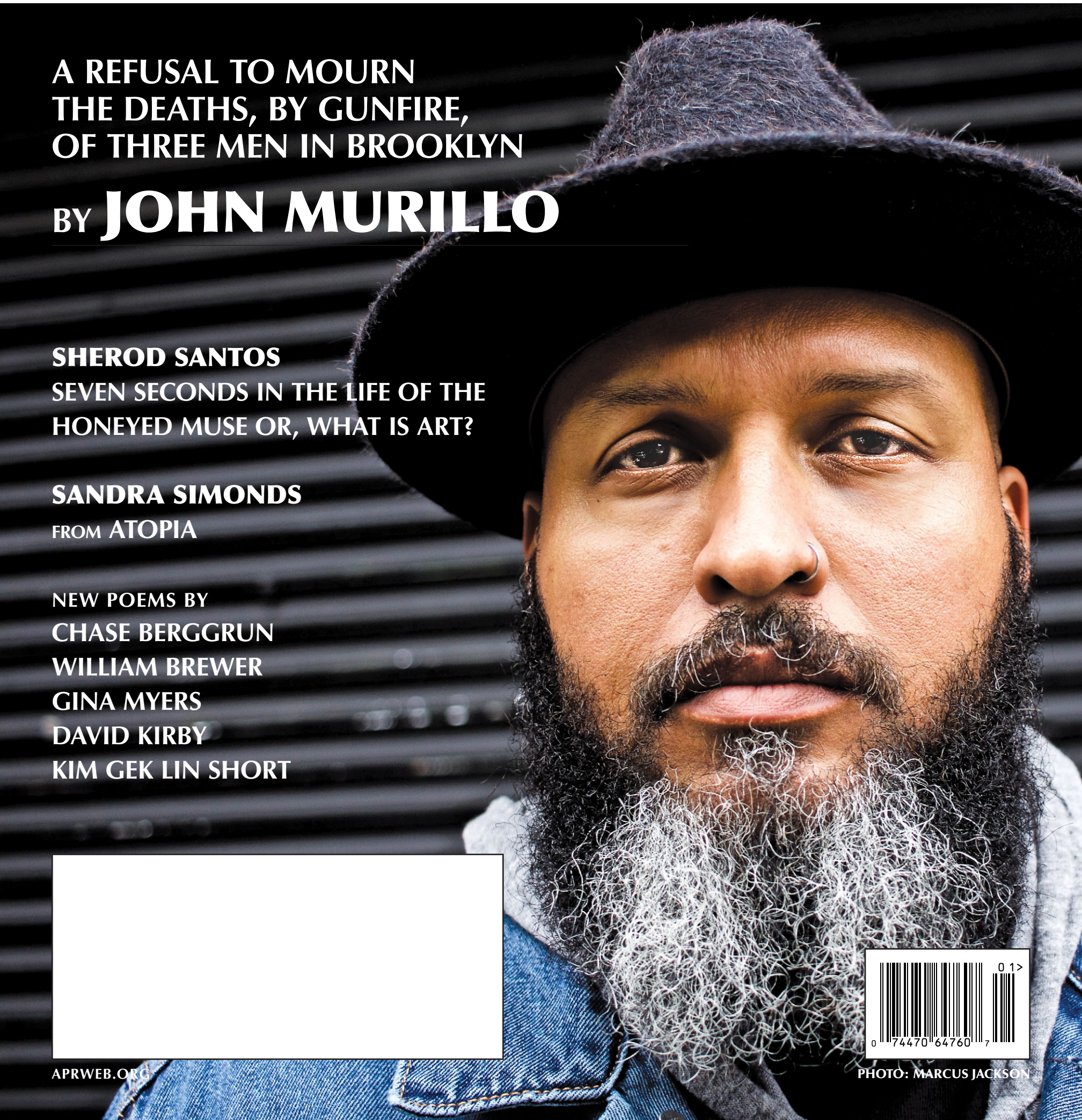
The AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW

"... it can be said that an art work has a 'thingly' character, and that the 'art' is secreted *within* that 'thing': this painting is *in* acrylic, that sonata is *in* three movements, this poem is *in* iambic pentameter. A secret the work both expresses—just above or below eye level—and keeps to itself."

(SANTOS, p. 9)

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2019 VOL. 48/NO. 1 $5 US/$6 CA



A REFUSAL TO MOURN THE DEATHS, BY GUNFIRE, OF THREE MEN IN BROOKLYN

BY **JOHN MURILLO**

SHEROD SANTOS
SEVEN SECONDS IN THE LIFE OF THE HONEYED MUSE OR, WHAT IS ART?

SANDRA SIMONDS
FROM ATOPIA

NEW POEMS BY
CHASE BERGGRUN
WILLIAM BREWER
GINA MYERS
DAVID KIRBY
KIM GEK LIN SHORT

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THE AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW (ISSN 0360-3709) is published bimonthly by World Poetry, Inc., a non-profit corporation, and Old City Publishing, Inc. Editorial offices: 1906 Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia, PA 19103-5735. Subscription rates: U.S.: 3 years, $78.00; 2 years, $56.00; 1 year, $32.00. Foreign rates: 3 years, $129.00; 2 years, $92.00; 1 year, $49.00. Single copy, $5.00. Special classroom adoption rate per year per student: $14.00. Free teacher's subscription with classroom adoption. Subscription mail should be addressed to THE AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW, c/o Old City Publishing, 628 N. 2nd Street, Philadelphia, PA 19123-3002. www.aprweb.org.

IN MEMORIAM
Tony Hoagland
1953–2018

Periodical postage paid, Philadelphia, PA, and at additional offices. *Postmaster:* Please send address changes to THE AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW, 1906 Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia, PA 19103-5735.

Nationwide distribution: TNG, 1955 Lake Park Dr. SE, Suite 400, Smyrna, GA 30080, (770) 863-9000. Media Solutions, 9632 Madison Blvd., Madison, AL 35758, (800) 476-5872. Printed in U.S.A.

Advertising correspondence should be addressed to THE AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW, 1906 Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia, PA 19103-5735.

All previously published issues of APR from the first in 1972 to 2013 are accessible online through JSTOR—www.jstor.org.

The American Poetry Review receives state arts funding support through a grant from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, a state agency funded by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

This magazine is assisted by a grant from The Dietrich Foundation.

The columns in APR are forums for their authors, who write without editorial interference.

The Editors are grateful for the opportunity to consider unsolicited manuscripts. Please enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope with your manuscript or submit online at www.aprweb.org.

Subscription blank: p. 43

Index of Advertisers: p. 46

PENNSYLVANIA COUNCIL ON THE ARTS

OLD CITY PUBLISHING

THE AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2019 VOL. 48/NO. 1

IN THIS ISSUE

ANNUAL PRIZES

The Editors of APR award these annual prizes:

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A REFUSAL TO MOURN THE DEATHS, BY GUNFIRE, OF THREE MEN IN BROOKLYN

JOHN MURILLO

And at times, didn't the whole country
try to break his skin?
—Tim Seibles

You strike your one good match to watch its bloom
and jook, a swan song just before a night
wind comes to snuff it. That's the kind of day
it's been. Your Black & Mild, now, useless as
a prayer pressed between your lips. God damn
the wind. And everything it brings. You hit
the corner store to cop a light, and spy
the trouble rising in the cashier's eyes.
TV reports some whack job shot two cops
then popped himself, here, in the borough, just
one mile away. You've heard this one before.
In which there's blood. In which a black man snaps.
In which things burn. You buy your matches. Christ
is watching from the wall art, swathed in fire.

This country is mine as much as an orphan's house is his.
—Terrance Hayes

To breathe it in, this boulevard perfume
of beauty shops and roti shacks, to take
in all its funk, calypso, reggaeton,
and soul, to watch school kids and elders go
about their days, their living, is, if not
to fall in love, at least to wonder why
some want us dead. Again this week, they killed
another child who looked like me. A child
we'll march about, who'll grace our placards, say,
then be forgotten like a trampled pamphlet. What
I want, I'm not supposed to. Payback. Woe
and plenty trouble for the gunman's clan.
I'm not supposed to. But I want a brick,
a window. One good match, to watch it bloom.

America, I forgive you . . . I forgive you
eating black children, I know your hunger.
—Bob Kaufman

You dream of stockpiles—bottles filled with gas
and wicks stripped from a dead cop's slacks—a row
of paddy wagons parked, a pitcher's arm.
You dream of roses, time-lapse blossoms from
the breasts of sheriffs, singing Calico
and casings' rain. You dream of scattered stars,
dream panthers at the precinct, dream a black-
out, planned and put to use. You dream your crew
a getaway van, engine running. Or,
no thought to run at all. You dream a flare
sent up too late against the sky, the coup
come hard and fast. You dream of pistol smoke
and bacon, folded flags—and why feel shame?
Is it the dream? Or that it's only dream?

& still when I sing this awful tale, there is more
than a dead black man at the center.
—Reginald Dwayne Betts

You change the channel, and it's him again.
Or not him. Him, but younger. Him, but old.
Or him with skullcap. Kufi. Hoodied down.
It's him at fifteen. Him at forty. Bald,
or dreadlocked. Fat, or chiseled. Six foot three,
or three foot six. Coal black or Ralph Bunche bright.
Again, it's him. Again, he reached. Today,
behind his back, his waist, beneath the seat,
his socks, to pull an Uzi, morning star,
or Molotov. They said don't move, they said
get down, they said to walk back toward their car.
He, so to speak, got down . . . Three to the head,
six to the heart. A mother kneels and prays—
Not peace, but pipe bombs, hands to light the fuse.

Fuck the whole muthafucking thing.
—Etheridge Knight

A black man, dancing for the nightly news,
grins wide and white, all thirty-two aglow
and glad to be invited. Makes a show
of laying out, of laundry airing. Throws
the burden back on boys, their baggy wear
and boisterous voices. Tells good folk at home
how streets run bloody, riffraff take to crime
like mice to mayhem, and how lawmen, more
than ever, need us all to back them. Fuck
this chump, the channel, and the check they cut
to get him. Fuck the nodding blonde, the fat
man hosting. Fuck the story. Fuck the quick
acquittals. Fuck the crowds and camera van.
You change the channel. Fuck, it's him again.

I enter this story by the same door each time.
—Julian Randall

At Normandy and Florence, brick in hand,
one afternoon in '92, with half
the city razed and turned against itself,
a young boy beat a man to meat, and signed,
thereby, the Ledger of the Damned. Big Book
of Bad Decisions. Black Boy's Almanac
of Shit You Can't Take Back. We watched, in shock.
The fury, sure. But more so that it took
this long to set it. All these matchstick years . . .
He beat him with a brick, then danced a jig
around his almost-carcass. Cameras caught
him live and ran that loop for weeks, all night,
all day, to prove us all, I think, one thug,
one black beast prancing on the nightly news.

And when it comes to those hard deeds
done by righteous people and martyrs,
isn't it about time for that to be you?
—Gary Copeland Lilley

Not Huey on his high-back wicker throne,
beret cocked cooler than an Oaktown pimp.
Or young Guevara marching into camp,
all swagger, mane, and slung M-1. But one
less suited, you could say, for picture books
and posters, slouching on a northbound Bolt,
caressing steel and posting plans to shoot.
He means, for once, to be of use. Small axe
to massive branches, tree where hangs the noose.
He says he's "putting wings on pigs today,"
wants two for each of us they've blown away.
Wants gun salutes and caskets. Dirges, tears,
and wreaths. Wants widows on the witness stand,
or near the riot's flashpoint, brick in hand.

I itch for my turn.
—Indigo Moor

Like Malcolm at the window, rifle raised
and ready for whatever—classic black
and white we pinned above our dorm room desks—
we knew a storm brewed, spinning weathervanes
and hustling flocks from sky to sky. We dozed,
most nights, nose deep in paperback
prognoses. *Wretched* and *Black Skin, White Masks*,
our books of revelation. Clarions
to would-be warriors, if only we
might rise up from our armchairs, lecture halls,
or blunt smoke cyphers. Talking all that gun
and glory, not a Nat among us. Free
to wax heroic. Deep. As bullet holes
through Panther posters, Huey's shattered throne.

Poems are bullshit unless they are teeth . . .
—Amiri Baraka

It ain't enough to rabble rouse. To run
off at the mouth. To speechify and sing.
Just ain't enough to preach it, Poet, kin
to kin, pulpit to choir, as if song
were anything like Panther work. It ain't.
This morning when the poets took the park
to poet at each other, rage and rant,
the goon squad watched and smiled, watched us shake
our fists and fret. No doubt amused. As when
a mastiff meets a yapping lapdog, or
the way a king might watch a circus clown
produce a pistol from a passing car.
Our wrath the flag that reads *kaboom!* Our art,
a Malcolm poster rolled up, raised to swat.

every once in a while
i see the winged spirits of niggas past
raise out the rubble
—Paul Beatty

Could be he meant to set the world right.
One bullet at a time. One well-placed slug,
one dancing shell case at a time. One hot
projectile pushing through, one body bag
zipped shut and shipped to cold store, at a time.
Could be he meant to make us proud, to fill
Nat Turner's shoes. Could be he meant to aim
at each acquittal, scot free cop, each trigger pull
or chokehold left unchecked, and blast daylight
straight through. Could be he meant, for once, to do.
We chat. We chant. We theorize and write.
We clasp our hands, spark frankincense, and pray.
Our gods, though, have no ears. And yet, his gun
sang loud. Enough to make them all lean in.

Paradise is a world where everything
is sanctuary & nothing is a gun.
—Danez Smith

A pipebomb hurled through a wig shop's glass—
nine melting mannequins, nine crowns of flame.
Hair singe miasma, black smoke braided. Scream
of squad cars blocks away. Burnt out Caprice
and overturned Toyota. Strip mall stripped.
And gutted. Gift shop, pet shop, liquor store,
old stationery wholesale. Home décor,
cheap dinnerware. An old man sprinting, draped
in handbags, loaded down with wedding gowns.
Three Bloods and two Crips tying, end-to-end,
one red, one blue, bandana. Freebase fiend
with grocery bags, new kicks, and name brand jeans.
Spilled jug of milk against the curb, black cat
bent low to lap it. This, your world, burnt bright.

I love the world, but my heart's been cheated.
—Cornelius Eady

He thought a prayer and a pistol grip
enough to get it done. Enough to get
him free. Get free or, dying, try. To stop
the bleeding. *Blood on leaves, blood at the root.*
I didn't root, exactly, when I heard
word spread. Word that he crept up, panther like,
and let loose lead. A lot. Before he fled
the spot, then somewhere underground, let kick
his cannon one last time. "One Time," our name
for cops back at the crib. It had to do,
I think, with chance. Or lack of. Chickens come
to roost? Perhaps. I didn't root. Per se.
But almost cracked a smile that day. The news
like wind chimes on the breeze. Or shattered glass.

We beg your pardon, America. We beg
your pardon, once again.
—Gil Scott-Heron

To preach forgiveness in a burning church.
To nevermind the noose. To nurse one cheek
then turn the next. To run and fetch the switch.
To switch up, weary of it all. Then cock
the hammer back and let it fall . . . But they
were men, you say, with children. And so close
to Christmas. But their wives, you say. Today
so close to Christmas . . . Memory as noose,
and history as burning church, who'd come
across the two cops parked and not think, *Go*
time? One time for Tamir time? Not think *Fire*
this time? To say as much is savage. Blame
the times, and what they've made of us. We know
now, which, and where—the pistol or the prayer.

. . . like sparklers tracing an old alphabet in the night sky
—Amaud Jamaul Johnson

It's natural, no, to put your faith in fire?
The way it makes new all it touches. How
a city, let's say, might become, by way

of time and riot, pure. In '92,
we thought to gather ashes where before
loomed all that meant to kill us. Rubble now
and lovely. Worked into, as if from clay,
some sort of monument. To what? No clue.
Scorched earth, and then . . . ? Suppose a man sets out,
with gun and half a plan, to be of use.
To hunt police. Insane, we'd say. Not long
for life. In this, we'd miss the point. A lit
match put to gas-soaked rag, the bottle flung,
may die, but dying, leaves a burning house.

> *Afro angels, black saints, balanced upon*
> *the switchblades of that air and sang.*
> *—Robert Hayden*

But that was when you still believed in fire,
the gospel of the purge, the burning house.
You used to think a rifle and a prayer,
a pipebomb hurled through a shopkeep's glass,
enough, at last, to set the world right.
Enough, at least, to galvanize some kin.
Think Malcolm at the window, set to shoot,
or Huey on his high-back wicker throne.
Think Normandy and Florence, brick in hand,
a Black man dancing for the camera crews.
You change the channel, there he is again,
and begging: Find some bottles, fill with gas.
Begs breathe in deep the Molotov's perfume.
Says strike your one good match, then watch it bloom.

A Note on the Poem

"A Refusal to Mourn the Deaths, by Gunfire, of Three Men in Brooklyn": The title is a nod to Dylan Thomas' famous poem, "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London." The poem itself was written in part as a reflection on police-community relations since the 1992 uprisings, and partly as a response to the killing of two NYPD officers and subsequent suicide of twenty-eight-year-old Ishmael Brinsley. On December 20, 2014, Brinsley shot and killed Brooklyn officers Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu, before fleeing the scene and ultimately shooting himself dead on a subway platform. Brinsley also shot and wounded his ex-girlfriend before boarding a bus that morning from Baltimore to New York City. His attack on the officers was reportedly motivated by the rash of police killings of unarmed Black people nationwide. Coincidentally, while Brinsley was carrying out his attack, poets were gathered in New York's Washington Square Park to read poems in protest of said killings.

John Murillo is the author of the poetry collections Up Jump the Boogie *(Cypher, 2010), finalist for both the Kate Tufts Discovery Award and the Pen Open Book Award, and* Kontemporary Amerikan Poetry *(forthcoming from Four Way Books, 2020). His honors include a Pushcart Prize, the J. Howard and Barbara M.J. Wood Prize from the Poetry Foundation, and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, the Cave Canem Foundation, and the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing. His work has appeared in* Ploughshares, Poetry, Prairie Schooner, *and* Best American Poetry 2017. *He is an assistant professor of English at Wesleyan University and also teaches in the low-residency MFA program at Sierra Nevada College.*

TWO POEMS

CHASE BERGGRUN

The Forty-Third Day

with lines from "Ocean of Earth" by Guillaume Apollinaire, translated by Ron Padgett

Today I got mad at a door

I did most of the talking

In the sunlight I sneezed

& reabsorbed the sneezes

I went to the room they suggested

Let's all look at loneliness together

How many holes do I have

I like my whiskey messy

I kiss my wife without her diamonds on

I like a jug with a sturdy handle

The evening as it's turning brown

My bare ass bounces to the bottom of the sea

I wrote an ode to Dillon

I did not do most of the talking

There's a rat in the trash room

Twelve minutes to twelve

Either my body is a bullet

That will not stop misfiring

Or I'm asleep in the crawlspace

Lapping at lead paint

I am the blood

& the surface to which

The blood is fixed

I am not the washcloth

I am not the soap

Two lines of Apollinaire's:

I have built a house in the middle of the Ocean

Its windows are the rivers floating from my eyes

I told Jerry today that sadness is the ocean

& depression is the wave

I was trying to be helpful

I think I'm two steps up the staircase

Can't be sure

Flatly I am refusing

To become my own gravedigger

Octopi are crawling all over where the words are

What do you think a girl really is

Amenorrhea or only "amen"

A man with a limp fist

A moon or a lamppost

A fleshy hourglass

Of wine glass of wine glass of wine glass of wine

A ceaseless white noise

Haunting rhythmic static

Maybe a girl is

Something that fucks up your sleep cycle

Something that smells like sweat

In the morning underneath a blanket

Something that sticks to the stubborn bone

I wore a silk blouse today

I wore lipstick I went to a museum

I woke up with a cup of tea

Good conversation with God in the afternoon

Conducted in

Single unpunctuated double-spaced lines

The plan is to give away

Everything I do not possess

& then see what happens

I went for a lazy walk

All the way to the other side of the island where

The beach is long & boring

I saw a kite in the sky but I

Could not see its master

Feet & sand & the strange warm

Light blue of the tide

I grew up near the ocean

I know it well & it's true it's never still

Today

Once again

The legs that drove me into the room

Weren't mine

I was so grateful

I have a weakness for legs

One of my weaknesses

Dillon says I've officially arrived

But I don't know my zip code

For dinner

I threw lettuce into a bowl

& half a cucumber

Dried cranberries

Far too much dressing

I am bad at salad

But I am trying to get better

Poem for the Second Step

I am too well-spun to unravel
I told myself the night I was almost raped
By a cab driver somewhere in Miami Beach
Came to with a headache & one clear thought
Previously I had only known a God
Of increasing demands & diminishing returns
His liquid equation that gave
My sullied psyche the extra ataraxia it needed
One handle every three days
Two hundred dollars on the table in a white pile
Thirteen drinks into a thirty drink Thursday
I lit the Bible on fire I was
Completely in control of my life
There was so much pain I imagined myself
Empress & original architect both
Of human suffering I knew I was unique
My cardboard costume wasn't designed
To withstand water but I wore it
In any weather whatever
I painted my face until it wasn't
I looked beautiful at rare angles
I cannot remember
Saint of sex something precious that you told me
While I made you feel good
While I made you feel good I felt mostly thirsty
Our feet near each other's foreheads
Whiskey always within reach
I felt bad I wasn't wanted
The way I wanted to be
I thought that words were meant to work like liquor
By which I mean I thought I could be healed
That I was confused by desire I know now
Akhmatova says it perfect
I drew my left-hand glove
Onto my right hand—
I had the same sort of mystic love I swear
Except the object of my adoration
Was sweet & strong & sparkled in its crystal house
I saw the crescent moon that lazed above New York
As a vessel to be filled & quickly
Emptied into my body my body
A vessel to be filled & quickly forgotten
Living with the cannibals on the western coast
Of my miniature bedroom I lined
The outside hallway with my glass conquests until
The hallway was no more I was
A plague for part of the year
The best friend you could ever ask for
I left everyone to worry while I dove toward
Whatever it was I was diving toward
Worming for wine ten thousand times I
Swung my feet over the side of the sewer
Willing the crocodiles to come & rescue the top
Half of my body from the lower
I pushed my way through the teeth of
January & came out in May with roses
Wrapped around my wrists I became
The best corpse I could be I arrived
At the funeral home pre-embalmed I despised
Any luxury I couldn't find inside
Half a gallon I rotated
My legless insanity again & again through the street
Billow of smoke & a swig of Tussin I scuffled
Out of my wet sheets & found the floor
Painted with piss & blood & birthday cake I
Believed this was normal I wanted to believe
This was normal I needed so badly
To believe this was normal I
Came to believe
Something different

Am I weak if I end in prayer
& turn to a different tense
O
Lord
Bend me until I am kissing the earth
Then tilt my neck backward
Let me drink the rain & only

Chase Berggrun is a trans poet. They are the author of R E D *(Birds, LLC, 2018). Their work has appeared in* Poetry Magazine, *the Lambda Literary Spotlight,* Pinwheel, *PEN Poetry Series,* Sixth Finch, Diagram, *and elsewhere. They received their MFA from New York University. They are poetry editor at* Big Lucks.

TWO POEMS

ELEANOR MARY BOUDREAU

The Heart Is Not a Synonym for the Chest

What you called a *cloud* was not a cloud. I am in hell here. Hell is a party where I don't sing, and don't dance, and someone turns to me and says, "You are a very pretty girl. Don't ever forget that."

I spend all night tramping up and down the staircase trying to figure out if you really love me.

Each stair a copy of the first and each of your words a copy of the one before it—*love, love, love*—above us an 18-wheeler on the highway bucks and shifts—*fishtailing*—and you think of me.

I would think of you, too, bucking and shifting, but that is not my heart.

That is my left breast.

There is a photocopier at the top of the staircase. I make a photocopy of my heart for you. It says: WTF?!

I am in hell and I have picked up some of the language.

If I was Eurydice I would not not be mad at Orpheus—
I'd be the register above.

The truck, our house, our life together—these things I do not miss. A reminder written out on every mirror, "You are a very attractive lady—don't ever forget."

This I do not miss.

The bathroom with its three mirrors—I am happy, humming to myself in the morning, when you enter. You appear behind me again and lay your hand over my left hip, like a shadow.

This I do not miss.

The bathroom beginning to look like a lobster trap with its yellow bars of reflected light and my skin turning pink with sex again—

This

I miss—the knowledge that there is blood and it is pounding, fishy rivers beneath the skin, sperming toward an inland island.

Scatter Plot

I would never compare men to God, but let me start
by saying—names or not—they all respond, or don't respond, to *you*.

The vacuum sucks a desert from the carpet—*varoom, room*. You enter
and say words to me, words I do not hear until you tear the cord-head out,

"—nothing," you say, "happens in a vacuum." An argument
proceeds from here, and you tell me to go to hell. I think I would like hell—

Hell, at least, is just,
its pain intelligible—unlike this world so full
of double standards and double talk and the double question,

So this is or is not about my faithlessness?

I thought we'd live
happily ever after—*ha, ha, ha*. I like to laugh,
an art that's empty and not tragic. Now Monday, on the radio, I say:

Bombs kill civilians in Kabul, a parade moves down South 4th Street.
Of course I would never compare the two, all events are separate, discrete.

But they happen simultaneously. And from behind a sound-proof pane,
my boss gives me two thumbs up. Anything is
better than dead air.

The only constellation I can recognize, Orion's Belt, lowers in the sky.
Nothing surprises me.
Art has not taught me to be ethical, but

the form of this feels wrong, wrong,
wrong. We weren't meant to be just
bright points in space and time.

There were supposed to be cords, strings connecting us, if only
in thought. And the cords were supposed to mean something to you

as well. I care for nothing
in your absence.

Eleanor Mary Boudreau has been published recently in Tin House, Waxwing, FIELD, Copper Nickel, *and* New American Writing. *She has worked as a dry-cleaner and as a radio reporter. Currently, she lives in Tallahassee, where she is working on her Ph.D. Her website is eleanormaryboudreau.com.*

SEVEN SECONDS IN THE LIFE OF THE HONEYED MUSE OR, WHAT IS ART?

SHEROD SANTOS

I. THE DOCTRINE OF SIGNATURES

1.1 In trying to think about what art is, we might begin with the mind-clearing assumption that art itself is not a real entity, but a notion, an idea, a concept within which we group the real entities of "artist" (the maker) and a "work of art" (the thing that's made).

Which is no solution at all.

For we're still left wondering: what within "the thing that's made" makes it a "work of art"?

1.1a Since words only mean what we agree they mean—the term "hatchet," for example, ceases to mean anything if one person understands it to refer to a light bulb, another to the Sistine Chapel, another to the flight of birds—we must assume that the meaning of the term can only be deduced from a set of particulars that are, however diverse, common to all works of art.

But what do we know about all works of art?

The subject is full of shadows.

1.1b *Hamlet: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?*
Polonius: By the mass. And 'tis like a camel indeed.
Hamlet: Methinks it is like a weasel.
Polonius: It is backed like a weasel.
Hamlet: Or like a whale?
Polonius: Very like a whale.

1.2 It was at one time largely taken for granted that art begins where function leaves off. Something fashioned to a particular end—a hammer, let's say—exists by limitation, by adaptation to a singular purpose. We don't use a hammer to erase a word, we don't use an eraser to hammer a nail.

When that object is, however, liberated from its function and taken in as an object of contemplation, it becomes more aesthetic than utilitarian (Duchamp's bottle rack and urinal are fine examples), and the degree of that difference defines its nature as a work of art.

1.2a By that definition, it can be said that an art work has a "thingly" character, and that the "art" is secreted *within* that "thing": this painting is *in* acrylic, that sonata is *in* three movements, this poem is *in* iambic pentameter. A secret the work both expresses—just above or below eye level—and keeps to itself.

1.3 Like so many inherited assumptions, "Art" in our age has been transformed into a relative concept. So much so that the distinction between what is and isn't art has grown increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to make. Yesterday's beliefs have become our doubts, its doubts our certainties.

1.3a Not so long ago, to have employed the term "beautiful" in critical appraisal of a work of art might've been viewed as vague, but it wouldn't have been viewed as contentious; today, it's more likely to arouse suspicions that the work in question is *merely* beautiful, a product of the beauty industry.

A declining respect for the authority of beauty? Or a declining belief in the reality of art?

1.3b The theoretical speculations of professional aesthetes and tenured academics have hardly helped simplify the issue.

While in day-to-day life we employ the term "art" without the least self-consciousness, we're inclined to fall silent when asked to explain the aesthetic difference between a Henry Moore bronze and the river-span girder of a steel worker. As if there's something condescending in saying that one is "art" and the other is "not art," never mind the fact that there's little chance of a steel worker feeling slighted. In fact, the opposite response is more likely: "Who cares?"

A perfectly reasonable question.

1.3.c One apparently shared with the Italian Renaissance, where such distinctions were far less fretful than they are today. Art was by nature wrought, makers were makers, and the term "artist" applied to architects, silversmiths, city planners, even to designers of *trionfi*, the ceremonial banquet sculptures composed entirely of sugar.

1.4 While past expectations combined sensory significance with some highly refined technical skill, modern expectations don't necessarily include any particular skill, nor any particular sensory engagement. Oftentimes, in a piece of conceptual art, for example, the artist's preliminary idea of the work *is* "the work," and the execution itself is a secondary concern often carried out by someone other than the artist.

No longer reliant on what Cézanne called "the logic of sensations," art opts instead for a disputation with the aesthetic schema out of which it grows.

1.4a A similar dispute breaks out in conceptual poetry, but since words—unlike color and form—carry with them traces of their etymological history, the medium itself cannot be sidestepped so easily: words can never fully shake off their sense.

Likewise, there is in poetry a secondary, no less intractable consideration: the effect a specific arrangement of words has on a reader's emotions, imagination, and aural sensations, the sign system by which words connect with other words through their shared associations. The conceptual poet's theoretical challenge: how to circumvent those associations.

1.4b With the logic of expedience, an improvised solution presented itself. Why not do away with a "readership" altogether? Why not replace it with a "thinkership," a point of view that finds its satisfactions in the *thought* of creating a poem rather than in the poem itself?

Readability is the last of that poet's concerns; "uncreative writing" is the first. An experiment guaranteed by the constitutional claim that poets, like all artists, are endowed with the inalienable right to establish their own aesthetic criteria, even when those criteria exclude (antagonize?) a reader's sensory experience.

The visuals change, orthodoxies and heresies switch place, the serpent devours its tail: *Set the word itself / against the word.*

II. THE ARDENT WEST

2.1 In a book about his travels in Italy, Stendhal describes a violently debilitating reaction he experienced while visiting the Basilica of Santa Croce in Florence. Upon seeing Giotto's frescoes for the first time, he fell into "a sort of ecstasy . . . a point where one encounters celestial sensations . . . palpitations of the heart . . . life seemed to drain from me, and I walked in fear of collapsing."

2.1a Based on the details of that narration, the psychiatrist Graziella Magherini invented the term "Stendhal Syndrome" (*hyperkulturemia*), an illness she treated in more than a hundred cases of people who experienced similar afflictions while viewing especially beautiful works of art. (Those afflictions, it was noted, occurred with greater frequency in Florence, and most especially in the Uffizi.)

2.1b The historical context and narrative structure of Giotto's frescoes barely figure into Stendhal's account. For him, their beauty was not in the content, it was in the paint.

2.2 Times change. Cultural tastes change. And today it's not uncommon for a work of art to be celebrated or excoriated on the basis of its content, the position it takes (or appears to take) on certain political or ideological issues.

The art of constituency: art evaluated by the evidence of its affiliations.

2.2a In Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*—a ceramic, porcelain, and embroidered installation—a viewer is invited to imagine a gathering of thirty-nine celebrated women seated around a triangular table.

Each wing of the table is 48 feet long, and the guests are arranged chronologically. Eleanor of Aquitaine, Ishtar, Virginia Woolf, Kali, Sojourner Truth, Sappho, all are among the invited guests. Each woman has her own embroidered place on the tablecloth, and each place is highlighted by an individual plate with raised motifs based on vulvar and butterfly forms suggestive of that woman. The names of another 999 women are inscribed in gold luster on the white tile floor beneath.

2.2b An icon of 70's feminist art, the work was regarded with ambivalence by a later generation of feminists who considered it less a work of art than a political statement whose time had passed. "Feminism has become a dirty word," Chicago

would later complain, "not something to be proud of, but rather to disown."

2.3 Like our appreciations of art, our appreciations of the natural world also appear to change with time. Mountains (to take just one example) weren't always seen as inherently beautiful; indeed, the early Greeks tended to look on them as unappealing, even unsightly, even in some instances repugnant. As late as the 17th century, John Donne described them as blemishes on the landscape, disfigurements of Nature's beauty.

2.3a The 19th century changed all that. Painters and poets began to portray the massifs in sublime images, wondrous and terrifying at once, the natural expressions of God's presence in the world.

It's as though mountains took on, in the viewer's eyes, the artists' feelings about them. As though the mountains themselves had changed.

For the Eye altering alters all
[Blake]

2.4 Glenn Gould believed that the achievement of art in general, and music in particular, wasn't a momentary rush of heightened experience but "the gradual, lifelong, construction of a state of wonder and serenity."

To achieve that state, in his early thirties Gould stopped performing in public, recommending instead that his music be listened to by way of the hi-fi set or phonograph, and of course only when the listener is alone. This allows a person to modulate the volume, adjust the dials, determine the distance from the speakers, an interactivity that draws us into a co-creative experience of the music.

Through those ministrations we are "learning to appreciate the elements of aesthetic narcissism—and I use the word in the best sense—and are awakening to the challenge that each man contemplatively creates his own divinity."

2.4a For Proust, imagination's god preexists the substance of the work. Within the felt time of our subjective memory, that "substance" resides in impressions experience has already stored within us, unknowable to others, unknown to the artist, until they're "dragged forth" into the light.

As Swann reflects in *Time Regained*, "I had arrived then at the conclusion that in fashioning a work of art we are by no means free, that we do not choose how we shall make it, and that . . . we are obliged, since it is both necessary and hidden, to do what we should have to do if it were a law of nature."

And nature's law: There are no artists, only works of art.

2.4b Although she saw the relation between art and artist in much more combustible terms, Marina Tsvetaeva likewise viewed creation not as a process the artist directs but as a compulsion he or she submits to: "The condition of creation is a condition of dreaming, when suddenly, obeying an unknown necessity, you set fire to a house or push your friend off a mountaintop."

III. IF ONCE WE BELIEVED IT TRUE

3.1 From the beginning, a largely unspoken task of art was to distinguish between the real and unreal, just as philosophy and religion sought to distinguish between good and evil, truth and falsity, life and afterlife.

At no point has art ever come closer to resolving those issues than philosophy and religion have theirs. And of course time keeps changing the terms of the search.

3.1a For a painter like Avigdor Arikha, Realism meant painting a dirty undershirt, an old house slipper's grimy sole, his wife Anne returning from the eye clinic with a large patch over one eye. When an artist chose something pretty to paint, Realism ended and Idealism began.

Show me an angel and I'll paint you one.
[Courbet]

3.2 Plato's bed.

The Divine Idea of a bed is the "real" thing, while the wooden structure a carpenter builds is "unreal" insomuch as it's a "copy" of the Archetype. Likewise, an artist's rendering of the carpenter's bed, because it's a copy of a copy, exists at a second remove.

This imitates *that*, which imitates *That*.

3.2a Rauschenberg's bed.

Identified as *Bed* (the First Idea) on the MOMA wall plaque, it is composed of castoff bedclothes and arranged "like a bed" mounted on a wooden bedframe (the carpenter's copy), then hung in the museum "like a traditional painting" (the artist's copy). As such, Rauschenberg's *Bed* embodies all three levels of reality, conflating the spaces in Plato's divide.

What's more, it's rumored that Rauschenberg slept beneath those bedclothes, and in so doing closed yet another gap, the one contained in the idea that art begins where usefulness ends.

3.2b Setting aside the theoretical assumptions underlying each bed—and, as well, the question of material realities in the spiritual and metaphysical realms—the meanings of the beds are only realized by analogy: Rauschenberg's with Plato's, Plato's with the Divine Idea.

Which is to say, their "realities" are largely rhetorical and largely a matter of positioning. Each is manifest in the other.

Each is, as it were, a metaphor.

3.3 Symbol, metaphor, allegory: to bring together and disclose.

In the material world, we have things which *appear* to us, but we also have another *kind* of thing, a thing-in-itself, a thing which *doesn't appear* to us but is, all the same, not nothing: air, death, God, love, as in "I gave you my love, and you took it."

Those things we perceive only when they're unconcealed by something else: when the air is unconcealed by the rustle of leaves, death by the corpse in the casket, God in religious fervor, love in human longing and attachment. And all those realities may be unconcealed by a work of art.

Beautiful are thy feet with shoes
[Song of Solomon]

3.3a The Bible tells us nothing about the physical appearance of Jesus, nor does it say anything about God taking on human form. And yet artists through the ages have portrayed them both in likenesses we've come to accept as true. Those images have fixed themselves in the cultural imagination to such an extent that deviations have been deemed sacrilegious, and many artists have been punished for the offense.

3.3b *If a workhorse or lion or unyoked ox*
Had eyes to paint, had hands to sculpt,
Had voice to sing its tribal song,
The horse would paint god as a horse,
The lion would sculpt a lion god,
The ox would sing a divinity of oxen.
[Xenophanes]

3.3c Things are never only one thing.

IV. STANDING AROUND THE CORNER OF ONESELF

4.1 The industrial revolution: Artist-as-person (i.e., personality).

Once science and industry outstripped the social priority of art, artists were forced into the defensive position of defining their work in personal terms.

Pushed to the margins of public interest, artists began to exaggerate their separateness and, inevitably, a growing aesthetic individualism ensued. Art began to exemplify the artist and, increasingly, its value was driven by the raw, self-expressive marks imprinted on the work. A kind of trademark style. A colophon. One might even call it an eccentricity.

4.1a "Individualism" for Marx was little more than a fanciful construct of the bourgeoisie. Moreover, he considered works of art interesting only as evolving social paradigms, imaginary structures governed by inexorable historical circumstances that in time arise to replace them.

"Is the *Iliad* at all compatible with the printing press and even printing machines? Do not singing and reciting and the muses necessarily go out of existence with the appearance of the printer's bar?"

4.1b But what of the time before history, when people were closer to the origins and conditions out of which civilization evolved? Before "art," as we understand it, and the "artist," as we understand him or her, existed?

When art was made—in the same way that clothes and shelter and weapons were made—to protect us from natural forces.

When art was used to make magic.

When art wasn't "individual" or responsive to some abstract notion of the beautiful.

When art was "art" only when it "worked."

When "art" existed without a theory of art.

4.2 While the history of ideas related to beauty goes back as far as those related to ethics and metaphysics, the discipline of "aesthetics" didn't appear until the middle of the eighteenth century.

Using the Greek word *aesthesis* or *aesthetikos*, meaning "sensory perception," philosophy established aesthetics as a separate mode of inquiry, a study through which an empirical set of standards could be instituted.

4.2a But who would determine those standards?

Those who possessed, like the oenophile's tongue, the recognizable physiological attributes to do so. Those who, in other words, possessed the authority of "taste."

Although the concept was new, the assumptions behind it were not.

4.2b First century CE

In *On the Sublime* Longinus proposed a structural basis for establishing a hierarchy of aesthetic objects: "For when men of different pursuits, lives, ambitions, ages, languages, hold identical views on one and the same subject, then the verdict which results . . . makes our faith in the object of admiration strong and unassailable."

4.2c Aesthetics was a study Tolstoy distrusted, knowing that it served to strengthen the gentry's already ironclad hold on the arts.

To his mind, the study proceeded by a dangerously self-serving logic: When a circle of people designates certain handmade objects as works of art—because they're pleasing—they've already framed a theory by which only handmade objects that please them warrant that designation.

They have by those standards improvised a definition of art whereby making art means making something that reminds them of art.

A surplus value.

4.2d It's a common situation in Kafka's work that one of his characters finds himself in a country ruled by laws he's unaware of.

No one he encounters will tell him the laws, but his sense of their governing presence is a source of great anxiety. Slowly he begins to realize that only the rulers—the "invisible tribunal"—know the laws, and that the laws derive from what the rulers do.

4.2e The rise of the art museum was a demonstration of the general agreement that, by relocating works of art from site-specific locations (churches, city squares, royal chambers) to the confines of a public building, communities would be united in the civilizing experience of shared aesthetic and moral standards.

4.2f Since those standards were considered self-evident, they could be applied in surprisingly literal ways. To make that point, in *Art as Experience* John Dewey proposed a hypothetical example.

"Suppose a finely wrought object, one whose texture and proportions are highly pleasing in perception, has been believed to be a product of some primitive people. Then there is discovered evidence that proves it to be an accidental natural product. As an external thing, it is now precisely what it was before. Yet at once it ceases to be a work of art, and becomes a natural 'curiosity.' It now belongs in a museum of natural history, not in a museum of art."

It was simply a matter of emphasis.

V. BETWEEN TWO NEVERMORES

5.1 Art is in a race with its definition.

A race which requires the work of art to *unbecome* what it just became the moment before. In order for art to *be* art in the first place—not the recapitulation of what's already here, but the bringing-into-being of something that's not—it must resist whatever identity the world has already formed for it.

Once art loses that resistance, once it becomes describable in words, then it also becomes certifiable, and that prerogative removes it from the realm of discovery and relegates it to the realm of recognition: "I know art when I see it."

5.2 July 19, 2001. Prenzlauer Berg, Berlin.

Wrapped in blood-soaked sheets, Austrian artist Wolfgang Flatz was suspended from a crane attached to a helicopter. At some point the sheet was dropped, revealing the naked artist with his arms outstretched crucifixion style.

To the accompaniment of broadcast music and mooing, a second helicopter appeared with a headless cow stuffed with fireworks dangling from a rope. The rope was then cut and, on impact, the cow exploded to loud applause from hundreds of people gathered to watch.

Beforehand, a thirteen-year-old girl had appealed to a judge to stop the performance, arguing that the detonation could trigger a "spiritual trauma." Her appeal was denied on the grounds that, since the cow was dead, it was considered food; that being the case, in advance of the performance the animal was tested for mad cow disease.

5.2a This might be understood in one of two ways. Either our notion of beauty has narrowed and we've become less aware of, less susceptible to, and less respectful of aesthetic values inherent in traditional works of art, or our notion of beauty has expanded and we've become more aware of, more susceptible to, and more respectful of aesthetic values inherent in things formerly excluded from the category of art.

5.2b "Even the act of peeling a potato can be a work of art if it is a conscious act." [Joseph Beuys]

There have been crazier ideas.

5.3 April 9, 1917, Grand Central Palace, New York City.

Marcel Duchamp submitted a standard porcelain urinal, produced by J. L. Mott Iron Works, to an art show sponsored by the Society of Independent Artists.

The urinal was hidden from view during the show and eventually lost. A replacement was found and subsequently purchased. Following convention, Duchamp assigned it the title *Fountain*, dated it 1917, and signed it with the nom de crayon, "R. Mutt."

5.3a For some, *Fountain* was just another avant-garde joke. For others, it made the egalitarian point that art can be found in the lowliest of places. For still others, the elegance of its lines, the coherence of its form, the images reflected on its polished surfaces, all evoke the same aesthetic

reaction one might experience when looking at a Brancusi bronze.

5.3b For Duchamp, all such responses were appalling. *Fountain* didn't stand for anything. It was independent of aesthetic and interpretive meaning, free from the discriminations of taste.

It was only art because he said it was.

5.4 Having come to expect the "shock of the new," the contemporary sensibility is no stranger to the idea that a work of art need not be either a *work*, in any literal sense, or *art* in any conventional sense.

Carried to its logical extreme, the question then becomes: are the arts of the past and the arts of the present compatible?

5.4a What does that mean, exactly? The liberation of art from the shackles of tradition? A severance that frees the artist to create unencumbered by anything other than his or her own inspiration?

But how to create the illusion of newness without comparison to the signs by which art in the past was identified? Can "make it new" be achieved without the conscious displacement (or, in more hostile form, defacement) of the vast storehouse of symbolic images that were already valid or meaningful?

5.4b And what of the tools and methodologies that evolved in the course of making those images? The Golden Section ratios, the armillary sphere, Renaissance perspective and the tuning fork, affordable musical instruments, the flying buttress and stereopticon, the transnational history of poetic forms, the table of alphabets, the language of musical notation, dictionaries, libraries, moveable type, a great chunk of the world's literature available in translation, a full palette of watercolors as close as the local department store? And what of the technical skills artists developed over a lifetime of practice with those tools?

5.4c Some riddles are best left unresolved.

5.5 1958. Yves Klein exhibition. Iris Clert Gallery. Paris.

Although, except for a large empty cabinet, the gallery space was bare, more than a thousand people showed up, the crowds spilling over into the streets, where a special cocktail was served by waiters with silver trays. Prepared at a nearby brasserie, the cocktail was Klein's own mix of Cointreau, gin, and methylene, a concoction that, for several days after, turned the drinkers' urine blue.

The aura of art was enough.

VI. HOODED HORSES ROUND THE FOUNTAIN RAN

6.1 March 10, 1914.

After moments spent contemplating Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus*, Mary Richardson, a prominent militant suffragette, pulled out a knife she'd concealed beneath her coat, shattered the protective glass, and hacked away at the canvas.

Her act was intended to draw attention to the imprisoned founder of the Women's Social and Political Union, Emmeline Pankhurst.

In an interview forty years later Richardson clarified her reasoning, stating that she simply found intolerable the idea of men gaping at a picture of a naked woman.

6.1a May 21, 1972.

In a notorious, widely publicized event, the Hungarian-born Australian geologist Laszlo Toth slipped into St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Wielding a sledgehammer, he dashed past the guards, vaulted a marble balustrade, and attacked Michelangelo's "Pietà," knocking off a piece of the Virgin's nose, chipping one of her eyelids, and breaking off an arm at the elbow.

6.1b The Italian sculptor Giacomo Manzù called for the death penalty, while a group of artists in the Swiss Institute in Rome sent a telegram to the Venice Biennale recommending Toth for their most distinguished award.

6.1c November 14, 1986.

After confessing his part in the destruction of Hans Gieng's polychrome *Fountain of Justice*" in Berne, a twenty-nine-year-old auto mechanic, Pascal Hêche, explained that what he attacked wasn't the monument, but the "symbol represented by the monument."

Art conceived of as a delivery system for a set of cultural signs.

6.1d Vandal art, image-breaker, *ïconoclästës*. History is rife with examples, and with whole populations enlisted in its cause.

Byzantium and the Reformation, the French Revolution, the wholesale purging of everything the Nazis considered *Entartete Kunst* (degenerate art), the Red Guard's destruction of "bourgeois" art during Mao's Cultural Revolution, the preemptive rise of Socialist Realism under Stalin, the Taliban's demolition of 2,000-year-old Buddhist monuments.

6.1e The list has no beginning or end, but what's common to all such moments is the connection they make between the act and the object of the act, for the violence intends not to *eradicate* so much as *humiliate* the icons, to shame their meaning. For without the meaning of the abominated icon intact, the act itself is pointless.

One cannot desecrate what is already meaningless.

6.1f The index to Dario Gamboni's *The Destruction of Art* lists common ways that pieces of art are damaged or destroyed:

with acid
with pickaxe
with instruments of protection
by bombing
by breaking
by defaming
by erasing
by explosive
by melting
by pulling down
by throwing away
by ripping
by sawing
by shooting
by fire

6.1g One might also add, by art: "The impulse of modern art is the desire to destroy beauty." [Barnett Newman]

As if the blood sport of History hadn't done that already.

6.2 At a period when the Perugian Republic, with its long history of bloodshed and cruelty, ruled over Umbria, the aristocratic Baglioni family was so renowned for its refinement in the arts that it slaughtered its foes only on "beauteous summer evenings."

6.2a 1999. Forested area. Velika Kruša.

In a small, poppy-filled clearing in the woods, a Serbian soldier is bent to play an English rosewood upright piano. Off to one side, an abandoned cache of musical instruments. Leaning against the piano, a Russian Dragunov sniper's rifle with a night scope and box magazine.

In a shallow cave halfway up the mountainside, a family of Albanian musicians can tell, from the sound of an out-of-tune G-flat key, that their piano is the one being played, and that the person who plays it does so with exceptional tenderness and skill.

6.2b 1942, Winter. Janowska road camp. Upper Ukraine.

Two old men with garden spades are digging a hole in the frozen earth. In an outer ring, a dozen or so European Jews, each with a musical instrument, appear to entertain the diggers as they go about their work.

Outside the ring stands a group of five uniformed guards. One of the guards is smoking a cigarette, another has turned aside, a third is patting a German shepherd tethered to a leash, and all appear to be lost in contemplation of the music the orchestra plays.

VII. BUT MANLY SETTE THE WORLD ON SIX AND SEVENE

7.1 Seventh century BCE

As an alternative to the "heroic hexameter" of epic poetry, the domain of warring armies and gods, Sappho invented a four-line stanzaic shape whose lines are determined by a fixed sum of syllables:

x u x *u* – *x* u u x – u *x u*
x u x *u* – *x* u u x – u *x u*
x u x *u* – *x* u u x – u *x u*
x u u x – *u*

Scaled to the metrics of the human form, her stanza gave shape to a poetry that could be played to the lyre, performed in the marketplace, enjoyed by laborers, bakers, and field hands alike, a mathematical formulation that expressed our earthly experience of the world.

7.1a Fourth century CE

For Augustine, the calculus of proportion yielded very different sums. Laying out the foundation for medieval Christian aesthetics, he developed the idea that art reflected, not our earthly experience, but our spiritual harmony with God.

Derived as it was from the beauty that suffuses the natural world, art's sacred origins were evident in its formal properties—unity, proportion, symmetry, rhythm, the fittingness of the parts—properties rooted in number (*numerus*), in immutable mathematical principles that are attributes of the beauty of God.

7.1b 20th century.

Having drifted from St. Petersburg to Constantinople to Paris to Boston, the Russian *wunderkind* Nicolas Slonimsky (pianist, composer, conductor, musical lexicographer, professor of Slavic languages at Harvard) composed *51 Minitudes for Piano*, a series of mini-études.

The first étude is entitled "$\sqrt{B^5}$", the square root of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, a piece in which Slonimsky compresses, by their square roots, all the intervals of the famous opening. By this calculation, *ba-ba-ba-bum* becomes *ba-ba-ba-bee*, and so on.

As it was with Augustine, the collaboration was realized through the symphony's formal properties

(*numerus*)—proportion, symmetry, the fittingness of the parts—although, in his case, those properties were attributes of the beauty of Beethoven.

7.1c Time immemorial

In the most common of all the Navajo ceremonies, the *Klay'jih* (the Night Chant healing ceremony), numbers play an essential role in summoning supernatural powers. The most important song in the ceremony, the *Atsá'lei*, is sung on the final night by the Talking God and four male Dancing Gods.

Four fires are started on each side of the dancing space, then the dancing and singing begin with four words rearranged and repeated four times. Those lines are followed by four more lines of meaningless syllables, also repeated four times.

Well in advance of the ceremony, the singers receive long and intensive instruction, every step and word exhaustively rehearsed, for if even a single syllable is left out, a single word misspoken, the chorus repeated more or less than twelve times, the ceremony is immediately halted, the significance of the preceding nine days is lost, and the crowds return to their homes.

7.2 4'33"

In a lecture at Vassar College, John Cage spoke of his desire to compose a piece of uninterrupted silence to sell to the Muzak Company. In the composition that eventually grew from that wish, a professional musician sits down at the piano and refrains from touching the keys for four minutes and thirty-three seconds.

The music consists of the aleatory sounds in the auditorium: murmurs, coughs, the shuffling of feet, the street sounds filtering in from outside. Nothing heard is anything the composer intended; everything heard is wholly a matter of chance.

A stopwatch is used to keep track of the minutes and seconds.

7.2a Through countless experiments and manifestations, art in the modern world has flirted with its own oblivion, with a process of self-subtraction which, if carried to its logical end, could only be realized in the silence of art.

But what would that mean? Not the poetics of silence, not the white canvas, not the bell jar of an empty stage, not silence as metaphor or sensory impression—for those are artistic effects like any others. Imagine instead a real silence, the silence of *no art at all*, of no medium to make it from, no context to present it in, of nothing made and no one to make it.

Is such a silence imaginable?

7.2b At the age of twenty-one, Rimbaud abandoned poetry and took up a life as a wandering solitaire, traveling through East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, working for brief periods as a shopkeeper, a foreman in a rock quarry, a trader in guns and coffee. He considered writing about Harer and the Gallas country and took an interest in the Koran. But there's no evidence that he ever contemplated writing poetry again. The poet in him fell silent and remained that way until his death at the age of thirty-seven.

7.2c It would be melodramatic to characterize his silence as the fulfillment of some runaway modern impulse. He didn't preface his decision with a manifesto, there was no literary equivalent of a suicide note, no symbolic gesture, no fanfare, nothing to draw attention to his life as a poet. Those who encountered him in his wanderings were, in fact, unaware that he'd even been a poet.

7.2d If anything can be made of his decision, it's that, using *x* for art, *y* for silence, *z* for artist:

x is *y* if and only if *z* is *y*

Silence, it seems, is easily achieved.

7.2e Breaking that silence is, on the other hand, a much more difficult affair, and it needs to be acknowledged that, amidst the revolutionary calls to arms so fashionable these days—The Death of Art! The End of Beauty! The Dream of the Tabula Rasa!—the wonder is that art continues at all.

From the perspective of time, it appears everything has changed and nothing has changed, for when all is said and done, at the moment a lump of clay is placed on a wheel, the first word of a poem printed on the page, a box of spray paints set beside the wall of an abandoned building, at that moment, successfully or not, art will attempt to happen again.

It isn't a matter of *being* so much as *becoming* art that gets lost in the dense thicket of opinions. Art appears to have a life of its own, and as much now as ever before the desire to make it outreaches the voices that would serve as its monitors. Having outlived the gods, the archaic process continues in one form or another, in one context or another, as though the world depended on it—to what end it may be impossible to say, but it's nonetheless worth saying.

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ORANGE

WILLIAM BREWER

My nail cuts through the peel, sends a burst
of oily mist through the sun splayed over
my aisle seat. The droplets move
in tandem, refracting the light,
and with the mist come bright citrus notes
that rapidly disperse into the olfactory systems
of surrounding passengers, interrupting their thoughts,
stirring awake the man in front of me
who hours ago told his seatmate *I'm taking*
a little Valium. If you need to pee, climb over me.
He shivers, rubs his eyes. We speed into a knot
of clouds and before we're through he's asleep again.
Chipped ice sweating onto napkins mapped
with the country. An already-completed
crossword in the seatback. A game
I play with myself is to see how long
I can keep the peel as a single coil, its carpeted
underside, its surface pocked like a teenage face.
Each tear releases more droplets I admire
for how they seem to assemble and swell,
a plume that breaks apart with a kind
of intention, a mission, how I imagine chemicals
to operate in a medical context, dispatched into systems
of cells, trained to obliterate, defend, convert.
Depending on the light, some reach an almost
amber tone while others bleach to yellow
as if administered different dyes
like the slides of deformed cells
I studied three nights ago
while googling the specifics of my father's
leukemia, a browser window opened
onto paragraphs describing how
it's most common among California migrant workers
and those exposed to Agent Orange in Vietnam.
And yet my father stayed out of the war.
Another page showed photos of drum barrels
stacked in rows, each one painted with
a stripe of orange from which the Agent
gets its name. There's also an Agent
Pink, Purple, Green, Blue, White, called
Rainbow Herbicides. Because nothing
is too benign to be excluded from tactical use.
I see maps of dioxin production
include a plant in Newark, New Jersey
where a few miles inland my father as a boy
stood at his front door and watched
his father waking up hungover in the front seat
of his Ford where he passed out again
after a night at the VFW, a memory
inherited so long ago I can't remember
when he told me, or if he even did,
and yet it matures in shapes and textures,
the color of the car, the dewed grass shining,
high broken ceiling and easterly winds
blowing over from Newark.
I remember watching the war in black and white
in someone's living room, then in color,
my father said once. I searched for images
of scorched bone marrow and my wife
demanded I come to bed. I eat the orange
wedge by wedge, the pods exploding
between my teeth; wipe my fingers
on the seat cushion. I look up and see
on a seatback TV a few rows down
an aged Marlon Brando
as an even older Vito Corleone—
squirrel-cheeked, sitting among the tomatoes—
slide an orange peel over his teeth
and smile at his grandson who screams
and cries. He removes the peel,
laughs, the boy laughs, chases Vito through
the stakes, trying to spray him with a canister
of chemicals that mist over the family's
San Marzanos, then Vito coughs, staggers
through a pirouette, and collapses.
The boy thinks this, too, is a joke, stands
over the corpse, soaking its shirt with chemicals.
The cabin jerks. The seatbelt sign dings on.
A child behind me coughs. I hold my breath,
flash through panic fantasies of carrying my father's
death to him. In my head I hear the sentences
that describe how possible side effects
and genetic mutations can be passed down
to the exposed's offspring.
I read them once, then again, then couldn't stop,
wondering if I had just been introduced
to my death through reading, that it's already
in me, a blip on the end of an x-axis
just waiting for the data to catch up to it,
something I can google, read its Wikipedia page,
my death as a searchable item, my death inherited,
manufactured by the war, my death
the result of my country, already fraying
the edges of my cells, a future blankness
detected by scans, the war passed down,
the war inside of me. I stare down at the bare
wintered woods of the Alleghenies blurring past
and wonder if all the acres decimated
by the rainbow look like that, but all the time.
Rolling hills of brown trees give way to sprawl.
Pre-fabricated homes. Cul-de-sacs.
The oils moved like angelic flame,
the scent with incredible speed. I imagine
the phantom waves of messages I can't yet read
rising to my phone that say
we've been discharged and are heading home.
call us when you land. My father
shivering in the passenger seat.
Extreme nausea and aches, fatigue and low
spirits. I hand the peel to the flight attendant.
Gray flaps of wing metal rise and adjust,
a slight shift of the plane's axis.
My tray table is in the locked and upright
position. My seatbelt is low and tight

across my lap. I look down once more
at the mountainous dirt I call home,
then return to my book about the assassination.

William Brewer is the author of I Know Your Kind *(Milkweed Editions, 2017), a winner of the National Poetry Series, and* Oxyana, *selected for the Poetry Society of America's 30 and Under Chapbook Fellowship. Formerly a Stegner Fellow, he is currently a Jones Lecturer at Stanford University.*

from ***ATOPIA***

SANDRA SIMONDS

See, the thing is poet, is that you're failing.
You're failing at capitalism.
You're failing at "self-care."
You're failing at feminism.
You're failing at activism.
You've fallen deep into your addiction.
Your despair spreads everywhere.
None of this is your fault
but it's still happening.
The failure is the fracture is the opening.
Like that infection that started in your elbow
and moved to the depths of your being.
You spend the night reading about a god
cleaved in two so the dream demons come true.
Capitalism is shrinking and the rich
have gotten more violent.
Capitalism could fail and win at the same time.
Poet, this is called "crisis."
The swans and the trees and the birds are buzzing.
They don't care.
They hum.
Capitalism won.
I went on a run.
I am dumb I hum on my long run.

⋆

That hail is rare in South Georgia
That once my former colleague saw a 12-foot alligator on 319 before they divided the road
That that was 20 years ago
That I regret reading an article on what it is ⋆really⋆ like to have Trump supporting parents
That I feel bad for saying that
That my kids are eating toast for breakfast this morning
That when they don't eat what I think they are supposed to eat, the guilt is overwhelming
That I am a single mother
That my kids are age 4 and age 7
That maybe I should not have taught a four-year-old to use the oven
That I hate soccer practice because I hate the other parents
That I tried to read Brecht at soccer practice but I felt like a snob
That the translation of Brecht was bad anyway and basically unreadable
That I was cold and sick and the bench was cold and I didn't want to touch the baby that someone brought to the practice and said "I don't want to touch your baby"
because I didn't want to get the baby sick
but maybe I just didn't feel like touching a baby
That it's probably Communism or nothing
That fascism really kills your sex drive
That the rich don't need us all anymore
That oh yeah they never did need us all so what's the point of writing this?
That maybe one time they did but that time is over
That probably they never did
That I already said that
That popular uprising may lead to nothing
That things that look like a "win" are often the very things that pull us closer to loss
That popular uprising will probably lead to nothing or the consolidation of the 1%'s power
That it is unpopular to say this since it is not "positive"
That I had to convince my boyfriend that the 1% needs to die
That he said can we not talk about murder before we go to sleep
That there needs to be a theory
That no theory is still a theory, just a bad one
That my four-year-old daughter is singing "Manic Monday" on the way to preschool
That leaves are falling in South Georgia and it is beautiful in the way that my daughter's singing is beautiful and this is the way that some things, which are held together so precariously, are also beautiful
Daymoon, Utopia

That you came to me in those dreams and I tried not to be afraid of you
That the dreams were never about the world falling apart as so many dreamed
That this was not the apocalypse and we both knew this
That someone will ask who the "you" of the poem is seriously leave me alone
That I wish it was Sunday
That I wish it wasn't Monday
That it is Sunday and the leaves keep falling in South Georgia across the field of nothing ever happens except for leaves falling
That last week a hawk stared at me and I said, "What are you looking at, hawk?" and it wouldn't fly away
That it came closer and closer to me
That a bird approaching a human is one of the most startling things in the world
That other creatures are generally scared of you
That the bird was not afraid of me or anyone or anything
That a friend posted the advice that if you feel lonely you should build a community but fuck community, I want my loneliness back since I deserve it
That Selena Gomez might or might not have gone to rehab for a cell phone addiction
That I would love for someone to feed me fruit in the desert for 90 days like I was Jesus or some other ornate martyr
That I drink too much or too little depending on the voltage
That sometimes people send me checks of money and I cash them immediately
That my boyfriend bought tickets to the opera is that what they call it?
That all operas end badly for women like screaming and breaking dishes
That I have often thought about operatic suicides and ordinary suicides like factories
That my language is something between an opera and a factory
That I might be bourgeois like soccer moms and commuting
That I feel like I'll never be a good enough leftist why am I not good enough for you?
That I have lived somewhere between an opera and a factory and that is called the moon on a windy night in South Georgia
That there are always animals in my dreams which is telling
That the nature of the future hides in the dreams of language like animals
That today I thought about the way the landlord is the boss is the president as I took a broom and gently swept a gecko to the front door of my apartment

⋆

Tallahassee. Tallahassee. Tallahassee.
Your mist today is incredible
as it settles on this rose garden!
When the largest rose shook off its dew
and looked at me like a cartoon, I smiled back
and promised not to break his neck.

And here we are together again, walking in a park
that honors dead children. A tree planted for each child
on such a mild day in December. And how the dead
children stream through me, scrolls of them:

Lily! Rose! Bobby!

Kierkegaard says anyone who follows through
on an idea becomes unpopular. And also
that a person needs a system, otherwise you
become mere personality. He must not have
known very many poets, so prone to tyrannical
shifts in mood. Don't let me go crazy.

In the car on the way to school Charlotte says,
"I like to be gentle with nature
because I like nature."

But my mind wouldn't rest, system-less,
as I drive through dread:

Lily! Rose! Bobby!

You're dead, you're dead.

⋆

I'm so angry I will
throw my fathers into
the supremacy of their
wilted sacrament.
I'm so angry I will dance
the love dance of roaches.
I'm so angry every cell
in my body is a shard
from the broken
heart of a porcelain doll.

My skin, the Fahrenheit
of my existence, burns
Pollyannaish and strange.
Like an exorcism, I heave
the gaudy flesh of my awakening
and cut from existence
my old selves
as the moon twists the elms.
My face, with its
weakness for beauty,
is the mask of purity.

⋆

Dear Jorge de Sena,

"I don't have enough money
to buy these books," is what you said in your book
in the bookstore in Princeton, New Jersey
but I don't have enough
money to buy your book either
so soon I'm putting your book back
on the shelf but thank you.

Last week I read about a Putin
blown up by a million Erdogans
in the Trump deluxe hotel complex
of biting sorrow, how I cried in the snow,
while my daughter sang "Let It Go,"

and now, Jorge, I sit here reading your book,
punk-like and delighted,
scarfing down a Power Bar
that tastes like dust or lice or froth
bubbling from capitalism's labyrinth
while the clerics of money
sit in their divine tower
drinking Greek pine wine.

Jorge, before I go, answer me this.
Would you agree that half of the beauty
of the house of poetry is that it
never works out exactly?

⋆

"Everything is terrible."
When I opened the internet, these are the kinds
of things I would read. Then I looked away
from my computer and over at my kids:
the older one was teaching the younger
one how to set up the chess board and they
were fighting over the queen. My little girl
couldn't sleep at night because she said
her friend Stella's dog died and the ghost of the dog
was barking at her all night. I said, "Charlotte,
dogs don't have ghosts," but what I meant was
dogs don't have to pull things together
the way we have to. Then I remembered
the sign at the zoo said, "Shhhhhh, the wolf
is pregnant so please be respectful" and I walked
her to the bunk bed and tucked her back in.

⋆

It's May. Don't you think the birds
of prey are loud today inside
this pretty hallucination anthology?
I dreamed I was filling out a form
called "The United States of American
Single Payer Health Care System."
The only place I wanted to be was outside.
Nietzsche walked eight hours a day.
The walking body has no identity.
Who are you? I resigned myself
to the fact I would not longer
"heal from childhood trauma."
Child rape translated into . . . there would
be no way to chlorinate the truth.
Hello. Are you my future
reader? The belief that I was flawed
was making transformation king
yet I was queen of tropical stasis.

⋆

Today, something about the Russians.
Today, I locked myself inside my house as my house grew hotter.
In the first month of summer, I ate some cheese like a rat
and smoked all my neighbor's cigarettes.
Today, something about Kissinger.
Today, something about gaslighting and damage.
Today, the spine is tired.
Today I will do ballet until I don't have legs.
Today, I text Carmen about trauma.
Today, I will bathe my misery.
Today, there has to be more than damage.
Today there is more damage and wreckage than wreckage
so why not remove oneself permanently?
Today, my body tells me there is only damage but that is unbelievable.
Carmen, that cannot be right.

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TWO POEMS

GINA MYERS

Emma

Mid-May, 90 degrees. Severe
thunderstorm watch.
Outside of the subway station,
teenagers hand out flyers
for a politician. This week
already long, only Tuesday.
Yesterday's medical tests
left me nauseated & sick
in bed. I missed
the poetry reading.
I missed the concert, I missed
yoga. A hidden cost
of illness: the things I spend
money on but don't go to
because I can't get out of bed.
Emma sends me an article
about the discovery of rocks
formed from plastic.
I send Emma an article
about trees having a heartbeat.
No one I know knows
how to function right now.
Every day at least one
new horror in the news.
Emma asks, "What keeps you
going?" Yesterday
Palestinian protesters
were slaughtered in Gaza.
Today: business as usual.
I have a meeting. I meet Erin
for lunch. I read my emails.
I work on the report.
I tell Emma: poetry,
music & friends. The sky,
a minute ago, sunny. Suddenly
dark as the storm comes.
The truth is, Emma, I don't know
what keeps me going
right now. The wind picks up,
howls down the alley
behind my apartment.
I hear my neighbor's footsteps
above me. I wonder if he heard me
cry last night when I was
feeling alone with my illness.
My friends tell me I'm not
alone, but I still feel this way.
I was surprised
by the sudden tears
at the bar on Sunday. We
were talking about rents in Philly
& I didn't even know
I had begun to cry until my voice
cracked. The radio
loses its signal to the storm.
When friends say they're sorry
for what I'm going through,
I always say, "It's okay. It will be fine."
I say things I don't believe
but believe I'm supposed to say.
The teenagers now running
down the street, seeking shelter.
Thunder & the downpour begins.
I was taught to never ask
for help. My dad mistaking this
for strength. It's okay.
It will be fine. The radio
has found its signal again. Dear Emma,
it's okay. It will be fine.
The radio: static. Now: silence.

New Year's Day (2018)

champagne bottle shattered
on 4th Ave. paper silver
crown
flattened
9 degrees & it's good to see you
we warm up
over ramen 2 cups
of tea & memories of faraway beaches
riding the train into Manhattan
I seek a shape to place
my desire into
it's my heart that leaves
first do you remember
what it was like
to live here? capital
gleams off the buildings
Philadelphia far away
what is the opposite of
a resolution
a dissolution
a disillusion

Gina Myers is the author of two full-length poetry collections, A Model Year *(2009) and* Hold It Down *(2013), as well as several chapbooks, including most recently* Philadelphia *(Barrelhouse, 2017). She co-edits* the tiny *with Gabriella Torres, and runs the Accidental Player reading series in Philadelphia.*

MEMOIRS OF A FOX

On reading, and running with, Siegfried Sassoon

LAURA KOLBE

My year of graduate work in Cambridge, England was a somewhat bleak and desperate affair, coinciding with a bout of depression that could perhaps have been shortened or ameliorated if I had been assigned hard agricultural labor, a daily column of local news to fill, or double shifts as a postal carrier, rather than being given an apartment and a library card and complete freedom from all responsibility. I was in my then-usual attire and position—smelly pajamas, blanket over shoulders, cold oatmeal managed with the left hand and laptop managed with the right—when a mass email came over the university transom. The Cambridge Drag Hounds Club was looking for a "fox."

I grew up in rural Pennsylvania surrounded by deer hunters. Our yard, a former apple orchard with trees in variously picturesque or grotesque decline, was perennially attractive to wild animals. In consequence, my mother was continually shooing away hunters building surreptitious tree stands at the bounds of our property, where they'd wait in silence and camo facepaint for a deer to step into their crosshairs after glutting on half-rotten windfall fruit. Hunters were silent, spooky presences, like green plastic GI figures blown up to life size. They did not seem to move, unless it was to fall out of trees, as my sister's friend's father did, breaking his neck.

British fox hunting is another matter, loud, kinetic, and vicious. The medieval sport was rendered more humane, if more bizarrely abstracted, in 2004, when Parliament passed the Hunting Act, which banned using more than two dogs to hunt a live mammal. (Until Theresa May's government hit a new low in popularity last year and mere survival became the imperative, she had kept a repeal of the Hunting Act prominently on the Tory to-do list, citing the usual "way-of-life"/"values"-y rhetorical readymades.) Drag hunting—chasing after animal scent in lieu of actually fleeing animals—arose to fill the void. This Drag Hounds club was apparently in search of a human who could run ten miles on a Saturday morning such that a subsequent pack of dogs could, at some point later in the day, follow their nose and lead their brightly clad masters on a pastoral romp. Runner gets forty pounds sterling.

From where I sit today, this looks like one of the more heartbreakingly clownish manifestations of the so-called gig economy. At the time, though, the email seemed to betoken some kind of providence. The salvific potential of a run that I would be constrained to complete!

I should explain here that running seems to be both a cause and an effect of my temperament's autumnal and vernal equinoxes, when darkness and light are in balance. When my inner calendar is summer solstice, all highs, I am not running because I am likely falling in love, tossing off poems, shopping for outrageous attire, performing splendid feats of procrasti-baking *avant la lettre*. At my winter solstices of mood I am likewise prevented from running, being nearly always asleep, in tears, or curled on the couch reading Simone Weil in multiple sweaters, whatever the objective calendar date. More and more I live at my equinoxes, but in my late teens and early twenties it felt like all solstices, the bright and the black. Perhaps a run would force a reset.

Early that morning, a pickup truck arrived for me, headlights still ablaze in the February dark. The truck in itself was cheering—I wasn't even sure they had these in the UK, and clambering in the back made me feel that I was in some way home, in the land of my own childhood. Every other aspect of the rendezvous, however, was discomfiting. The two young men in the front seats, Jack and Inscrutable-Mumble, were scarcely intelligible, speaking at a pitch of posh crossed with a rurality of the landowning that made words seem to effervesce not from the mouth but directly off the nasal septum like a pedal steel. They wore matching and spotless Barbour coats over equally luminous button-downs and trousers, with pretend-to-work, faintly glowing boots.

I generally stand behind my principle of avoiding specific accouterments of running—what appeals to me most, after its psychotropic properties, is its democratic vistas, that billions of humans can do it—but that day I regretted my pit-stained sweatshirt and pilled, thinning tights, my small and close-fitting cap perhaps best described as surgico-religious in form. After several repetitions of the same phoneme patterns, I came to understand that the young men were asking me if I knew friends of theirs who resided in my same Cambridge college. I did not. The truck cab lapsed into silence. This was England's coldest winter in years. Though the Lenten rose and the crocus had already come up, the morning was still jagged with occasional five-minute bursts of snow.

From where I sit today, this looks like one of the more heartbreakingly clownish manifestations of the so-called gig economy.

As an undergraduate in the U.S., I'd taken a class on the English poets of the First World War. I see now that I was too young for it; I didn't deserve them. In the solipsism of my twenty years, their rising indignation felt suitable, a ready-to-wear garment for life's small affronts—petty academic injustices, treacherous frenemies, the image of President George W. Bush frozen in a post office or animate like a pet-shop window in one's peripheral vision on a waiting room TV. The incipient realization, taken very personally, as though *I* had been singled out for duping, that a "drone" was not just an insect, a drudge, or the bass-line of a bagpipe tune. Poetry decorated these angers. But only the very young or very stupid treat the corpus of poetry as an anthology of potential captions for the reader's own life.

Where I could most reliably comprehend these poets as, invaluably, *not*-me, was in reading their prose. It is perhaps for that reason that their memoirs and autobiographical novels (Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That*, Siegfried Sassoon's *Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*, Edward Thomas's essays and letters) have imprinted on me more than their more famous, objectively *better*, poetry. Sassoon's first volume of an autobiographical trilogy, *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928), sprang to mind as soon as the email advert had arrived, and I likely would not have finally agreed to board the pickup truck and set off for the unspecified estate if it hadn't been for Sassoon's assurances.

Sassoon's title is somewhat misleading, as there are some fox-hunting scenes but a great deal more ink spilled on youth itself, outdoors and in. The author's continental name, courtesy of an English mother who loved Wagner (hence "Siegfried") and an originally Iraqi-Jewish father ("Sassoon"), was likely felt at times as an inconvenience upon its bearer, his life having coincided with two major wars against Germany, one of which he fought. Needless to say, most English of his period didn't particularly favor Germans, and those who did were unlikely to particularly favor Jews. (It was for this reason that real-kid Sassoon wore brass knuckles on the schoolyard.) The story of adult Sassoon's growing disgust with the First World War, his near-suicidal acts of martial bravery, his open-letter "Soldier's Declaration" on the war's rapacity and absurdity, and his subsequent commitment to the same psychiatric hospital as Wilfred Owen is all well known. (If it doesn't ring a bell, read Pat Barker's *Regeneration* in a pinch.)

Less known outside England and a few American oddballs like myself is Sassoon's alter ego George Sherston (the much blander name seems deliberate), particularly the bucolic George of the first volume of *Memoirs*. Young Sherston grows up in Kent, learns to hunt and play cricket, and generally manages to excel at childhood and youth while maintaining a dreamy, melancholic nature that keeps his aesthetic sense intact without in any way compromising his horsemanship. In general shape and ambition, it's Proust's Combray plus sports, except the war comes much faster, not three thousand pages later but at the end of the very first volume, when Sherston heads to the front and almost immediately suffers the deaths of nearly every male character encountered in the preceding two hundred pages.

Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man is a kind of modern *Georgics* (see what S. did there?) in which the ethic of the land is codified and revealed. Days are punctuated by "the soft clatter of pigeon wings . . . at the approach of one of the well-nourished cats," or "Aunt Evelyn with a green bee-veil over her head." Cats will stalk pigeons and humans will expropriate honey from bees; the country life is rude but just in its predictability. The same rude justice holds in the world of the hunt, where the worst mortifications seem to be the accidental dropping of one's riding crop, a muddy fall, and a reflexive, embarrassing cry of sympathy at the sighting of a fox pursued. All these are quickly righted by invitations to co-ed dances and the next cricket match or hunting meet. Prior to the inassimilable and impending war, life is brave and amusing, and displeasures are quickly redressed.

Sassoon's scandalizing 1917 open letter "Finished with the War: A Soldier's Declaration" ends as follows:

> *On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practiced on*

them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacence with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize.

That the author of these lines could, a decade later, set himself to write an autofiction of such willed and thorough naiveté is nothing short of astonishing, and part of the book's eerie *Kindertotenlieder* appeal.

It was with Sassoon/Sherston in mind that I arrived at the manor, comforted by the idea that among the hunters and ritzy types there would be secret Siegfried/Georges, closeted lefties and war protesters and poets manqués.

As we approached our destination outside Peterborough, Inscrutable-Mumble got on his phone. By now the soft murmurings between him and Jack had gone on long enough for me to have deciphered the accent.

"Hello? Mum?" Inscrutable asked his mother to bring whiskey and a crowbar to the meet. He appeared satisfied with her response. After he hung up, I waited a few decorous minutes, then asked after his intentions. He explained that his desk at college had gotten jammed shut so many times that he couldn't bring himself to ask the porter to have a go at it again. Hence crowbar. The whiskey, obviously, was just hunt tradition.

Having been reawakened to my presence, Jack thanked me again for agreeing to run. It was such *awful* work, and *so* hard to convince a runner to do it more than once. They'd blown through most of the local cross-country teams, and the marathon junkies too. It was hard to know what to say to this besides "you're welcome."

Jack then went on to tell me that if I ever did run for them a second time, I'd be wiser not to wear tights. The older hunters were a lewd bunch. The gardeners and groundskeepers were worse. He might've told me at my doorstep, I thought, thinking of my large collection of ratty, airship-wide sweats.

We arrived at a beautiful old mansion hidden in woods. Still in the parking lot, I was immediately introduced to one of the men whom I'd expressly been warned by name to avoid in leggings. Jack and Inscrutable disappeared. The man offered me a ride in *his* truck to show me around the course. Caught between possibly imminent harassment and the certain indignity of getting lost in the woods, I chose the former and got in the truck. Plus, he was clearly some form of hired help, like me. Maybe Jack had only named him out of class prejudice. To my relief, there were three antsy hound dogs sharing the space between him and me.

He gave me a baffling terrain map and then pointed out the route from the truck. It turned out that the run was not a single ten-mile loop but rather three three-mile loops. I already had the sinking feeling that I was not spatially intelligent enough for this—particularly with the new snow, the patchwork of fields and woods seemed to radiate identically from every angle, a pallid kaleidoscope with me at its center. Not wanting to corroborate a probably benighted view of the female sex, I kept nodding enthusiastically while taking notes on the back of the map. We returned to the parking lot, where people in beautiful green coats were already tending to their horses and hounds. I was told to wait for a man named Henry, who would "give me the scent" and send me on my way.

By this time it was about 11 o'clock. The boys I'd come with had never re-materialized. I was frozen, ridiculous, hungry. The green coats had become a puffing, boot-stamping crowd with adorable vintage thermoses and occasional glints of smaller flasks, the latter less and less covert as the morning went on. I overheard someone say that the riders and hounds would start at—was it one o'clock? I was too chastened by my attire and my middling decipherment of local speech to ask.

I did a quick calculation to assure myself that there was still plenty of time for my run, then hunched further into my coat to keep warm and go over the map. The map made no sense. I tried closing my eyes and walking the course in my head—down the slope, past the bramble hedge, sharp turn after the sheep with the black head—no, not a reliable marker, it might have moved. I checked my handwritten instructions. They were much more hurried and less detailed than they had seemed half an hour ago while composing them. Mostly phrases like "RIGHT @ OAK. UP HILL. JUMP. LEFT @ FAT TREE. STRAIGHT. JUMP. RIGHT @ BUSHES. JUMP."

Around 12:30, the house's fine gravel car park grew deserted as all the riders, horses, and dogs assembled on the front lawn. I could no longer feel my feet from the mid-arch out. I sat on the hood of someone's car, the warmest spot I could find.

A woman drove up in an SUV and rolled down the window. "Are you the runner?" she called. Yes. "Well, you'd better get going—everyone thought you left hours ago." Very close to tears, my voice came out in a whine—"But I haven't met a Henry yet, and I don't have the scent!" She drove off. A few minutes later, a portly older man bustled towards me.

"Still here?"

"Don't I need 'the scent' or something?"

"Yes, yes, go and grab it from the truck. You're late."

"I don't even know what I'm looking for!"

We stood in mutually incensed standoff. Then he turned and dug into one of the truck beds, coming up with a shriveled, matted fox corpse tied to a few yards of rope.

"You can hold the rope, or you can tie it round your waist. Just make sure the scent touches ground the entire time." It was 12:55.

"Scent" is not, I think, the right word for an animal's body. It completely misses the other four senses, the sight of the greasy coat, the sound and weight of its slithering behind one. But it is completely correct in making odor the most immediate and unforgettable feature. Tying the rope around my waist would have brought this flesh a little closer to me, whereas by holding the end of the rope I gained a few feet of distance. So I began running, far too fast, dragging the scent like a kite that refuses to launch.

What happened for the next ten minutes is very hard to recollect. I was running very fast, getting the route about half-right. A taste like dirty pennies was in my throat. The "jumps" turned out to be much higher than they had looked from the truck, and I was losing precious seconds lumbering over them and reeling the dead fox up and over along with me. And, as mentioned, I had not been running in some time, not since some dimly remembered equanimity, and my body was almost immediately tight with distress and fatigue.

After about a mile, the first of the hounds caught up, grabbed the fox corpse, and refused to let go. I kept running, slowly dragging the hound along with me. Reverse dogsledding. Soon there were over a dozen hounds, all happily jumping on me and the scent. The first rider called them off and urged me to run on ahead. The dogs were called off and the riders stopped in a puzzled heap, gave me about five minutes, then shouted whatever goonish cry gets the hounds going.

The Romantic poet John Clare, himself eventually driven mad by the predations of poverty and drink, is the single greatest portraitist of prey, how the hunted become simple, stark, robbed of reason by the relentlessness of the chase.

With nose on ground he runs an awkward pace,
And anything will beat him in the race.
The shepherd's dog will run him to his den
Followed and hooted by the dogs and men.
("The Badger")

I was exhausted from nerves and my earlier sprint, so in the whole five minutes I probably advanced less than half a mile. In a few instants, the hounds were at my heels, rending my leggings, delighted with this new game.

The Master of the Hunt, identifiable by his singularly baroque and ugly jacket, rode up to me.

"Everything all right?"

"No."

"Well, we'll just hold the hounds again and give you another head start."

The idea of another humiliating half-mile was unbearable.

They get a forked stick to bear him down
And clap the dogs and take him to the town,
And bait him all the day with many dogs,
And laugh and shout and fright the scampering hogs.
. . . . . .
The frequent stone is hurled where e'er they go;
When badgers fight, then every one's a foe.

Unsurprisingly for my age, sex, and nationality, my first instinct was to apologize profusely for the petty catastrophe I'd wreaked, and, moreover, the ugly picture I made. My second instinct was to complain, and defend myself: the poor communication, the labyrinthine terrain, the snow, the ill-mannered dogs. The third and middle way, finding both options unacceptable, was simply to avoid his gaze and eke out a flat, unmistakeable "No."

There was a long silence. "You're sure you can't? Well then."

He turned to the pack of riders. "Jack?"

Jack trotted forward, looking intensely distraught—though whether out of pity, disappointment, or embarrassment at our faint connection, I'll never know. Jack reached for the rope, I handed it to him, and away he rode. This time I stood with the riders and hounds while Jack got his head start. Then they left, too, and I was alone in a field except for a line of cars I hadn't noticed before, parked at the crest of the ridge, full of families watching their loved ones ride so beautifully on the sharp winter day.

A few minutes later, Henry drove up in his truck and offered me a lift. The warmth of the car was delicious. He told me not to take it too hard, that lots of other runners had quit—most had made it a touch farther along—and that I had heart. I must have still looked despondent, since he then tried to cheer me by showing how he could pop his dentures in and out of place with his tongue, or wiggle them side-to-side. This was indeed distracting. He told me about his six grandchildren and his hope to retire soon. He asked about my life, and I told him that I studied literature but now found myself at loose ends, utterly disgusted with my life and situation. He had no advice. He did, however, offer me cookies and cigarettes, in the most generous act I had witnessed all day.

When the chase was over and we returned once more to the parking lot, I was in the difficult position of wanting to find Jack, my ride home, as quickly as possible, while being seen ideally by no one. I skittered around the edge like a morose sandpiper. As at any sporting event, people were rehashing each play in numbing detail—but unlike most sports, this one features dogs and dog-owners, the latter of whom tend to be the globe's most intransigent old-school gender fanatics when it comes to their chattel, such that I kept hearing things like "Can you believe what that bitch did?" or "And then the bitch went completely mad!" or simply, "What a bitch!" Needless to say, this did little for my peace.

Eventually I resumed my post on the hood of Jack's car, and eventually the crowd began evaporating as mysteriously as it had just before the chase. I was cold again. At last Jack strode towards the car, sandwich and steaming mug in hand.

"There's tea in the gun room if you want." He presumably wouldn't drive off with another family's nice porcelain mug. Perhaps I had a minute. I was shamefully ravenous, considering the brevity of my part in the hunt. I piled a plate with coffee cake and found a spot next to the fireplace where I could slouch, half-hidden by the projecting mantel. I counted over thirty taxidermied creatures on the walls, always in positions of theatrical, glassy-eyed surprise. "The dead are more real than the living because they are more complete," Sassoon wrote in his diary. More complete, and in their resistance to our advances, our pleas for attention and care, more honest than those niceties of the living that are extended and as abruptly withdrawn, having often come about by social reflexes and narrative templates driven by their own internal devices, in which we recipients of those almost accidental exertions are minor characters played by an available understudy.

I am braced by the astringency of Sassoon's words in the "Soldier's Declaration" about insufficient imagination being the force that created and prolonged war. He does not say, as others have, that with proper exercise and airing—perhaps a few book clubs and field trips and visualization techniques—the imagination can become a more sculpted, muscular thing, and the populace more empathic and less inclined to violence and predation. There is simply an atrophy in most or all of us. We act according to the shrinking diminutives of what we know and are pleased by. Sassoon's line of thought may not be absolute truth—I think it is not—but it is a good deal more honest than the Panglossian carnival-barkers invoking "imagination" and its pop-gun, "creativity," as so many hobby sports that are not just diverting, but additionally and salubriously improve our moral aim.

Someone cleared his throat next to me. It was Henry, counting out forty pounds. Jack was at his side. I demurred, not having fulfilled my end. Jack looked pleasantly surprised at my correctness, but Henry was determined. This went on for some time, Jack's pleasure shaded towards a bored distaste where small haggling was concerned, and he walked off. Finally Henry suggested that I take half, to which I agreed.

"And," Henry added, his hand on my hand with the money pressed between, "the old man gets a kiss." Before I could interpret this, much less react, I found his lips on mine for an excessively long moment. He turned away immediately to take his portion of tea and cake, hanging back, of course, for all the people of consequence to have their share first and take their ease. Thus ended for certain my career as a scent-layer for the foxhunters of England.

Laura Kolbe is a physician in Boston. Her poetry, fiction, and essays have appeared in The Iowa Review, New England Review, Virginia Quarterly Review, The Yale Review, *and elsewhere.*

THREE POEMS

BENJAMIN GARCIA

Ode to the Pitcher Plant

In the Victorian language of fans // como se dice //come hither
I am the three-headed // head giver // Heather Heather and Heather

be my Veronica Sawyer // but you'll have to dye // your virgin hair
let me make you over // a quien le importa if they say // she's a man-

eater // they're not wrong about the latter // I expect a booty call later
from my whereforeartthou Romeo // come use my trellis as a ladder // I am

pansexual // with omnivore vigor make you breakfast // the morning after
see me wavering // waving my spade impatiently // for any lad or lass

come shake that ass // booty-bump-a-bump // let me whet your appetite
with my siren waters // seamen // which is what a man's come is called

I want a man // that comes when called // I want to have a better name
for when women climax // meanwhile my secret is vaginal // secretions

gender fluids and fluid genders // see how come can mean // collapse
of distance between objects // to the point of overlap // until two are one

as is the case with come // love // in Spanish those four letters mean come eat
they fold into each other // like a handfan // *come* you're almost skin and bones

and meat and legs and wings and // carapace // cara mia come at your own pace
but come // down my throat follow your gut to my gut // come Narcissus come

to your sissy prissy boipussy pitcher // I'll be your catcher too // the game is lost
my fans are in the stands // doing the wave they're cheering you on // come on

roll your love into a ball // if we had but world enough and time // I would woo you
to kingdom come // but life's a stuff will not endure // so gift me your endurance

damelo duro papi // forgo coquettery's etiquette // I've got your ticket down here
where bodies float // transverse the manhole cover // draw the curtain and do

mind the man behind // I'm flashing my fan as hard as I can // ready for my close up
I am the Victor with a capital V // thank you for your participation here's // a trophy

The Egress

> *At one point, Barnum noticed that people were lingering too long at his exhibits. He posted signs indicating "This Way to the Egress". Not knowing that "Egress" was another word for "Exit", people followed the signs to what they assumed was a fascinating exhibit—and ended up outside.* —Wikipedia

With a name like that, it could be a bald baby
female eagle, an eaglet, but "this way to the egress"
is another way of getting told *get out* without
being crass. Fancy it a word trick, now use it
in a sentence: "Because of past factory fires,
every room by code should have one door
and a second means of egress." Like this,
my patriotic ignorance of history is an eaglet
of regret, fed on the dead fish the mother stole
from other birds, in a behavior known to us
as parativism. Though it sounds like parrotivism,
or what a parrot does when it copies us. But a bird
can't understand language in the fullest sense,
only in a full-ish sense. Let me repeat here
what I was told as a child: Benjamin Franklin
despised the eagle as a national symbol.
He favored the turkey, for its self-reliance.
I don't know if it's true, but in that America,
no bill would pass if it meant trickery, to take
from another. But I digress, this way to the egress . . .

The Language in Question

He has a mouth on him. Yes, bitch.
But allow me this amendment:
I've had several mouths on me,
sometimes simultaneously, but let's
not go there now. Suffice it to say
God gave me two ears & one mouth
for reasons I've been unconvinced by.
Goddamn, my mouth has many uses:
to eat, sing, bite, kiss, but most of all
to insinuate. Have you ever been sucked
by the cups of an octopus' underside?
It's a daily special I highly recommend
to the critics who might say some words
don't belong in poems. Just because
you won't twirl the legs of a live octopus
due to texture or fear of asphyxiation
doesn't mean it won't taste good. Taste
is what the octopus does on its way down
with its tentacles. The language in question
is like that. It's a squishy worm-like squirm,
can contort and go down the wrong pipe.
If some words don't belong in poems then,
I say some people can go fuck themselves.
Just kidding, I don't really say that because
they might actually enjoy it, if they could only
let themselves relax. Here's a word I never
thought I'd have occasion to use in a poem:
poppers. One whiff and even a novice no-vice
could let the sphincter open just long enough
for this octopus to pass: uvula violet vulva.

Benjamin Garcia provides HIV/HCV/STD and opioid overdose prevention education to higher-risk communities throughout New York's Finger Lakes region. He had the honor of being the 2017 Latinx Scholar at the Frost Place, 2018 CantoMundo Fellow at the Palm Beach Poetry Festival, and winner of the 2018 Puerto Del Sol Poetry Contest. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in New England Review, Best New Poets 2018, Boston Review, Kenyon Review Online, *and* Gulf Coast.

from THE NATURE NOTEBOOK

Translated from the Polish by Jennifer Grotz and Piotr Sommer

JERZY FICOWSKI

1.

this unchanging landscape
with a lifelong birch
with the wind tugging at the tree
and leaving it in place
now he knows that on the other side
on the back side
is a darkness
where patiently
spiders hatch

2.

serene pigeons
with rainbows on their neck
are studded with feathers
one after the other

the arrow that grows out of us
doesn't hurt

3.

a dragonfly
divining rod of amazement
made of emerald-sapphire
with a pair of huge eyes
inflated with sight
rises on the transparent
illusion of wings

it will freeze suddenly
it will hold time like a breath
to rest for a moment
to test eternity
in the harbor of balance
in its self
in a dragonfly

4.

by their leaves you shall know them
said the Lord
and since then
by the cut of leaf
is expressed
a maple star
a poplar heart

5.

a far-reaching flower
speaks out loud
to blind moths
with scent
each in its own dialect

6.

a falling feather
lingers in the air

it still remembers the wing

7.

from branches a cap of snow falls
and leaves a trail
a trace of snow on snow

8.

in the trunks shot through by bird
the hollows are overgrown with silence

turn off the time go to sleep
turn off the time

don't burn it without need
it may come in handy
for the next part of the flight

Jerzy Ficowski (1924–2006) was a poet, songwriter, and scholar on the Polish Roma population as well as the writer-artist Bruno Schulz.

Jennifer Grotz's most recent book of poems is Window Left Open *(Graywolf Press). She is the director of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conferences.*

Piotr Sommer is the author of Continued *(Wesleyan University Press) and* Overdoing It *(Hobart and William Smith Colleges Press). His collected poems,* Po Ciemku Też *(Also in the Dark), appeared in Poland in 2013.*

FOUR POEMS

KATHERINE BODE-LANG

Beauty's Many Absences

I stare at the wood showing beneath paint
chipped from the doorframe, so many layers of lead.

The man who nailed this together—
the wood that meets the door, the ceiling—is long dead.

Here, where the town sinks slowly with age,
we walk with the shadows of carriages and match factories,

cobblestones and lime quarries. We cannot possibly keep knowing,
keep breathing the dust of the dead who came before.

We must forget how the light, when it reaches us
from some distant star, has already gone brown with wanting.

Sanctuary

My father and I sit before the sermons
in his study in the Texas apartment.

I am 23, he is 57; my parents are Midwest exiles
and there is no job after this church year—

just applications. My mother has taken to crying,
will not leave her room. So I sit with him,

cull through thirty years of funerals,
responsive readings. I know them all:

spent early mornings as a girl tucked in the hallway
outside his study, listening to him rehearse

to the empty house. Now I edit, photocopy,
organize the collections of his life for the churches in Utah,

Missouri, Washington—all places I am far from.
As a family, we have decided not to remember that winter,

but make no mistake: I chose the baptisms and the sermons too.
Stayed in that study until every file was sent.

It is my congregation.
But they do not know this:

with my absence and his blessing,
hands on the pulpit and hallelujah,

they are building a bigger sanctuary. Such glory.
And no one misses me. Not even him.

Morning Has Broken

I always meant broken like the dishes;
though that's not what Cat Stevens—
or the hymn—meant. There were no
shards in the song when we danced to it,
the record scratched with skips.
No porcelain chips when my father
closed his eyes and listened to the organ,
just praise and elation in C major.
But that's what I was always thinking.
Don't believe what they tell you now:
morning was always breaking then,
and all the glass was stained.

Notes on the Unseen

The lady on the bus says she's sure the seasons fell off
rotation when the ocean rose into a wall—*tsunami*—
sank like a shipwreck with a country in it. In those thin seconds
she tells us the axis skipped, so March, mixed-up month,

dips in and out of winter, spring. Seasons, invisible
as ever, float like steam from my tea cup, like the shadow
of steam the sun casts on our table. Even the photos
flooding our morning newspapers never made visible

the noise of the wave, or the thoughts of the dead—all
that is lost with the camera lens and its glass translation.
Same with the captioned names: each name only a messenger,
the paper envelopes of men and women. I like to imagine our dead

smiling when they hear their names, though each has the same name
of a thousand others. I saw white gulls, unmarked envelopes,
appearing over the snowy ground only against the trees,
the dark sky, then descending, dying back into the white, the snow.

Katherine Bode-Lang is the author of The Reformation*, which won the APR/Honickman First Book Prize in 2014, and a chapbook,* Spring Melt*. She earned her MFA in poetry from Penn State University, where she is a director in the Office for Research Protections. Katherine lives in central Pennsylvania with her husband and daughter.*

Note: The title "Beauty's Many Absences" is from Alain de Botton's *The Architecture of Happiness*.

"IMPERSONATIONS OF ORDINARY"

On humility

JONATHAN FARMER

1. ELIZABETH BISHOP

"I caught a tremendous fish." So begins, recognizably but not quite famously, Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish." Five words, four of which are remarkably plain: "I caught a fish." Minus the one adjective, "tremendous," the only polysyllabic word in the line, it would be so plain that actually saying it would seem like an attempt to ward off talk: "How'd it go?" "I caught a fish."

But "tremendous" is weird: rhythmically, it causes a slight ripple in the meter before the meter has even been established; and the word itself feels a little grand, a little long, ever so slightly out of place, maybe even a little unclear. By the end of the first line, which could be the whole sentence—subject, verb, direct object—all we know about the fish is that it was "tremendous," a claim she, uncharacteristically, leaves unsupported and undefined. The word wavers, holding a place in the poem open, something more or other than the typical fish story's boast, admiring, but uneasy too.

The second line doesn't provide any information about the fish. It does, however, level things out a bit: "and held him beside the boat." The sentence stretches out a little, and with the sense that there's more to the story, the strangeness of that first line, in isolation, starts to fade. There's nothing here to disrupt what James Merrill referred to, writing about Bishop's life, as her "instinctive, modest, lifelong impersonations of an ordinary woman." The only thing potentially out of place is her claim that she held him "beside the boat," rather than in it. But that's not that unusual—not if she only held him there a little while.

Nor is it strange—not yet—that she held him "half out of water" as she says in the third line. But that phrase, with its unblemished literal-mindedness, turns out to be an important symbolic moment in a poem that works very hard to resist turning anything, even the thrice-repeated "rainbow," into a symbol. For almost all of the poem that remains—another 71 lines; another 14 sentences—she tries to keep it there, "half out of water" and half in. I'm tempted to say that she tries to keep it all the way out of the water and all the way in. But that's not quite right, either. She knows better than that, and knowing better is essential to the self-portrait-in-observation that is at the hesitant, elegant heart of so much of Bishop's work.

Etymologically, the word "humility" points earthward. There's a sense of knowing one's place, of never standing up so straight that it would be easy to knock you over. There's a sense of staying on the ground. In that most literal sense (but only in that most literal sense), the word has no application for this unearthly fish hovering in water and air—"the terrible air" where the half of it with gills likely hangs.

The fish fascinates Bishop. The poem seems to exist because she can neither remove the fish from memory nor explain in concrete terms why it persists. She can neither pull it out into the air nor return it to its foreign element. After that first sentence, she comes up short, literally; the next sentence can't even fill a three-beat line, and she waits a line to start again:

> *He didn't fight.*
> *He hadn't fought at all.*
> *He hung a grunting weight,*
> *battered and venerable*
> *and homely.*

There's a hint of admiration here, too. It seems related to that lingering word, "tremendous"—that which, at its root, causes one to tremble; that which makes one, in awe, distinct from its awe-inspiring self. This is the first description of the fish besides "tremendous," and so the first possible explanation for that descriptor. Only "venerable" seems to point in that same direction, but even that stops well short, more still. "Tremendous," for Bishop, seems to be that which manages to endure beneath our notice—something so plain it becomes potentially profound.

Humility, of course, can turn inside out. It can turn into a source of pride. It can also be a hiding place, something like what one becomes or where one goes when afraid to be entirely alive. It's remarkable to watch how hard Bishop works to see the fish in the light of her own humbled knowledge that to pull it out of its element is already to get it wrong, and remarkable to see how such knowledge, combined with the desire to stand before the fish in true humility, which, presumably, entails honesty—service—draws her out. She knows, I think, two things: that a fish out of water (as the saying goes) is already inaccurate, and that to leave the boat, as Marianne Moore does in her own earlier poem of the same title, is to engage in fantasy. And yet she feels compelled, because she is humbled, to get it right.

Bishop goes on:

> *Here and there*
> *his brown skin hung in strips*
> *like ancient wallpaper,*
> *and its pattern of darker brown*
> *was like wallpaper. . . .*

". . . was like wallpaper." Simile collapses into repetition, a deadened repetition, too listless to repeat the adjective "ancient" the second time. Repetition, in Bishop's poetry, never stops intruding, because in poem after poem she finds herself pulled by two elements—humility and grandeur, the latter a vastness that only in our smallness do we comprehend. And because repetition both deepens and stalls.

It's everywhere in "At the Fishhouses": "netting" and "net" just a couple words apart; "silver"; "iridescent"; "herring"; "up"; "down and down." Each one has its own character. Each feels studied, though the study often feels like a retreat. And then, more dramatically:

> *Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,*
> *element bearable to no mortal,*
> *to fish and to seals . . .*

The ellipses are hers. After the correction, she trails off, retreats, then tries again. This time she pulls back even sooner, though after the ellipses something stranger persists for a few lines before she turns it, again, into a joke:

> *Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,*
> *the clear gray icy water . . . Back, behind us,*
> *the dignified tall firs begin.*
> *Bluish, associating with their shadows,*
> *a million Christmas trees stand*
> *waiting for Christmas.*

After that, the poem returns to repetition, though it's different now, more elemental—two kinds of gray, both modifying the same set of "stones," and "stones" shows up four times in five lines; and "same," which enlarges in the shift from adjective to noun—as if she's finally realized that instead of lifting off, she can go down. It's water, after all:

> *The water seems suspended*
> *above the rounded gray and blue-gray stones.*
> *I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,*
> *slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones,*
> *icily free above the stones,*
> *above the stones and then the world.*

Eventually, the three terms—"cold," "dark" and "clear"—all repeat, scattered now, along with another mention of "stones." She goes down and down, all the way into abstraction, all the way out to "the world." A "you" enters, rhetorical but somehow a riskier presence than the "old man" of the long first stanza, whom she knows how to handle, largely by limiting herself. "You," which is to say we, is instead handled by the sheer force of her authority, her unchecked mastery, as in the lines above. The pretense of humility disappears.

But to say humility is a pretense isn't quite right, either. It's a position, moral and social and, therefore, like all positions, complicated.

I'm always won over by the bus driver in "The Moose," his modest description of majesty: "Curious creatures," / says our quiet driver, / rolling his *r*'s. / "Look at that, would you." It's almost the end of the poem, and what follows is more precise, but it's no more penetrating. Curious. Look at that. Language like that is always pulling on Bishop's poems, where the characters are far more likely to be bus drivers than tenured professors. Where even the painter who shows up in "Poem" and "Small Bad Painting" is somewhere between an amateur and a craftsman. Bishop had money. She had education and opportunity. But if she tended to leave that out of her writing, it wasn't (or at least, wasn't primarily) to romanticize people who had less. They mattered more to her than that, and in more complicated, sometimes treacherous, ways.

Bishop was the kind of person who would say less, or nothing, rather than say something untrue or out of place. (A lot of things, for Bishop, never got said.) And she was the kind of person who feared standing out—a person for whom the double meaning of "curious" (interested but also worthy of interest: strange) meant a lot. I've never been able to give myself over to "The Sandpiper," in whose downcast eyes "The world is a mist. And then the world is / minute and vast and clear." For whom "The tide / is higher or lower. He couldn't tell you which." It feels thinned out, in places,

by a meanness meant for herself, and like several of her poems that are concerned with humility, its ending is both appropriate and insufficient. But it *is* telling, a sharpened and more severe version of Isaac Newton's self-summary, "to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the sea-shore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me." "Poor bird," she mocks, in a way she would never write of the bus driver or the old man. *Poor* meaning *fool*.

And *fool* meaning me. By now, it may be apparent that this is my own self-portrait of sorts. That the Elizabeth Bishop I'm describing here is occluded and configured by my own fears about my own foolishness, and my fears, too, about how that fear has fashioned me. Humility *has* been, for me, a hiding place, a way to lower my center of gravity. I, too, have tended to impersonate an ordinary person, though not so much in the sense of hiding something extraordinary, like Bishop's brilliance, but of being less obviously weird, less strange, less foolish—the last of those my lifelong fear: shame.

Some of the problems of this are obvious—the life not lived, etc.—and they all apply to me. I have spent, I think, most of my life getting ready for my life, waiting for, working for, that moment when I can be safe from judgment. And the problem with that, aside from its inevitable self-harm, is that it's a lie, and that the actions it impels promote that lie, and that the lie is in part rooted in the ways that we (that I) imagine what ordinary might mean.

Consider a poem like "Manuelzinho," and how differently Bishop writes when writing of "ordinary" people in Brazil, even around the same time she was writing about the old man and the bus driver in "At the Fishhouses" and "The Moose." How far from ordinary they seem, and how little the language of those poems seems constrained by the language of those she—or, it seems important in at least one poem to say, her speaker—describes. They stand in her poems odd and exposed. She can play with them. She can judge, evaluate, stand apart—stand out—safe from being judged in return. She seems, in one regard, to see them more clearly, with less awe, than she might someone in Nova Scotia, but at the same time they have less power, less pull—less of whatever it is that might lurk behind a word like "tremendous" in her description of the "battered and venerable" fish.

And yes, she notes that the person speaking in "Manuelzinho" is "a friend of the writer," but she—Bishop—is freer here, fiercer, funnier, more at play, both as and about the friend and in relationship to the person the friend describes, than I can imagine her being in any poem set in her native New England and Nova Scotia. As she writes

> *Half squatter, half tenant (no rent)—*
> *a sort of inheritance; white,*
> *in your thirties now, and supposed*
> *to supply me with vegetables,*
> *but you don't; or you won't; or you can't*
> *get the idea through your brain—*
> *the world's worst gardener since Cain.*

the ordinary gravity of her work seems to relent, something that usually only happens in those poems of hers that forego narrative, or realism, or both. The poem feels unchecked, more immediate, more willing to take what it needs. Less wary of making too much (or too little) of anything. And, at least for me—and maybe for her, as well—less interesting for that.

One dictionary starts off its definition of "humble" by saying what it isn't: not proud; not arrogant. There's something oppositional about humility, a resistance, an awareness of what it will not or cannot have. Even the false modesty of a phrase like "I am humbled . . ." seems to recognize this, to use humility as a kind of charm against boastfulness, though only so that it's then possible to boast. It's humility with the gravity turned off.

Compare the freedom of "Manuelzinho" to the opening lines of "At the Fishhouses," ruled by a decorum so strict that the poem grows edgy and odd underneath. Working to avoid calling any attention to herself, Bishop finally, after six lines, takes it to a comic extreme: "The air smells so strong of codfish / it makes one's nose run and one's eyes water." The repeated and willfully uninformative pseudo-pronoun—the awkward twice-attempted marriage of personal and universal and singular in so pedestrian an observation ("*one*'s nose run and *one*'s eyes water")—seems to have slipped in from some other, snootier, set of conventions altogether. Surely no one at the docks says "one" in that way. She's hiding so hard that she's exposed herself.

All the while, inside the careful modesty of Bishop's description, her work to honor this scene by never making it more than it is, the mannerly syntax (the information delivered one unit at a time), sense keeps slipping loose. "The five fishhouses have steeply peaked roofs / and narrow, cleated gangplanks. . . ." Read just that far, the lines indicate that "narrow, cleated gangplanks" are merely the second of two things "the five fishhouses have." The punctuation suggests this, too: no comma after "roofs" should mean that the "and" is merely making a list. But "gangplanks" seems to change its mind, or hers: the direct object turns into a subject as we read "steeply peaked roofs / and narrow, cleated gangplanks *slant up*," a surprising verb, the most energetic in the poem so far. They ". . . slant up / to storerooms in the gables / for the wheelbarrows to be pushed up and down on." A small energy gets loose in that phrase and keeps running until the dangling preposition, so ordinary elsewhere but out of place here, brings the brief fluency to a halt.

Immediately after that, she leaps again: "All is silver." But the easy, earned grandeur tires in figure and fact: "the heavy surface of the sea, / swelling slowly as if considering spilling over, / is opaque. . . ." What at first seems to be the beginning of a list of examples, silver things swelling into imagination, turns out to be, once again, the subject of a new sentence. The "is" lands flatly in a new line, in contrast to the aspirational "is" of "All is silver," correcting it almost, deflating: "is opaque." Short and flat and maybe not (not really) silver at all. She has to look elsewhere, repeating herself, to move on: "but the silver of the benches. . . ."

> *"Yes . . ." that peculiar*
> *affirmative. "Yes . . ."*

Among the many odd affirmations poetry can make, in addition to translating bad news into something softer than gossip, something that can keep talk meaningful and be borne more readily, is that of making familiar words more proper to experience and even the plainest terms more worthy of song.

Bishop's poetry *is* affirmative, in part because it so persuasively presents an acute mind humbling itself to articulate life on a small scale. There's often a kind of tidal patience at work in her poems, a sense of a large force moving in small increments. At times, the comfort of her poems, with their repetitions and their mostly unremarkable language deployed remarkably, feels almost parental, like the grandparents whose "peculiar / affirmative" she draws out over four gently metered stanzas: "Now, it's all right now / even to fall asleep / just as on all those nights." In such affirmations, I suspect, she's making (or repairing) a home for herself.

The paradox, though, is that the humble world of her poems is made habitable by the force pressing against their smallness. The paradox is that she left the places she describes. The paradox is that these humble elements also affirm—and allow—what is large in her work, including what is occasionally vast and unfettered, almost frictionless, tremendous, grand.

> *. . . as when emotion too far exceeds its cause.*

The past tense of "The Fish" seems lengthy, as if the memory has persisted out of proportion to the facts of the moment. The poem feels like an attempt to find some way of describing the fish that will both account for its persistence—for its having seemed and seeming still "tremendous"—and stay true to the actual, ordinary, scene: I caught a fish.

What does humility look or sound like in a poem? Must humble poems use humble materials: simple words, plain images, settings that don't seem to depend on wealth? Should they stay calm? Should they be unusually honest? Should the poet or speaker or both refrain from serving him- or herself? And if so, if it really requires all this, can it be worth much without being at least somewhat at odds with itself?

In many of Bishop's best poems ("At the Fishhouses," "The Moose," "In the Waiting Room," maybe even in "Crusoe in England," with the implied audience that seems to motivate Crusoe's monologue) someone more apparently humble than Bishop looks on and seems almost to be listening in. In "The Fish," the fish itself—tremendous, battered, venerable, homely—exerts a similar pull.

"While his gills were breathing in / the terrible oxygen," she writes. It's her first act of sympathy, though it doesn't last, and it doesn't go far. Her imagining the air she breathes as terrible doesn't make her think that she could have just put the fish back in the water where it could breathe. Instead, after a dash cuts in, she imagines the gills in terms of their ability to damage *her* flesh: "—the frightening gills, / fresh and crisp with blood, / that can cut so badly—" And when she returns to the body of the fish, she's moved from empathy to an imagination of the fish's flesh from within, cut open, all anatomy now, all fact, but she stays visible, opening the next observation with "I thought":

> *I thought of the coarse white flesh*
> *packed in like feathers,*
> *the big bones and the little bones,*
> *the dramatic reds and blacks*
> *of his shiny entrails,*
> *and the pink swim-bladder*
> *like a big peony.*

Two similes—the kind of thing that calls attention to itself. The two before had quickly collapsed: "like ancient wallpaper . . . was like wallpaper."

Now you can hear her putting the brakes on herself again. Before she can even say "peony," she introduces an adjective that's willfully plain, almost childish: "a big peony." It's one of the very first adjectives we learn, and one of the least precise.

There are moments like that throughout "The Fish," places where Bishop begins making connections, interpreting, finding figures, then once again pushes the fish away, into the factual, the practical. You can hear it over and over again in her work, as in "Poem," where she catches herself:

> *Our visions coincided—"visions" is*
> *too serious a word—our looks, two looks:*

It's a performance of revision. She doesn't go back and write "Our looks coincided." It's important to say "visions," and to say it again, this time self-critically—to keep the "too serious" impulse in as well as the explanation of why it's wrong.

"We both knew this place," she writes a few lines earlier in "Poem," leading up to the moment of excess:

> *apparently, this literal small backwater,*
> *looked at it long enough to memorize it,*
> *our years apart. How strange. And it's still loved,*
> *or its memory is (it must have changed a lot).*

"How strange." It's like the bus driver's lines in "The Moose"—but this is Bishop talking, using one of those expressions that, like the *yes*-es in "The Moose," adds nothing but acknowledgment, leaving room for all who are willing to say no more than that.

After downgrading from "visions" to "looks," Bishop seems tempted to lift off again:

> *Life and the memory of it cramped,*
> *dim, on a piece of Bristol board,*
> *dim, but how live, how touching in detail*
> *—the little that we get for free,*
> *the little of our earthly trust. Not much.*
> *About the size of our abidance*
> *along with theirs: the munching cows,*
> *the iris, crisp and shivering, the water*
> *still standing from spring freshets,*
> *the yet-to-be-dismantled elms, the geese.*

"Dim," and then "dim" again, as she starts to accelerate, revising upward: "but how live, how touching," the repetition of "how" in those unobtrusive phrases suggesting (as opposed to the slowing of just one: "How strange") that something grand is coming, now that she has finally grounded the poem carefully enough to let it soar. The language then shifts to something larger but still proper to this place, moving from plain speech into the biblical tones of "the little of our earthly trust," before pulling back again: "Not much." The unfussy "about the size," and then again the slightly archaic "abidance," with its pseudo-biblical formality. And that's the last of it. The poem retreats into humility, description, nothing more abstract than what precision can yield: animals, plants, the painting, with only "yet-to-be-dismantled" estranging and enlarging the scene before "the geese," without even a conjunction to make it feel conclusive, ends flatly, an insufficient half-rhyme reaching back toward "free."

The humility, here, seems too successful. There's too little that she'll allow herself to give. The ending feels ungenerous, if accurate in its way. I can't help feeling that it's a little romanticized, a little smaller than it would be from inside, and unable to see what true humility allows: a view of grandeur, an experience of awe. It insists on disappointment without (to my ear) seeming to acknowledge how much of that disappointment is hers.

Compare that to the ending of "2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance":

> *Everything only connected by "and" and "and."*
> *Open the book. (The gilt rubs off the edges*
> *of the pages and pollinates the fingertips.)*
> *Open the heavy book. Why couldn't we have seen*
> *this old Nativity while we were at it?*
> *—the dark ajar, the rocks breaking with light,*
> *an undisturbed, unbreathing flame,*
> *colorless, sparkless, freely fed on straw,*
> *and, lulled within, a family of pets,*
> *—and looked and looked our infant sight away.*

Here again, the repetitions, the hesitancies, but this time bolder: "Open the book." She slips back into description, but she's more commanding next time: "Open the heavy book." The visionary impulse, when it comes, comes hedged: not actually seen, only in the book. But her commitment to it, for at least three lines, is absolute, even in its contradictions and impossibilities. Even if she still needs to be honest about its impossibility, even as she gives in and mocks the image ("a family of pets"), the gift of those three lines does not recede, nor can the subsequent conclusion of the question shake off their passion, no matter how critical it is, the "looked and looked" so much more emphatic than the "'and' and 'and'" that starts the stanza on a brilliant dead note. The final erasure of "away" (itself also unreal), like the "flown" at the end of "At the Fishhouses," is not a return to the earlier restrictions, but rather an attempt to bring humility to bear on this newly dominant, still-ecstatic mode.

This is the Bishop I love most. The one who finally, partially, slips free. Though I doubt I'd love her so much were it not for the long labor from which the freedom flows.

There's always a danger in learning too much from the things we love, and so I'm wary of making too much of Bishop's humility. But I'm wary, too, of holding her too accountable for my flaws. I believe humility is a cardinal virtue, a necessary check on our arrogance and ambition, a means of

acknowledging others and living more lightly on the earth. I believe, too, that it's a short walk from humility to parochialism, and that it's easy to mistake the two, so much so that we fail to recognize humility when it comes in clothing we haven't seen before—how often has white America accused others of being too flamboyant? It enables nostalgia, and it has served power with terrible frequency (though what hasn't, and what won't?).

Humility served Bishop. At times it blinded her; often it hid much of her from view. It would have been insufficient had she been at home in it (the one likely exception, to my mind, is "The Moose"), and in those places where she gave humility the last word, her poems typically fall flat. Even "The Fish," which I've discussed at length, feels too beholden to its principles at the end. And yet. And yet, the attempt to live alertly inside the challenges of seeing something accurately ("'visions' is / too serious a word—our looks, two looks"), an act that is only possible when we submit the world to our distorting, animating, mysterious care, *is* humbling in the most profound sense: it allows us to see where we are and allows us, occasionally, to look up.

2. PHILIP LARKIN

How many of Larkin's best poems end (or at least advance toward their endings) with him looking up—or at least out—from a room of some sort? How many of them are, in some fundamental sense, *about* rooms: small rooms, bleak rooms, single rooms? How often does he burrow into places where he feels less than at home? How much does he resist and return to the idea of "home" itself—"Home" which, he wrote, "is so sad"? That poem's ending is a lot like the final pentameter line of Bishop's "Poem," the flat, imperfect rhyme and the lack of a conjunction to lend any sense of conclusion:

> *You can see how it was:*
> *Look at the pictures and the cutlery.*
> *The music in the piano stool. That vase.*

But where Bishop's ending is meant to sound like a failure, this one sounds like success of a sort. Larkin seems to be relishing the bad news. There's a commanding element more akin to the conclusion of "2,000 Illustrations." And there's a heightened musicality in Larkin's measuring of the pentameter, so that the two-syllable sentence fragment lands with its own conclusive, contradictory force.

At the heart of that contradiction is, I think, the heart of much of Larkin's poetry. The sadness Larkin finds at home relies on the assumption that there should be happiness, a still-inscribed "joyous shot at how things ought to be, / Long fallen wide." Larkin's humility, his insistence on meagerness, verges on knowingness, and his knowingness depends on a sense of "how things ought to be" that he never really turns away from, even as he insists that nothing will actually work out that way.

Continuity pulled hard on Larkin's imagination. He exclaims, in "To the Sea," "Still going on, all of it, still going on!" His warmest concluding lines offer, if not continuation, then at least the unironized wish for it: "Let it always be there." "Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain." Or ironized in ways that are easy to overlook: "What will survive of us is love." Even more often, his poems end in the disheartened knowledge of endings: "I just think it will happen, soon." "And age, and then only the end of age." "And dulls to distance all we are." "Never such innocence again."

Death, of course, was the great discontinuity in Larkin's imagination, the inevitable ending that at times made it almost impossible for him to go on. This has its own irony: Larkin's fear of death so diminished his experience of life at times that death's significance should have been lessened, there being so much less for it to take away.

Only in "Church Going" does death become part of a meaningful continuity. It's wrapped in a deflating irony—but continuity was always in part about diminishing things for Larkin, making the world knowable, manageable, England its own small room, so that it could then be cherished without pretense and without overwhelming him. (Death, after all, wasn't problematic just because it ended things, but also because it seemed so vast: "the total emptiness forever," he wrote in "Aubade.")

Larkin ends "Church Going" by imagining some future version of himself

> *surprising*
> *A hunger in himself to be more serious,*
> *And gravitating with it to this ground,*
> *Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,*
> *If only that so many dead lie round.*

The ironies are everywhere, down to the slightly comic rhyme of "surprising" and "wise in." Same goes for "he once heard," which recalls Larkin's own bemused entrance into the church at the poem's beginning, and the concluding line with its opening "if only" and the subsequent sense that this is hardly the kind of wisdom that would provide comfort. (If the "dead lie round," they are not resurrected.)

But Larkin's not kidding around. After a brilliant comic opening, he acknowledges, "Yet stop I did: in fact I often do." The final sentence unfolds with an almost courtly elegance. He introduces his future envoy in the penultimate stanza with another turn, as

> *Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt*
> *Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground*
> *Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt*
> *So long and equably what since is found*
> *Only in separation—marriage, and birth,*
> *And death, and thoughts of these—for which was built*
> *This special shell? For, though I've no idea*
> *What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,*
> *It pleases me to stand in silence here;*

Larkin keeps turning away from his own mocking—"yet," "yet." And then there's the pivot that introduces the dependent clause ("For, though") suggesting that *this* time, even as he mocks the "accoutred frowsty barn," he's already planning to say something more tender. He's getting ready to say again that this compels him, to talk about its ability to hold so much of life, as he says in another phrasing that diminishes without destroying, "unspilt."

But the pleasure of the poem is just as much in the diminishing, both because it makes what Larkin finds more credible and because it's such a detailed performance. Consider the first stanza:

> *Once I am sure there's nothing going on*
> *I step inside, letting the door thud shut.*
> *Another church: matting, seats, and stone,*
> *And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut*
> *For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff*
> *Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;*
> *And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,*
> *Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off*
> *My cycle-clips in awkward reverence.*

It's an extraordinary mix of attention and apparent disinterest. That extra "and" at the start of the fourth line, a spilling over that suggests indifference—oh, and that, too. The imprecision of "brownish" and "some brass and stuff" and "God knows how long"—with "God" sounding particularly and pointedly idiomatic, given the context. The substitution of cycle clips for a hat.

Larkin's putting on a show here, and it's a hell of a show. It's also essential, like the long buildup in "At the Fishhouses," to the latter beauty it resists. The show, just like the humility, for Larkin, was never the point—until, to his detriment, it was.

It's fair to ask, as Larkin's defenders do, why Larkin, among all the poets who have said and written and done bigoted things, has been so defined by those failures. It's also fair to ask why his defenders are so determined to insulate him from his own words. The answer is, I suspect, the same in both cases.

Larkin's own imitation of an ordinary person roots so deep in his work that, for all his originality and refusals, he becomes representative of a particular ideal—a proud parochialism that imagines itself to be universal, a version of common sense that proves its reliability by always circling back to itself. Larkin's bigotry was inextricable from that and also, at times, from the poetry itself. It gets near the heart of his achievement and speaks to the ways we blind ourselves to the reality of others—and to the way certain visions rely on that blindness.

If I'm being harsh, it's probably because Larkin, even more than Bishop, has always felt like a version of myself. He was a sentimental man who disdained sentimentality, partly because he knew he should. He was ambitious and insecure, and he worked hard to hide each impulse inside the other. He seems to have defined himself in large part through others' perceptions of him, and he preferred to spend much of his time alone as a result. He hid inside a certain posture so long his range of motion diminished. He was immediately recognizable and yet somewhat elusive. He was easily overwhelmed. He hungered for transcendence and feared it terribly. He saw most of these things about himself and hated himself for them, and he also felt superior for seeing himself so clearly—and for the ability to pick apart others that came with it.

Or so it seems to me. Larkin's bigotry frightens me because I can imagine it being mine in a way that, for example, Ezra Pound's could never be. My relationship to his poems is probably more personal than my relationship to any other poet's. For all their bleakness, they console me in a way that no other poems do. They leave me feeling simultaneously exalted and safe. They suggest, to me, that the worst of life is manageable and that beauty is near at hand. They are, for me, in their insistent pessimism, the clearest example of poetry's peculiar affirmation. I feel, at certain moments, the way you sometimes feel on vacation, alert and yet freed for a time from obligations and awareness, more at home than you would ever feel anywhere you lived.

Many years ago I was in a workshop with Brenda Hillman, a poet I adore and in no way resemble. "High Windows" came up and she shuddered, recalling the final lines: "that shows / Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless." Until that moment, I'd never considered the possibility that

the poem's ending might be bleak. To be honest, I still can't hear it that way. I can't even get close.

Maybe it's the "sun-comprehending glass" that contains that endlessness, my imagination of the room in which such "deep blue air" might enter through those windows, enlarging the confined space in which such endlessness might come, suddenly, to mind. It feels like a relief to me, a sudden and profound (and also safe) evasion of the social world in which everyone (or, at least, "everyone young") is "going down the long slide // To happiness, endlessly." (How much bleaker *that* endlessness seems to me, its going forever down into the world of others and expectations and happiness that will never materialize.) A relief from the awareness of yourself as having also been watched at one point, and misunderstood just as badly. (Like I said, I see a lot of myself in Larkin.)

Andrew Motion has written of the "number of moments" in Larkin's work, the ending of "High Windows" among them, that "manage to transcend the flow of contingent time altogether." It's not just "contingent time," though—it's social contingency, too. Humility, for Larkin, was an important part of managing (and, when possible, evading) that contingency. I always imagine the high windows *he* imagines being a part of one of the small bedrooms he rented over most of his adult life, the kind he described in "Mr. Bleaney." (Though in that poem, the windows initially look down, only exposing clouds once Larkin has entered, inside the allowances of "if," Bleaney's imagined perspective from the unimaginable past.)

In "Mr. Bleaney," too, Larkin works in descriptions that are at once offhand and precisely observed. (The first starts off as if it will be an unpredicated list. The second is. Both end without the expected conjunction.) "Flowered curtains, thin and frayed, / Fall to within five inches of the sill, // Whose window shows a strip of building land, / Tussocky, littered." "Bed, upright chair, sixty-watt bulb, no hook / Behind the door, no room for books or bags—" He follows the latter with his response, "I'll take it," a kind of self-mockery that implicates him in the notion that "how we live measures our own nature."

"Mr. Bleaney" ends in its own irresolution: "I don't know." But as with the conclusion of "The Old Fools" ("Well, / We shall find out") the suggestion is that he *does* know. You couldn't help but see, Larkin thinks, how a room like that judges you. It's worth noting that the actual character Mr. Bleaney, unlike the nondescript woman who shows him the room, never appears in the poem. For all that his poems are set in the ordinary world of work and town, Larkin's most noteworthy characters are all offstage, where they won't interfere with things. Actual, specific people would need too much, entail a second audience, and for better and worse, Larkin's poetry depends on a careful management of his audience. It requires an audience that is, at least in its responses, predictable: uniform.

(Here, too, I'm superimposing myself. I hate to mix different groups of friends because it's so hard to keep my balance, trying to be the person each one of them might want me to be. But I don't think I'm *just* superimposing it. As in his life outside of writing, Larkin put a lot of work into his poses, and the poses mitigate against the same perceptions, so much so that it's easy to imagine Kingsley Amis, Larkin's cooler and in many ways colder friend, lurking on the other end of his poems. And so much so that it's easy for me to imagine where my own hunger for a uniform, predictable audience might have carried me and god, who knows, maybe someday will.)

Like Bishop, Larkin spent much of his childhood feeling far from at home in the world, and he seems to have constructed a sense of self—as so many of us who grow up out of place do—based on others' responses to him. And like Bishop, he seems to have spent much of his life trying to build places in which his cares and impulses could fit in, as well as standing out.

Part of what makes Larkin so fascinating—so extraordinary—is that his impersonation of ordinary was so much more agile than ordinary itself. In the rooms of his poems—both the rooms they describe and their elegantly rhymed stanzas—Larkin moves, once you've tared the enabling, essential, sourness and cynicism, with more grace than seems imaginable in so hunched a posture as he presents. He's like the star actor, on whose face the life of the character is richer than it would ever be on the face of the character her- or himself. And so for those of us who find some version of our humbled, if not actually humble, selves in his poems, the encounter can be strangely (and, in some cases, frighteningly) ennobling.

—

"Aubade" was the last good poem Larkin would write. It was also the last great poem he would write, a final, vibrant creation in the expansive mode that produced so much of his best work. It opens with Larkin working in a continuous present tense, in the same room where he wakes to his failures to be more alive, as death approaches, night after night. As in his actual life, Larkin is trapped inside his performance: "I work all day, and get half-drunk at night."

How Larkinesque an opening it is, calling back from decades earlier the opening of his first poem in this style, "Church Going." Even the "half" of "half-drunk" feels right, a self-effacement diminished lest it turn into a boast. It's reminiscent of the title of Larkin's first important book: *The Less Deceived*.

Seamus Heaney complained that "Aubade" "does not hold the lyre up in the face of the gods of the underworld; it does not make the Orphic effort to haul life back up the slope against all odds." The statement seems like an uncharacteristic failure of imagination on Heaney's part. (Whether the standard is even valid is an argument for another essay.) For Heaney, the idea that such a poem could serve the living was incomprehensible. Warmer consolations served Heaney, who was far more available to joy and more capable of imagining redemption. (His *North* was a remarkable example of just the type of heroic, Orphic effort he thought Larkin had neglected.) But "Aubade" is a consolation for the disconsolate, a poem that lifts into markedly social language the elements of despair that had calcified around Larkin's imagination by that time. It was Larkin's last beautiful act of dancing through the by-then shrinking room he had spent much of a lifetime erecting around himself. It was a denial of reality as he saw it grounded in something uncompromisingly real, and in that sense not so different from the concluding lines of "Church Going." It brought what Larkin saw as the utter isolation

(even from oneself: "Not to be here, / Not to be anywhere, / And soon") of death into the continuity of speech. In making his fear extraordinary, he also makes it conventional:

> *I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.*
> *Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.*
> *In time the curtain-edges will grow light.*
> *Till then I see what's really always there:*
> *Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,*
> *Making all thought impossible but how*
> *And where and when I shall myself die.*
> *Arid interrogation: yet the dread*
> *Of dying, and being dead,*
> *Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.*

"Making all thought impossible but how / And where and when I shall myself die." But the poem stands outside that thought, those nights. The poem makes room for other thoughts.

How quickly "Aubade" throws off the humility of "I work all day and get half-drunk at night." How fast and how thoroughly the room dissolves into a confident universalizing. After that first stanza, the first-person singular disappears, and Larkin instead speaks for a "we" that clearly means everyone—or everyone, he might say, who's honest enough to admit to the truth.

You can see why the poem would have angered Heaney. Larkin's not just trying to articulate his fear; he's arguing for its accuracy as an image of the world. The poem gets condescending: "Religion used to try, / That vast, moth-eaten musical brocade / Created to pretend we never die. . . ." As those lines continue, there's an astonishing fluency that feels almost like a delight in the horrible news that proves his point:

> *And specious stuff that says* No rational being
> Can fear a thing it will not feel*, not seeing*
> *That this is what we fear—no sight, no sound,*
> *No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,*
> *Nothing to love or link with,*
> *The anesthetic from which none come round.*

The room is gone. The narrative circumstance is gone. The *fear* is gone. This is straight argument, and it relieves Larkin's burden for a bit. (He even laments the loss of a social and love life he almost never celebrated in poetry.) He's alive here, arguing for death.

That's not to say that "Aubade" is a dishonest poem. I actually think it's one of Larkin's most honest poems—not because of what it says, though it matters to me that he makes that so sayable—but because he says it so early in the poem. The modesty that Larkin usually spends much of the poem erecting (which is often one of the pleasures of his poetry) falls away after the third line. When the trappings of humility return in the final stanza, as he nods, briefly, to the narrative circumstance, they mean something else altogether. This is now the "uncaring / Intricate rented world," and its plain materials, paradoxically, gleam with meaning:

> *Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape.*
> *It stands plain as a wardrobe, what we know,*
> *Have always known, know that we can't escape,*
> *Yet can't accept.*

I do not doubt that this appalls most. It thrills me, though. Not because I want to convince anyone to look at the world this way, but because one of the reasons I go to poetry is a desire to hear the unspeakable spoken well. To make it seem a little more human—and a little more than human, too: to bring it into a version of our voices that is more agile and extraordinary than much of what we ordinarily share.

It's anger, I think, that fuels the poem, far more than fear—frustration with all the consolations that felt like refusals to acknowledge his fear. And it was a kind of anger that, I think, he could only follow so freely in a poem that late in his life. Just as he could no longer write the kind of poems he used to write, having lived so long inside his defenses that they had become a kind of permanent armor, stiffening his movements but indistinguishable, especially to him, from himself—just as he could no longer write those poems this far into his life, I doubt he could have written a poem like this back then, when the door to the universal was, for him, at most a window, small and out of reach. The continuities between the two are obvious, but Larkin has stopped imagining those who might dislike him except as people to be dismissed.

You could make too much of this. I adore this poem and have no real problems with it. Sure, the dig at religion seems petty, but it's also fun—sharp, witty. (And harmless, I think; religion seems to have survived Larkin's disdain.) But I think it also reveals some of the same forces that enabled Larkin, elsewhere, at his bigoted worst. And in that, it also reveals one of the risks of humility as an enabling pose.

I love the first-person plural in poems—its ambition and risk and tension. I love it for what it reaches toward and what its faltering can remind us of. But it can also be facile, and facility is, I think, something many of us hunger for. I do, and I think Larkin did as well. One of the pleasures of Larkin's poems, and Bishop's, too, is the agile and intricate work they undertake in trying to make their way to that moment when the coefficient of friction is finally overcome and the poem accelerates into something simultaneously hard-earned and apparently easy. More often than not, the awareness of others who disagree with us or stand outside of the "we" that we reflexively employ interrupts or simply prohibits such ease. It prohibits fluency. It makes the "we" waver until our sense of who "we" are grows.

As Larkin aged and the world around him became more aware of its own complexity, his sense of audience risked becoming unmanageable. The "we" he had worked so hard to construct, poem to poem, room by room—and the particular version of humility that had allowed him to stand erect—became, as did England's image of itself, more aware, more alert to all of England that "England" did not include. And Larkin, who had put so much of himself into that ideal, reacted as so many do in that situation: he doubled down on his blindness. Larkin, who longed for continuity, and who so often invested his ideal of continuity in an image of humble English life, looked at anyone who threatened its continuity as a threat. In "Going, Going," he was able to return it to a kind of pastoral. The final image could resonate with one strand of our present environmentalism:

> *Most things are never meant.*
> *This won't be, most likely: but greeds*
> *And garbage are too thick-strewn*
> *To be swept up now, or invent*
> *Excuses that make them all needs.*
> *I just think it will happen, soon.*

So, too, could the lovely and unusually loving "Show Saturday," which concludes:

> *Let it stay hidden there like strength, below*
> *Sale-bills and swindling; something people do,*
> *Not noticing how time's rolling smithy-smoke*
> *Shadows much greater gestures; something they share*
> *That breaks ancestrally each year into*
> *Regenerate union. Let it always be there.*

In such poems, Larkin finds a place for that hunger, and the humility becomes (to use Larkin's astonishing adjective) "regenerate." There's no need to dismiss these poems because of the uses to which they could be put—no need to do away with humility, or even the performance of humility (which can at least allow us a momentary scent of the earth), simply because it can be exploited. All things can. But neither does it makes sense to keep from them the news of the company they kept in Larkin's imagination and, sometimes, in the poems themselves.

"Show Saturday" ends in repetition, "Let it stay hidden there like strength" (how odd, and perhaps how telling, that he presents "strength" as something hidden) becoming "Let it always be there," the latter plainer and more emphatic, giving the impression that he has finally, in the midst of that last enumeration, managed to hone it all down to the essential. A little like Bishop at the end of "At the Fishhouses," he's arrived at a universal by going down—where the universe also is.

We are now at a moment in American life when the worst of us is convulsing loudly, angrily, menacingly. This is obviously not the place to examine the ascendancy of Donald Trump or even the recent proliferation of Confederate flags I see twice a day, driving to and from the school where I teach. Past failures prolonged and resurrected, injustice woven so thoroughly into all of American life that parts of American life must be completely unstitched to do away with them. There is, as many have already written, no true version of American history that is not also the history of plunder. This is not that essay. But it's worth saying, I think, that the awareness of a similar unstitching stands just outside of a poem like "Show Saturday." The people there do not notice, Larkin says, what he does: "time's rolling smithy-smoke." But they will notice the change, in years to come, that Larkin had by then already noticed at the university where he worked. Some of them will respond with grace and kindness, with versions of humility that say I am no more entitled to this country than anyone else. Others will not, and some of those will invoke humility in trying to protect themselves from a complicating awareness of others as just as English as them.

If poetry is in part a place where the otherwise-intolerable might, with enough care, eventually be said—if it is, at times, the at-first-inexplicable pull of an emotion that seems to exceed its cause—then humility is essential if it will ever be possible to get both that impulse and the larger reality in which it's felt—fish and feeling—right. And if the desire to say, of the things I love, "Let it always be there," is to be honored, then I must be humble enough to acknowledge that even humility might blind me to what "it" entails. And I must admit, too, how often performances of humility begin in something actually humble, in ordinary human fear.

The ecstatic moments in both Bishop and Larkin—the ones their humility so often seems to be preparing for—achieve their own humility as well: "self-forgetful," as Bishop once described the pleasure of writing in a letter to a friend. The paradox of it almost shines, perilous and redemptive at once: We are delighted by unawareness of the very being that enjoys the unawareness of itself. "And that much," as Larkin wrote in "Church Going," with a small, playful sneer at the world he couldn't bear to lose, "never can be obsolete."

Jonathan Farmer is the editor in chief and poetry editor of At Length *and the author of* That Peculiar Affirmative: On the Social Life of Poems*, which will be out this spring.*

TWO POEMS

TONY HOAGLAND

Happy and Free

I should not have gotten the tattoo that says
May All Beings Be Happy and Free on my left arm,
running from the inside of my elbow to the wrist
in 20 pt. Verdana sans-serif type.

My serotonin level that day was so elevated
that it deceived me
into an optimistic feeling that I was finally
ready to be pure. I have been happy in that way before

and you would think I would have learned by now
that I inevitably return to earth
like a leaky, gradually deflating helium balloon.

Now I see that my great tattoo might better have been
a customized sweatshirt purchased online for twenty dollars,
that said *Short Attention Span*,
or *University of Repetitive Emotion*.

How quickly things pass. How long mistakes last.
How unrealistic I am when left to my own devices.
When I rolled up my shirt sleeve at the tattoo emporium
to have that sentence stenciled into my pale flesh

I was getting into a relationship
I could not possibly sustain.
May All Beings Be Happy and Free—what a fitting punishment
for the hubris of my passing and unstable self-esteem!

And yet, it is my life, mine to squander as I will.
—That is a kind of freedom, I suppose.
And I have a story, which is still
unfinished;

that makes me kind of happy, too.

Incompletion

In the blues song, the singer begs the doctor for a diagnosis.
Doctor, doctor, he says, *tell me please, // what is this pain inside of me?*
But as soon as the doctor tells him, he starts demanding a cure.

This great dry cold of winter in the mountains, parched blond of the
expansive fields
and huge black crows flapping through the mesquite trees.

Remember sex, that used to be so all-important?
and then children, and then success?—and what comes next?

The boat rubs and chafes against the dock, held in place by a rope.
The words of flattery or blame linger in your head for days.

Your fear that no one would tell you the truth was justified.
However, your fear that no one cared was incorrect.

"If I hadn't dropped out of cooking school," says Gretchen, happily,
I would never have mastered my
Sunday morning waffles for screaming kids,
which I feel is my greatest legacy."

Maybe it would be best to stop trying to finish the story.
It may be you're not missing anything.

The sun comes up out of the shrouded fog on the horizon.
The finches and sparrows quarrel at the feeder,
and their chests are dusty gold and red.

What is the name of that bird that always flies away
when it notices me watching?

Why, as it escapes, does it continue to bother me?

Tony Hoagland's seventh book of poems is Priest Turned Therapist Treats Fear of God *(Graywolf, 2018). His craft book* The Art of Voice: Poetic Principles and Practices *will be published by W.W. Norton in March 2019. He died in October 2018.*

TWO POEMS

KIM GEK LIN SHORT

How Soon the Trees

Seven I'll be. Then eight. Then nine. Ten is where I ends, ten is all, comes last. Ten is old enough to start my own, ten is when I leave. Start my home, find my mama, *kai shi*. I make a map. Inside my *qi*. The place the colors how soon the trees. How many soon? Ten thousand double-steps by a soldier soon. *Kai shi*. Today I am up before her. I sleep on that bed before. I sleep in the middle unless she comes to sleep too. I make room. I make room. It makes the gut ache hard to clay. A song the night's a newer color. I thrum her sound inside my ear by laying close and then tighter. I lay until she is inside me. Her hair is silkworms in my ear. Silkworms sparring her heart thrum in my ear. I know how to stop it. Heart Stopping Palm I practiced ten thousand times with Baba. *Kai shi*. Scent like Bone Righting Water after all night with me: her hair. I gave my black and blue to her blonde my injuries disinfect her. Mama said we born with muscles too quiet, so we work all the time make them louder. *Kai shi*. Mama said we born with enemies, girls, small happiness soldiers we. We work all the time drill us daughters. Kicking shins against trees. We work all the time fix us fighters. Striking knees at trees. Bloody trees. Bits of bone trees. Train us tougher trees. I smashed the candy of my knuckles smashed those trees. Trees in a China ten thousand double-steps by a soldier away. *Kai shi*.

Playboy Bunny Swimsuit Biker

American Momma keeps a toy gun
in the glass china cabinet she got
from the basement of that building that burned down
with two babies and a grandma inside.

She tries to make it look pretty.
Clothed jars of jam mismatched porcelain Polaroids
of decked-out strangers lucky tie-dyed rabbit's foot
chained for power to the 1977 Kiss lunchbox

& the gun
grouped with linens
its glossy muzzle
denting a doily.

The gun looked so real that once Amateur Ray mistook it for his
& left on a job with it snug behind the buttonfly of his 501s.

That was the day American Momma found out
her biker bitch neighbor stole
her Playboy Bunny Swimsuit.
It was Lucy's best.

One-piece halter strap
ghost sheer backless top
midnight bottom ruched across the hi-cut seat
bowtie bunny cut-out stenciled in nude mesh
hip-height of the upper right cheek.

If truth be told
the theft began
a time before
that summer day.

It began the time her neighbor peeped
Lucy in a lawnchair
tanline of bowtie bunny
towel flung on chain-link
wind wobbling the fence
a voice no woman disregards
there are ways prettier to be.

These are dark times
American Momma
told Boxer.

Boxer had been at Lucy and Ray's for exactly one night.
Boxer stood on the bathroom lino sagging in a swimsuit
dripping from the only bath she had
since living in that car.

American Momma crouched on the toilet
a laundry sack of clothes between her legs
sorting to see if any might fit the child.
The child was diminutive even for a child.

It was becoming clear to American Momma
she would need to get the kid some clothes.
Ever since yesterday it was becoming clear
to American Momma
she was full-up doubled-over
with feelings for the child.

These are dark times
American Momma
told Boxer.

It's true any thief can traipse through your door
swipe a swimsuit off your radiator
stretch it over her wide ass
it's true

I had Ray's real gun that day
I'm telling you this
cuz I'm not that kind of person
I'm not gonna raise you to be that kind of person

plus you're my responsibility now
I want to make you safe
(American Momma dead serious spoke)
so don't go knocking on Apartment 5
got it?
That bitch has had it in for me ever since I shot her only lamp.

American Momma was not used to having
feelings for foreigners.

Do you understand me?
She dead serious spoke.
Do you speak English?

Kim Gek Lin Short is the author of the lyric novels The Bugging Watch & Other Exhibits *and* China Cowboy, *both from Tarpaulin Sky Press. Her debut hybrid collection,* The Residents, *was published by Chicago's dancing girl press. Her work in hybrid poetics appears in anthologies such as* Narrative (Dis)Continuties: Prose Experiments by Younger American Writers *(Moria Books) and* &Now Awards: The Best Innovative Writing *(Lake Forest College Press), as well as numerous literary journals.*

RIHANNA & CHILD

DARREL ALEJANDRO HOLNES

The rude girl is with child in the Instagram pic. It's not her baby.
She wears a costume conservatives may describe as *exotic* and *revealing*.
I call her *mi pana* and *mi pai*. The baby pulls sequins off her bustier.
But she's not afraid she won't shine. I was raised by her kind.

She shows us how to celebrate carnival as a #badgirl
goddess, tantalizingly #wifey material, playing
a benevolent stepmother with #milf appeal, taking
a break from dancing to hush a child in her auntie's laundry room.

Over half a million followers *like* this portrait of Rihanna
as the black Madonna. In it her voluminous hair is a halo, her dazzling
headdress is a crown, a beaded curtain frames her
as a domestic deity with a washing machine for a throne.

Her breast sits ready to be clutched for comfort by
the bawling majesty in her arms. Over half a million
followers hail woman for nestling babe against her
bejeweled bustier. Millions more were raised by her kind.

Millions more once nestled on the chest of a mother's uniform
or on the costume of an auntie close enough to be a stepmother,
taking care of others on break from dancing
soca or murga in the parade.

I was raised by her kind, dazzling and Amazonian,
running so fast through the hairspray that her wig almost
bursts into flames. She who fills beach dunes with matches,
feathers, rhythms, and milk bottles.

Her nude arms waving at parade people walking by,
her ribs cracking where the DJ drops the beat.
She is not afraid to die. Yes, I was raised by
women like that. I was raised by her kind.

After Anne Sexton

Darrel Alejandro Holnes is a researcher, poet, and playwright from Panama City and the former Canal Zone of Panamá. He is the recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, MacDowell Arts Colony, Cave Canem, Bread Loaf Writers Conference, Page 73, and CantoMundo. He's an Assistant Professor of English in Creative Writing and Playwriting at Medgar Evers College, and he teaches at New York University. For more information, visit darrelholnes.com.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

APR welcomes comments, criticism, and dialogue in response to work in the magazine. Authors of poems, essays, and other work will be given an opportunity to respond to letters scheduled for publication.

Letters should be sent to:

Letters to the Editor, The American Poetry Review,
1906 Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia, PA 19103-5735.

TWO POEMS

STANLEY MOSS

Ode to the Scallop

I'm offered a Chinese scallop on a toothpick
at a Botanical Gardens Halloween *pumpkins*
and a hundred friendly scarecrows event.
Some kids play I am one of the hundred.
I carve an Assyrian face out of a pumpkin.
I make faces to make children laugh:
Russian, French, English scarecrow smiles,
I pull handkerchief seagulls from my sleeve.
Drunk on Irish whiskey, I talk to myself,
"Blind trees are in love with the sun,
they have green eyes, teach philosophy,
some are Buddhists." I tell the barkeep,
"If I am born again a bivalve,
I'd rather be a scallop than a clam.
Give me a shipwreck on the rocks,
singular and numerous, please."
I speak to a kind lady scarecrow,
"Maryrose, a scallop has a thousand eyes
inside its hinged shell, each eye akin
to a reflector telescope,
the sort first invented by Isaac Newton.
This cloudy night, I believe in the Big Bang,
but I do not know the reason why it happened."
My old board and hay lady scarecrow
is undressed by moonlight and the wind.

Truth is, neither scarecrow nor pilgrim,
without authority, I wear a scallop shell on my hat,
I walk to Santiago and Saint James,
then to 8th Street with its five used bookstores
and two theaters. Out of the blue
a stranger says to me, "I disagree
with Oscar Wilde who wrote: *art is useless*."
Stranger, in Paris I used to live where Oscar died,
at the Hôtel d'Alsace on Rue des Beaux Arts.
I am full of useless information.

I'm comfortable on Washington Square.
I step on a handy Ivory soapbox,
I speak to passersby, "Attention! I draw
your attention to the wonders of the scallop's eye:
each eye contains a miniature mirror
that reflects incoming light onto a pair of retinas,
each of a thousand eyes reflects a different part
of the scallop's surroundings. Each eye
like a novelist or poet, penetrates self."
Why have I left All Hallows' Eve in the Bronx?
I raise a single finger like Christ Pantocrator,
I face myself like a congregation,
an almost empty church
where the old and shivering come to sleep.
I put this note in a poor box:
"A scallop swims from predators,
it opens and closes rapidly in water,
flies away from starfish and crustaceans."

* * *

I write I speak aloud to the living and the dead,
to begin with—trees living and petrified.
Since time's beginnings and loose ends,
osprey dive into the ocean, catch scallops in their claws,
drop the shells on rock to break them,
then devour the miraculous creatures
that have souls but no hearts. Ignorant,
I've often dined on Coquilles Saint Jacques.
I just discovered the mirror in the scallop's eye
is made of molecules called *guano*,
crystals found in seabird excreta.
Chameleons use such crystals to help them
change the color of their skin, that means to me
so much created has nothing to do with mankind.

A paradox, guano crystals don't reflect light on their own—
they are transparent, but their arrangement
turns them to a collective mirror.
I'm on my way to Alabama or Bethlehem,
I'm game.
I hold a scallop, a fellow of infinite jest.
Eventually the light is completely turned around,
like poetry, it heads back to the front of an eye,
it sees what it hadn't seen before.
Like Goya, I mirror grotesque reality.
I have no one to thank for the gift of my eyes.
My hat is out of fashion. I still ask, "Who am I?"

Street Music

I judge matters
differently now:
Captain David McDowell,
cultivated publisher
and editor,
told me in 1949
he fought the Nazis
at Monte Cassino.
An infantryman, halfway up
the bloody mountain,
almost shot in half,
screamed in pain all night.
At dawn David ordered
a corporal to shoot the soldier,
whoever he was.
When the corporal refused the order,
David shot
and killed the corporal.
He was one of thousands
slaughtered on the mountain.
I did not whisper or shout
when I was told the story,
"Murderer! Murderer!"
I thought, "It happens,
war is war."
David spoke French and Italian
without his Southern accent.
He telephoned me to go to
William Carlos Williams' funeral
at a Rutherford church.
In attendance Bill's sons,
grandchildren, beautiful
old ladies, ex-girlfriends
and Fanny.
I looked for asphodels
green among the flowers.

I did not recognize
a single attending poet.
I cannot count all
the babies
Bill pulled into America,
among them American poets
he freed from idols—
a few English bastards.
W.C. Williams resolved the conflict
between form and freedom in verse,
stepped lines.
When I drive near Rutherford,
where Bill was born,
along the Passaic River,
still mourning
for what's past
I feel I'm driving a double-deck bus
along the Tiber in Rome.
I'm dreaming, void of guile,
we're near the Isola Tiberina
the bus loaded with poets
some cold sober
some drunk some high.
I hear dozens of languages
and dialects—
cobbled, tar,
and dirt music
wherever a shoed, sandaled,
or naked foot has trod.
Montale beside me,
I hear Rimbaud say,
"*Je suis un autre*."

Denise Levertov says,
"We're all here
on this queen of long roads
because of Bill's love of love,
his secret, American stuff
for all of us."
We're on the A-Line
to Michelangelo.
Bill pushes his way
from the back of the bus,
tells me, "Stop!"
He steps down,
disappears in the night
to help a soldier
screaming in pain.
Each of us has his or her reason
to know who's screaming.
The poets head back home,
to their lives and graves
the most serious appear
the personification of frivolity,
all of them write poetry
that would be impoverished
without nonsense.

Stanley Moss is the author of The Wrong Angel *(1966),* The Skull of Adam *(1979),* The Intelligence of Clouds *(1989),* Asleep in the Garden *(1997),* A History of Color *(2003),* Songs of Imperfection *(2005),* New and Selected Poems *(2006),* Rejoicing *(2009),* God Breaketh Not All Men's Hearts Alike *(2011),* No Tear is Commonplace *(2013) and* It's About Time *(2015).*

TWO POEMS

ALISON C. ROLLINS

To Whoever Is Reading Me

after Jorge Luis Borges

You are invulnerable.
The only thing constant is change.
Such repetition leads to nostalgia
for the present. Tense and timid
you recite this book by heart. Blind-
folded you commit me to memory.
The baldhead scallywag philosopher
knows that man's character is his fate.
This poem—not alive, but the remains
of a construct known as will.
Heraclitus is walking on water in Libya
or: *no man ever steps in the same river twice.*
Be wary of how the translator twists
my words, these ruins he interprets as
alive. Why do you dread being forgotten?
Know that in some sense
you are already dead.

Self-Portrait of Librarian with T.S. Eliot's Papers

In the year 2020, T.S. Eliot's papers will be unsealed.
Let us go then, you and I. Let us take the dust in
our claws, lap the hundreds of letters spilling secrets
into the waste land of irreverent mouths.
Have we no couth? Have we not been trained
to know good things come to those who wait?
Each year we gather round the cave. We don our Sun-
day best, come to see what young muse has risen
from the dead. Tomorrow brings the past wrapped
in plastic eggs, the seal of history broken in present tense.
Storage units preserve our culture's haunted houses.
The canon is merely a ghost story. Write a poem *after* me
before I'm gone, and please do not include *rest in peace*,
only those that are forgotten go undisturbed, only things
kept in the dark know the true weight of light.

Alison C. Rollins was born and raised in St. Louis City. Her poems have appeared in Black Warrior Review, Indiana Review, Poetry, *and elsewhere. She is a 2016 recipient of the Poetry Foundation's Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg fellowship and a 2018 recipient of a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers' Award. She has also been awarded support from the Cave Canem Foundation, Callaloo Creative Writing Workshop, and Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. Her debut collection,* Library of Small Catastrophes, *is forthcoming from Copper Canyon Press in Spring 2019.*

ICE MAN

MARK WUNDERLICH

Born from the ice, he was born again
and into a world, rough and cold,

as unkind and kind as the one
he left behind on a day in fall,

when he fell from the arrow
lodged in his back, and someone

came upon him to bash in his skull
and finish the job for good. His murderer

left him lying there, and did not
rob the corpse, let him keep

possession of his valuable copper axe
in reach of his newly useless hand, left his tools

strapped to his body now cooling on the top of an alp.
His last meal of grain and roast goat

stilled in his gut. No animals came
to feed on his flesh, no people came

to bury him. That night the sun set
then rose, and set again ten thousand times,

and the man froze and thawed,
and the glacier wrapped him in a counterpane of ice.

His hand reached toward the glittering sky,
the mountain's chilled tongue pressed into his hardening mouth,

and so he went on into the centuries
that went on without him, but which would not let him go.

Below him and leagues away
Rome rose and burned and rose again;
the Trojans practiced their maneuvers in the sun.
and they too died away just as the Sybil

said they would. The alp kept him
beyond speech, and beyond pain,

beyond avarice and regret. Kept
his last day legible to anyone who looked,

for its testament of violence shot into his back.
Now he lies in state,

hovering on a bed of glass, and can be looked at
like the body of a saint.

Through the vitrine window
he is more a joint of smoked meat,

a skin bag dragged into place by the ice.
His lip curls up to show the ivory teeth

that bit down on a thousand clouds.
Around him, the Bozeners keep pouring their beer,

selling their fruit in sacks on the square,
while their dogs sleep under restaurant tables

before they tighten the slack leashes
binding them to men, and lead

their keepers away.

Mark Wunderlich is the author of The Earth Avails *(Graywolf Press, 2014) and* Voluntary Servitude *(Graywolf Press, 2004). His first collection,* The Anchorage *(University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), won the Lambda Literary Award.*

SPELLCHECK

MARIANNE BORUCH

Whose history I do not know. I do know I've been e-upbraided for my fast and loose spelling of Woden, the god whose last worshipper must have slipped under the sod during the medieval period, somewhere in the 10th century—imagine those bog-soaked desperate sickbed prayers. (Just put out of mind the Alt-Right's current co-opting that archaic royal presence, his reputation narrowed, almost destroyed via their sick devotions.) And though that more recent deity Spellcheck, made to keep the world on track, alerted me dead wrong on the laptop screen, it refused to save me. "No spelling suggestions," it archly stated, i.e.: not even going to try. Machines can be so callow. They adolescent-shrug with the best of them. It happens that I have rather a crush on Woden, the only ancient god who (I'm told by a medievalist I trust, Dorsey Armstrong, who knows her time travel cold) arranged himself upside down for ten days to lure into his powers the gift of poetry, a nifty if unnerving shortcut for any poet. But there he was on my computer, no longer recognized by the e-know-it-alls of the language.

Thus I understood *Woden*, Anglo-Saxon god of poetry (yes, and war, then throw in learning and magic too), to be officially forgotten, his rich complexities e-pushed onto an ice floe. In one of his small prose pieces, "The Witness," Jorge Luis Borges laments the death of Woden's last worshipper as *example*, the end of a complicated mindset: a dug-in culture's bizarre take on a force, a shadow, a god, a raging mystery only half human. "What will die with me when I die?" Borges wrote to the future disguised as his anonymous reader—unless he is merely talking to himself. "What pitiful or perishable form will the world lose?" he adds. Fragile and vulnerable, details stupid or brilliant made by rage or love or *those awful times I . . .* ? We leave behind; we take with us. Either could be the starting point—of what? Fear? Poetry? Triumph?

Bear with me.

You can always figure out the age of an older woman by her hairstyle, locked in place in her twenties; you do the math from there. So my grandmother, born 1883, told me. She herself kept curling her hair with five-inch leather-covered wires which looked to me like overgrown darkened string beans, no doubt bought in a shop with a little bell over the door about 1906 and repaired by needle and thread over the years as the stitches frayed. She'd coil up her thin gray strands with them, set nightly in place with big black bobby pins. And never strayed from that look. I suppose that's been true for me, at 22 waylaid and stamped ever after, it seems, by the fashion of the day, my hair long and pulled back as so many other young women managed it in 1972, held fast with a simple elastic band. It was either that or a fab Twiggy-girl bowl cut, truly short, still a new thing then. But that required regular trips to the stylist to keep it short which in turn demanded a consistent outlay of cash I didn't have. Besides, word was that you needed to be preternaturally skinny, nearly anorectic, to pull off such a look.

In so many other ways there's a *keeping on* in us past an expected expiration date, stubborn ghosts of habits vapid or profound, even dangerous, picked up to be doggedly—more like mindlessly—carried on. As poets, we absorb the quirks and biases and freedoms and limitations of our coming-of-age, and honor them pretty much forever. Irresistible, so communal at times, they're near lock-step. Thus *history* set in stone beyond singular whim to define culture itself.

Still, maybe it's true that whole worldviews do just stop, kaput—à la Woden's last worshipper buried peacefully, if not burned or hung first. New thoughts take over, willed or by seeming accident. Consider those last-century poets whose nerve we revere—Adrienne Rich, say, or Robert Lowell, James Wright, Ginsberg—who started in more traditional ways of style and subject matter but at some point wildly boomeranged out and back to themselves, altered. Rebellion. Of course that's viral too, the gestalt of the era. But as we age and keep writing, we leave behind what we can bear to lose by some river. Parting, whenever and however it happens: how suddenly light we feel is the poetry in it.

Thing leads to thing, yes yes yes and bully for that. But both kinds of past (personal history, the world's history) have a lot to do with any future. I keep seeing the Wright brothers, Orville and Wilbur, nine Decembers in a row on a stretch of hard North Carolina sand near the sea, both from a land-locked expanse in Ohio, trying for *impossible*. To fly. Unlike Leonardo, no dreams of the moon though in ways similar to his they studied wings, mostly birds airborne, against wind. And like Leonardo, they worked up images of unthinkable contraptions, erased, drew again, miming their hands just so to visualize fixed and movable bits in slow-motion wonder, how sockets welcome turns with their threads. A flying *machine*. The flying part is ancient, is dream; the *machine* of it more recent and not genius but what might trigger it, habits of thought that leap over, link a sudden and multiple *how-does-this-work?*

Because those brothers were, by trade, early aiders and abettors of that 19th-century craze: bicycles! Serious and diligent, they made them. Then in their shop in Dayton, sold them. That's the sweaty successful difference. Study the blueprints of their aircraft—*The Kittyhawk*, named for the site of their experiments—that single double-decker crossbow-looking wing is delicate, huge, iconic now, jerry-rigged with modest chains and chain plates and hubs and crank arms right off their workbench back in Dayton, looking very much the standard parts of any bike, even the one the training wheels dropped from, your first shivering rush down the street as a kid, *lift off*, toward trees. What of it and eventually to that vast nowhere of stars and planets and moons those brothers never really reached for. Recently I heard this on NPR, quoted from Greek poet Dinos Christianopoulos, from the '70s, far beyond this subject: *they thought they had buried us, but they didn't know we were seeds.*

The believer whose eyes last closed on Woden may have been a brute or an angel or both—not unlike the rest of us—a hybrid though that first god's specialty was fury. "Outside . . . a deep ditch clogged with dead leaves and an occasional wolf track in the black earth," Borges wrote, and "by now the sound of the bells is one of the habits of evening in the kingdoms of England. But this man, as a child, saw the face of Woden." And Borges imagines the details, what he claims the world forgot—"the holy dread and exultation, the rude wooden idol weighed down with Roman coins and heavy vestments, the sacrifice of horses, dogs, and prisoners." And what happens if even just one of us dreams the old to make it new. . . . (Ask yourself: do you—or do those you read—write poems to be loved or to discover? Do you want a moral tale or harder, stranger truth? Is it mending we're after, or to blow something up? To remember or to forget?) As for those two obsessives from Ohio—a *flying* bicycle? Are you kidding? What an outrageous, dumb idea.

Wilbur haunts me, taken out relatively young, at 45, by typhoid. Wilbur who just a decade earlier stood in a doorway distracted, idly twisting an empty bicycle tube carton. Untwisting it. Twisting again, then: *Wing-warp!* (Would the great god Spellcheck disdain and dismiss and counter that lovely phrase with its WRONG!—"no spelling suggestions"?)

Slow it down. *Wing* plus *warp*, a *wing* that *warps*. A warping with wings. OMY, the lyric key, the seeming disconnect = flight = poetry. What perished when Wilbur Wright did? The feel of his hands on that small cardboard box? His fooling around changed gravity for us.

Because they shared every panic and pleasure, he looked up: *Where the hell is my brother!*

Marianne Boruch's tenth book of poems, The Anti-Grief, *is forthcoming from Copper Canyon next fall. Her third collection of essays,* The Little Death of Self *(Michigan, "Poets on Poetry Series"), came out last year. She will be a Fulbright Senior Lecturer at the International Poetry Studies Institute at Australia's University of Canberra this spring.*

A POETICS OF NOTHING

ARIEL YELEN

after Clarice Lispector

Do you know if you can buy a hole?
We could treat the hole with care

Clean it out when it grows
Full of dust and stuff

I've been told the edge is near
We could practice falling

Or create jobs
Purchasing and selling holes for a little

More than we earned for digging them
To potential hole-buyers we would say

Holes are great for looking into
Shout into a hole and a hole

Swallows your shout
How wonderful they are for seeing through

Burying something
Dangling your leg

I see us performing our shtick
Where while you dig the hole

I stand outside of it looking in
So that while we talk to each other

Your voice gets farther
And farther away

And farther
The hole-buyers will ask what good

What good is this
What use

I don't need more things to avoid
I don't need more things

For dangling my leg in
To pull myself out of

To fill to shout at
To trip over to consume me

What are you selling me here
This good for nothing *nothing*

(The *nothing* punctuated
By an echo from the hole)

We would say stop yelling
This is our job

Holes are good to have
We insist

Ariel Yelen is a poet and visual artist living in Brooklyn. Her work has been recognized by grants and fellowships from Fine Arts Work Center, The Yiddish Book Center, Vermont Studio Center, Art Farm, and more. She received an MFA in Poetry from Rutgers-Newark and is the Associate Editor for Futurepoem.

THREE POEMS

DAVID KIRBY

Good Seats

Ever wish you had a doppelgänger? Me, too.
Sometimes life just comes whammering at you
every day, and it'd be so much easier if one of you
could shop, cook, clean, and take calls from
telemarketers while the other ate chocolates
and painted or wrote symphonies to rival Beethoven's.
This is called bilocation, which is not for everybody.

Actually, it's not for anybody, unless you're Saint
Isidore the Laborer, who had a reputation
for ploughing his master's field even as he was
seen praying at one of the tonier churches
in downtown Madrid. You could also try being
someone else, as did Alex Miller, an itinerant
musician until he was hired to play the King Biscuit

Power Hour show on radio station KFFA in Helena,
Arkansas, which is when the show's sponsor began billing
Miller as Sonny Boy Williamson to capitalize
on the fame of the well-known Chicago musician
of the same name. The birth year of the fake Sonny Boy
is uncertain, since scholars believe he was born
in 1912, whereas he himself claimed the year

was 1899, meaning he was old enough to have used
the name Sonny Boy Williamson before the real
Sonny Boy, who was born in 1914. Now the name
change is understandable—show biz is show biz,
and you do what you gotta do to get ahead. Once you
start changing your birth date, though, you're in big
trouble. Once you begin to think that way, anything

is possible: Kennedy killed Oswald, for example,
instead of the other way around. Actually, I first
encountered the verb "whammer" in James Jones's
memoir of the attack on Pearl Harbor where Jones
says it was a Sunday, so the men had a bonus ration
of milk at breakfast that morning, and "it was not
till the first low-flying fighter came whammering

overhead with his machine guns going that we ran
outside, still clutching our half-pints of milk
to keep them from being stolen." That's also
the last time I ever encountered that seldom-used
verb, yet doesn't life whammer us every day?
Bam-bam—bam-bam-bam! I give up, life.
I'm so little, and you're so big. You're the Greatest

Show on Earth, as P. T. Barnum said. In addition,
you are the earth as well as everything beyond.
And what a great seat I have. Here, you can sit
beside me and watch yourself. Don't mention it:
this is my way of thanking you. It's the least
I can do, also the most. After all, who do you think
I'm writing these poems for? I'm trying to make

you even more wonderful than you are already. That
would sound boastful if I were talking about myself,
but there are millions of us: poets, yes,
but storytellers as well, painters, glassblowers,
cello players, lighting and set designers, actors.
Waiters. Actors who are waiters. Waiters
who never dream of being actors, though you can't

blame someone for turning on the charm if it means
a bigger tip. We all do our part: archers, acrobats,
auto manufacturers, auto mechanics. Bank tellers,
barbers, bar owners. Carpenters, craftsmen, coffee
farmers, and classics professors, just to mention
jobs that begin with the first three letters
of the alphabet and not even all of those. Okay,

settle down. Here we are, front row center,
drink in one hand, hot dog in the other.
The show's starting! Oh, that's right, the show
started long ago. Also, you never settle down.
You surprise me all the time, and not just in bad ways.
Do I surprise you? That hardly seems possible.
But Napoleon surprised you, as did Julius Caesar

and Hitler, also Gandhi, Marie Curie, Nelson Mandela.
Life, you've got a lot more tricks up your sleeve
than we do. Fore! Thank you for those surprises.
And thank you for that half-pint of milk. Okay,
there was a war, but there was going to be
a war anyway; at least there was extra milk.
That was a good thing, that milk.

Forget about that doppelgänger business.
It'd be like bigamy, only worse. Life,
I'd be all mixed up if there were more than one
of me, though it wouldn't bother you. You can
handle anything, even death, which is either
the opposite of you or the extension of you,
depending on which philosophical school

you subscribe to. I know, I know: you subscribe
to them all, since you dreamed them all up
in the first place. Here comes death right now,
as a matter of fact. Hi, death. How's it going?
Can't complain, huh? Yes, I will have
some of your cotton candy.
You're right, these are good seats. Really good.

Tony Bennett Sings "Smile" for You

Tony Bennett's 90! And we love him because, like all
successful entertainers, he conveys that sense
of loving us as well, and he also loves his material—
indeed, before he begins his next number, he says,

"I really love this song. Its composer lived in Switzerland,
and when it became a hit, he wrote me a note,"
and we think, Switzerland? because we can count the number
of famous Swiss songwriters on the fingers of one hand,

and not even that. What's Switzerland famous for? Okay,
the cuckoo clock, as Joseph Cotten famously points out
in *The Third Man*, also cheese and neutrality. Of these,
surely the most important is neutrality, especially when

one's neighbors include the Germany where Hitler comes
to power in 1933, which is also the year when a woman
named Francine Christophe is born. Eleven years later,
she is deported to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp

along with her mother. They survive somehow, and the adult
Francine Christophe recalls that the deportees are allowed
to bring a few personal items into the camp, so her mother
packs away two small pieces of chocolate, knowing that

her daughter will need them some day when she collapses
from hunger, though when a pregnant woman named Hélène

goes into labor, the mother asks Francine Christophe
if she can give the chocolate to Hélène instead, saying

it may save her life, and Francine Christophe says,
"Yeah, sure, I'm fine," and the mother gives Hélène
the chocolate, and Hélène gives birth to a baby girl,
and the baby girl survives, and six months later, the camp

is liberated. The composer of the song Tony Bennett
is about to sing is, of course, Switzerland's most famous
non-Swiss citizen, Charlie Chaplin. "Dear Tony,"
he'd written, "thank you so much for resurrecting my song

and making it famous all over again." "And I couldn't
believe the signature," says Tony Bennett; "it was signed,
'Mr. Charlie Chaplin,'" although Mr. Charlie Chaplin
didn't actually write the lyrics to the tune Bennett sings to us:

"Smile" was an instrumental theme from the soundtrack
for the 1936 movie *Modern Times*; Chaplin composed
the music, and in 1954, John Turner and Geoffrey
Parsons added the lyrics. "Smile, what's the use

of crying," sings Tony Bennett; "you'll find that life
is still worthwhile, if you just smile." Francine Christophe
grows up and marries and has her own children, and one day
her daughter asks her if she thought that the deportees

would have been better off after returning home in 1945
had they had access to psychologists or psychiatrists,
and Francine Christophe replies, "Yeah, sure, but we didn't
have them." Now imagine that you're Francine Christophe.

You're in your eighties now. And you can't stop thinking
about the question your daughter asked, so you decide
to have a conference to discuss these issues of trauma
and resilience and survival, and you invite Holocaust survivors

as well as therapists and mental health professionals of every
kind. In *Modern Times*, Chaplin plays an assembly-line worker
driven mad by the monotony of his job, and for the rest
of the film, he can't catch a break: he's in and out

of the asylum, in and out of work, in and out of jail,
and along the way, he meets an orphan called simply
the Gamine, played by Paulette Goddard, and he keeps
taking on new jobs so he can be her friend and protector,

but every job ends with a dismissal and another jail term,
and when orphanage officials show up to claim the Gamine,
she moans, "What's the use of trying," but Chaplin tells her
to never say die, and the film's last image is of the two

of them strolling down a California highway towards
new adventures. At the conference, Francine Christophe
recounts the horrors that she and her mother underwent:
"I'm frightened, Mother," you say. "Last year, I was seven

years old. This year, I'm eight, and so many years separate
these two ages. I have learned that I am Jewish,
that I am a monster, and that I must hide myself."
And then the experts begin to read their papers, and when

one of the speakers approaches the podium, she begins
by saying, "I live in Marseille, where I am a psychiatrist."
And she says, "But before I deliver my talk, I have something
for Francine Christophe." And she takes a piece of chocolate

from her pocket, and she hands it to you, and you think, what
in the world? And the audience sees this coming, and they're
in tears, but by now you're smiling at her, and she says,
"I'm the baby," and she smiles at you, and you smile.

The Whys

A girl has just pulled herself onto the river bank
and is trying to explain herself to a couple
of understandably angry policemen
or, actually, not trying to explain herself so much as say
I don't know why I did it again
and again as the policemen scold her and ask repeatedly

why she did it, though the girl, not they, is the one
in the right here, not because she went swimming
in the river but because there really is no good reason
to have done so and therefore no answer to the question *why?*
Why is there anything rather
than nothing? For example, why is there turndown service?

Pulling the bedcover back is not exactly one of the Labors
of Hercules, and as for the chocolate they leave
on your pillow, it's middle-shelf chocolate at best,
and besides, since chocolate contains not only caffeine but also
theobromine, which is a vasodilator,
diuretic, and heart stimulant, it'll keep you up all night anyway

and thus counter the intended purpose of the service.
The driver of the cab I'm taking to the airport tells me
about his life coaching high school baseball teams
and quelling gang violence in East LA, and when he says his dad
got married after he'd served ten years
in San Quentin for armed robbery, and I say his mom must have

been quite a gambler to take a chance on a guy who'd
done hard time, he says, *I don't think she knew.*
Smart woman, huh? Don't ask, don't tell.
She just took the plunge, and a good thing, too: no ex-con husband,
no baseball coach son, a lot more dead
Bloods and Crips. Have you ever seen that old black and white

movie where the city fellow pauses at the fortune teller's
table to have his fortune read, and the old lady
in the head scarf turns the cards up, and her
eyes get big, and she shouts, *No! No!* and starts to back away?
What does the old lady know that
we don't? When the movie ends, you wait for her name

in the credits, but then the phone rings, and it says
Unknown Caller on your caller ID, and by the time
you get back to your television, the movie's over,
and you don't know the answer or even the question because
you started the movie
in the middle, but then you started your life the same way,

didn't you, you had no idea what was going on
until you were what, five? Six? All you knew
was that the journey of your life was underway,
that you were on the road, and you couldn't see very far ahead,
just to the end of the street,
maybe, but for centuries people have walked from one end

of every country in the world to the other without
seeing any farther than that, though most walks
are a lot shorter, like the walk you took around
your neighborhood last night. Just because it was a short walk
and had no purpose doesn't mean
that it wasn't a good walk. The psychologist Amos Tversky

said before his own early death: *Life is a book.*
The fact that it was a short book doesn't mean
it wasn't a good book. It was a very good book.
The light changes, and my cab moves forward. Back in her tent,
the old lady spreads
a kerchief and puts everything she owns on it, which isn't

much: deck of cards, change of clothes, knife,
apples, a jewel she can sell if she has to.
And then she adds all the *whys* in the world,
which are numberless yet so tiny that they fit easily,
and she pulls the corners of
the kerchief together, knots the ends around a stick, puts the stick

on her shoulder, and sets out across the world,
taking the world with her when suddenly two policemen
brush her aside as they rush past,
and the old lady thinks of herself when she was young and went swimming
in another river in another country,
and the current was really strong that day, and for a moment

she was pulled under, and in that moment she thought
she would never come up again, yet here she is now
on this bridge, and she sees a drowning girl,
a girl much like her younger self, and she's just about to reach
the other side now, and she looks
again and sees the girl is not drowning, not drowning at all but waving.

David Kirby's collection The House on Boulevard St.: New and Selected Poems *was a finalist for the National Book Award in 2007. Kirby is the author of* Little Richard: The Birth of Rock 'n' Roll*, which the* Times Literary Supplement *called "a hymn of praise to the emancipatory power of nonsense." Kirby's honors include fellowships from the National Endowment of the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. His latest poetry collection is* Get Up, Please.

VALENTINE'S DAY

BONNIE JILL EMANUEL

Today I shall write about love.
It hasn't stopped drizzling all life
I chalk yellow suns onto yellow lines
running down Woodward Ave,
go writing bright green rivers and 1000 hills
into the dark damp gutter sky.
I think about the petrified.
The lost.
The gunned down.
Scribble us all into one perfect
red blood painted wooden flower cart poem.
I'll just plant roses now under a wet lamppost.
I heart rain.
Ah there's a pigeon poking around in the weeds and crosswalk
drenched and some tossed off smashed champagne.
Me, I'm just a girl waiting
for the DDOT Bus 53.
My legs are getting soaked.
Tomorrow I'll be more prepared for this.
I'll stick a thesaurus, a laptop
in my waterproof backpack.
Wear my parrot yellow waterproof slicker.
I'll sit in the middle of some wet cement and scrawl
world, won't you be mine?

Bonnie Jill Emanuel is a Creative Writing MFA candidate at The City College of New York, where she received the 2017 Stark Poetry Prize in memory of Raymond Patterson. Her poems have appeared in Midwest Review, Great Lakes Review, Chiron Review, Love's Executive Order *(poems on the Trump presidency), and more. She was born and raised in Detroit.*

TWO POEMS

MARC McKEE

Lester Bangs Talks Scottie

PSH (1967–2014)

It's not enough to say "sad," alright,
you need a flood. You need a line
like a serrated knife edge
to even get started, an anti-riff, like
whatever the violin that can't keep its chin up
crawling out from under the worried trombone
says in the bathroom mirror
to "Kashmir" or "Should I Stay
or Should I Go" or something, like
you take a spiral ring notebook, right? and
you fill it. You fill it with lust and shame
and real beauty and the feverish,
trembling trust you get from puppies
or babies, anybody truly new, who knows
what they need absolutely
but they're half a planet from having
any way to actually say it
but they go and wail toward it anyway, right
they wail with their mouths and their arms,
their thighs, it's a caterwaul attacked by
another caterwaul in the dark, it's coming
from the cheese-brained hearts
at their crying, lurching, gaping, hoping
centers—you call it cock, you call it cunt,
you call it yearning, kissing
as a respiratory emergency, it's like
waking up on a beach, what beach?
I don't know / nobody fucking knows,
you get more clinical if you have to
but *that's* the notebook
and then you rip the metal spiral out
and you put the paper in the driver's
seat of a stupid car / you almost want
the car to kiss the boy and everyone
watching they didn't even know
they could want the boy to be kind
to this other boy, this off-kilter, discomfiting
boy, yawn and sigh made flesh
like an Orange Julius with feelings
until they see what's left, and you know
technically the metal spiral can be
threaded back through and restore
the notebook to being a notebook,
technically, that flaming, wrinkled,
stabbed with ink hope chest
but it's not the same notebook
and you know it / the pages don't turn
the bottoms of significant moments curl
and disintegrate in a dirty mist
and it's as bad as you think,
it's worse and then there's seeing it and being
another human, fucked and wired to love
and protect whatever we think we are
to the point of inventing murdering
who we aren't, who we are / we are so
embarrassed, dumb want is the long shadow
of every light in the cosmos
stuffed into short shorts a size too small
and how is that pain beautiful
to us, how is that beauty so disgusting?
Oh Scottie. Is that the upset apple cart
of questions you leave us with,
like a pile of 8-tracks with goo all over it,
is it some other order of intervention?
How much Scottie can you stand, I mean
how much Scottie can you stand
to recognize you are?

Gust Avrakotos Pulls Lancaster Dodd's File in the CIA Archive, 1989

PSH (1967–2014)

Sooner or later you realize: every tragedy of the last century
is at least partly a story of the failure
of power to account for its own sustenance.
Look, don't be dumb: existential threats never really end,
they just get managed. For every epic,
winter, babies, etc. Vacuums grow pricks like mushrooms / E.g. "the Master":

> *You seem so familiar to me.*
> *We are not helpless, and we are on a journey*
> *that risks the dark. Who likes you, except for me?*

You forget how you got to any peak? then suddenly the Zen master's
"We'll see" has more murderous edges, a century
of knives broken into smaller, sharper knives. The epic
really is in the fiefdoms of all these little pricks, the constant failures
to realize how to maintain an infrastructure that doesn't beg for an end—
Power? Power can't *wait* to be an idiot, you know? "I. AM. SUSTENANCE":

> *Go to that landless latitude, and see.*
> *If you figure out a way to live without a master, any*
> *master, let us know.—So familiar to me . . .*

Oh what a *fucking hack*—and not for nothing, but *sustenance*
is compromise. That shouldn't be hard. You don't need a master's
degree in geopolitical divination to see that the end
of the illusion of freedom is the end of freedom. Each and every century
has an endless scroll of people's harrowing failures
to not destroy other people, epic after epic after sorry epic.

> *Above all, I am a man . . . hopelessly*
> *inquisitive man, just like you. If you leave—*
> *Who likes you except for me?*

I don't use the word "titanic" casually, but that's the epic
scale of a narcissism we're talking about here: to *play* commander, less sustenance
than seed of drought to the people whose failures
you have to weaponize just trying to master
the crushing fears you convince yourself have—*for centuries*
of millennia—plagued your specialness. How you loathe that you will end.

> *I don't ever want to see*
> *you again. You are asleep.*
> *You see so familiar to me.*

There's no reason this can't be fun, Lancaster. The end?
You gotta see it as a punchline / so epic
it takes the better part of a disastrous century
to land. What's *key* is having people left who can laugh; *that* sustenance
cannot be overvalued. You gotta undermine masters, would-be masters,
you have to make of their precious industry / ostentatious fucking failures.

> *Your spirit was free—*
> *I give you facts a trillion years*
> *in the making. Who likes you except for me?*

When failures
end
the masters
we have room for new epics,
period. Just let *sustenance*
be the first word of our rebuilding, just / give us more centuries—

> *A grilling, this. Your worries. Leave—free*
> *winds—your memories—a four and a half month siege—*
> *. . . Familiar seem-so, you see to me.*
> *Ex-me. Except for. Who likes you accept me.*

You got me *there*, Lanc: I'm fucking tired. No centurion for the bosses, me. Failure is always a plurality. Rage smart and hard for sustenance, it all still ends.
We'll see: the only real future is an epic begun without masters.

Marc McKee is the author of one chapbook and four full-length collections of poetry: What Apocalypse?*, winner of the 2008 New Michigan Press / DIAGRAM Chapbook Contest,* Fuse *(2011),* Bewilderness *(2014),* Consolationeer *(2017), and* Meta Meta Make-Belief *(forthcoming, 2019), all from Black Lawrence Press. He teaches at the University of Missouri and is managing editor of the* Missouri Review *in Columbia, Missouri, where he lives with his wife Camellia Cosgray and their son, Harold.*

COME ANGELS! COME BEASTS!

An appreciation of Revelations *by Ruben Quesada*

APR Books

SPENCER REECE

Revelations by Ruben Quesada
Sibling Rivalry Press
Paperback, 38 pages, 2018

ANITA BRYANT WHO WANTED TO DROWN A FAGGOT REBELLION

"Come angels! Come beasts!" Ruben Quesada beckons on the opening page of his dazzling wild chapbook. Have the four horsemen from the Apocalypse come to break seals? Quesada's exclamation shakes the spine of the book. Into the glue and pulp and ink of this text are the raw nerves of the speaker of these poems who is calling out to the beasts and angels of this world. Joy and hurt are sealed within a book called *Revelations*.

In the twelfth revelation Quesada writes:

> *I have tried to avoid*
> *blaming myself for being called a faggot*
> *for most of my life I could not escape it*
> *but those days have gone like the gospel*
> *of Anita Bryant who wanted to drown*
>
> *a faggot rebellion like that one at Stonewall*
> *in the summer of 1969 and we shall overcome*

How the line breaks break. How Quesada slices off "gospel" and introduces us to Anita Bryant on the next line. How "gospel" accidentally half-rhymes with "Stonewall." *Revelations* is written by a gay man who has escaped crucifixion. Hallelujah. *Revelations* arrives in the world when the world could use some revelations.

Revelations crashes and mashes hope and yearning and strife and prayer together. The poems strive to overcome after Anita Bryant's attempt to "drown a faggot rebellion." Anita Bryant is less known now for her rendition of "Paper Roses" or for her orange juice commercials than for the fact she opposed gay rights in 1977. She's a footnote of ugliness about as small as the period at the end of this sentence now. She continues to advocate fundamentalist Christian values while each decade has brought her bankruptcy, divorce and alienation.

Anita Bryant aged. Quesada grew. The world changed. Newspapers disappeared. Records became curios. The telephone became a tiny office in your hand. Homosexuality went from a psychiatric illness to acceptable and, at times, not even captivating as difference. Gay became mainstream as Bryant drowned in her fundamentalism. And the landscape of published poetry, particularly in North America, expanded: more writers of previously ignored cultural groups are published wider and broader. Latino and Latina poetry has expanded, now more commonly called Latinx to neutralize gender. As gay bars boycotted the screwdriver to oppose Bryant, the migrant workers under those Florida orange trees had children, educated them, and some of those children picked up pencils and laptops and began writing poems. Quesada's *Revelations* are historical. They stake a claim that is somewhat surprising. They seek salvation.

INSTEAD OF BEING THE TREASURER OF PENNSYLVANIA I'M A POET

In *Revelations*, Quesada describes the filmed suicide of R. Budd Dwyer, which can be found streaming on YouTube:

> *He holds a revolver the size of his head his hand is shaking like the tail of a copperhead colt slivering inside his body waiting to rattle like the Holy Spirit out of his head waiting to get out so it won't come around to visit him again and now every time I fall asleep I dream it's me but instead of being a politician I'm a teacher instead of being the Treasurer of Pennsylvania I'm a poet*

How Quesada combines the flat grotesquery of a filmed suicide with a copperhead colt and the Holy Spirit rattling. Instead of imagining a suicide, like that of Sylvia Plath through poems and letters and diary entries, it's now possible to see one enacted by clicking a search engine. How can we jerk the leash of the large barking animal of cyberspace and ask it to behave and be trained? Perhaps poetry can be some sort of anodyne for all of this? What art slows us down more? Hard for a reader not to wonder this as they read along.

Quesada's poems feel uneasy in their relationship with technology. The speaker is able to access death through seeing it on television. He is able to witness it over and over again. Another poem features Daniel V. Jones, who was in a car chase, and committed suicide on live television. He had HIV and cancer and his insurance would not cover his health care. The speaker keeps witnessing these deaths artificially. Technology detaches us from death and makes it into two-dimensional entertainment. Paradoxically, Quesada says "the internet introduces us to life, angels via technology, with the salvation of information."

"These poems examine the relationship I have with technology and how technology offers us a vision of the world that is both beautiful and destructive," adds Quesada. In the poems, we see a browser as a church without religion in it.

I WISH IT HAD ONLY BEEN A DREAM

In 1985, we were all forced to open our mouths a little more frankly:

> *I wish it had only*
> *Been a dream after*
> *Thousands had died*
> *Finally then did*
> *President Reagan say*
> *AIDS then months*
> *Later an actor Rock*
> *Hudson died there*
> *Was no funeral just a*
> *Body turned to ash*

Quesada's poem, his fourth revelation, is written in a block, the product of how we write now on our screens, with lines right and left justified making up fonts like Gutenberg. The poem is a poetic obituary to commemorate what didn't get said in Hudson's official obituary. This poem gets at the heart of the beast of AIDS. This skinny little tablet of a poem where the end lines break awkwardly, including breaking Rock/Hudson in half, as the crisis did. This flat newspaper-like prose style we have seen most recently with Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*. The way Quesada's poem is written on the page mirrors the way we received this information. In such a world of such a black and white beast where was the angel? Mainly we began to find that in art and not the church. Tony Kushner wrote *Angels in America*. And everywhere gay American poets began to document the plague. Behind the work of Quesada is the work of James Merrill, Paul Monette, Mark Doty, Thom Gunn. By the time Quesada writes the closet was in smithereens. The church lagged behind.

While the church is rendered useless in these poems, Quesada casts about throughout this collection for the trappings of religion to make a new sound. He uses words like "gospel" and "cross" and "angels" and "spirit" often. Furthermore, Quesada's chapbook is physically shaped like a 19th-century devotional. The cover is of Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* that sits at the Prado, that wild intricate 16th-century phantasmagoria of passion and sin seen as if from the clouds. Just as this book is divided between a consideration of beasts and angels, so art historians are divided as to whether the Bosch triptych's central panel is a moral warning or a panorama of paradise lost. Peter S. Beagle, a science fiction writer, describes the painting as an "erotic derangement that turns us all into voyeurs, a place filled with the intoxicating air of perfect liberty." Such a cover art touches on the troubling theme of sex within these poems. All these men and women, both black and white, in groups or pairs, in wild poses, echo the chaos the writer is up against as he makes sense of sex in this book.

Quesada writes:

> *Last night as we lay in bed we talked about one-night stands we'd had you told me about the time in Salt Lake City when you went away to college when you'd spent a night in a sling high on heroin with a line of married Mormon men waiting their turns to be inside you the smell of fireplace filling your nose*

The references to sex in this book are mainly connected to death and disease and drugs. Having sex for a person of Quesada's generation meant he might die and healthcare might not take care of him. The media shapes this poet's sensibility regarding his sexuality. Here is the close of his thirteenth revelation about a pick-up:

> *the feeling that slowly sweeps*
> *through the body it babbles*
>
> *and burrows in the veins*
> *as it charges the heart*
> *the smell of our bronzed skin*
> *in my mouth the silken road*
>
> *of my spine against the wall*
> *stitch the braided memory*
> *of prepositions and interjections*
> *remember to piece buttons*
>
> *onto the cuff press an adverbial*
> *crest over the breast and frenzied*
> *fringe for flare your face in pink*
> *neon no longer is a hanger*
>
> *for shoulders to lean upon*
> *a curled collar forms a question*

finish with an explanation
what is your name

Such have been the rituals of many gay men. This gospel leaves our speaker empty. Again and again, the poems cast about for salvation and come up empty. Where can one go and be known?

I TURN TO CERNUDA

Quesada, a poet now in his forties, based in Chicago, where he teaches at the college level, grew up in Los Angeles, in a household with a single mom from Costa Rica who spoke English as her second language. He must have felt at times like José Olivarez, whose debut was published in 2018, *Citizen Illegal*: "It's hard for me to articulate just how impossible writing felt for me at the beginning . . . I could trace myself to no kings or queens. I couldn't trace myself back to the pilgrims. No one in my family had fought in a World War. I didn't have superpowers." But poetry, the most fragile of all the arts, is giving this new generation of poets superpowers and poetry is ringing ever stronger. No longer is it impossible to write as a man from working-class Mexican immigrants.

A poet like Francisco Aragón, whose parents immigrated to the States from Nicaragua in the 1950s, paved the way for poets like Quesada, as both a Latino poet, and as a fellow gay man. In an essay entitled "Flyer, Closet, Poem," Aragón wrote:

> *I've never been reticent about claiming my status as "Latino poet." I've said many times that a Latino or Latina poet should be able to write however or whatever he or she wants and not feel any less "Latino" or "Latina" for it. I can't recall ever saying or writing that a gay poet should be able to do the same and not feel any less gay. In the former instance, the immutable trait—being Latino or Latina . . . can be considered, in my view, a source of pride. In the latter, the immutable trait—being gay or lesbian—is not so much a source of pride as something one accepts, yet downplays, or deftly omits from most conversations. This has been the case with me.*

Whereas Aragón might have begun publishing verse that was more understated about his sexuality, Quesada's generation is no longer held back by a need to edit out his sexuality.

In the recent expansion of voices in the Latinx community we have seen *Slow Lightning*, which won the Yale Younger Poets Prize in 2011. Eduardo C. Corral used what he called "code switching," mixing Spanish with his English, which felt perfectly natural in his voice and honored his experience. Quesada does not mix languages within poems, but instead layers his voice with that of exiled Spanish poet Luis Cernuda: two psyches strike up against one another at a more spiritual level. Two men, one alive, one dead, lean in, shoulder to shoulder. The mystical shamanic art of translation is woven throughout the chapbook. Cernuda's exiled heart must be jumping with recognition somewhere. Unlike Budd Dwyer or Rock Hudson, the ghost of Cernuda glimmers with wild possibility. There seems a way in, with Cernuda, to something larger now.

Luis Cernuda (1902–1963), born in Seville, Spain, and member of Spain's Generation of '27

poets, hovers over this collection. While less known than Antonio Machado and Federico García Lorca, Cernuda is equally memorable. Quesada places these translations between his revelations: this element makes of the book its own revelation. Ingenious. Quesada's poems react within the translations.

Cernuda is famous for leaving Spain at the start of the civil war and never returning. Curiously, he left in 1938 and the Bosch painting placed on the cover of this book arrived at the Prado in 1939. Quesada, through his art in the making of this book, pushes two revolutionary artists together who did not meet in life.

Much of the verse translated here was written in the pain of exile. Cernuda was also, unusually, openly gay. This kind of bravery deserves a pause. Cernuda's short crisp verses have a resignation and dry tone that just escape bitterness. This tone reverberates and interacts with Quesada's tone, which is more playful and expansive. Unlike Machado, who holds back emotion akin to Jane Kenyon, or Lorca, who rhapsodizes passionately, Cernuda says things like: "Because I have never loved crucified gods, / Sad gods who insult / That ardent earth that made you and undoes you." This echoes Quesada's attitude about being alienated from organized religion. Both poets use free-flowing surreal language that bucks conformity. Both poets are drawn to the prose poem. These elements of prose poetry and surreal language are subversive to the expected propriety of thought and form in poetry and thus they match and mirror the direction of these poets who by nature of their sexualities had to work the margins.

Quesada said of Cernuda: "I am drawn to his confidence. His poetry was the most forthright in expressing his same-sex desires. He was remarkable. It is this confidence that I aspire to in my own work. As someone who has struggled with feelings of shame about my homosexuality, I turn to Cernuda with admiration for this courage to openly write about sex and desire at a time when homosexuality was criminalized under Franco's dictatorship."

Revelations becomes a triumphant melody bridging one gay man to another. From Cernuda to Aragón to Quesada a line advances and shame shrinks. Cernuda in his critical writing often stressed that poets tapped into the spiritual world better. *Revelations* does that.

CHRIST WAS NEVER MORE THAN A MAN NAILED TO A CROSS

Revelations could reference the work of Julian of Norwich, the famous English anchoress from the 15th century, remembered for her visceral renderings of Christ crucified and her intense identification with his suffering. Julian wrote in intense packed prose and some of Quesada's verses here are also intense prose poems without punctuation. Or perhaps also the title nods to the Apocalypse in the Bible? The book is open to interpretation.

Whatever the case, this poet's rosary is a book of poems, not anything directly connected to Christ. In the first revelation he tells us exactly that:

> *Christ was never more than a man nailed to a cross but from him I learned that an entire life fits into a person's palm like a book of poems like an executioner's hammer now at thirty-five I have learned confession won't save me*

I would say the person writing this book has a faith *in poetry* and remains disillusioned to some extent by Christ. And right next to the book of poems the poet jumps to the next simile, which is an executioner's hammer. Much like Emily Dickinson, this poet cottons much more easily to Christ's suffering than to an idea of salvation.

Seth Pennington, Quesada's editor at Sibling Rivalry Press, has said of these revelations: "each section is stripped of any pausing, any stopping, is one long exasperation, is confession, that kind that saves you from yourself because of the power inherent in a mirror." What's beyond the mirror? Outside the internet? Beyond the self? After the sex?

It isn't religion for Quesada. Yet what to make then of religion or Christ, gently referenced here in the work? Quesada writes: "Catholicism was a part of my life as a child. I attended church with my mother every Sunday. I attended Sunday school and I was taught about the importance of the seven sacraments. I was baptized and confirmed but as a teenager I became disillusioned. I was conflicted by my same-sex desire and the teaching of Catholicism that didn't recognize my desire to love someone of the same sex as natural." This story is unfortunately all too common. So many have left the church for its obsession with judgments over people's sexual lives. Anita Bryant has to answer for that.

Somewhere the message of Jesus to love one another has at times gotten murky. The legion of sex scandals over closeted gay Catholic priests turned predators who destroyed and abused so many lives has not helped matters. Where one church door closes, however, a window in poetry opens.

Does poetry, then, offer a new way in, a way, perhaps, to salvage Christ, coming at him backwards, reclaiming Christ in a queer way? While this book is inconclusive on that score, it would hardly be surprising if this poet moved in that direction with his future work.

Poets read the tea leaves. Poets see signs. Poets declaim like Old Testament prophets. Poets stress what isn't stressed. I love the art for this, more than other arts. Most modern American poets would check the spiritual box long before the religious box, but in either case, poets glom onto what cannot be seen. Poetry rides the spirit. Here our poet embraces a dead poet.

Here is a poet whose world has been formed by gay pioneers. Let's call them angels and AIDS the beast that slayed so many. Here is a poet who traces his sound to Luis Cernuda. Let's call Cernuda an angel and the Franco dictatorship that persecuted homosexual artists like himself the beast. And let's go further and call an American government that is scapegoating Latinos a beast. The effect of this swirl of concerns is the labels drop away and the work reveals a searching soul who finds kinship with a dead Spanish poet. That's what poetry does best: time travel and X-ray the flesh to reveal the soul.

I PRAY FOR SILENCE

In his last and fifteenth revelation Quesada writes:

> *Dear sister remember that time*
>
> *I was eight and I snuck a record*
> *From your collection to listen to music*
>
> *While streetlamp shadows shifted*
> *On the snow vinyl spun in purple*
>
> *Like the sky shaping itself into inky streaks*
> *As the hum of a ballad like a prayer*
>
> *Murmured through the house*
> *Now each morning I pray for silence*

Our speaker gives a clear scene that spins into something Dalí-esque, where vinyl spins into "purple like the sky." Notice Quesada embedding consonance with his *s*'s and original euphony with "spun in purple" and elsewhere like "a haze of zinnias" and "loose neck of a goose" and "Antilles lilies." He's incanting.

The silhouette of the young boy in the house bending over a record player is almost like a person in prayer. He's a gay boy seeing deaths on TV—his first visions. Our adult speaker, who has found himself disillusioned by sex, is now praying for silence—like a religious person might. "Silence is God's first language," wrote 16th-century mystic John of the Cross. Over and over again from the beginning to end of *Revelations*, we see a poet crafting a passion close to religious although not religious.

To speak the unspeakable requires faith. Such speech-acts expand the world. To write poetry takes faith. Remember the blind beggar from Luke? The crowds kept telling him to shut up. But he would not relent. He kept screaming from the ditch. From across a border. He kept yelling, "Christ, over here!" Unique, memorable, strange, surreal, lyrical, driven, Quesada speaks without pause and the world of *Revelations* expands. He and Luis Cernuda connect in a holy communion. There's unexpected salvation with this book. Such a book arises in a time when disgracefully the American government is telling Latinos to shut up, putting Honduran children in cages with numbers on their backs, demonizing women and children walking in a caravan across Mexico. Brothers and sisters, this book is a reason to rejoice. This poet sees and is now seen. Hallelujah.

Revelations is not a religious book. *Revelations* is a religious book.

Spencer Reece is the author of The Clerk's Tale *(2004) and* The Road to Emmaus *(2014). In 2017 he edited an anthology of poems by abandoned girls in a home called Our Little Roses in San Pedro Sula, Honduras:* Counting Time Like People Count Stars. *A book of prose, sixteen years in the making,* The Little Entrance: Devotions, *mixing autobiography with literary appreciation of poets, will be out by 2020. He lives and works in Madrid as an Episcopal priest and the national secretary for the Spanish Episcopal Church.*

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WARHOL'S WIG: 1986

WILLIAM LESSARD

in late photos, it attained a tropical effulgence
silver fronds blossoming
each pronging a different direction

plants that flower before dying
mast seeds at prolific intervals

horticulturalists explain the phenomenon
as a form of speciated
dice-throwing

the seeds not finding sky
becoming a forked beneficence
to rats and passing crows

Warhol's wig rested
atop the same
pocked circumstance

in his final self-portraits,
we see the face abraded by human weather
exposed
at the surface

it is the face that grows all our lives,
the one that only emerges the closer we get to skull

Warhol's face
seeded from a bullet to the ribs

pupils widening around us
glance erasing our glance

as if we
fingering metal

one foot from nightmare, even when awake

in the final silkscreens,
Warhol's wig bled
in colored wavelength

red, blue

gesture toward departure,
toward arrival

William Lessard has writing that has appeared or is forthcoming in McSweeney's, Best American Experimental Writing, Hobart, Brooklyn Rail, *and* Hyperallergic. *His visual work has been featured at MoMA PS1.*