most recently, prior to them, we got Tessa Thompson as a lone Black Valkyrie in *Thor: Ragnarock*, with no counterpart nor kin to speak of.

Okoye, like the spy Nakia (played by Lupita Nyong'o), is three-dimensional, duty-

bound, ethical, and hilarious. Her snark against Western beauty's inanities was so thrilling, but the gravitas was in the conversation she has with Nakia about the differences in their roles and the expression of their allegiances. When N'Jadaka takes the Black Panther throne, Nakia's instinct is to flee, but Okoye hisses at her contemptuously, "I am not a *spy*. I do not come and go as I please. I am loyal to that throne no matter who is in it." Though they are both Wakandan, their exchange plays out a part of the larger concern about nation and identity, homeland and diaspora, rootedness and movement. That was a brief but riveting moment.

I see constant movement and constant (re)invention as working together, and perhaps my use of "(re)" is the problem, because invention is constant in the African diaspora (perhaps more than reinvention, a changing same), which creates movement and space for possibility and new expression. Until non-Black people catch up, which *is happening* faster and faster in this Internet world, which in turn fuels my concern and need for Black privacy. If anything, Black culture is so inventive and moves so fast that it has the effect of turning coal dust into diamonds by the heat of our flight. I recognize the need to not lament our apparent abandonment of forms we've created. It's recombinant material. Jazz. Blues. Hip Hop. The drumming, strumming rhythms from rivers we know from rivers we've never seen. But I also want to say that Wakandans wear the mask. They allow for the exhibit of the Unicef African, rather than their true selves. What we don't see or know, though, because this is about superheroes, is how ordinary everyday Wakandans think, feel, about vibranium, how it is the source of *their* Wakandanness. How does it power their lives? So back to those opening scenes: they're layered with class, or at least that thing that divides the rural from the urban, and seems to indicate, or rely on a connotation, of hierarchized knowing and relation to vibranium and Wakandan identity.

DK: This is certainly where the fiction of Wakandan life asserts itself pragmatically—we can imagine that the five tribes are each existing "how they'd like"—that the Border Tribe prefers being rural and the Mining Tribe loves having a closer connection to vibranium. The suggestion of affinity for one's social role is a fiction that many actual societies insist upon, but in Wakanda, there is no other reality until, say, we need a plot point in some later story (one already exists in the comic, I believe). In the film, the Border Tribe doesn't resent not being in the city; if anything, they resent not expanding their borders.

There's a book, *The Art of Black Panther*, that has some insight on the tribes and some of their hierarchies. The Merchant Tribe, for example, is often literally

masked, which speaks to something of their daily lives and the relationship between Wakandans when it comes to the movement of capital. I wonder, also, with a renewable resource like Black creati—I mean—vibranium, whether class is more about role than money. I am reminded of something I read about the Yoruba orisha of iron, Ogun, who is associated with marginal figures like cab drivers and people who prepare the dead for rest. This is class in a relation to social capital, not necessarily fiscal. I am also curious as to how much the Wakandan citizenry know about the rest of the world. Or is that knowledge held for the leadership alone?

This line of curiosity reminds me of your opening remarks, which is to say: do we wonder these things as a means of imagining a fuller fiction, or because we seek a documentary perspective? That durn sociology coming in.

TB: Maybe both, though my asking is as much from a desire for more immersion and detail of the world of Wakanda.

DK: Which is the title of another Marvel comics series!

I like what you're saying about privacy and how most of the audience is *working with* the film. I want to get more into that working with. Like how "Wakanda Forever" is something at least members of my family say when dealing with moments of Black pride.

TB: Yes! It's amazing and sometimes a bit disturbing how "Wakanda Forever" is analogous to raising a fist. Now, it's arms crossed over the chest, that bounce. I heard tell of a public event focused on Black artists. During the Q&A, a woman started whitesplaining and one of the hosts barked like a Jabari until the woman stopped talking.

DK: BWAHHAH!!!!

Is "Wakanda forever" and, by extension, Wakanda, itself, syncretic?

TB: Oooh. I was about to say, "Should we even reveal?" Privacy! But then I was also about to say, "Isn't the doubling obvious?" It was a big part of what I savored in watching the film. A coded system of communication that was *for me*. For this reason (and much more) it's important to give props to what Ryan Coogler was able to do with *Black Panther*, both the character and the film, vis-a-vis some of what Ta'Nehisi Coates was able to do in the comic. "Able," i.e.,

“allowed.” So he, they, had to be slick. What’s embedded within the film points to so much more outside the frame, which is why the discourse on *Black Panther* went so far and so deep so fast. In the opening originary tale of Wakanda, the narrator (T’Challa’s father?) uses the phrase “hiding in plain sight.”

DK: You KNOW that praxis is on so many of my syllabi.

Coogler definitely gets props—it’s what he does with something he didn’t first make that I think the term can amplify.

TB: YES.

DK: But also, I have to remind myself that Coates and Coogler didn’t *reimagine* Black Panther as a badass. When he was first introduced in the comics decades back, he was single-handedly the equal to the Fantastic Four—both in combat and intelligence. Coates and Coogler’s coding you just described is syncretic work, itself, even before an audience’s usage of it. I was thinking of syncretism because Black Panther is a character created by folks who aren’t Black. And Wakanda—even as a fiction—is not in the U.S. and, judging by the opening narrative, would account for very few, if any, captives on the Middle Passage. Syncretism is disidentificatory at the same time as it is a kind of remixing, thus the complexity of claiming Wakanda as an instance of diasporic pride requires grappling with Wakandan attitudes toward that same diaspora—and the rest of Africa itself.

TB: Right. For Coogler and Coates, I’m meaning code not about Black Panther’s abilities, but their ability to talk to Black audiences across generations *through* him. So I’m just nodding agreement with the Nicole, the woman who married you.

DK: Ah. Right.

TB: In the syncretic mix, I wonder here if it’s high time to parse the Erik-Killmonger-N’Jadaka identities, as we’ve been using each name in particular contexts or for political or emotional reasons. My take: Erik is the boy of Oakland. Killmonger is the vengeful black ops veteran villain made in part by the CIA. N’Jadaka is the Wakandan revolutionary, like his father, who seeks to make Wakanda accountable to the African diaspora, and to use vibranium to liberate them. What’s your take on Erik-Killmonger-

N'Jakada's prismatic self?

DK: Dag. True, we are playing a bit of a shell game with his name. How you are analyzing it makes sense to me. It could be interesting to think of "Erik" as an assimilated name, but it's also an alias—he is a noble from a super powerful country, in hiding. He is Akeem from *Coming to America* gone mad wrong/mad real. His mama called him "Erik," I'ma call him...

Also, in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), the trope is that the heroes generally refer to each other by their names, not their code-names. The CIA (through other operatives) replaced Erik's assumed surname with "Killmonger." It's a supervillain name and a codename on top of a codename. An alias turducken! Does he ever call himself that?

TB: No, he points to his body and the marks of his kills, but I don't recall him ever calling himself that. Or even Klaue addressing him that way.

DK: Nope. I think it's just Ross and the Wakandans. I would, if it weren't important to document the fluidity of our usage, suggest going back and changing all references to him to read N'Jadaka. It is his name and, for him I think, his real key to Wakanda—and, as for many diasporic people, an "African" name is a path to a truer self.

TB: Beautifully put. I also have no memory of him ever introducing himself at all. Shuri tells him his name in Wakanda, reciting his CIA docket. But when he states his name before the big challenge to the throne, he says he is N'Jadaka. In this and in so many other ways, the film is syncretic, in much the way (though the term might not be appropriate) that *Get Out* is, though that's debatable, as some folks thought the film was talking more to white people than to Black, but there was definitely a deep code to it, and I think there is a deep code to *Black Panther*, about political histories and sociocultural affinities and dissonances as to the coded inventiveness of spiritual practice that syncretism usually engages. So perhaps here, our idea of the syncretic hinges on how *Black Panther* affirms centuries of creativity, innovation and knowledge production between Africa and its diaspora, and how the film itself uses that knowledge as recombinant material for new Africana aesthetic, political and social praxis in a continuum, creating new signs, symbols, references and language, on the continent and elsewhere, in the process.

DK: I agree. I appreciate the depth of that code, even in this hypervisible film. I appreciate what it tells studios about what “the market will bear,” and—spoiler within a spoiler alert alert—a lesson they learned, I think: Wakanda is under threat in *The Avengers: Infinity War*, but the city itself doesn’t get hit. Unlike the other cities in the MCU. But I don’t want to leave this film, yet.

TB: I haven’t seen *Infinity War*! But I am relieved rather than salty about this tiny spoiler, because my cynical ass was sure that Wakanda was going to be a site of expropriation and destruction as soon as T’Challa, Nakia, et al. went to that UN press conference and announced they’re going to share their incredibly dope and until now secret technologies. I *really* didn’t want them to do that. So this is interesting, in terms of the MCU, analogous/syncretic stories versus alternatives or revisions. Check Stan Lee at the roulette table in the Korean casino, raking Black Panther’s winnings over to himself, saying “I’ll just take this over here for safekeeping.” They are not going to mess with that schmoney.

DK: The reveal, the making available. If we’re talking about syncretism, we are in the realm of appropriation—though Marvel hiring Coogler to write a script based on an established Marvel intellectual property is something different. The anxiety I feel and perhaps I am echoing something in your disappointment in Wakanda going public, is that along with maintaining privacy, Wakanda resisted a particular kind of appropriation. This was what made Klaue and, for that matter, N’Jobu’s transgressions so visceral. If vibranium is only found in Wakanda, and the Wakandans valued it as a commodity, even as it had a spiritual valence, then its theft is both a stand in for colonialism’s material pillaging and cultural appropriation.

Wakanda knows how much what it makes means for the global economy. Letting everybody see behind the mask is perhaps the least African American (diasporic?) act of the film. Which is potentially fucked up, as we could view T’Challa’s decision as (smugly for us) naivete or (covetous for us) confidence in their sovereignty, which ultimately is their ability to defend themselves against appropriation and exploitation. We might hope that their military resources will guarantee this, though it is likely that at some point—under the logic of the Accords introduced in *Captain America: Civil War*—The Avengers could be assembled by world powers to deal with “The Wakanda Problem.”

TB: Given what we know of the state of affairs in post-colonial Black Africa, it will be interesting, then, to see what kind of escape Wakanda actually is, once

the *Black Panther* film franchise builds out. It seems the storyline plays into the history of the victor thus far, rather than into speculative futures from alternative past paths. “The Wakanda Problem.” And emotional capital. I’m thinking about this right now as if there were real-world implications. SMH.

DK: But that goes back to your opening point, doesn’t it? That culturally, we work with and (in the spirit of critical prepositions) work *through* the stories. It’s why escape, in the sense of a Hollywood popcorn flick, doesn’t seem desirable to me as a sole mode for enjoying a film. If comic books can be myths and comic book films can be so as well, they have some real world implications or, at least, resonances. Klaue, despite all he knew about Wakanda’s technological advances, still referred to the people as savages. What is interesting to me about this is that Klaue (whom Andy Serkis plays as an Afrikaan) is speaking doubly here—there is the racist usage of savage, but also a note about the harshness of Wakandan justice in tension with their technological advancement. The Wakandans branded him on the neck after they caught him stealing vibranium. The brand means “Thief” (see *The Avengers: Age of Ultron*). In this way, “savage” is not simply a means of describing an absence of technological knowledge, but a way of pointing out an instrumentalization of violence. So, um, US American law enforcement? Howdy.

TB: Right! There’s something between Killmonger and Klaue, too, in the marking of their skins and villainy. Racism as an instrumentalization of violence, also, in how Klaue calls the Wakandans “savages,” as how dare they be smarter and have advanced technologies out of his reach, and brand him as punishment for trying to steal it. Mines of diam- I mean vibranium.

DK: “...back to reality.”

TB: Can’t really escape it. And speaking of which, what about T’Challa’s move to buy the building in Oakland where his father killed his own brother for betraying Wakanda, to turn that site of fratricide into a tech center for the youth. That was...wow.

DK: I feel the “wow,” but illuminate me.

TB: On the one hand, I got it, as part of this “right thing to do” trajectory that might go horribly wrong, but it also seemed so capitalist and western an approach that I felt unsatisfied by it. Very pat. Not particularly Wakandan, though I

can't say I gleaned much about their philosophy in this regard. It smacked of the fraught politics of gentrification also, as though issues of class, education, wealth, are more easily smoothed by of-color capitalism rather than challenging capitalism itself. Is Wakanda a capitalist nation? That's not how I understood their infrastructure.

DK: I am summoning my geek knowledge on this. I'm still not sure whether the Merchant Tribe is about manufacturing or pecuniary functions. In the market scene of the film, people are shopping, but I don't think any currency changes hands. Unlike, say, Zamunda, where currency is a way of identifying the rulers —

TB: Zamunda being the mythical African nation in the film *Coming to America*.

DK: Right. Or OutKast's Stankonia, which may or may not also be capitalist.

TB: And this is where we are with "purchase in the franchise," and having a country. Buying land. Hoping it's not taken away. While still not being full citizens. So Wakanda comes in, with a national identity that Black Americans can never claim, and awe-inspiring resources that Black Americans will never control, and...hmmm. This is where vibranium as metonym for Black cultural production falls apart. The fantasy is that with the arrival of the Wakandans, African diasporic people will pull their bottom lips down and see the glow, that they already had it, bore the trace. Better than sickle cell. Stronger than *Roots*.

DK: Damn. That was a mic drop.

TB: Ha! I'm realizing here that unlike writer Amanda Choo Quan's (and so many others') question, "Where's our Wakanda," my question is two-fold: "What's our vibranium, and how do we hide it?" LOL. Privacy again. And again, Which again is why the sharing of this resource with the world in an uncomplicated, seemingly naive and non-syncretic way is so tough. Perhaps the Wakandans will only share the *mask* of vibranium, its surface power. Could we be said to do the same, in reality, as African diasporic people. Below the surface of appropriable Black cultural production is something else, and that something else isn't just "the burden." What is it?

DK: I think that gets at the confluence of T'Chaka, N'Jobu, N'Jadaka, Nakia, and T'Challa's thoughts about a Wakandan global policy. For N'Jobu, ruling

the world “the right way” is ultimately an enculturating move. If the Wakandans under N’Jobu’s program took over (through military might, if necessary), eventually, the rest of us would understand Wakandan ways as we might have pre-racism, a cultural path without a necessary phenotypical connection. I think this presumes that Wakandan ways are correct, but leaves the possibility open for *anyone* to learn them with respect, recognize their origin, and perpetuate them whether or not they have Wakandan ancestry.

N’Jadaka engaged questions of Wakandan international presence with a personal knowledge of U.S. American racism, which is to say, he reckoned that if you allow white people any weapon, they will use it to destroy Black or brown people.

TB: With the irony being he became that very weapon for the CIA. It’s a trip that we never get any sense of N’Jadaka’s sleeper cells, who these people are, etc., but it seemed clear that if you weren’t down with the revolution, he’d kill you.

DK: Indeed. He even emphasized that he killed Africans— “[his] own brothers and sisters”—to get to T’Challa, so he could challenge and kill him for the Wakandan crown and his global policy. Also, as you wisely admonished regarding Coogler and syncretism, N’Jadaka had more influence, I’d argue, on T’Challa’s decision than Ross did.

TB: This illustrates how Killmonger adheres to the annoying boilerplate profile of screwy villain: angry family member. This also points to the complexity of people like Bobby Seale and Geronimo Pratt, both members of the Black Panther Party in Oakland and Los Angeles, respectively, who were veterans (and the aftermath, Black gangs in the vacuum of leadership post-BPP, as detailed in former Crip Cle “Bone” Sloan’s documentary, *Bastards of the Party*). Speculative ethnology, indeed. In the fictional cinematic intertext, I’m thinking of Ivan Dixon’s 1973 film, *The Spook Who Sat By the Door*, in which the first Black man to join the CIA uses all he learns to foment a revolution among Black people in Chicago, a storyline in direct conversation with *Black Panther’s* socio-political moment.

DK: Yes! I read *The Spook Who Sat By the Door*, the novel upon which the film was adapted—the author, Sam Greenlee, was a co-screenwriter—but never saw the film. On the subject of spies: Nakia, a Wakandan espionage operative and

one-time romantic partner to T'Challa, wants direct intervention throughout the continent. It is unclear whether she would limit such activities to Africa, but she is a covert international presence in a way that even N'Jobu and the other “war dogs” (deep-cover Wakandans gathering intelligence throughout the world) are not, in that she has mobility and autonomy.

TB: Right! (Though the fact that the deep-cover war dogs are Wakandan escaped me, because, in N'Jadaka's context and call to them, we never see them or understand they're anything but diasporic.) And it seems, though it's not made explicit save by Wakanda's isolationism, that this friction between Nakia and T'Challa—her missions and Wakanda's cloaked rather than overt powers on African soil — is why they broke up, though they're clearly in love. T'Challa helps her in her mission to free kidnapped women, which definitely has Boko Haram overtones, so that she can attend the ceremony for his ascendency to king and Black Panther.

DK: Boom. Though she would say T'Challa “interferes” in her mission.

TB: True! She was salty about that. But throughout the film, her continuing her missions is a condition of any future coupledness for them. I like her feminism and her own brand of superhero prowess, enhanced, it seems, by nothing but her training (by whom?), her convictions and her will, and, of course, a little vibranium. I'm also curious about her complete lack of parents, siblings or other kin in the film; is the leader of the River Tribe (played by Isaach de Bankole) supposed to be her father? It seemed she was parentless. Is this what makes her free enough to do her spy missions? Her support of making Wakanda public is surprisingly uncomplicated, though. The world of the film did not care about the women she rescued; her missions stand in for much that our actual world ignores. But support T'Challa she does, though without an utterance for how it benefits her work on behalf of Black African women. As long as she can do it, she's good. He wants her bad enough, and wants to do the right thing enough, to make her an equal partner and integrates her missions into the Wakandan ethic.

DK: Nakia's ethos is also anti-isolationist. More or just as compelling as N'Jadaka's influence, for real.

TB: But also it complicates what T'Challa's father had his brother doing in the U.S. What was he placed there *for*? So, anti-isolationist, but also anti-Western?

DK: I don't think he was anti-isolationist. He was keeping tabs on people to help Wakanda, not the world. N'Jobu was essentially a war dog. As far as I can tell, the war dogs exclusively protect Wakandan interests. T'Chaka confronts N'Jobu *because* he is thinking globally, placing the diaspora's interests ahead of Wakanda's.

Like N'Jobu's, T'Challa's move to make Wakanda public is cultural—he'll share knowledge and not just the material. Otherwise, he'd have to police every kid that went into that Oakland tech center. He is being a positivist (again, like N'Jobu—the world will rationally understand why our knowledge regarding vibranium should be the authoritative knowledge), but he also must have trust in his weapons, the Dora Milaje, the Border Tribe, the Jabari, and—most dangerously, perhaps—the enhanced “colonizers” he has assisted over the course of several films.

TB: So has N'Jadaka subverted the use of “war dog”? I'm confused about this bit; did he radicalize existing war dogs without the Wakandans knowing? Did he shift a tradition? There's more beyond the frame of the film than it accounts for within it, it seems.

DK: I *think* he takes control over most of the war dogs—he first calls them “spies”—as a part of his kingship, not before. After his plan for distributing Wakandan weapons is in motion, it seems most war dogs resist, but those secreted in a few major cities are standing by. So, yeah, there's a lot that happens out of frame and perhaps not all by way of the MCU's narrative web.

I think this is a film that hinges, ultimately, on how tradition is observed and maintained. N'Jobu breaks that tradition when he plans to sell vibranium. T'Challa's father kills his brother and doesn't bury him. Issues around burial play as at least somewhat diasporically significant (see Erik's speech about burial in his last scene), yet are explicitly important to Wakandans, dramatized as the path to the spirit world in the ritual that accompanies assumption of the throne. Thus, T'Chaka's fratricide without burial would have left young Erik without the patrilineal link to a tradition (he didn't know at the moment what N'Jobu had taught him) that Wakandans prize, were it not for Erik's knowledge of how to push the buttons of W'Kabi (the vengeance-hungry Border Tribe leader played by *Get Out's* Daniel Kaluuya), the same knowledge that allowed him to challenge T'Challa for the throne and disrupt a court for which some traditions seemed to have atrophied into formalities. T'Challa must ultimately face down

his spectral ancestors, who stand in and for tradition, in order to move Wakanda into world affairs. I should go back to see how the Queen Mother discussed the external world.

TB: I don't think she did. I might be wrong, but she wasn't the most compelling character. The most cliché of all, save for this trope of the spurned and vengeful relative that Erik is beholden to (at least in this context, unlike the shoe-horning of this trope in other Marvel movies, this approach works). But your points about tradition hinging this film are very important. I think of the journal N'Jobu left for Erik, with the ring indicating his royal lineage, how N'Jobu may have instructed Erik as an ancestor, albeit disconnected from the afterlife that perhaps being properly buried in Wakanda would have afforded him. We never see what the text says, but we can infer that N'Jobu is telling him as much as he can about Wakandan culture, ritual, and life. How else does he know that he has a chance at the throne? Maybe this also fills the plot hole for Erik's knowledge of how to push W'Kabi's buttons re: Klaue. The rest of whatever N'Jobu imparts from beyond is perhaps obscured by Erik's rage and revenge.

DK: And his sorrow. In their scene on the Ancestral Plain, it's telling that he changes from being the child Erik to the adult Killmonger when N'Jobu says—"Well, look at what I've done." This is the mirror image of T'Chaka admonishing his son's grief, saying a father is responsible for preparing children for his own death—that to fail in that is tantamount to not being a real father. N'Jobu sees his culpability in his son's anger and isolation. His son's, as he puts it, lostness. His inability to prepare Erik before he died seems un-Wakandan, not simply in that it doesn't meet the traditional expectation, but because of his death's suddenness. Its senselessness. Yet "random" mortality in Oakland is punctuated by young Erik in that scene. Who says: "Everybody dies. It's just life around here." In the film's narrative, N'Jobu's death seems particularly tragic because of that un-Wakandanness. It's as upside down as the throne room when Erik becomes king. We don't know why T'Chaka would place Zuri's life over his brother's, why he would kill one to protect the other. But fratricide is compounded by the royal blood spilled. In the final exchange between N'Jadaka and N'Jobu on the ancestral plane, N'Jadaka is almost tender—he says the Wakandans may be the lost ones, because they didn't come to find "us"—which, I take to mean the African diaspora.

TB: Mic drop! The hinge of tradition; possibility opens and closes on that door. There were a number of holes in the plot, and Zuri's is one, but might we

surmise that given N’Jobu’s betrayal in T’Chaka’s eyes, T’Chaka wouldn’t let N’Jobu kill Zuri, as if Zuri had done something wrong in betraying N’Jobu? This is a deadly triangle; in every direction, there’s a breach of tradition.

The hinge of tradition also has a cinematic dimension, as Black directors (and showrunners) often reach back and give props to earlier generations of actors, and our cosmology of theatre and filmmaking practice, vis-à-vis casting. If you don’t frequent the theater, particularly Black theater, there are legions of actors you’ll just never see until a director or showrunner taps them. It’s how we take care of our own. I loved seeing Isaach de Bankole as the leader of the River Tribe. He’s been a mainstay in indie films from Jim Jarmusch and Claire Denis. I will say here that it was odd not to give de Bankole many lines, since he is from Côte d’Ivoire, and could have added to the polyglot Africanness of Wakanda (which mirrors that of New World Africans at the advent of the Atlantic slave trade). On that note, John Kani’s casting paid homage to South African theater and film in the same way, along with other actors in the cast whose presence resonated for global viewers in ways that may have escaped African-American audiences.

We can consider here, too, how Shuri’s role must break with tradition, given Jabari tribe leader M’Baku’s rage and incredulity that the technology and defense of the nation are, in his words, “in the hands of a child.” Shuri is without peer in her role. Wakanda’s most impressive technological advances seem to have come from her, without mentor or predecessor. She takes that already-abandoned term “digital native” and turns it all kinds of ways. The film gives no sense of what Wakanda was before Shuri, who is supposed to be 16. She can repair a fractured spine, design T’Challa’s Black Panther suit, weapons and car, program the vibranium powered world of Wakanda. She keeps it all humming with her wiry tomboy charm and inexhaustible commitment to innovating the future into being. I like what she lends the film, in energy, humor and sneakerhead aesthetics. She is the first Black girl wonder of comic book films.

DK: Word. Shuri’s attitude perhaps jibes with what you said earlier about Cauleen’s take on Afrofuturism. As you say, she constantly reinvents—making improvements on the tech that came before. It’s a dicta of self-improvement through change, making her yet another influence on the king’s new direction.

TB: Which is and isn’t towards sharing resources with the world. Shuri’s quip, “Another broken white boy,” when Ross was brought to her for surgery, made

me squelch the feeling that she was put in the [sole?] position of tech mammy, but that feeling seeped out despite my efforts, along with the very impulsive “she only likes white boys” thought that accompanied it. A suspicion that my girl protested too loudly about “colonizers” and such, based on the way she flirts with the White Wolf (Winter Soldier) during the “Easter egg” scene embedded in the film credits.

DK: I think she also likes broken things. Problems to solve. And improve.

TB: Ah. I’m wondering here if Shuri has a Black counterpart somewhere...or is beholden to the “engineered scarcity” of our world, for Black professionals. I call it “engineered scarcity” because I am thinking about exceptionalism and isolation for educated Black people, especially in fields like tech, that engineers a sense of scarcity, that promotes the idea that there’s no one on her level in any way in the African diaspora. I like what you said about her liking broken things and people, though. She is a problem solver. Really enjoys that. You’re right.

DK: I think here of a scene in *The Avengers: Infinity War* when Okoye (general of the Dora Milaje) remarks that she had thought opening Wakanda up to the world would have resulted maybe in a Starbucks or two. Of course, that was written before the highly publicized racist incident in a Philadelphia Starbuck’s (May 2018).

TB: Speechless.

DK: I wonder whether Wakandans would have a brand for “racist”....

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REVIEWS

Amaranth Borsuk
 Andrew Joron
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 Lindsay Turner
 Adrienne Raphel
 Calvin Bedient

GHOST OF, by Diana Khoi Nguyen. (Omnidawn, 2018)

Reviewed by Amaranth Borsuk

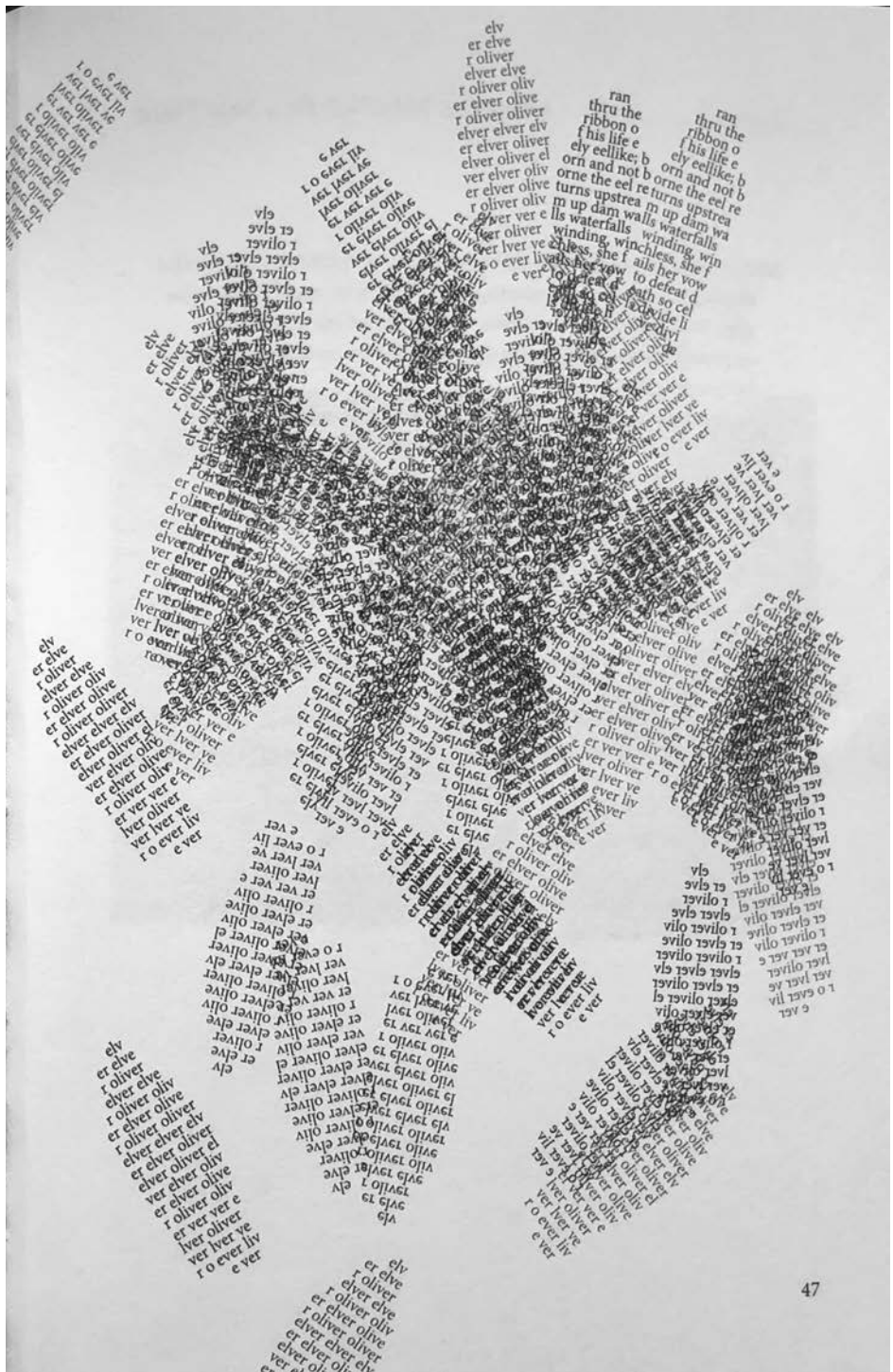
Though the same platitudes arise whenever someone loses a loved one, anyone who has experienced death knows each grief is unique and requires of us new forms in which to grapple with loss, mortality, and the deeper traumas unearthed by the confluence of these wounds. In her haunting and visually inventive debut collection *Ghost of*, Diana Khoi Nguyen invents such forms to contain the uncontainable and to fill the irremediable gaps left by suicide. Like the flowers in the work's opening poem, "A Bird in Chile, and Elsewhere," these are poems

that keep secreting pollen even after the petals have gone.
 Like a flower that grows only in the invisible
 the whole world of its body noiselessly shaking against the dust. (13)

This opening image recurs throughout the book: a "noiseless" emptiness where the body once blossomed—a space the survivor fills with pollen that can never

hope to bear fruit. From the very cover, with its tender image of a shadow, emanating from a pair of empty house sandals, cast across a tennis court, Nguyen parries with Frost's injunction against free verse — as ludicrous as “playing tennis without a net” — by weaving new nets, new rules, new verse forms through which to approach the ghosts of both her brother Oliver's suicide and the lasting legacy of the Vietnam War on her family. The year before he killed himself, Nguyen's younger brother carefully excised himself from each photograph hanging in the hall of the family's Southern California home then slid the pictures back into their frames, presaging a departure that would be no less painful or shocking. In a series of poems titled “Triptych,” Nguyen peers into those gaps, writing into and around the spaces he left behind. She presents these photographs first as eerie double exposures in which each figure, window, and tree is blurred and the negative space of Oliver's absence stands out starkly. She then writes into that space on the subsequent page, crafting poems shaped so closely to the contours of his x-acto-sharp frame that words break themselves uncomfortably across each enjambed line. And finally, she continues on the third page, a prose spill that fills the rectangle of the image in text, leaving the body's absence intact as if holding space for it, acknowledging the removal. The deeply affecting technique of breaking language first within then across these gaps enacts the hesitation and tentative groping toward answers death, especially suicide, draws out of us.

These excavated photos serve as a metaphor for the way grief makes of survivors a haunted house. As Nguyen writes in “An Empty House Is A Debt,” “I reach inside my empty house: as far as I'm allowed to go. / I reach outside my empty house: as far as I'm allowed to go.” Grief, like water, flows both around and within us, and so these poems present both what is caught and what flows through the net. In addition to imagining her way into the gaps, Nguyen invents a form she calls “Gyotaku,” for the Japanese tradition of printmaking from fish, making of Oliver, anagrammatically, an “elver,” swimming with and against the current of family toward a future only he can see. As relief prints, no two gyotaku of the same fish are identical, and in Nguyen's hands, the form honors this variation, offering first an excavated photo with a poem formed in the shape of Oliver's excision, and on the facing page a series of prints from that inked positive, overlapping, inverse, and gradually lightening as the ink runs dry. They look at times like schools of fish, like a single long eel, or like a contrapposto form, as classically beautiful in silhouette as it is devastating within the white space of the photo from which it is hewn.



While these visual poems strike at the reader's heart and open up our understanding of loss, the collection gestures beyond them in a series of lyrics that remind us that grief does not occur in isolation—it is part of a wider net of trauma cast by the Vietnam War, which her parents survived, and which marks not only their sense of self, but their children's identities as well. As she explains in "The Exodus":

Before my brother was born, all four of us
slept beside one another in one bed.
In an effort to resist memory,
my mother asked me to shake her awake (34)

The nightmares of the things her mother had to do to survive after the fall of Saigon form another absence, another set of gaps filled both by imagination and reportage. Even when passed from one family member to another, the horrors of war can never be fully seen, understood, or known. They inhabit us, both as bad as and worse than what we imagine, and we are marked by the trauma that is both inherited and not our own. Ultimately, *Ghost of* suggests, a lost brother, like the wartime traumas embedded within our very DNA, is not in the gaps he left behind at all, but in the space surrounding it: in the survivors themselves, the walls of the house, everything that remains in the photos. As Nguyen writes in the final triptych, shaped like three circular portraits of the siblings with an empty frame for Oliver, "I play / the first part then you are silent I s/ound and silent you are part of / the whole and all around it; sma//l, I am growing and wi//ll fill in for you, fill you in u/ntil the end" (77). Brutal and beautiful, *Ghost of* reverses erasure in reverberant images and language that, in turn, haunt its reader.

BODY & GLASS, by Rodney Koeneké. (Wave Books, 2018)

Reviewed by Andrew Joron

“The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.” That’s a good line, one of Marx’s best. Written in the mid-nineteenth century, it hasn’t lost any of its poetry, even though, inevitably, it too has found its place in the tradition of dead generations. By the mid-twentieth century, it was clear that something had happened to the relation between history and culture: the past had become weightless, rendered irrelevant and inaccessible behind the screen of the media spectacle. We’re all in freefall now, awash in a kind of cultural spacetime foam, a confetti of information bits. Not that our present condition, floaty and postmodern as it is, has become any less nightmarish. It turns out that the erasure of history induces a new and even more disorienting type of nightmare.

I find in Rodney Koeneké’s poetry a kind of reinscription of history, but not in the manner of the New Formalists or any other reactionary turning back to tradition. It’s something more like the cadence of a half-remembered song filtering back into the flow of lived experience. Technologized and commodified as that experience has become, our bodies and our language—the indispensable conductors of that experience—are still liable to manifest symptoms of a return of repressed history. In Koeneké’s case, the default irony of most recent avant-garde poetics—so necessary, it seems, for coming to terms with the floatiness of our condition—is undermined by the Undermind of an undead tradition whose word-weights and word-motions still pull toward something rather than nothing.

The gravities in Koeneké’s work, beyond the way it situates the subject—ruefully and wryly, rather than ironically, for the most part—in a landscape of “damage and uplift,” are felt most strongly in rhythms that mime, and sometimes achieve, defined meter, and in the deployment of a vocabulary, ornate and bookish, whose rarities invoke a world beyond price, beyond commodification. There’s no justice in that world either, but its very alterity, rich with depths and shadows, provides a telling contrast with the flat screens of our present life:

Tarnish the coppice, punk autumn
Kick smug green down from the trees.
Kings die like we die, kings
are just bumps on furzed glebes.
See how the fallen enjoy
being beaten, look at the bishop
sit there and twist his gemmed rings.

It's hard to miss the iambic drive of these lines, and most readers will have to google at least a couple of the words here. This ordonnance of rich rhythm and word-choice holds true for much of this collection. The content that comes alive within this framework is often personal, but that personhood is already a highly fashioned interiority, caught not uncomfortably in a zone where "dreams are glad but clouded."

I made myself accept the day's obeisance,
Made blouses from the swatches close at hand.
Adored gandharvas, complaisantly spinning,
Spin beyond my thinking or my theme.
The given chose to spread its awesome colors—
I took them like the candy from a hand.

This stanza, taken from the book's final poem, could almost function as an *ars poetica*, indicative of at once an artisanal labor process and a gift economy, both operating at a remove from our mass-produced reality. It's not hard to imagine the later Ashbery working, albeit more carelessly, in the same room.

Koeneke's work, then, takes its shape from a cornucopia of past prosodies, rhetorics, word-inventories—the shape, in other words, of history (one of the poems in this collection is entitled "the shape of russian literature"), whose artifacts are disjoined and reassembled into new and often poignant patterns of

coherence. In the process, even doubt moves confidently toward its expression here, even melancholy is happy to find the words it needs falling perfectly into place.

Suffering is not not being happy—
Lost stamps to the night's philatelist,
Wishes' places fixed in Prussian blue.

The poet possesses all the good humor of a fairground puppetmaster pulling the strings of meaning, practicing the subtle and sublimated comedies of "Ur-words meeting Ur-things." There's a modest self-consciousness at play in Koeneker's mastery that's almost self-deprecating, even as he performs moves so deft, so astonishing, as to be funny. Even if "the scene develops tears," he asks, "Why // Solder sick hearts to sick raindrops?" In the poem entitled "his concert experience," Koeneker both dismisses and bares his device: "Cycles, circles, breathing, meter, blah."

Body and Glass is an autumnal harvest (Koeneker admits, "I continually put autumn / in my writing") of words and meters plucked from the tree of literary history. Yet, inexplicably—in the end, poetry must be inexplicable—the poet maintains a spring in his step.

SEMIAUTOMATIC by Evie Shockley. Wesleyan University Press, 2018.

Reviewed by Cole Swensen

Verve and nerve underscore this latest collection by a voice that is rapidly becoming one of the clearest, most novel, and most socially nuanced of her generation. Evie Shockley's novelty is not simply difference for difference's sake; while deeply connected to vibrant and urgent concerns in our culture today and historically well-informed, her work is nonetheless full of angles, tones, and approaches that seem unprecedented. The most apparent concern is racism, but through her probing treatment of that issue, she addresses additional issues, such as the inveterate intransigence of the American mind and the ways that language has protected that intransigence and its embedded ideas from exposure and challenge. From the opening words – "if i sang the blues would that be new? or knew?" – she builds momentum that she then not only maintains, but brilliantly calibrates throughout the whole collection, creating a through-line based on dynamic energy, a vivid spine that keeps all of the book's varied parts in vibrant tension and engaged conversation with the others.

There are so many ways that one can enter this collection; I'm going to start with sound, in part, because that's what she does, immediately, with that blues/new rhyme followed so closely by the new/knew pun. Right out of the gate, we're invested in impacted sounds and meanings that both wrestle with and reinforce each other. As in this opening line, sound and sense twist so quickly that a reason-based – a reason-yourself-out-of-it – analysis has no chance to enter the reading. And in these sounds, we hear the things that language cannot or does not want to say. But that it nonetheless harbors. Shockley works in the charged territory of the unsaid and the under-said, which has always been the territory of non-sense, pun, and overboard sound relationships; she plays them with a revealing delicacy that lets their haunting out.

I think that it's important, too, to read this collection as a critique of the *American* – not of *America* because that so quickly becomes abstract and thus slips out of reach of real critique; Shockley recognizes this, and thus focuses on the adjective, which is much harder to shed. Her lens throughout is the American idiom; after all, language is her specialty, and she knows how to read it against itself to reveal its role in constructing the current moment of radical social inequality. One of her most fruitful foci is the canned phrase. She uses them throughout; we recognize them and recognize that we hear them all around us, and coming out of us. Her insistence makes our recognition go yet one step further to realize

that this is how language gets “packaged,” how it ceases to be a virtually infinite recombinatory system and begins to get rigidified into larger and larger chunks, which we think of as idioms, but which are actually received ideas that in fact keep us from thinking for ourselves. The new term is sound bites, but the veil of technological novelty masks the facts, first, that this has been going on for millennia through idiom and cliché and, second, that the cultural availability, even imposition, of such phrases prevents us from coming up with our own language-sequences in response to every immediate, and necessarily unique, situation. Instead, *boing*, up pops the phrase that seems appropriate (it’s not) and suddenly the situation looks exactly like the last one (which it isn’t) for which that phrase seemed appropriate (which it wasn’t), and all particularity is lost.

Shockley often disrupts the manipulative and reductive constraints of canned language by punning it out of shape. In the poem “lotto motto,” for instance, phrases such as “i’m gonna run like the wound” and “i’m gonna head for the thrills” use a change in the last word to turn a familiar phrase emotionally 180 degrees while leaving the “i” fully in charge, choosing and controlling that change in affective temperature. This same agency rules over other instances; for example, the grammatically passive “then wash out my mouth with hope” demonstrates how derailing a cliché can shift the power-base from subject to object, as the object, suddenly given hope, is no longer just a victim.

While such unveiling of linguistic machinery goes on in a number of ways and at a number of levels throughout the book, a particularly pertinent one plays out in what is arguably the book’s crucial series, “the topsy suite.” It is, among other things, an aggressive replay of a stock character, and therefore of the very notion of stock characters, refusing them while also and above all demonstrating the way that, in American culture, fiction works its way into reality. Today, as its inverse, “fake news,” is dominating national discourse, Shockley deftly displays the way fictional characters, particularly stereotyped ones such as Topsy from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, have become embedded in American culture and reinforced to the point that, without ever thinking about it consciously, the population in general thinks of the character as having been real, and thus as having some relationship to or even as representing actual living people and their ideas and actions.

Shockley’s evocation of Sandra Bland, a young black woman who died in extremely suspicious circumstances while in police custody in 2015, drives her point home with jarring force. Shockley develops her argument through a series of slippages deployed with extremely subtle dexterity – never didactic or overt,

she makes her point much more surely by giving the character a new presence, one that is not fictional, but potential, and not only potential, but volatily so. It's the force of volatile potential that drives this book, and that includes the potential to reconstruct the American idiom, altering its ramifications in distinctly liberating directions. It's a book of instances, allusions, and references that shift quickly, sending shock waves throughout the whole that in turn link up to create a weave in which tendrils of news, of rumor, of fiction, and of fact are stripped down – sometimes to the glaringly raw, always to the alertingly fresh. As Pound (slightly tweaked) said, she keeps the news news – pertinent and urgent.

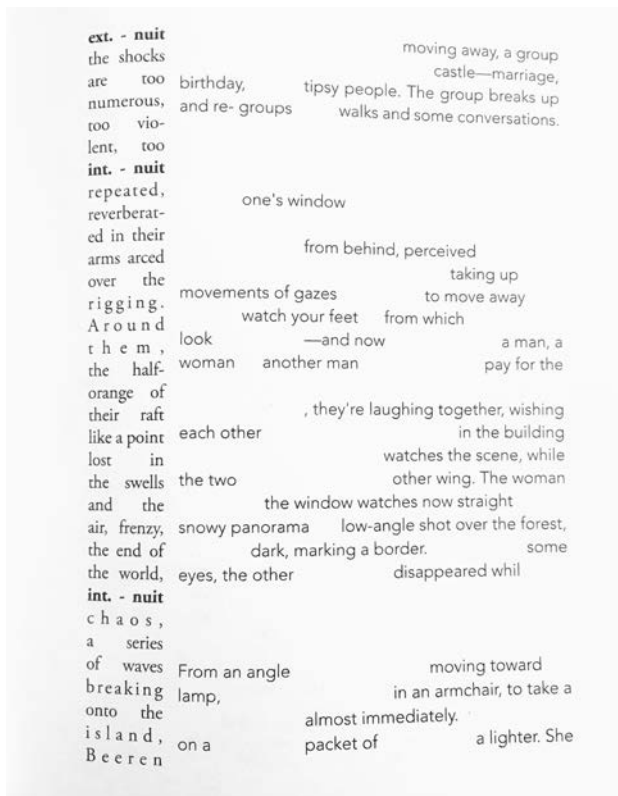
SCREWBALL, by Anne Kawala. Translated by Kit Schluter. (Canarium, 2018)

Reviewed by Lindsay Turner

The French poet Anne Kawala’s *Screwball* bears little narrative relation to its title. This is a fitting obliqueness. Whether it’s a noun or an adjective, “screwball” works well for this eccentric, exciting, disarming book. Here are some of its many moving parts: *Screwball* is part multi-genre essay on gender and anthropology in a loose sense, part feminist survival epic, part harbinger of cultural and economic breakup or meltdown, part accumulation of scraps and fragments against that disintegration, and part love song to the linguistic and physical excesses of this world. Nothing in *Screwball* happens as a reader might expect; nothing happens without a supercharge of narrative, cultural, or formal energy. The first book by Kawala (b. 1980) to be translated into English, *Screwball* is exhausting to read and to write about. It is also—unexpectedly, for a work of such textual “difficulty”—captivating, a screwball page-turner.

knots holding down the waxed canvas, cuts, hooks them into eyelets, carabiners, adjusts the height of the rope. Canvas bucket. Bails out water, slowly. Teeth clenched, body in pain. This weakness. Provokes anger. Calms down. May this rage pass as she dries the boat. Is exhausted. From time to time, she looks at the kid. Sitting, straight up, maybe asleep. Now, keep bailing out water. Bails. Bails. Bails. Bails. Bails. Bails. Bails. Bails. Bails. Bails. Bails. Bails. Bails. The kid, maybe asleep. Bails. Sitting, straight up, motionless. Bails. Bails. Bails. Bails. Bails. Bails. Bails. Bails. Bails. Bails. Bails. Bails. Bails. The kid, asleep. Asleep. Spreads another emergency blanket on the bottom of the raft. Takes the amautei, in one arm. Wakes the kid up, makes him lie down on the blanket. Lying down. On his belly, sets down the amautei, crosses his arms over, she puts the tot’s arms back in his armpits. Takes off his pants and tights. Rubs his arms, greases them with oil. The survival blanket spread back over them, the baby and the kid, his face now edged with gold. Give him something else to drink, antibiotics, anti-inflammatories, vitamins. She opens another can, lifts his head, puts a finger between his lips, pours water in, slips the pills onto his tongue, makes him drink again, closes his mouth back up, he gulps with difficulty but swallows, she places his head back on the bottom of the raft. She drinks. Now, before, now, remounts their shelter—as much as possible. The rings, stick them in their eyelets. Extend the canvas from them, even if torn. Stitch them back up, yes. It’s necessary, later, now tend to the most urgent. To make shelter. Makeshift shelter but, should hold up for a night, keep out rain, waves. She spreads out the furs, the clothes, that they dry—a bit. Looks, finds another box, eats, squatting at the stern, back against the crates, she chews slowly, watching the kid sleep under the canvas awning. Now to close the shelter back up. And then sleep.

The engine for this momentum is the survival epic component of the book, which begins in a series of fragments in English and French and sometimes German that coalesce into the story of a figure called only the “huntress-gatheress,” who is stranded on a raft atop an Arctic ice floe with a small child, a baby, a dog, and a hummer™ (reproduced consistently with the trademark). The ice is breaking up; the small crew drifts from the Arctic to the coast of Nicaragua, where some are rescued. Both the hard tension and the unpredictability of this incredible journey are rendered visceral in the intensity and variety of Kawala’s writing throughout this section, which comprises roughly two-thirds of the book. (The remaining third, “Notebook,” is a sort of essay-meets-commonplace book about sex and gender; it functions as both theoretical underpinning and tangential afterword.) The majority of this narrative section is prose, written without paragraph breaks and aligned to fill the entire page, often ending with a full stop. At a basic level, this is one of Kawaka’s feminist interventions: the drama of exploration and conquest reframed as one of reproduction and care. Interspersed with this prose are a variety of visual elements: pictures of birds and insects, hand-lettered passages, diagrams of stars and flows too various to catalog easily here or to reproduce. There are also pages that look something like this:



The left-hand column carries on with the blocks of survival narrative, compressed: this page represents one climactic moment in the story, as the raft tips off the ice into the water. The right side of the page is a more recognizably lyric account of some version of “ordinary life,” vaguely European: the next few pages again include bits of German, as well as English and French, setting out scenes of homes and castles, intimacies and recognitions. All this is vaguely reminiscent of certain strains of Anglophone High Modernism. But if the crisis T. S. Eliot worries over in *The Waste Land* is the historical undoing of classically inflected Anglo-European culture and language, Kawala’s worries come through in expanded geographical and cultural contexts, spanning continents and oceans, scales and domains. Her breakup registers the pressure points of European colonization and its aftermath, the structures of gender and identity as complexly interwoven with language and history, and—perhaps above all—the impending disaster of climate change, as it is and will be experienced by real people, and especially by women and animals and children.

A quick concluding remark about translation. The book begins with a translator’s note: “All instances of French in the translation represent the author’s use of English in the original, and vice versa. The instances of other languages remain untouched.” This virtuosic swapping works; it also opens onto a rich assortment of questions about language, imperialism, and science, given the differential roles of English and French, respectively, in these domains. And yet—finally—there’s a counter-force here, which is provided by Kawala’s frequent use of the catalog: lines of the names of sailor’s knots, a list of Latinate plant names that occupies almost two prose pages, a litany of things encountered after the huntress-gatheress reaches land again, from “ermine, brown bear, raccoon, snakes” to “herbs dried, tied, and hung, potted plants, weeds, catnip, perennials.” These nouns and names function like solid ground in *Screwball*’s shifting linguistic and cultural chaos, something to hold onto. There is joy in their enumeration, even if the world in which they exist—in and outside the book—is in actual jeopardy.

NATIONAL PARK, by Emily Sieu Liebowitz. Gamma Poetry, 2018

Reviewed by Adrienne Raphel

In reviewing the fashion label Eckhaus Latta's art-exhibit-cum-boutique at the Whitney Museum, the *New York Times* dubbed the show "blurrealist": not so much skirting the line between reality and reality TV as re-drawing those lines in new forms. Emily Sieu Liebowitz's *National Park* is blurreal America, a Technicolor that doesn't let itself resolve into either artifice or nature. Is her National Park an actual landscape or an advertisement? Is there a difference, and do we care? (Or, as Mike Eckhaus, half of the design team behind the label, put it, "Why does everything need to be so easily understood?") "Days That Break," the book's opening poem, introduces what it means to be dawn in the United Nations of Liebowitz. Like so many of her best lines, the title breaks multiple ways. The sun rises; day breaks. Days that break are also days that split open, days that fail, days that don't work the way we wish they would. Liebowitz opens with a line that does origami-style duty as the poem unfolds. "News that keep sails taut on the we," the first line of "Days That Break," isn't grammatical. There are too many images: first, the news; then the news becomes a wind (or a compass rose—North, East, West, South) that keep the sails open. Then, we're not on the sea but on a "we": are the people the landscape? We're propelled across the line break: we / "we are conversation, big rough battle we are / roots to roofs." That "roots to roofs" shift makes motion happen on the level of the letter: the ground inverts to sky with the flip of a Scrabble tile. Liebowitz makes her landscape move both via image and at the level of the letter. "I feel like / like sitting here," she says, later in the poem, and lets herself sit, "obeying topography in my / crawling canvas circus strewn sky." The line operates by alphabetical logic, the c's at the beginning of the line curling into s's, but there's also an image that builds through what appears to be pure sound play, complicated clouds billowing across the sky as the day breaks.

For all the tightly controlled rhetorical acrobatics, there's also something totally loose about Liebowitz's aesthetic. I can't parse "News that keeps sails taut on the we," but I also don't care. I can see it, even if I don't know what "it" is. Plus, the monosyllables roll so nicely off the tongue. But don't mistake Liebowitz for a cultural commentator with no teeth. Liebowitz has a trick of making you think she's being tricky when she's at her most straightforward. This is blurrality, but it's not out of focus. "I've done nothing this month," writes Liebowitz in

“I Go onto Moment”; then “I go on sense-giving tours, / walked around by guides strangling their lungs / singing anything / to make something sung.” The physical silence on the page is Philomena’s carved-out tongue, the dead “jug-jug” of a landscape that doesn’t have a voice anymore. Late-stage capitalism has squeezed the sense—both physical sensation and all sense of reason—out of the world.

In “Today They Tried to Blow Up the Moon...How Embarrassing,” comic and violent co-exist in quantum balance. The phrase “blow up” conjures a poolscape, the moon a deflated floatie, people with round cheeks and flushed faces puffing desperately into a tiny airstream. “Blow up” simultaneously evokes a bomb. “They” takes on a sinister cast, a suited, faceless other that is destroying the world. But this is blurrealism. We are the joke, too. “How embarrassing” dials the outrage from declaration to daiquiri. We’re sitting poolside in our floaties, sipping a drink as the moon explodes. We are ready; it’s already happened. The “we are” refrain returns like a half-life throughout Liebowitz’s collection. I’m reminded of checkpoints in those eighties arcade race car games where you’d whiz around a track, trying desperately to get back to the place where you started so that you could partially refill the clock and hurtle ahead. “We are” and its correlate, “I am,” become rhythmic beats, places to pause and collect your bearings as you hurtle forward in the elliptical landscape.

“We” and “I” morph generously throughout *National Park*, brochure-style, like we’re tourists in our own life. By “Frame Wrong Picture Centuries,” toward the end of the book, “we are” shifts to “already”: in the littoral zone of letters, we’re ready, but the ready has already arrived. We’re living in potential, waiting for a future that has already past. If this sounds trippy, it is. “1906 loops / translation from universally understood spatial / signifiers,” Liebowitz informs us in “I Am Always Leaving to Gather the News.” If Heaven, as per Tony Kushner’s epic play *Angels in America*, is a place much like San Francisco, the National Park is a place much like the nation. Blurreality is where language is languid, terror is both terrifying and terrific, the coast is a roller coaster and a calm coastline. Everything is too real, and everything is two-dimensional. “I sit there, I go away,” Liebowitz writes. Time and tide wait for no man, but if we slow down enough, we can make time become tide and watch tide boomerang back into time.

NOISE IN THE FACE OF, by David Buuck. Roof Books, 2016.

Reviewed by Matt Longabucco

The world at this moment, as everyone knows and says, is noisy, dense with information, and in a state of seeming perpetual crisis amplified by our ever-increasing access to the breadth and depth of emergencies. It may seem that poetry—slow, freighted, and given to preening—can have only a marginal place in such a world. But I keep returning to a series of short essays Anne Boyer wrote “On Poetry,” in which she instructs us, in the spirit of Brecht, that “poets are to tell the truth,” even or especially the “low and ignoble truth” that she further identifies as “small, specific, ordinary, animal, prephilosophical, material, vulnerable, ugly, minor.” Boyer goes on to talk about poems that turn the world upside down, rehearsing an inversion of hierarchies in words so that they can be upended also in “objects, actions, and environments”—which is not separate from the doing in words but an extension of it. All of this she calls a poem.** Boyer’s reminds me how we forfeit ourselves to power if believe that poems have no place in the crisis, when in fact they are a necessity.

Such questions, doubts, and occasional galvanizing glimpses animate David Buuck’s *Noise in the Face of*. The doubts are in the foreground. I can’t think of another book that wants so badly to talk itself out of existing; one of the epigraphs, from Dutch poet Jeroen Mettes, reads “Nothing has less street cred than representation.” And there’s no redemption of representation by the end, though there is the book that has survived its author’s interrogation and is, partly, its record. But the book also wants to tell a low and ignoble truth: that language happens through and around events with a disobedience we can hardly predict or imagine. Buuck, a musician, a maker of puns and wordplay, a member of embodied communities, goes to Occupy Oakland and hears the microphone, the cops scheming over the scanner, the Michael Jackson song blasting at the rally. He sees the contortions of the arrested and abstracts their gestures, caught on video, into a performance. It’s anything but flippant, and refuses to reach for beauty. “Poetry” has a light touch here, turning the dial across frequencies.

* Boyer, Anne. “On Poetry, #3, or “Dichter sollen die Wahrheit schreiben” / poets are to tell the truth.” anneboyer.tumblr.com

** Boyer, Anne. “On Poetry, #4, the simple technique of upending the world.” anneboyer.tumblr.com

From the first poem in the book:

Dancing along
to what I hate
most in my shelf
sweatin' out the
contradictions
as the beer
cans tumble
somebody live
streams the scene (12)

It's tricky to excerpt from the book's many longish pieces, since they gain force by code switching and accumulating whispered, shouted, interrupted, half-heard, partially downloaded elements. And between these efforts, a multi-part piece entitled "Distance Now Closed Between" reproduces police communications eerily like the tweets and texts shared by protesters trying to stay a step ahead of them on the same contested streets.

"We Found Lulz in a Hapless Place" may be the most self-undoing of all the book's contents: the poem repeatedly stops abruptly to ask questions like, "would you prefer a reference/to Shelley here? / or to the licorice strike?" (38). The reader, the poem insists, is as implicated in pleasure-seeking as the poet is in name-dropping, waiting for the references that flatter either, in this case, a knowledge of past radical poetry or else an insider's knowledge of an obscure action from the Occupy era. Credentials — cred — when named, become a tangled mess of supposedly recognizable identities:

A Ugandan poet in Vancouver.
A black bloc poet at the MLA.

When is "I"? When are "she"? When is "we"?

That guy? He's his own tendency.
Broadside fetishist.

Backstabber.
Hand-wringer.
Online commenter. (46)

Who to punch first? I'm not the first to quote what are clearly quintessential lines from near the end of the poem:

Problem: sick of poetry, not finding another form
for this roving disgust.

Like escaping a fire in a building that you designed.
while hating metaphors and prosody
then running back in, to log back on and

<swipe> (48)

Here is the crux of a poetry that can't bear itself, that can find no way forward, but that can't reject itself entirely, either, since there is no other form to replace it. Indeed, every time I make a claim for this book I feel it pushing back—it exposes and makes dangerous the endlessly worried-over zone between art and action, it anticipates and dispenses with our attempt to hold that territory. And yet I can't help but want to find a way—the book does, too—to reach what that same Dutch poet calls “an autonomous rhythm, not outside, but in the midst of the noise, a piece of paradise in hell.”^{***} The poem I've been quoting from (“Lulz”) ends with questions and language ground down to a fine confusion, but also an impromptu street party, and an unexpected imperative:

wait, what— who's we? whose?

Everyone in the street
is in this fucking dance—

now pick up a tool
and fucking garden.

The crisis says there's no time to do anything but see the crisis, and then see the next one, forgetting the last. But if poetry can do anything, it can ripen with time—it is *in* time, like the fruits of a garden, and lets us see events at the human pace we must now and increasingly insist on.

*** Buuck, David. “We Are All Sound: Poetics and Public Space in the Occupy Oakland Movement.” *The Journal of Aesthetics & Protest*, issue 9.

Also Notable: Graham Foust, Carmen Giménez Smith, Doreen Gildroy

Reviewed by Calvin Bedient

The title of Graham Foust's **Nightingalelessness** (Flood Editions, 2018) is strung around from back cover to front, the latter reading only ELESSNESS; it's the admirable designer Quemadura outdoing himself, and it puts the reader on notice that the mood in the book is broken unsatisfied. All grimaces at the notion of linear progress and grace. Foust writes poetry that doesn't like poetry, but without taking the easy way out by writing anti-poetry. On the contrary, the writing in this book is usually beautifully civilized, as in "Full of cloud changes, ghost-of looks, rocks, recalled / talk, a snuffbox, Kant's walks continue nameless, / just stills, not films, filed back there in the dream realm," an enchanting instance of the device of the list, including a series of off- and off-off rhymes,; but the jewel box is lined with the black stuff of nihilism: "darkness's emptier synonym" ("Kalingrad, Formerly Königsberg"). Given his plan to "play unsanitary," his statement "Pretend and two dimensional, I am, / and so have always been barbaric," this last in his book *A Mouth in California* (2009), Foust could have written like, oh, Kruchenykh, say, "donkey / ant / nightingale / muse / 'owever / anonym / questionnaire," and not as if his sensibility has been marinated in iambic pentameter. The short lines of *Mouth* are countered here (though certainly not always) by classic lines of five beats ("and grieve your missing out on April's air"), varied by lines of 4 beats or 6: 6 or more for the vastitude in "if I'm one figure in one vast, inhabited painting." Static like a painting, yes, that's what life is, even on "this disappointingly bright bright morning." Love is "like having screamed at being moved." Foust owns his pain with a master's steady hand. No disguises, except those endemic to writing. His skepticism itself, of course, is in a classic tradition. *Nightingalelessness* is a first-rate collection, wickedly accomplished. Bring on the screams measured out in beats like little torches. No, even that's too pretty an image for Foust. Better the bare "Sound like guns out in the crops" ("Field Day").

Carmen Giménez Smith's new book, **Cruel Futures** (City Lights, 2018), is irresistible in its candid, spicy, ceaselessly surprising, totally unashamed self-shaming. "I want no window into me, not even pores," she writes, but her poetry is loud with flung-open shutters and windows. The wit pops: in "Dear Medusa," "I'll end by thanking you for your gift / to pre-feminism. You are truly one of my heroes." Giménez Smith is so spirited that she would be anybody's hero,

excepting perhaps her more assimilated children, whose doubts of her she writes about with hilarious honesty. She is at once vulnerable and fearless, full of fun, a headlong, natural performer. Exaggeration is her muse. The writing could equally be described as poetry and cut-up scrappy prose; but it escapes the low pressure and general disesteem of the latter through panicky pacing, an edgy breathlessness that remembers terrors and hurts. I quote “Dementia as about Me”:

How tidily she hid her illness for years,
which I hereby dutifully record. I write
things like *carved out* or like *guts spooned out*
with a rusty spoon: my guts, her spoon.

The disregard of gracefulness, the knocking roughness here as throughout, agrees with the no-bullshit temper of the times. I find that it is itself a tricky form of grace, of elegance and poise. Everything Giménez Smith writes compels attention: “The first spouse was an oppressor / The second: a divinity. / Each wedding dress / was made of wood: / an admission / of complicity. / The third will be Artemis / because that’s my jam” (“Egotistical Sublime”). *Press / dress; divinity/admission/complicity/Artemis* – a well-behaving succession of sounds. Then, jarringly, “jam.” An elbow poke. The writing has the impudent freedom and implicit sad gaiety of a survivor: “We once walked / around our father’s force field / looking in like the matchstick / children.” Not that she still doesn’t feel, neighbor in the mood-field as she is to Graham Foust, for all their differences, that there is “little skin left for transformation” (“Ravers Having Babies”). Poetry is at the least a smart and feeling start to grow more skin.

My friend Doreen Gildroy is probably one of the best contemporary American poets you’ve never read. **Trilogy** (New Issues, 2018), which is three short books in one, follows two others (both published by the University of Chicago Press). Her poetry is on its own and apart from any prevalent trends. To begin with, it has a singularly pure and slowly dealt-out style, which makes you listen to the careful step – reluctance? concern for precision? absorbed self-listening? – of every line:

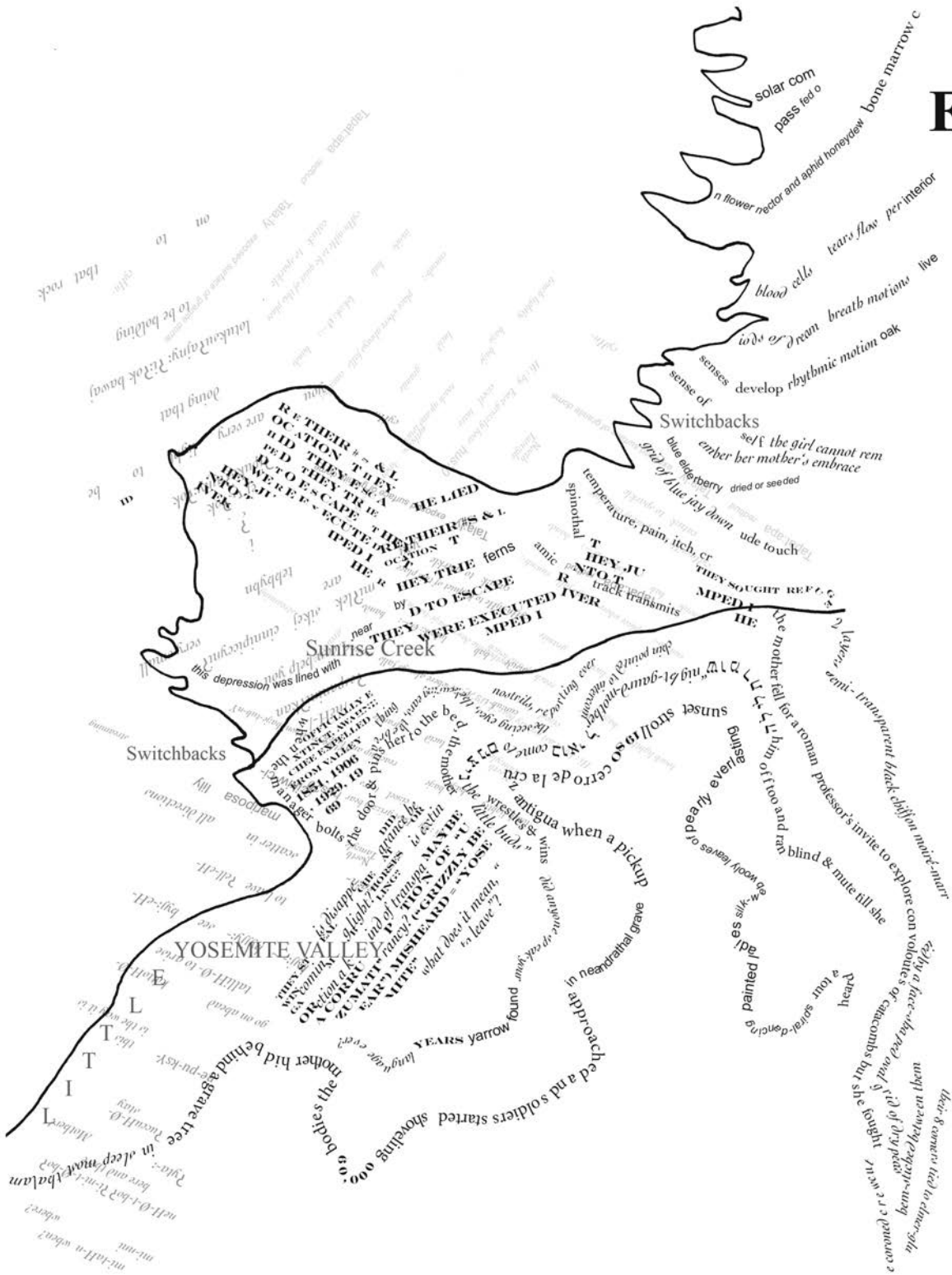
I know – know what I've been given.

I've been trained
for grief

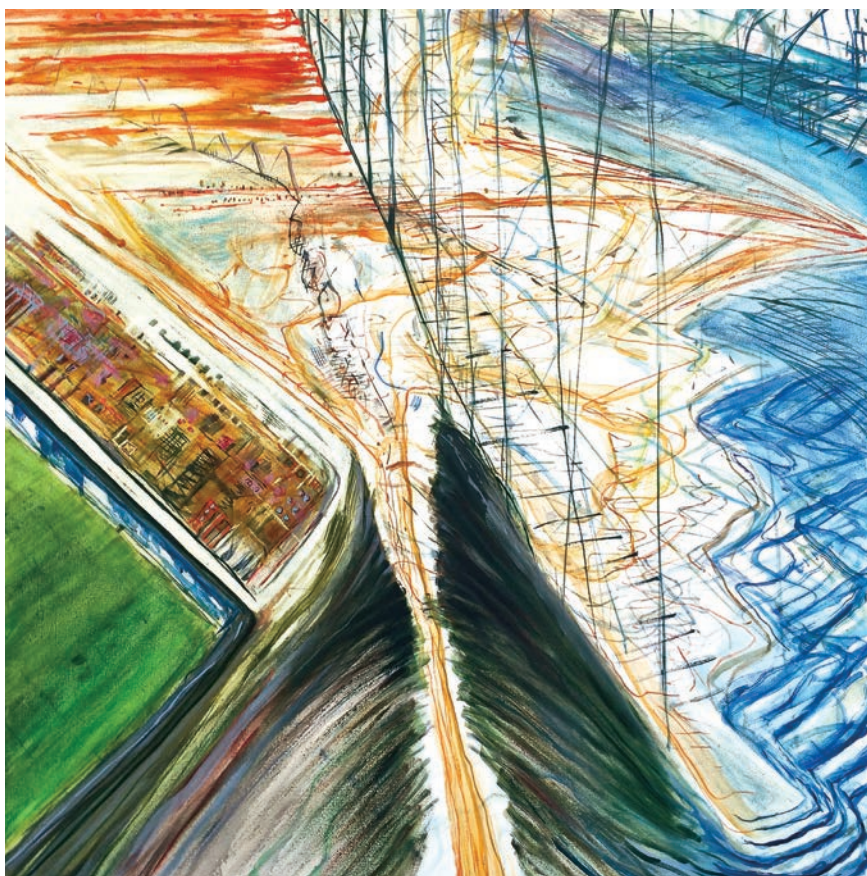
but this life
has blinded me into the living world –

of the permeated . .

As Stephen Berg notes on the back cover, her “pauses and breaks are necessary to the entire effect of authentic reverence, authentic seeking” and support a tone “that captures something like unconscious prayer.” In the lines quoted above, the one-, two- and three-syllable words are looking for a place to land and find it at last in the four-syllable “permeated,” whose ripe long “a” and dental ending recuperates “trained” and “blinded” and “world.” The issue is indeed penetration, but should it be by the “living world,” in which illness and tragedy mark her family history, or something else? “I see what I have to do / it’s in the chasm” (“The Funeral in my Head”). Gildroy is drawn to the literature of the great Christian maverick women mystics, but she herself is humanly humble, extraordinarily gentle and loving as wife and mother. So she is double, toggled, living now one truth, feeling the nearness of the other, of others. A light that haunts her room, a something that enters (as) her “voice,” leaves her asking, “Is what I am defined? // If I could go to that other place / and meet . . . I believed we could perceive / each other in something beyond me – terrifying light.” Her being is torqued, then, rising from sleep, as she hauntedly and hauntingly says, “as if . . . I was walking // in spite of myself, / in spite of my self that would sleep” (“A Requiem for the Self”). Getting over herself in both senses is the “terrifying” need, if not goal. Is there no reconciler? Why not beauty? “You are making beauty / in the world: // audacious task.” Beauty is part of what holds her “in the present // to go out looking at the world.” Her writing is from the looking as well as from the loving and from the leaving that would be a meeting. Beauty of her own making there is. But always a limitation: “Facts do not match the // soul. // Vast / the angel” (“A Desperate Attempt at Beauty”).



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