The AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW

"One outreaches language in poetry
when the in-seeing elements of
consciousness ask the unseen of life to
come forward. My aim has been to
unseat what we assume about time,
about the verities of love and death, of
the consciousness of those other sentient
beings next to us on the planet.
We must put aside the glib assumptions
we make just to domesticate
our walking-around days."

(GALLAGHER, p. 21)

MAY/JUNE 2019 VOL. 48/NO. 3 $5 US/$6 CA

RACHEL ZUCKER
THE POETICS OF WRONGNESS,
AN UNAPOLOGIA

TC TOLBERT
SELECTIONS FROM *SYMPHYSIS*

TESS GALLAGHER
WRITING FROM THE EDGE:
A POET OF TWO NORTHWESTS

NEW POEMS BY
BOB HICOK
DANUSHA LAMÉRIS
ED SKOOG
MALCOLM TARIQ

APRWEB.ORG

PHOTO: MAMTA POPAT

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
Stanley Plumly
1939–2019

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. 39

Index of Advertisers: p. 42

PENNSYLVANIA COUNCIL ON THE ARTS

OLD CITY PUBLISHING

The AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW

MAY/JUNE 2019 VOL. 48/NO. 3

IN THIS ISSUE

ANNUAL PRIZES

The Editors of APR award these annual prizes:

THE STANLEY KUNITZ MEMORIAL PRIZE: A prize of $1,000 and publication of the winning poem in *The American Poetry Review*, awarded to a poet under 40 years of age in honor of the late Stanley Kunitz's dedication to mentoring poets.

THE APR/HONICKMAN FIRST BOOK PRIZE: In partnership with The Honickman Foundation, an annual prize for a first book of poetry, with an award of $3,000, an introduction by the judge, publication of the book, and distribution by Copper Canyon Press through Consortium.

FOUR POEMS

TC TOLBERT

This is what you are

missing Melissa – dust turned to waves
in the desert – okra coming up two months
too late – a forward breaking gate opening
into someone else's field – I walk by
a window and I do not understand how little I see
you – but so clearly the wasp backing out
of a hole inside a long dead
tree – when we were children we lived
with our grandparents and I remember without
sadness mostly the sound of tires screaming into
the street – the porchlight welcomes
whatever intercepts it – I praise
insistence – I kiss
my love because our best friend died
when we were 5 years old – a brain tumor –
and then again at 7, 11, 17 . . . 43 – bodies
killing themselves by growing
beyond their own capacity – I am building
a bed for our visitors – it is infuriating how little
I understand about re-joining wood already broken
piece by piece – *anticipate everything*
I hear God saying to no one – I am still listening
when you stop, for a moment, breathing
in your sleep – I am recognizable
now as a part of the man who made me –
every man is a suspect – inside my own mouth
I am annoyed by who I cannot seem to be –
do you miss this Melissa – every part of our body
is ash aching to be reminded it is ash – unlike fire
reaching through the face of every forest
in order to be incited by wind or offered
some relief – I've learned to flinch
by standing absolutely still – it isn't death exactly living
without you – the purpose of a rope
is to borrow someone else's strength – that's why
I'm calling you – when I pray I hear nothing
so clearly as our new voice
singe-scoured and full of disbelief –

In someone else's home, 2018 February 08,

you are sitting in front of a considerable yellow mirror. Carved into the frame of the mirror are flowers, the leaves
of which, were they solo, could be mistaken for thumbnails lined up at a salon waiting for the arrival of the hands
to which they should be attached. There are fish underwater above you trying to tell the night what is coming.
One fish, in particular, has eyelashes and a body covered in lines much like a topographical map. You remember there
are tiny brooms all over your own skin that, even if you say *stop*, will not stop. You have said *stop* so many times before
to your own body, whatever that is, and the lines being drawn upon it. Now that testosterone has occluded estrogen, there
must be fewer bodies like yours, or more, it's hard to say. You often mistake reflection for its lyrical sibling and it hurts
to see anything this late. The auburn closet to your right was built after the room was finished. *Closet* isn't exactly

the right word, but neither is *metal bar with hangers inside an irregular collection of shelves*. You have always been drawn
to containers, repositories of any kind, strung with a simple strip of cloth. Perhaps this is why you cannot call Melissa,
or even Missy, your *deadname*. You understand the problems with *birth-name* and still you've spent so much time bargaining
to believe every name you've ever been called points at least partially to a body alive that you are willing to love today. The mirror
only returns parts of what holds you to yourself, no matter the angle, and in this way it is just like language, just
like every story about transition with which you've been harassed. Faced with the haunting of our innumerable
we become severing. Your prayer was severaled. Like the night to which you are repeatedly hope-harnessed and into
which soon enough you will pass.

What I told you while the keys kept the grass wet beneath them –

you did it all wrong and still there are trees
shooting up all along the creek in Greylock's Hopper Ravine – Common
Ash especially – a Hangman's Noose a knot that used to be known
as a collar – who cannot forsake their own name – who has not tried
by moving more quickly than the breath carried inside the blood –
because you did not say
I want to die – I thought I want to live was simply sleeping
inside your mouth – here we are now the quiet practices – bending
and wrapping a cord I am trying to learn what you know now – forever
fingering without a wedding ring a rope – was it easy for your hands
to do this – close each door you opened – I hope it was –
your body
somewhere still stepping on Bloodroot – white flowers and basal
leaves – just one shape of the air you always were –

Dear Melissa –

Either way, your name is not Liz nor Elizabeth – no matter what you signed with your right hand – you will look up the common words for *Euphorbia rigida*, *Stapelia grandiflora* and even though they live here – in The Natural History of the Sonoran Desert, 2nd edition – it is as if each body lives inside the word *zero*– language's optimism – naming an absence in order to make space full again – dark matter always already before we said dark matter – missing you is constant – who we become when we are not. Looking at you, even for a moment, the light returns and bends upon entering the cornea – this is not you, your image – but here you are passing through the aqueous humor, the lens, the vitreous humor – depending on a measure of refraction – smaller than you once were – having become a real image now – what isn't altered by letting light fall into it – what isn't disappeared subtly

suddenly – when light cannot get out. I am thinking of a man who has written across his arm with a needle this too shall pass – how I thought I understood it immediately – not the actual this but the nod toward moving – the nod toward moving toward. I thought I'd been there already – the threshold between living and dying and being dead and – I hurried toward your death as though I could live inside of it – what would I do there – in that room in which the useful is separated from the useless – in my mind, you and your hand are

caught pointing back at me – in that image, a seemingly infinite gesture – imperceptible hope of a nod that continues to refer away from itself – to pass is simply to stand in the blind spot of another – it's true that of all the sensory receptors in the body, 70% are in the eyes. For years I was afraid to touch the *Carrion Plant* (nickname: *Corpse Flower*) which attracts flies by emitting an odor of rotting flesh – it doesn't kill the flies – only attracts them for pollination – is also known as a *Starfish Cactus*– the names, themselves, encourage a sense of familiarity – which is to say here, don't worry, close your eyes – in order to touch a body storing water like your body – tender spine or no spine, at all – the wind is always the wind – regardless of reception – the skin you feel, stratum corneum, and think you love is a hiding place – a literal

hide – 30 cell layers thick – the body's most generous mechanism – the living you buried inside the dead you – this is what it means to be present – to trust that even the eye of the x-ray can only see a part of you – evidence of repetition – you trying to become one of many things you will look like when you are not. Whoever you are, are you missing? Everything I can hold is in the optic nerve – can you see me – exactly where the light begins to gather – exactly where the light breaks apart –

TC Tolbert often identifies as a trans and genderqueer feminist, collaborator, mover, and poet. And s/he's a human in love with humans doing human things. S/he is Tucson's Poet Laureate and author of Gephyromania *(Ahsahta Press 2014), four chapbooks, and co-editor of* Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics *(Nightboat Books 2013). www.tctolbert.com*

FIVE POEMS

DANUSHA LAMÉRIS

O Darkness

"My arm is so brown and so beautiful," is a thought I have
as I'm about to turn off the lamp and go to sleep.
I look at it a moment in the soft glow, and see it, briefly,
as though it belonged to someone else. A reddish
kind of brown, like a toasted almond, only flecked
with the fine, gold hairs of summer. And it occurs to me.
that I have always loved the brownness of my skin,
The way, just now, I stopped to admire my own thigh,
its deeper tone against the crisp white of my cotton robe.
As a girl, I wanted to be dark as my mother, whose skin
shone against crimson, malachite, plum. I loved the way
that gold gleamed against her neck, the way dark skin
forgives the accumulation of our years and griefs—and still
goes on, pliant and smooth and new. It made sense to me
that others slathered their limbs with oil, with unguent,
laid themselves out on roofs, on decks, on banks of sand,
gave themselves to the mercy of the sun. Though when
I seek a synonym for *dark*, I find *dim*, *nefarious*, *gloomy*,
threatening, *impure*. Is the world still so afraid of shadows?
Of the dark face of the earth, falling across the moon?
The dark earth, from which we've sprung, to which
we shall return? What we do not know lies in darkness.
The way the unsayable rests at the back of the tongue.
So let us sing of it—for the earth is a dark loam
and the night sky an unfathomable darkness.
And it is darkness I now praise. The dark at the exact
center of the eye. Dark in the bell's small cave.
The secret cavity of the nucleus. The quark.
How hidden is the sacred, quickening in the dark
behind the visible world. O Yahweh, O Jehovah,
henceforth I will name you: *Inkwell*, *Ear of Jaguar*,
Skin of Fig, *Black Jade*, *Our Lady of Onyx*. That
which I cannot fathom. In whose image I am made.

Passion Fish

for Joe and Dorianne

When we got there, Joe was expecting
a deep red dining room, shadows flickering on the walls, the waitress,
with a husky voice showing just a little décolletage as she leaned in
to take our order. Riffs of saxophone. A couple making out in the back corner.
A sea bass mounted on the fireplace, its glistening scales and puckered lips.
Codfish bladders covered in gold leaf, dangling from the light fixtures.

Instead, the place was plain as a train station:
painted a kelpy shade of grey, looked over by a somber hostess
with a long face and dark curly hair, tied at the nape. I almost thought
she might begin to cry as she led us down the narrow hall to our table.
Or that maybe she'd been crying in the kitchen, already, wiping her tears
on the creased cuffs of her starched shirt.

But, oh, when it arrived—the fish! Flaky and soft,
falling apart in our mouths. Arctic char, fresh wild salmon.
Armando's came on a bed of mashed turnips. Dorianne's, laid out
on a sea of jewel-toned vegetables. "Try this," she said, offering us small,
purple cubes of starch. Parsnips? Beets?

We never could tell. But still—the buttery flesh,
a fat moon slung between the pines. "For me, this is as good as it gets,"
said Dorianne and we nodded in agreement as the waitress
poured us more water from the endangered reservoirs of California,
and we feasted on the sustainably harvested bounty of the Pacific,
never mind the mercury quickening in our veins, the traces
of radiation borrowed from Fukushima's sunken fires.

By then we were talking about the long poem,
how you can tend it, bit-by-bit, keeping your nets in the water,
allowing the slow accumulation of old griefs, your mother's pearl earrings,
the paper cranes you kept in the closet for good luck, the crisp ten-dollar bill
folded in the back of your wallet, tick of the fluorescent clock
above your childhood bed, brush of fingertips against your neck,
the stars' dusky breath.

And I wished the night would go on and on,
a long poem, drifting over the page, lines spilling out to the edge
of evening and beyond, to this outcrop of the continent. And that
all of us would live forever, so we could keep sitting down
to plates of exquisite fish. And so Joe and Dorianne
could keep talking about the line, how you've got to follow it,
see where it goes, without imposing, without backing away.
"It's *April is the cruelest month, breeding. . . .*" said Dorianne,
lifting her glass to take another sip of Sierra run-off, the ice
clinking time as she spoke. "Not, *April is the cruelest month*."
Only then,

I couldn't help thinking about how everything
and everyone I love are slipping back into the sea, how voracious the abyss
that holds our fingernails and soft, tender knees, the delicate
bones of our feet.

The earth beneath us, indifferent, busy as it is,
making and unmaking. Which, I suppose, is what makes April cruel.
Because it's relentless, the way the world goes on, pushing out tulips
and sparrows, with or without us.

And I don't want to back away from it
with its polluted streams and sadness, and I don't want to grasp on
with the tight fist of my heart.

I just want to let it all pass by, as if I were riding
the North Equatorial Current, so in love with the ocean, each gorgeous
surge, each pulsing saline rush, that I don't even care where I'm going,
or what I'll leave behind. Only about how the sunlight filters through
the dark water, flecks the waves with mica and silt.

The Grass

Impossible not to ask, post-Whitman, *What is it?*
Green blades—a word that makes of it an artillery—
the weapons of the soil, brandished on the breeze. Or is it
the bristles of the biome, a living beast with emerald spines?
A thin defense against our ongoing intrusion. Or it's a shag rug
laid over the scuffed floors of history, fibers woven from
the hair of the dead. All my life, I've wanted to love the world
and what it's made of: Loam. Peat moss. This stiff-edged greenery.
And then I do. And then I recoil, again, at the roughness
of Things. The way goodness is taken, mercilessly, back
into the soil and covered up with grass. The way whole tribes

have been forced beneath that green layer, and it has served
to hide the evidence. How most tragedy is not an accident,
but a consequence for being wrong-bodied at the center of a target.
I don't matter. It doesn't care, my brother would say as a child,
confusing the two. And now he's dead by his own hand,
as if tricked by an error of language. What is the grass?
It is what covers his body, and is composed of his body.
I have sat on the grass over his grave—his coffinless grave—
where we laid him down in the moist soil. I have sat on the rich
verdure arisen from his flesh, rocking his young son in my arms
as the leaves of the grass bent in the wind and the bees
lowered themselves to the blossoms of clover, and the grass
trembled beneath their earthly weight. So I think I can say, now,
that the grass is my brother. And in it I sense his patience, his quiet
goodness—as if they were its fragrance. So it is the grass to whom
I can address this poem, to whom I can speak. Dear Grass, Dear
Curling Fronds, Dear Little Twists of Green, it's me, your sister.
I do not blame you. I only want to sit with you, to stroke your windy hair.

Palm Trees

We'd popped a tire coming off the summit—
me, my mother, and sister-in-law—and were sitting
at a rest stop, when a guy with dreadlocks got out
of his truck and started walking toward us. Now this
was up in Southern Oregon, white and Indian country,
where the hem of the Cascade mountains meets California,
and so I was surprised to see him, his outline
framed by cedar and pine.

Anything I can do? he asked, leaning into the driver's side.
Thanks I said *We're waiting for a tow.* And then,
because I thought I heard an island lilt, *Where you from?*
He said the Bahamas, and when he asked back, I said
Barbados, meaning my mom—and me, by association.

He nodded, made some small talk, left. Then—
a half hour later?—came back, carrying something
in his hands. What looked like a few pieces of paper.
He reached into the back seat, passed them out,
one for each of us, eyes downcast, as if he were doling out
Communion wafers, or the script for our next scene,
from which we were about to read, aloud.

There, on each page, rendered in crayon,
were drawings he'd made while sitting, presumably,
in the hundred-degree cab of his truck, the paper
a little crinkled from the glove compartment,
or wherever else he'd kept it. Palm trees, sketched
against a blue sky. The bright fronds of the trees
affixed to the tops of their brown trunks.

I'm sorry, he said, *they're not very good.* And in truth,
they weren't unlike something my five-year-old niece
might have brought home from school. So there
we were, holding the drawings and studying them,
not saying much, because really, we were too bewildered
to say or do anything that might adequately
express the moment, which had begun to teeter a little
under the weight of its own strangeness—

this unfolding of a gesture we couldn't quite place—
not useful (though I wouldn't say useless). And the drawings,
too humble to be beautiful, though they occupy, in my mind,
the exact *space* of beauty. So that now, years later,
looking out my window at the fringe of pines
around the field, I think of that afternoon—of the man,
the drawings (evidence, I regret, I've misplaced).

And of how easily we miss it—that opening
into ceremony. Hadn't he given us a gift
and bowed his head? And didn't time slow, almost to a stop?
I could have reached out, put a hand on this stranger's arm,
said nothing. Held his gaze a moment longer.
But I did not know this, or was too afraid to cross the distance
between those two points: one human,

and another. When he handed us the drawings,
I was not thinking *offering.* And so, I merely mumbled
the vague requirements of gratitude, ignoring it—
the thing none of us could name—
though it hungered, there, in the air between us.

Rites of Winter

We'd been feasting on the famous foods of winter:
squash, potatoes, a steamed pot of dark greens. And after,
we danced in Glenn's living room above Crystal Creek,
barefoot on the Persian rug, eating chocolate cake,
and almost knocking over the candles. So when the frogs
in the pond out front began to sing—a bass note followed
by a high-pitched exclamation—we danced out the door
and past the tall clusters of bamboo, over the wooden bridge,
moving to the frenzied rhythm of the frogs, who—it seemed—
grew louder and more intent the more we rocked to their cacophony.
So it was frogs and moonlight and dancing under the bare bones
of the trees, the creek suddenly swollen after six years
of drought. And Glenn was one year older and nearing
(though he didn't yet know it) the end of his greatest love.
And we were calling out to the frogs, who called back to us
as we stumbled, nearly into the bracken water,
and leapt up onto the pond-side boulders, hands in the air,
a light mist falling on our arms, our upturned faces.
And I couldn't decide: was the world enamored with itself?—
all this riotous back and forth? Or had we only
invoked alarm, amphibian for *get-back! get-back!*
I didn't know. But how happy we were, for that single hour,
to believe we were one marvelous body, in our smooth
and slippery skin. Even if the frogs did not want us.
Even if our joint fates are written, already,
in the tainted water, the dark and opulent mud.

Danusha Laméris is the author of The Moons of August *(Autumn House, 2014), which was chosen by Naomi Shihab Nye as the winner of the Autumn House Press poetry prize and was a finalist for the Milt Kessler Book Award. She has recently completed a second manuscript,* Bonfire Opera*, forthcoming from University of Pittsburgh Press in 2020, and is the current Poet Laureate of Santa Cruz County, California.*

THE POETICS OF WRONGNESS, AN UNAPOLOGIA

RACHEL ZUCKER

I'm writing this lecture in the middle of a particular night in my particular life. This is relevant. Three years ago I was asked to write these lectures by the Bagley Wright Lecture Series, and it seemed impossible. I'd never given lectures. I imagined that giving a lecture required me to tell other people what I think or what I know, which is not really my style. Or, perhaps giving lectures would require me to tell people what *they* should think, which is *really* not my style. What is my style, you wonder? I'm getting to that.

Stay with me, stay in the present, this moment, for a moment. I am, at this particular time in my particular life, the mother of three sons now 16, 14, and 8. This is relevant.

What you need to know about this experience is that I am always wrong. My body is wrong; my presence is wrong. The only thing more wrong is my absence. When I am present it is embarrassing. When I am absent, it is wounding. I have learned from my 14-year-old that I am always "not listening," even when I think I am listening. I am "not helping," even when I am trying to help. I "don't get it," even when I am trying to understand.

"Weren't you ever embarrassed by *your* parents?" he asks when he doesn't want me to meet him after the movie he is going to with his friends. Yes, I say. I was embarrassed by my mother every moment of every day and night when I was your age, I do not say. But it is news to me (unpleasant news) that I am now *that* mother, that embarrassing mother, although the fact that this is news is probably proof that I wasn't listening, that I don't get it, that everything about me is wrong.

My 16-year-old doesn't find me personally embarrassing or flawed. From him I discover that I am, rather, universally flawed, mistaken, existentially unredeemable. My wrongness is part of the human condition; I am just one not very interesting specimen of general disappointment. With surprising patience, a raised eyebrow, and frequent deep sighing, he explains the many ways in which my ideas about gender, race, mathematics, science, economics, politics, history, psychology, and countless other topics are outdated, erroneous, and sometimes reprehensible.

My just-turned-eight-year-old vaulted from his toddler phase, in which everything anyone said or did was indisputably wrong if it conflicted with what he wanted, directly into his Woody Allen phase in which he daily confronts me with questions like: "Can you tell me *one thing* that matters after the world ends? Nothing? See? So nothing matters, right?" or "If everyone dies, then why does being a good person while you're alive matter because eventually you're going to die and everyone you ever help will also die?" There are no right answers to these questions, and this makes me both wrong and profoundly disappointing. Also, I am specifically wrong about everything having to do with soccer, football, music, the appropriate volume of music, the purpose of school (that there is a purpose), whether so-and-so is a nice person or not, what is funny and what is not funny, what is too rough or dangerous, and the matter of playing ball in the apartment. In other words: everything important.

Well, you might be thinking, "being a parent is like that." But it's not just my kids.

This is the summer—18 years into my marriage—that everything I say hurts my husband and everything he says hurts me. We misunderstand each other. Our words come out wrong or are taken wrong. Our tone is wrong even if the words don't wound. If we stop talking we descend into a terrifying hopelessness.

Stay with me, this is relevant.

Two days ago it was gently revealed to me that the three lectures I'd spent seven months researching and writing are too long, about too many things, simultaneously unfounded and overly informational, too personal and too impersonal—basically: failures. Perhaps (with work) these drafts could become essays, but they are not lectures, said my editor.

So, to summarize: my math is wrong, my logic is wrong, my presence is wrong, my absence is wrong. My gender is wrong insofar as I come from a mode of thinking in which I believe that gender is a fixed trait rather than a fluid, social construct, infinitely complicated and slippery. Being male would make me more wrong but being female is also wrong and conflating gender with race or sexual preference is wrong. My heterosexuality and whiteness make me wrong, always and all the time, in the sense that they confer unto me privileges at great cost to others so that any "rightness" I have in the sense of power or agency is wrongly mine and part of what makes me wrong in the world and certainly part of what makes the world so very, very wrong.

At 43, I am too young and too old. Old people look at me wistfully, teenagers with disgust, children with distrust. Everything about me makes someone extremely angry—who does she think she is? Who do I think I am? And what does this have to do with poetry?

In this climate of wrongness it is difficult to say anything. This isn't new, it is just more apparent to me than ever before. The volume of my wrongness is turned up so high it's impossible to ignore and difficult to shout over. To say anything (even to say "I'm wrong") is wrong—white people should listen. But, simultaneously, to be silent, meek, and/or apologetic is wrong—women should be strong and assertive. And speaking of "this climate": I am one of everyone who is irreparably destroying the earth's environment. I am more wrong than my children can even imagine.

What woke me up in the middle of this night was the realization that all this wrongness is both excruciating and exactly what I need to talk about.

Over the course of the past seven months, writing about photography, confessional poetry, and the ethical considerations of writing about real people, I was trying to build a case for my thinking and convince you that my ideas were right. I wanted you to feel that my ideas were interesting and worth your time. In this way I'd abandoned what made me a poet and the very nature of my poetics.

I first started writing poetry (and still write it) because the world, its people, and their ideas are wrong, insane, immoral, flawed, or unimaginably terrible. I write because I feel wrong, sad, crazy, disappointed, disappointing, and unimaginably terrible. I write to expose wrongness and to confess wrongness, yet I sense that doing so is futile at best and more likely compounds wrongness.

I write *against*. My poetics is a poetics of opposition and provocation that I never outgrew. Against the status quo or the powers that be, writing out of and into wrongness.

Here's my current definition of a poet: "I am wrong and you are wrong and I'm willing to say it, therefore I am a poet."

A poet is one who feels wrong in a wrong world and is willing to speak even when doing so proves her wrong, ugly, broken, and complicit. This is not the same as saying that I write poetry to "feel better" or to be forgiven or that the goal of poetry is to "right wrongs." Perhaps some people feel better when they write poetry. Perhaps some poems make the world less wrong. What I'm trying to explain is that a poet's athleticism lies in her ability to stay in and with wrongness. Of being willing to be disliked for being too smart or too stupid, too direct or incomprehensible, elitist or the lowest of the low, and for what? For the privilege of pointing out that everything in the world is wrong (including me).

Wrongness is intrinsic to poetry, which asserts with its most defining formal device—the line break—that the margins of prose are wrong, or—with its attention to diction—that the ways in which we've come to understand and use words are wrong.

Maybe you think I'm wrong in the way I'm using the word "wrong"? Fine. I embrace it. I've never written to please you, even if I liked it when you were pleased.

I write to talk back (sometimes to myself), not to tell you what I think but to figure out what I think, which is always a process of proving myself and others wrong.

It is the job of poems to undermine, to refute, retort, re-see, disrupt. To tell you nicely or aggressively that you are wrong, that the world is fucked up, that all our modes of understanding and expressing are suspect, that there is nothing and no one above reproach or scrutiny.

Poets speak even when it is excruciating, even when no one is listening, often when the poet believes—despite Audre Lorde's admonition "your silence will not protect you"—that she would be better off staying silent. That's what a poem is: a breaking of silence, a form that makes and then breaks silence over and over. Poetry is the language of pain and grief and hurt and love and most people in our country hate it but often need it and sometimes find solace or pleasure in it.

I've learned from being a daughter and a mother that finding your parent wrong or being told how wrong you are is a complicated act of attachment, separation, individuation, and love. A parasitic sort of love perhaps, but love—a way of

paying attention, of giving a shit. The alternative to being wrong is being ignored.

So, here are some assertions about poetry, offered in the mode of opposition, without apology, with complete certainty that you, audience/reader, along with my sons, my friends, my students, the past, the future, strangers and intimates, both living and dead, are sure to consider what follows to be wrong. Enjoy being in good company. Enjoy the brief pleasure of feeling that I am more wrong than you are. Believe me, you too are wrong.

Therefore, to you, reader, I offer six anti-tenets of the poetics of wrongness:

1. POETRY SHOULD BE BEAUTIFUL.

John Keats is wrong. Or, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is wrong when it asserts: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." No.

First of all, I have a problem with beauty. To the extent that I even understand what beauty is, I distrust it and reject it as a quality poetry *must* or even *should* pursue or attempt to embody. I reject the notion that poetry is distinguished from other forms of language by its beauty or that the pursuit of beauty is a mandatory occupation of poetry or art.

Also, I do not accept the equivalence of beauty with truth. Beauty is a manipulation of a thing, a bettering, an idealization of the ordinary. Beauty is *not* truth but closer to anti-truth. My definition of "beauty" may be ahistorical; my "beauty"—a quality primarily invoked to make me buy something I don't need or believe something that isn't true; an industry sold primarily to women to make them make themselves look different than they would naturally look—might not be Keats's "beauty," just as I'm pretty sure my idea of truth is not quite the same as his.

Perhaps Keats or Keats's urn was referring to a beauty akin to the Platonic notion of "perfection," a just-right proportion that waits to be identified rather than created, a world wherein something is beautiful because it is symmetrical or closely approximates the golden ratio. It is this kind of thinking that underlies Samuel Coleridge's famous delineation of prose and poetry: "I wish our clever young poets would remember my homely definitions of prose and poetry; that is, prose = words in their best order; —poetry = the best words in the best order." Best, perfect, beautiful. I have just as much trouble with perfection or "bestness" as I do with beauty (a bettering). Perfection and beauty imply flawlessness, and flawlessness is an untruth.

I acknowledge, of course, that beauty exists, that the consideration of beauty is one of art's preoccupations, and that a great number of wonderful poems explore the knotty, troublesome problem of what beauty is, who defines it, what it implies, and the implications of beauty-seeking and making.

"To Dorothy" by Marvin Bell is an example of a poem about beauty, of beauty, that moves and pleases me and challenges the construct of beauty in wonderful ways:

To Dorothy

You are not beautiful, exactly.
You are beautiful, inexactly.
You let a weed grow by the mulberry
and a mulberry grow by the house.
So close, in the personal quiet
of a windy night, it brushes the wall
and sweeps away the day till we sleep.

A child said it, and it seemed true:
"Things that are lost are all equal."
But it isn't true. If I lost you,
the air wouldn't move, nor the tree grow.
Someone would pull the weed, my flower.
The quiet wouldn't be yours. If I lost you,
I'd have to ask the grass to let me sleep.

Part of what makes this love poem so poignant is that Dorothy is seen and loved for who she is (even though no physical description and scant biographical/characterological details of Dorothy are shared with the reader). Dorothy is loved for what she does (letting a weed grow by the mulberry and a mulberry grow by the house) and, especially, for the feelings she inspires in the speaker.

Reading "To Dorothy," I cannot help but think of the great epic poem that is not titled "To Helen," and that is not a love poem but a war poem: Homer's *Iliad*. Where did Helen of Troy's exact or perfect beauty get her? She was abducted by Theseus, won in marriage by Menelaus, seduced (abducted?) and awarded by Aphrodite to Paris, all of which putatively led to the Trojan War. I have no sense of Helen as anything other than a pawn in various male power games. I have no sense that Helen was loved by anyone, let alone understood or appreciated, no feeling that the loss of her was anything other than an excuse for vengeance.

Alice Notley, in her prose poem "Homer's Art," explains that "Both of Homer's public stories—as everyone knows—are generated by a war & are male-centered—stories for men about a male world." Notley wonders what a woman who might want to write a poem about the Vietnam War and about someone who may have died, years later, as a cause of the Vietnam War, should do. (". . . How could a woman write an epic? How could she now if she were to decide the times called for one?") Such a woman, Notley says, might try to distance herself from the subject matter "& find a sound for it—as the Greeks did—that makes your telling of it listenable to & true"; but this writer (like all women) "has no real access to the story or even a story . . . If she wants to write a poem about it, she is likely to write something lyrical(/elegiac) or polemical, rather than epic or near-epic . . ." Notley proposes that one strategy has been for women "to identify with one of his [Homer's] female characters & extrapolate." For a woman, though, "this is an especially peculiar undertaking" because ". . . Helen couldn't be a *person*, not a real person now, no. No woman is like Helen, no matter what the male poets say, or like Andromache (or Penelope). Only men are like them, in the sense that they invented them—they are pieces of male mind." (Soon after writing "Homer's Art," Notley would go on to write *The Descent of Alette*, one of the great female epics of all time.)

One myth of beauty as imagined by the male mind—and as apprehended via the male gaze—is that it renders desirous men (and jealous women) unable to control themselves. Beauty is a magical, irresistible force, and female beauty must be possessed and controlled.

Dorothy's inexact beauty has a mythical quality; it "sweeps away the day till we sleep" and is part of what makes the air move and the tree grow. But it is not a destructive, terrifying force. Dorothy's beauty and its effect on the speaker render the speaker vulnerable to loss, but Dorothy's beauty also makes the world of the speaker (and reader) animated, real-feeling, meaningful, alive. Poet Marvin Bell (a male-identified poet) engages his "male mind" and male imagination in the making of this poem and pushes back against this classical myth of beauty.

"To Dorothy" hints at several problems with exact or ideal beauty. Beauty is almost always comparative. Someone is more beautiful than someone else. A piece of art or a poem is more beautiful than another work. There is always a loser, someone or something that is less-than. Even if this is a life-giving, compassionate kind of affection, Dorothy's "inexact" beauty doesn't preclude the inherent cruelty of love, which is that we love unequally.

It isn't true, says the speaker (quoting a child), that "Things that are lost are all equal." Imagining how he would feel if he lost Dorothy, the poet comes face to face with the fact that he loves her more-than. Again, the love is based not on her inherent, superlative qualities alone, but on Dorothy's relationship to the natural world and to the speaker. The investigation of loss in relation to love and beauty is not only stated as part of the argument of the poem but is embedded in the form of the poem and the pattern of pronouns Bell employs. The first word of each of the first three lines is "you"—an emphatic anaphora reminding the reader that the first stanza is primarily a meditation on "you" (in this case Dorothy). The "I" quietly enters the first stanza as part of the heartbreaking "we" of the last line of the first stanza—"and sweeps away the day till we sleep." Here the "we" seems to be born out of—created by—the "w" sounds that build in this stanza—"weed," "windy," "wall"—and the implied "I" of the speaker regarding, addressing, and appreciating the "you." In this way the "I" is created by the "we" and by the poem itself.

"I" explicitly enters the poem only after the rupture of the stanza break, which foreshadows the arrival of the concept of loss. The "I" as a discrete pronoun emerges as a we-without-you. The last line of the first stanza ("and sweeps away the day till we sleep") rhymes with the last line of the second stanza ("I'd have to ask the grass to let me sleep"). The exact repetition of "sleep" and the slippage, inexactitude, and variation from "we" to "me" reminds us in the very structure and bones of the poem that love is understood as the charged, tragic, joyful space between we and me, that Dorothy's inexact beauty inspires and induces the speaker's particular, eccentric, profound attachment to Dorothy.

When I was a graduate student at the University of Iowa, the poet Mark Strand came to deliver a lecture. I remember Strand showing paintings of the crucifixion of Jesus as part of a lecture on the old painting masters. I remember him saying that all art is beautiful. I raised my hand—a bold move for a 22-year-old woman in her first year of a graduate program she felt wholly unprepared for and unworthy of—and asked, "What if I want to make art that isn't beautiful?" Strand explained that one could make art about ugly, difficult content, but that for art to succeed it had to transcend ugliness and become beautiful.

Oh, teacher, I say you are wrong. I reject. I fight back. What about the value of describing, recording, sharing, communicating (as Marvin Bell does, as so many other great poets do) that which is "inexact" or imperfect or even ugly, painful, broken? I too love the well-made thing, but the poetics of wrongness rejects the notion that poetry is a pursuit by which we take the ordinary and put makeup on it, make it better, make it "best." The notion that art *must be* the rendering of the ordinary into the transcendent or extraordinary is not only wrong but is ultimately part of a system of thinking that has been used to oppress, enslave, torment, and destroy.

The poetics of wrongness rejects flawlessness. The poetics of wrongness is only interested in perfection as a manifestation of the Greek notion of teleios or "completeness," because completeness

or perfection includes the flaws, the weeds, the "inexact" beauty of Dorothy and the poet's desire to write his love for Dorothy, which is a necessary and necessarily flawed endeavor. But even if we replace Keats's or Strand's "beauty" with a notion of perfection or completeness that includes flaws and wrongness, I still have a problem with the equation of beauty and truth. The relationship between teleios and truth is not a simple, synonymous "is"! The relationship between beauty and truth is wildly complicated, complex, and, ultimately, impossible to define. For this reason, the poetics of wrongness likes to fester in this space—the filled-with-error space of the relationship between truth and beauty.

Writing as I am, in the middle of this night, at the beginning of the 21st century, it is impossible to consider the word "beauty" without thinking of the myriad unconscionable atrocities that have been committed in the name of "beauty" or beauty's metonyms: perfection, purity, normalcy, goodness, godliness.

Even before the Nazi masterminds (many of them failed artists) turned an obsession with white supremacist aesthetics into genocidal action, beauty had been used as a weapon, a weapon particularly used to define and control women, racialized and colonized peoples, outsiders, the poor, the elderly, the infirm, or differently abled. Beauty, patriarchy, race, and other binary systems of worth and worthlessness rely on a master/slave construction in order to maintain power. Fascist and capitalist systems both (differently) employ beauty as a gatekeeping strategy and as a passive or explicit way to reify whiteness, ableism, masculinity, straightness, and narrowly (often hypocritically) defined "moral" behaviors. The appreciation and pursuit of beauty is still used today to justify the denial of rights, opportunities, protections, and resources to those who do not embody beauty as defined by those in power.

I espouse, instead, the pursuit of truth (≠ beauty), which includes wrongness and what-is-ness and an awareness that the pursuit of beauty is inherently flawed, doomed to failure, and inextricably bound up with the history of human cruelty. In the preface to her book *Tender*, Toi Derricotte writes, "the job of the artist is not to resolve or beautify, but to hold complexities, to see and make clear." Whenever the pursuit of beauty leads to equivalency, simplification, or imagined resolution, I reject it. I reject the pursuit of beauty, but welcome the interrogation of beauty as subject matter and also the subversion of "beautiful" forms as one of the ways in which we must "hold complexities" and strive to "see and make clear."

The poetics of wrongness admires poems that enlarge and/or subvert the definition of beauty or attempt to redeem beauty by redefining it—poems about people and bodies and things that have traditionally fallen outside of the frame the beauty-makers make, such as "poem in praise of menstruation" by Lucille Clifton or almost all of the poems in Sharon Olds's book *Odes*. ("Ode to Menstrual Blood," "Ode to Tampon," "Ode of Withered Cleavage," "Unmatching Legs Ode," "Ode to the Word *Vulva*," "Ode to My Fat," to name a few.) Consider Olds's "Ode to Wattles," which includes the lines:

> *. . . I love to be a little*
> *disgusting, to go as far as I can*
> *into the thrilling unloveliness*
> *of an elderwoman's aging . . .*

and ends with:

> *. . . I bow my head to time,*
> *and count my withered chins, three five seven*
> *nine, my muses, my truth, which is not*
> *beauty—my crone beauty, in its first youth.*

Take that, Keats! Olds is saying her wattles are "truth" in the sense that they are an unavoidable physical characteristic she possesses as she nears seventy-five and that this truth (of the aging body) is *not* beauty—at least not beauty as defined by a predominantly ageist, misogynist culture. And yet here Olds turns the tables and makes her wattles poem-worthy. She writes an ode to her wattles and an entire book of odes to parts of the female body, psyche, and experience that traditionally fall outside what "the male mind" has deemed beautiful or poem-worthy. Olds cleverly reworks Keats's last line. The wattles *are* beautiful if we redefine beauty as "crone beauty." The phrase "crone beauty" is an oxymoron if you value women primarily for their fertility and human beings for their ability as workers, if you accept the patriarchal definition of a crone as a thin, ugly, often sinister female archetype. From a matrifocal perspective, however, a crone is a wise woman, a woman who, because she is beyond her childbearing years and beyond her full capacity for physical labor, can fully inhabit her own power, freedom, and creative energy. Olds's crone beauty begins, can only begin, when her societally defined, wattle-free youth-beauty ebbs away.

Another complex and brilliant response to Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is the poem "The Facts of Art" by Natalie Diaz. Diaz was born in the late 1970s, raised on the Fort Mojave Indian Reservation, and is a member of the Gila River tribe. In Diaz's poem, the speaker encounters a Hopi basket from Arizona in a museum in Portsmouth, Virginia. The basket, like the Grecian urn, is an object that tells its own story. In Keats's poem, the urn is a historian who visually depicts "A flow'ry tale more sweetly than our rhyme." In "The Facts of Art," the Hopi basket does not speak sweetly but is a tale-telling relic or artifact of the Hopi people and their art. It also, crucially, serves as inspiration for the poet to tell the story of white laborers and managers enlisting Hopi men to build a highway across Arizona by cutting into First Mesa. The work does not go easily—blades are burnt out, new blades need to be flown in—and the elders know that the B.I.A. (Bureau of Indian Affairs) roads and this work are "bad medicine" even before the construction disturbs a burial ground, unearthing "the small gray bowls of babies' skulls." When the burial ground is disturbed, the Hopi men refuse to continue working on the road. The white men try to order, beg, and bribe the Hopi workers, but the Hopi men refuse. The white men send their wives up the mesa "to buy baskets from Hopi wives and grandmothers / as a sign of treaty."

"When that didn't work," Diaz writes:

> *the state workers called the Indians lazy,*
> *sent their sunhat-wearing wives back up to buy more baskets—*
> *katsinas too—then called the Hopis* good-for-nothings,
> *before begging them back once more.*

The white women, for their part, write letters home describing "the lazy savages," the "squalor in their stone and plaster homes," "devilish ceremonies," "barbaric" burial rituals, and (the last line of the poem), "oh, and those beautiful, beautiful baskets."

Out of the mouths of these white women the word "beautiful" is a festering curse. It is condescending, belittling, malevolent, and usurious. Over and over again Diaz brings to the reader's attention the fact that even though the elders and Hopi men correctly understand that this road building work is bad medicine that makes men into "bad spirits" and makes Ma'saw "angry," only the white people get to define the terms of engagement. Despite their failed technology and mistaken, abusive ways, the white people still have the power to name people "lazy," "good-for-nothing," "beautiful."

In this way, "The Facts of Art" is a well-made poem that at the same time resists beauty both in its making and its worldview. The reader learns to be suspicious of everything the whites say. Beauty, in particular, is inter-

rogated. What are the facts of art? asks the poet. Is the basket "art" because it is preserved in a museum? The basket, once an object of beauty and usefulness, was purchased not for its beauty or utility in the context of its community of origin but in order to bribe (under the guise of "treaty") Hopi workers into the act of desecrating the land. The basket is not only art; it is also a fact of art; an artifact. The basket is an inanimate witness to the systematic oppression and displacement of the Hopi people and the overwhelming destruction of Hopi art, culture, and lands. This poem is no ode. It is a narrative poem full of quietly spoken outrage. As the poem head-butts Keats,[1] it also acknowledges, responds to, and resists all received Western forms, including the form it might be closest to: elegy. The poem artfully resists high lyricism, resists being too beautiful, in part as a conscious resisting of elegy as a received form that is part of the language and language-making of the conquering whites. In doing so, the poem asks: Who gets to name things? Who gets to make the forms? And, is elegy—typically the form used when lamenting the dead—capable of witnessing and lamenting the loss of entire peoples, languages, and cultures?

Diaz's poem raises essential questions about art, art-making, beauty, beauty-making, naming, and the commodification of art, beauty, human labor, and land. Is the poet a maker of beauty? Is the job of the poet to make something beautiful, or to tell a tale, or to bear witness as historian? What does an artist do when she wants to make something beautiful and moving and brutal and true and at the same time wants to witness and resist the barbarism committed in the name of beauty and civilization?

Diaz's "The Facts of Art" illuminates the frame of its own making and calls into question the process by which craft becomes art becomes artifact, and also the way art seldom includes the truth of its own story of production, commodification, and valuation. The basket of Diaz's poem is preserved behind glass in Portsmouth, Virginia. It is impossible for me not to think about what is barely outside the "frame" of the poem or the display case in the museum—the history of enslaved Africans in Virginia, and in the United States, and the way museums tell "the facts of art" and what museums leave out or misconstrue. The museum becomes a kind of morgue, and "the facts of art" are not just where an art object was made/found, as well as the artist and time period, but the material conditions under which beauty is produced and who or what perished in the making. The facts of art include the fact that so much (most? all?) art is constructed through violence once you enlarge the frame broadly enough to include the means of art's production. Diaz brings our attention to the violence of making that is erased or disavowed by classical conceptions of art that privilege beauty, transcendence, universality, and an avoidance of biography.

Kenny Fries's "Beauty and Variations," which I read in the anthology *Beauty Is a Verb: The New Poetics of Disability*, is a three-page poem in five parts and begins with the question: "What is it like to be so beautiful?" The question is addressed to a lover by the speaker of the poem who says of himself:

> *Beauty, at birth applied, does not transfer*
> *to my hands. But every night, your hands*
>
> *touch my scars, raise my twisted limbs to*
> *graze against your lips. Lips that never*
>
> *form the words—you are beautiful—transform*
> *my deformed bones into—what?—if not beauty?*

Fries's scars and twisted limbs are never called beautiful by the lover or by the culture at large, and yet, what word do we give for the way the act and feeling of physical and emotional love render Fries's body cherished, appreciated, sought after? If beauty is something that is pleasing to the senses, something we want to go toward, something we want more of, why isn't Fries's body beautiful?

"Beauty and Variations" includes many questions, many of them about beauty: "Can only one of us be beautiful?" "Can blood be beautiful?" "With no / flaws on your skin—how can I find your heart?" "How much beauty can a person bear?" "Was this / birth's plan—to tie desire to my pain, to stain // love's touch with blood?" The questions and intensity of the poem build until the last section when the poet asks:

> *What is beauty? Who decides? Can the laws*
>
> *of nature be defiled? Your body tells me: come*
> *close. But beauty distances even as it draws*
>
> *me near. What does my body want from yours?*
> *My twisted legs around your neck. You bend*
>
> *me back. Even though you can't give the bones*
> *at birth I wasn't given, I let you deep inside.*
>
> *You give me what? Peeling back my skin, you*
> *expose my missing bones. And my heart, long*
>
> *before you came, just as broken. I don't know who*
> *to blame. So each night, naked on the bed, my body*
>
> *doesn't want repair, but longs for innocence. If*
> *innocent, despite the flaws I wear, I am beautiful.*

In these poems by Fries, Diaz, and Olds, the investigation and interrogation of beauty results in an enlarging of beauty's frame to include the things normally edited out, ignored, unconsidered, repressed, defiled, or censored, especially: Who is defining the terms of beauty? Who is harmed/oppressed/silenced by the production and commodification of beauty? What tools do artists use to dismantle oppressive beauty? What sorts of revisions or re-imaginings do poets suggest when enlarging, complicating, or subverting received notions of beauty?

Consider "study the masters" by Lucille Clifton:

> **study the masters**
>
> *like my aunt timmie*
> *it was her iron,*
> *or one like hers,*
> *that smoothed the sheets*
> *the master poet slept on.*
> *home or hotel, what matters is*
> *he lay himself down on her handiwork*
> *and dreamed. she dreamed too, words:*
> *some cherokee, some masai and some*
> *huge and particular as hope.*
> *if you had heard her*
> *chanting as she ironed*
> *you would understand form and line*
> *and discipline and order and*
> *america*

When studying the masters—those who were expert (according to whom?) art-makers—we must also study the history of one human being or group claiming to be the master of another human being or group, in particular, in this case, white supremacy. Likewise we must acknowledge the ways in which female labor has enabled the solitary male genius. All the great ideals of America ("america"), including beauty, were founded upon the labor of enslaved and oppressed peoples. If the category of whiteness depends upon chattel slavery, what does the category of beauty depend upon? To what extent does beauty depend upon the labor of women outside the frame of the production of art and the conflation of physical beauty with the normative and extraordinary, the productive, and the capitalist success? Clifton deftly explodes the double meanings of "master" and "sheets" and inverts the subject/object and master/mastered positions in order to make visible the positionality of the maker and unseen makers.

The male "master poet" uses sheets of paper to record his words that, for generations, we are meant to study (primarily in order to appreciate and replicate as a form of apprenticeship and refinement). But in order to truly "study the masters" we must step back far enough so that our understanding can include the terms of labor and creation of these "sheets." Despite his power, which depends upon his power over others, the male master has limited knowledge. It is Aunt Timmie who "smoothed the sheets / the master poet slept on," and when the master lies down on these (bed)sheets, on Aunt Timmie's "handiwork," the "master" becomes, in a sense, Aunt Timmie's creation. The master poet goes to sleep and is suspended in wordless slumber on the figurative compositional space of the poem. It is only Aunt Timmie's words and chanting that are given imaginative force and voice within the poem—it is her "poem" we "hear," and it is only through studying Aunt Timmie as a master, her handiwork, her words and knowledge, that we might "understand form and line / and discipline and order and / america." The initial uncoupled doubleness of "master" and "sheets" causes every word in this last phrase to reverberate with various meanings and valances in a way that foregrounds the crucial importance of positionality to the meaning of each word. Just as "beautiful" has a different connotation, usage, and effect when used by the white women to describe the Hopi baskets in Diaz's poem, the words "form," "line," "discipline," "order," and "america" have different valences depending on whether they are used to refer to the white male master or to Aunt Timmie. The poet and reader can only come to fully understand these words by imagining their multiple uses and users, and by considering the relationship between the white male master and Aunt Timmie alongside the history and terms of literary production.

Beauty as an objective ideal is an ocular-centric subset of "rightness," and of course the poetics of wrongness is not interested in "rightness." The poetics of wrongness is not interested in the poetic equivalent of plastic surgery, skin whitening, foot-binding, and other self-destructive forms of self-beautification. The poetics of wrongness admires all the forms of art and aesthetics that attempt to enlarge, complicate, subvert, or mock a monolithic, monumental, hegemonic ideology of beauty. Poems that ask: If beauty is not an inherent quality, then what is it? Who makes it? Who controls it? Who traffics in it? Who is beauty defined by and for what purpose? The poetics of wrongness marches in the midst of a glorious parade of anti-classicist movements—"Black is beautiful," camp, kitsch, the bizarre, the grotesque, the carnivalesque, the rococo, the Gurlesque, crip, absurd, abject, macabre, queer, surreal, uncanny, and mongrel—and does not seek to replace the pursuit of beauty with any other singular pursuit. (Let us not substitute innocence, purity, or x, y, z, for beauty.) The poetics of wrongness is an anti-bourgeois aesthetic of hybridity, alterity, and incongruity and, as such, embraces the outsider, the unknown, the alien, and the estranged.

Sorry (not sorry), Keats, beauty and truth are complicated and, more often than not, contradictory. Ye need to know that and so much more.

2. POETRY SHOULD BE SLANT.

Speaking of truth: here's another famous poet I'd like to contradict. "Tell all the truth but tell it slant," Emily Dickinson wrote, and she was wrong. Actually, the people who interpreted her directive to mean that poets should intentionally try to make the truth more complicated than it is, they are wrong. I prefer to read Dickinson's short poem as a wittier, quieter, but no less powerful version of Jack Nicholson in "A Few Good Men" shouting "you can't handle the truth!"

> *Tell all the Truth—but tell it Slant—*
> *Success in Circuit lies*
> *Too bright for our infirm Delight*
> *The Truth's superb surprise*
> *As Lightning to the Children eased*
> *With explanation kind*
> *The Truth must dazzle gradually*
> *Or every man be blind—*

Dickinson isn't saying "don't tell all the truth." She's not even saying "don't tell it all at once." She's saying that the truth, unmediated and given directly, will make human beings blind. I read Dickinson's use of the word "success" ("Success in Circuit lies") and the double meaning of "lies" as containing a heavy dose of proto-irony.[2]

Somehow, though, in the line "tell all the truth but tell it slant," the word "slant" has been taken to mean that it is the poet's job to dole out truth in small doses or show the dimly lit world in flashes because telling a slant truth is kinder, less blinding, or because the slant truth is more interesting. This kind of thinking has been used to bolster a poetics of coyness and indirection that often slips into glibness, abstraction, and meaninglessness.

The poetics of wrongness responds to "slantness" and the idea that "The Truth must dazzle gradually" in Whitman's voice and with his words: "Now I wash the gum from your eyes / You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and of every moment of your life." It's hard enough to know if there is such a thing as truth! Don't waste your time trying to make it *less* clear or sit there in the dark waiting for lightning to make things momentarily visible. Be as clear as you possibly can, always. Dazzle me. I dare you.

All this is not to say the poetic of wrongness disavows Dickinson—far from it! I attribute the privileging of "slantness" as a poetic value not to Dickinson but, as I said before, to a misunderstanding of Dickinson. There have been many helpful reconsiderations of Dickinson's work and life over the years. Adrienne Rich, for example, in her 1976 essay "Vesuvius at Home," pushes back against the way Dickinson's work was "Narrowed-down by her early editors and anthologists, reduced to quaintness or spinsterish oddity by many of her commentators, sentimentalized, fallen-in-love with like some gnomic Garbo." Rich tries to imagine herself into Dickinson's mind and in doing so encounters a mind quite different from the one presented to Rich by the anthologists and critics. Rich writes: "Emily Dickinson—viewed by her bemused contemporary Thomas Higginson as 'partially cracked,' by the 20th century as fey or pathological—has increasingly struck me as a practical woman, exercising her gift as she had to, making choices. I have come to imagine her as somehow too strong for her environment, a figure of powerful will, not at all frail or breathless, someone whose personal dimensions would be felt in a household." Rich theorizes that Dickinson's isolation—chosen rather than imposed—may have been a practical solution for a woman who wanted to write rather than take care of children and a household.

Like all poets, Dickinson's formal choices and, particularly, her use of metaphor developed out of her circumstances, including her lived experience. I understand why Rich writes: "What . . . [Dickinson] had to do was retranslate her own unorthodox, subversive, sometimes volcanic propensities into a dialect called metaphor: her native language. 'Tell all the Truth—but tell it Slant—.' It is always what is under pressure in us, especially under pressure of concealment—that explodes in poetry." Rich is rethinking the version of Dickinson as a mentally ill, hysterical, frail shut-in, and seeing how a shift in this picture of Dickinson changes our reception of her poems. Rich posits that poetry is a place where "what is under pressure in us, especially under pressure of concealment," explodes. Rich understands slantness in the context of pressure and concealment. Rich wonders, in particular, about Dickinson's relationships with women and posits that we "will understand Emily Dickinson better, read her poetry more perceptively, when the Freudian imputation of scandal and aberrance in women's love for women has been supplanted by a more informed, less misogynistic attitude toward women's experiences with each other." Rich's essay helps me place Dickinson's poems in the larger social-historical context of Dickinson's time and consider how the biases and assumptions of Dickinson's editors and critics may have affected my reading of Dickinson.

But what if Rich is overlooking the possibility that Dickinson might not have been employing metaphor when she wrote "The Truth must dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind"? Perhaps there is a more literal reading of this line that, until recently, has been largely ignored.

Poet and memoirist Stephen Kuusisto, interviewed by Ralph Savarese in *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, speaks about the relationship between disability and the lyric. Kuusisto mentions Dickinson in particular and the possibility that Dickinson's fear of going blind may have heightened "the brevity of the lyric impulse." Kuusisto explains:

> *Emily Dickinson began to experience vision loss when she was in her thirties, and although we have no surviving medical notes about the matter we do know that she visited one of New England's leading ophthalmologists who examined her eyes with the newly invented ophthalmoscope. The doctor is said to have reassured her that she wasn't going blind. In turn, Emily Dickinson told her circle that she was not going blind. The odd thing is that after her visit to the eye doctor, she began to experience absolute photo-sensitivity—in effect she was blinded by daylight. Dickinson spent the remainder of her life living behind closed shutters, and she wouldn't even enter the main parlor of her family's house to greet visitors, preferring to speak with them from behind a half opened door. The available evidence suggests that she had a form of blindness that affects the rods and cones that process light—a form of blindness that her nineteenth-century eye doctor would not have seen by looking at her retinas with the opthalmoscope. I think that her poetry is thereafter concerned with interiority and with the evanescence of seeing—and that she works these things into lyrical studies of personal feeling and intuition. My general feeling is that Emily Dickinson was quite substantially visually impaired after 1862.*

It was always part of Dickinson lore that she was afraid of going blind but this is often attributed to her anxiety and hysteria. Evidence about Dickinson's actual visual impairment was not available to

Rich when she was writing in 1976. Rich reinterpreted "Tell all the Truth—but tell it Slant—" not as an admonition against truth but as a description of the pressure of concealment on women. How might we continue to re-imagine the meaning of Dickinson's line if we read it as simultaneously literal and figurative? Certainly Dickinson must have experienced the "pressure of concealment," but perhaps she was also describing her literal, physical relationship to light—"Too bright for our infirm Delight"—while also considering what it might mean to have to approach light, understanding, and truth itself in a slant, sideways, gradual way.

3. POETRY SHOULD BE SHORT.

Wrong. A poem should be as long as it needs to be.

The poems I love often brush up against the rules of the form, then run roughshod over those rules, then turn around and spit in their face.

It's not that a short poem is *necessarily* impossible, but I absolutely reject the notion that what makes a poem a poem is that it contains language that is best or better than regular language (see anti-tenet #1) or is a thing of beauty made with language (see anti-tenet #1) or that it is a difficult, tricky, altered truth for the sake of inventiveness or kindness to the reader (see anti-tenet #2) or that what distinguishes poetry from other forms of language is brevity, concision, not an extra word in sight.

Here's a tiny, lovely poem by W.S. Merwin:

Separation

Your absence has gone through me
Like thread through a needle.
Everything I do is stitched with its color.

Here's another short poem, this one by Margaret Atwood, less sweet but also powerful:

You Fit into Me

You fit into me
like a hook into an eye

a fish hook
an open eye

And, perhaps my favorite short poem: "Poetry" by Marianne Moore:

Poetry

I, too, dislike it.
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in
it, after all, a place for the genuine.

The poetics of wrongness can accept and admire poems which have a remarkable ability to surprise and confuse and contradict in a small space. Moore's contempt isn't "perfect," of course; it has a fault in which the appeal of poetry slips through. She makes space for the genuine in her poem in part by contradicting herself and by undercutting our assumptions of what poetry should be. This poem is called "Poetry" but doesn't sound or look very much like a lyric poem. It feels more like an aphorism or the moral at the end of a fable or a riddle than a poem, and it's not quite clear (despite the cheeky simplicity of the first line) what exactly she dislikes about poetry, how reading with contempt allows for the discovery of the genuine, or what she even means by "genuine" in terms of an attribute for poetry.

What I like about the poem is that it sounds demotic and self-assured—the voice of a wise and seasoned poet-teacher—but fails in its definition and legibility in compelling ways. "Poetry" may seem to be a simple, dashed-off opinion, but the poem was revised several times over several decades. The version above (the shortest of the versions) was the one Moore chose for *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore* (1967). I love that this poem thumbs its nose at critics and readers who had admiringly commented on the earlier (longer) versions, especially the 1924 version, which contains one of Moore's most quoted lines: "imaginary gardens with real toads." The longer version of "Poetry" is wild but meticulous and contains a bat, elephants, a wolf, a strange simile ("the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that feels a flea"), a baseball fan, a statistician, several more jibes at literary critics, a quotation from William Butler Yeats ("literalists of the imagination") which was Yeats's light criticism of William Blake, and these amazing last lines:

In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand,
the raw material of poetry in
all its rawness and
that which is on the other hand
genuine, you are interested in poetry.

In an article about Moore's revisions of "Poetry," Robert Pinsky writes, "Moore, as I understand her project, champions both clarity and complexity, rejecting the shallow notion that they are opposites." I agree, and I understand Moore's decision to include the 1924 version (widely considered to be the best version) as an endnote to the three-line version (widely considered to be the worst) in her *Complete Poems* as a sort of clever but serious joke. If you are really interested in poetry, you will demand both "the raw material of poetry in / all its rawness" *and* "that which is on the other hand / genuine." Moore admonishes: if you are interested in poetry, you will not worship concision or any other poetic device. You will not slavishly pursue a single, reducible, easy definition of what poetry is. Especially when read in relation to the longer versions of the poem, I do not see "Poetry" as promoting short poems but rather as implicating itself, as a poem, as part of what one dislikes but still engages in, as an effort to get at something wild, complex, raw, and genuine.

I reject shortness as a goal. The poetics of wrongness does not adore Occam's Razor or the Law of Parsimony: poems are not problems to be solved with the fewest possible words. Length as a standard of measure for poetry is irrelevant, but, if it matters at all, I would say that it is *more* difficult for short poems to embody a poetics of wrongness.

See how well-behaved those poems are? How easily I can insert them into this lecture, how easily you can sigh a self-satisfied "poetry sigh" and move on? They are portable, easily memorizable. They are digestible, and, often, feel predigested. And these are the good ones. Many short poems read to me as self-satisfied products of a condescending mind. The poet, like a parent bird, has chewed up the world and regurgitated it into my open beak or has come at me with a thin needle, promising to painlessly insert the essence of something into my bloodstream. Get away from me, lyric poet of beauty and perfection! Give me, instead, food with all its fiber. Give me a poem that has the grit and pebbles necessary to break down a whole disgusting, moving worm. The poetics of wrongness prefers real foods even if they make me sick, even when I have to chew and chew and chew.

The poetics of wrongness doesn't want a chiseled jewel or a small purse of emotions recollected in tranquility. The poetics of wrongness wants the kind of poetry that, as Sylvia Plath said, "at its best can do you a lot of harm." Of course it can harm: "The blood jet is poetry / there is no stopping it" (as Plath herself wrote).

I want Bernadette Mayer's unwieldy, book-length, 150-page poem, *Midwinter Day*, that she supposedly (it is impossible) wrote all in one day, a book that travels from dreams to consciousness and back, that includes the voices of her children, the history of her town, sex, what she eats for lunch, gossip, lines in Shakespearean meter, prose, and common lists.

Mayer writes: "The history of every historical thing including God but not including all men and women individually is a violent mess like this ice. But for the spaces even hunchbacked history has allowed in between the famous and loud for something that's defined as what does please us. Which is perhaps the story of an intimate family, though you won't believe or will be unable to love it, driven to research love's limits in its present solitude as if each man or woman in the world was only one person with everything I've mentioned separate in him or she didn't represent history at all though he or she had stories to tell and was just sitting kind of crazily before an open window in midwinter . . ."

How else can Mayer begin to accurately describe the incoherence of the mind, of life, being a woman, being alive? This poem is *impossible* and feels nearly unstoppable, and she does it successfully by including her awareness of the inherent failure of the project.

"From dreams I made sentences, then what I've seen today, / Then past the past of afternoons of stories like memory / To seeing as a plain introduction of modes of love and reason, / Then to end I guess with love, a method to this winter season."

Instead of the Fabergé egg of a short lyric, I prefer the aesthetics of intractability and exhaustive exhaustedness, the physicality and ruptured rapture, the unapologetic plain spokenness of James Schuyler's long poems, such as "Hymn to Life," "The Morning of the Poem," and "A Few Days," that are too long and messy and loose to be poems, but are poems nonetheless. His lines are too long for the page, too long to scan, too long to function as stand-alone lines, but they are, most certainly, lines of poetry. His tally of physical complaints, his observations about garbage trucks and air conditioners are anti-poetic and embraced and lauded by the poetics of wrongness.

Or, I want the book-length poem "Tape for the Turn of the Year" by A.R. Ammons, in which he typed (and did not later edit) a poem that begins and ends at a length determined by a 2¼-inch-wide roll of adding machine paper that would turn out to be 200 pages long. Ammons loves and hates the roll of paper, adores and despises the project. The poem is so long his back suffers. The project is like a long marriage and provides him ample opportunity to be wrong, to change his mind, and find himself again and again. It is epic and anti-epic. Odysseus is a man trying to get home; Ammons is a man who almost never leaves home. (The few times he leaves home for more than a few hours during the five weeks or so of composing, Ammons carries his typewriter with the roll of tape inside it along with him.) He must continue the poem until the roll runs out. He is Penelope at her loom but never unweaving, and it is the moments when Ammons grows exasperated, exhausted, bored that he comes upon exquisite language-making. Thank goodness he did not edit this poem down to the crucial plot points or a greatest hits collection of best lines. It is the discursive, rambling journey of this poem and its many mistakes that is its glory.[3]

What do you get when you mix the pursuits of brevity and beauty? Advertising. The motto, the jingle, the political slogan. A pitch that should take no longer than a ride in an elevator. The

poetics of wrongness prefers the stairs, prefers a half-finished, crumbling stairs to nowhere. The poetics of wrongness often can't fit in an elevator, wouldn't know what button to press, doesn't know where it's going, suffers from a fear of elevators, and has forgotten its keys and wallet. The poetics of wrongness wants poems that are expansive, inclusive, contradictory, self-conscious, ashamed, irreverent. It's hard to be those things in one hundred words or less.

What, you might ask, is the advantage of this ongoingness, this going-on-and-onness? I don't have time for all this meandering, you might say. I find long-windedness inconsiderate and annoying.

Well, first of all, the poetics of wrongness prefers poems that some people worship and other people detest to poems that everyone "likes," so your dislike does not worry me. Second, one note does not music make. Third, the poetics of wrongness values process above product, and longer poems are almost always more honest and self-conscious about their status as made things than short poems are in that they are often self-aware of their own making.

I'm not saying that longer is always or inherently better. The poetics of wrongness is not interested in who can eat the most hot dogs without throwing up or who can hold her breath underwater for the longest time. The poetics of wrongness likes a good rant or jeremiad but disdains the filibuster. It's not length for length's sake that I appreciate. Let us not hold longness up as the new beauty!

A bad poem that goes on for a long time is surely worse than if it were quickly over. It's not length that makes something good, but there is something about the presence of time in a poem that often pleases the poetics of wrongness and something about the sleight-of-hand refined, sublimed, edited nature of many short poems that makes the poetics of wrongness (or at least this poet of wrongness) cringe.

The very long or book-length poems I've mentioned take time and are about time, and in the time that it takes to write these poems, the poet punches a time card into the time clock of the poem and begins to become real (to the reader and to herself) in a different way. There is space (created by time)—can you see my son rolling his eyes at my misuse of physics?—for the poet to inhabit, for the reader too.

When one sees a painting by Jackson Pollock, one of course notices color and composition, but the thrill of these paintings is the way in which the viewer sees a record of Pollock's body moving through time and space as he splattered or threw paint. All made works are records of an artist's time but some are more visible in the recording of this time or in their preoccupation with time. Some art goes to great lengths to pretend that it emerged fully formed, like Athena from the forehead of Zeus. The poetics of wrongness is not interested in art made by the gods or by God and gives no gold star for the illusion of effortlessness.

Perhaps you say it is boring to watch a person sit in a chair hour after hour, day after day, breathing in and out and in and out, taking breaks to eat and shit and make love and listen to the weather. You say this is not what art should be about or what art is for.

The poetics of wrongness cares not for an absent God-artist we can't see or hear but wants the living miracle of a real-person-in-a-real-place-at-a-real-time.

The poetics of wrongness says that art is these moments of repetition and recurrence and that in the time it takes to read such a long poem—in the experiential recognition of how long it took to write such a poem—the poet becomes real. With frustration and boredom and anger, with familiarity and adoration and gratitude, the writer and reader spend time together. The poem is their meeting place—the place where they become visible to one another, and begin to have a relationship that is both imaginary and real, full of faults and failure and desire. It is like sex, and isn't that what all art, short or long, aspires to?

4. POETRY SHOULD BE TIMELESS.

Speaking of time, the poetics of wrongness has a problem with "timelessness" as a virtue.

A journalist once said to me, "Journalism is important to a large number of people for a very short period of time, whereas poetry is important to a few people for (potentially) a long period of time." Okay, maybe. But this does not necessarily lead to the widely held belief that a good poem should be "timeless."

I've already said that being full of time, visibly, audibly, palpably full of time, can be an asset, and I know that "timeless" is not meant to imply "without time"—most poems have some relationship to narrative and narrativity cannot exist without time—but the poetics of wrongness rejects "timelessness" and lastingness as essential poetic attributes and suggests "timeliness" as an alternative.

The poetics of wrongness wants a poetry that is conscious of time (timefull), that is of a particular time (timely), and that is relevant (timely). Some poems will last and continue to be relevant, but the poetics of wrongness wants a poem that is hard to capture and hard to hold. The poetics of wrongness wants a poem that will *not* last forever because it is fresh, alive, unstable, potentially (hopefully) useful at a *now* moment even if sometimes the poem is on its deathbed. The poetics of wrongness is not afraid of hospice. Everything alive dies. Everything fresh expires. The poetics of wrongness wants poems with a shelf-life, made with living ingredients.

The poetics of wrongness would like artists to rethink the idea that the purpose of making art is to make something that will outlive and outlast our minor, mortal lives. Rethink the goal of making something that will *endure*. Rethink the virtue of timelessness. Do you want to write a poem that will outlive you? That will last forever? Really? Like plastic? Like toxic waste?

5. POETRY SHOULD BE UNIVERSAL.

One of the great long poems of all time is Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself."

The poetics of wrongness embraces Whitman and his barbaric yawp, his multitudes, his "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself," the relationality of the poem as it reaches out to the reader, its willingness to imagine its own demise, its insistence, its long-windedness. The poetics of wrongness loves Whitman's inclusiveness, his energy, his corporeality, even his unbounded ego and passion, but the poetics of wrongness rejects the way Whitman's love of absolutely everything has been used to espouse universality as a mandatory quality in lyric poetry.

Here are the first three lines of "Song of Myself":

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

Oh, the poetics of wrongness does wildly love this poem! But to say that Whitman's open-armed poetics, his democratic attention, makes him a universal Everyman writing for and to a universal Everyman is a misunderstanding of Whitman just as slantness as needless indirection is a misunderstanding of Dickinson.

The poetics of wrongness is deeply suspect of universality. The poetics of wrongness rails against the way in which Universalism is often used to exclude certain bodies or subjects or tones from poetry, the way encouraging poets to write about common experiences that "everyone" can relate to often has the opposite effect of leading to a poetry that is only about certain (often male, often white, often heterosexual, often normative) experiences that according to straight white men are "universal."

The poetics of wrongness prefers, instead, to write with the parts of our brains and hearts and souls and emotions that are broken or disrupted, to write out of our fetishes and aphasias the way Chuck Close who is face-blind has spent a lifetime making portraits. The poetics of wrongness suggests that it is in the specific, honest portrayal of your most peculiar, obscene, esoteric quality that you will provoke empathy and identification.

Rather than aiming for universality, let us abide in the specific, the particular, the peculiar, the personal—even if it means we are accused of narcissism. It is just fine to look at myself if I am looking with attention and with scrutiny. And often, it is not myself I gaze at in a still pool but rather "you," the other, an other, and the world in all its wrongness. Even if your atoms and mine are remarkably similar, even if we are all made of what everything in the cosmos is made up of, let me *not* assume I know you, or worse, that I am you.

"Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted," wrote Percy Bysshe Shelley. The poetry of wrongness would like to try to describe the distorted and the distortion without making it beautiful. "Pain is filtered in a poem so that it becomes finally, in the end, pleasure," wrote Mark Strand. The poetics of wrongness would like a pain that stays pain not because this is a poetics of sadomasochism (although the poetics of wrongness has no problem with sadomasochism) but because it is a poetics of what-is-ness, not what would-be-niceness.

Here's Philip Roth, a writer full of wrongness, in *American Pastoral*:

You fight your superficiality, your shallowness, so as to try to come at people without unreal expectations, without an overload of bias or hope or arrogance . . . you come at them unmenacingly on your own ten toes instead of tearing up the turf with your caterpillar treads, take them on with an open mind, as equals, man to man, as we used to say, and yet you never fail to get them wrong . . . You get them wrong before you meet them, while you're anticipating meeting them; you get them wrong while you're with them; and then you go home to tell somebody else about the meeting and you get them all wrong again. Since the same generally goes for them with you, the whole thing is really a dazzling illusion empty of all perception, an astonishing farce of misperception. And yet what are we to do about this terribly significant business of other people, which gets bled of the significance we think it has and takes

on instead a significance that is ludicrous, so ill-equipped are we all to envision one another's interior workings and invisible aims? Is everyone to go off and lock the door and sit secluded like the lonely writers do, in a soundproof cell, summoning people out of words and then proposing that these word people are closer to the real thing than the real people that we mangle with our ignorance every day? The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It's getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That's how we know we're alive: we're wrong.

Yes, I say, yes to that. The poetics of wrongness knows that summoning people out of words and mangling real people (with and without words) is always an act of getting them wrong. Our word people are no more or less wrong than real people and as writers we should try to be at least as alive and wrong in our writing as we are in our real lives.

Even if we were able to rescue universality from its highly problematic history and its tendency to mean "majority" or "mainstream" even when it imagines it's prioritizing that which is "shared," even if we were able to appreciate the good-hearted social-utopianism that motivates liberal notions of universality, I would still reject it.

Writing out of the universal is often confused with writing for the everyman, which can, too often, become a kind of lowest-common-denominator poetics (in this way deeply underestimating the intelligence of "everyman") or a total abstraction that renders everyone equally estranged from meaning. Notions that we are all created equal, that women can do anything men can do, that really "we're all the same," and other liberal, well-intentioned fantasies don't keep us from killing each other. We see difference, we act difference. Let us at least admit it and return to particularity in a relational context, an "I" that is singular but always reaching out to you and you and you and you. An "I" that acknowledges personal and institutional bias rather than selling the snake oil of colorblindness and similar universalist myths.

Let us turn to the I of Alice Notley, who the poetics of wrongness does indeed worship. Here is the end of her long poem "The Prophet":

. . . Do not generally
Go about giving advice. That which is everybody's business
is nobody's
Business. Let thyself become undeceived through the
beauty & strangeness of
The physical world. It is almost possible to believe that if you
look at it really see it be it for yourself
You will be free. They say it will be cloudy tomorrow but they
Are often wrong. There's a lot to say about two & one. Your life
Is not small or mean, it is beautiful & big, full of
planets clouds skies and
Also your tiniest things of you. One is you & all this & two & yet.
You must never
Stop making jokes. You are not great you are life.

6. POETRY IS CLOSE TO GODLINESS.

The poetics of wrongness is anthropocentric: it is written by human beings for human beings and about human beings. It is interested in the divine and nature as seen and experienced through the human senses and intellect.

In its preference for the literal, for the direct, for the domestic, for the political, for the relational, for the sociological, for the individual, for the particular, the poetics of wrongness can be perceived as atheist. This is not necessarily the case. The poetics of wrongness knows that ideology is a petri dish for wrongness. The poetics of wrongness is foundationally anti-fundamentalist while recognizing, of course, that being anti-anything can easily develop into fundamentalism.

The poetics of wrongness recognizes prayer as an ancient and enduring form of writing out of wrongness both external and internal. The poetics of wrongness loves the impossibility of monotheism but only for its impossibility and for the ways in which it reveals the fragility and pathos and imagination and terror of humankind.

The poetics of wrongness knows that whoever or whatever or however created the world, it wasn't by my own hand, and I have only the power to name and love and suffer and die. If the poetics of wrongness believes in any God, it is a God of Human Failure, a God imagined to make visible in us all that is ungodly, that is: doubt, weakness, fallibility, fear, ineptitude, physicality, mortality. The poetics of wrongness is interested in getting close to God (or beauty or perfection) only insofar as the journey reveals the inherent and absolute failure of our inevitable reaching.

As Whitman said:

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?
I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then,
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass,
I find letters from God dropt in the street, and every one is sign'd by God's name,
And I leave them where they are, for I know that wheresoe'er I go,
Others will punctually come for ever and ever.

Or, they will not. Perhaps we will finally destroy the world one day, in which case let us be thankful that we made poetry and had poetry.

FINAL THOUGHTS

It is by misunderstanding these poets and these ideas about poetry and by feeling misunderstood by them that I have come to have the courage and energy to say anything at all.

I've spent most of my life figuring out who I want to be by figuring out how to be unlike (and like) my mother. I watch my sons come into adulthood, wanting to do things their own way, which arises out of an awareness of my wrongness, my insufficiency, and which also arises out of their awareness of who I am or who they think I am. My husband and I hurt each other as we struggle to see one another as separate and connected, to apprehend each other with honesty and kindness.

Human babies are astonishingly dependent and remain so for an impossibly long period of time. It is remarkable how long it takes for infants to perceive that they are not one-with-the-universe, not at one with the face that is (hopefully) staring back at them with love. Oppositionality is not always an act of violence or hatred to the one opposed; it is often an act of differentiation, which is a normal and natural part of being a responsible and connected human being,

"Poetry," wrote Allen Ginsberg, "is not an expression of the party line. It's that time of night, lying in bed, thinking what you really think, making the private world public, that's what the poet does." The poetics of wrongness agrees! Part of knowing what I think is knowing what I do not agree with, saying NO to the party line. And, making our private disagreements public? Yes, that's what the poet does.

So, what if there were no more "party line"? Would poetry cease to exist? Cease to be necessary? I say that such an age of agreement and sameness and rightness will never come to be and that, therefore, poetry will always be necessary.

Of course, I would love to be proven wrong.

Notes

1. In a "Divedapper" interview with Kaveh Akbar, Diaz talks about her relationship with the canon, saying, "But really, the canon for me sometimes feels a little bit strange because where I come from, here on the reservation, in our community, you respect your elders and you know that all the things coming out of you have come through them to you. I'm grabbing onto them, and the energy is moving through me—these words came from somewhere else, somebody else, some other time. But it seems to me when people talk about the canon, that what they are often trying to talk about is assimilation. I really want to headbutt it: you know, we headbutt out here."
2. I heard Al Filreis use the term "proto-irony" to describe Dickinson in one of his Modpo conversations.
3. Roger Reeves' forthcoming *On Paradise* and Carmen Giménez Smith's "Be Recorder" come to mind immediately as examples of long, unstoppable, contemporary poems.

Death Project [poem]

This will help.

Smaller & smaller. Skin looser.
The healthy are afraid to mention, afraid to say what is happening.
As soon as you think you know what is happening, you do not know.
What is happening?
It is happening to you, afraid it is happening to you.

This will help you.

There is nothing surprising except everything you are feeling.
The giving way.
The way everything is predictable but never to you, exactly.

This will help you to arrange, hold, stem, reconstruct words into meaningful predictive protective—

The made.
The made way for.
The giving way to.
Words makes you watch.

What? your son says into the dark from bed, You're saying I will cease to exist? Isn't there any way to stop this?

> be there watch stay wait into the dark or the dim light into the whatever light there is // as the breathing changes (yours the mothers the fathers the grandmothers the other grandmothers the other mother the machine) / stay here / you want to go out screaming into the diminished environment / the way "we" have ruined everything & the we that wants desperately against everything you know is true to be anything other than I //
>
> you need to // stay // *stay* // *here* // see what is happening to the diminishing giving way / giving away / words reach / you need words to reach into / where there are no words / "there are no words" / people always say *those* words / those words are the words people say /
>
> stay there // *stay* // in the unmade made room in the still cardiac place / inside the loosening skin / the polar icecaps giving way / the giving way the world warming // the bodies one by one losing heat inside the giving way / for a brief time / he she they / we / treated each other as theirselves / the polar diminishing animals the vanishing / we were once hearty with a sense of smell touch vision feeling taste future /

That's it, right? The belief that there will be something that does not warm or cool, a second more of—

⋆

After the success & controversy surrounding her *Immediate Family* photographs Sally Mann decided it was time to stop taking pictures of her three children & move on to something else.

But what? She looked. She waited.

One day, as she stood in the kitchen of her Virginia farmhouse the sheriff called & told her there was an escaped convict on her farm & she had to get out. At that very moment she saw him. Running. Running toward the house. Police running after him as he ran toward the house. He shot. They shot. Police shotgun hit to the hip. The convict turned his pistol on himself.

Later she touched the pool of blood near the convict's head. It was surprisingly dark, she said. When she touched it, it moved, she said. She saw the ground take a sip.

She began to photograph the place where he died. She began to go to the places nearby where many had died long or short ago & photograph those places using the materials photographers had used during the Civil War.

Then what?

What Remains.

She was given access to a facility in which someone was studying the decomposition of human bodies. A facility in which human bodies were strewn, laid out, in the open. Fly eaten, maggoted, at various stages. Sally Mann made photographs of these bodies, plate after plate.

Then closeup exposures of the children again but not children anymore rather living subjects & similar—like her face but not her face—living, ethereal from the old-timey process. The lens open, open, hold, hold, stay, stay, stay, OK.

Prints made & framed, years of work created & ready when the Pace Gallery in NY canceled the show at the last minute. Who wants to hang photos of dead bodies on their walls? Who would buy these? It is the only time in the film that Sally Mann cries on camera. Not when speaking about the death of her father or her favorite dog or the threats to charge her with child pornography & take her children & her equipment into custody.

I think it [the work] is important, but maybe it isn't, Sally Mann says. Maybe it's important but no one wants to see it? she says, wiping her nose.

⋆

The inclusion of this information helps you navigate the aboutness of this poem, maybe the whyness. It is a transmission from the poet, a kind of de/composition. The poet is not the you, is no I either.

[here] [now] the poet takes this opportunity to say:

This morning standing in the hot shower, hoping heat would enter my body & be trapped there even for an hour, even minutes, knowing it would dissipate, unlike the arsenic mercury BPAs my cells won't give up—

which is the poem?

which is the poet?

how does anything get inside anything else?
anyone? how do you get it out?

⋆

You're telling me I will cease to exist? the boy asks.

into the night into you the night pressing you
in the dark his breathing catching uneven

Not for a very long time, you say.

but it is a short time // it is no // time // there are rocks & trees & polar icecaps // it is no time at all / it is too short

It will feel like a long, long time, you tell the boy.

Maybe you will be ready, you tell the boy.

maybe you will feel ready to give way to let your / muscles give way even your heart to stop / beating let go of / the sense of future // the holding tight to clutching to others the we / clinging / the way the poet clings to the boy the night the voice the words

This will help you die—

asserts the poet not sure of anything

—take it take it take this take it
she says

the mark you make in the present // weight of your body // way you press into the present your in out of oxygen carbon nitrogen / the gravity that holds you to this planet / is a clinging to others / even as you repel / the fabric of / the only perceivables are // // this is the meaning of

the music of the room / live musicians / the nurse reading a book into / the room the stranger the doctor the daughter the friend / the gurney down the brightly lit / the home bedroom with hospital bed / the box the plot the visiting hour // the hours // the breath //

what did you think was going to happen? / did you think there was another way of bearing up? / a giving way the giving way to / the suddenly

the slowly / the you saying someone else's pain is worse / is lesser / is a blessing / the you who dreams the gone-away souls back again /

the you who goes on toward your own room bed stranger doctor daughter friend

We have made paintings of this. Paintings of all the stories in the world. And none of all the stories in the world are the stories of what happens next, only the stories of "we in the face of."

She wrote *fact of*, but that is the face of it, the fact of it is not faceable. You never can know what it was like for anyone else. You never know birth fear pleasure of anyone else. You have always been alone in the dark with a young boy asking you:

how is this possible?

You have always been alone in a room wanting any small other to ask anything of you which is the only thing that makes you sure you're you.

[there]
[here]

hearing a you, the you you are

Hasn't anyone ever tried to stop this? the boy asks.

Yes, you say, People try but—

What happens after? he asks.

No one knows, you say.

After all this time? he asks. Really?

Really, you say.

And you're doing nothing about this?

You make a poem called "This Poem Will Help You Die" to hang on the wall for no one to buy. *Here*, says the poem, *Take it, take it in*.

Rachel Zucker is the author of ten books, including SoundMachine *(forthcoming from Wave Books in 2019). Her other books include a memoir,* MOTHERs*, and a double collection of prose and poetry,* The Pedestrians. *Her book* Museum of Accidents *was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. A recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, MacDowell Colony and the Sustainable Arts Foundation, Zucker teaches poetry at New York University.*

FIVE POEMS

BOB HICOK

Climate change: having our cake and being eaten by it, too

How long can you say no
to crème brûlée and peanut butter cups, air conditioning,
flying to Paris, flying to New York, the big bag of Fritos,
a new iPhone, new extensions, new hair color,
remodeling the kitchen, a nose job, bigger boobs,
smaller bigger boobs when you get tired
of your bigger bigger boobs, two flat screens
in the basement, air conditioning, caramel corn,
sour cream on your baked potato with butter, the V-8,
the turbo V-8, the twin overhead cam turbo V-8,
masturbation, a third Coke, a thirty-second Coke, a line of coke,
a second loan on your house, building a plastic straw factory
in Chicago, in Kuala Lumpur, masturbation, the extra-large pizza
with cheeseburger-infused crust, watering your grass,
cutting your grass, fertilizing your grass,
playing nine holes of golf, eighteen, the dream
of an air-conditioned golf course, air conditioning:

I hate air conditioning, resist it until July, late June,
until I sweat at night and can't sleep, until I'm tired,
until the ease of pressing a button three times
and changing the setting on the thermostat from OFF to COOL
takes all of what—a quarter pound of pressure, two seconds,
the teamwork of a few million neurons—until convenience
kicks the ass of knowledge, until the future recedes
into the future, until I'm human, pass the Coke, the coke,
the Fritos, the next-day delivery of toilet paper, dog food,
and day-old bread: have you ever had pizza

while you masturbate, ever golfed eighteen holes on a plane
to Paris, ever told yourself, No, I won't eat that last piece
of chocolate cake, told yourself at six, seven, eight, nine,
ten, eleven, then got up at midnight, walked in dark
through a house your hands have memorized, flicked on a light,
snagged a plate, a fork, gently placed the cake on the plate,
walked it to the table, pulled the chair out, sat down,
and looked at love, your love of cake and your love of your life,
this air-conditioned and heated life that gives you cake,
and devoured the cake and your happiness and any chance
that you can say no when you need to, when we need to:

and of course now all I want is everything I want when I want it
plus chocolate cake

Long distance call

Afraid of clowns, buttons,
including the word buttons. Of waking at four
the rest of my life, sweating for reasons
the night won't tell me. Of becoming a pariah,
or piranha. That I talk with people
about as well as gnats
perform a bris. That my only friend
will turn out to be a fallen oak
that continues to grow leaves.
That nurses and bankers and plutocrats
are laughing at me, that my paranoia
has no authority for wire taps.
That my face makes strangers
turn to fascism. That my voice
is the comedy of piccolos
tuning up. That I mistake worry
for love, the creases in my forehead
for my arms around my wife, the moon.
That I am being eaten by the mirrors
of the self, one angled slightly
from the other, my narcissism
getting tinier and tinier
as my glass incarnations
run away from my flesh. That rain
will never tell me its secret. That dust
won't mention me in its autobiography.
That stones are geniuses
for having just the one big idea
their whole lives, the rest
is cheese, confetti, dread.
That I'll never train the monkeys of my thoughts
to stop throwing their shit.
That no one thinks of me and smiles,
thinks of me and sings, if only
by rustling their wings. Afraid
that I am what cancer would get, I woke up today
desperate to tell the truth: I need you
to save me, to nod at the other end of this poem
if you'd give everything you own
for one clear moment as one clear note
from a robin or clarinet, even the sound
of a man ripping the air as he falls
from wherever I am falling, and you, also falling,
hoping once to be beautiful, simple, precise:
can we hold each other on the way down,
one dragging of fingers across a chalkboard
in the arms of another? If such an anatomy
sounds familiar, you have my condolences,
my understanding, my love.

Report from the field

The cricket inventory
is going well. A lot, a lot, a lot. The river's set list
rarely changes. I bought this land to be naked
in the later, saggier portion of my life
and not offend any cedars. The ground shakes
and vibrates: rocks bubble up
to ruin mower blades and be sat on
by crows. Sometimes I light a car on fire
rather than bury it, fly home and spread its ashes
in Detroit, where it was born. I've shot two
wounded deer in the head. After the third,
the deer make you an honorary bastard.
It says something about me
that I like watching cows eat
while they piss, maybe that I'm a connoisseur of the waterfall
however yellow or born,
or that it's better I don't come to your house
for dinner. Thank you, though, for asking. We'll see

if any of the superheroes are real
in the end. Spiderman, Wonder Woman, Captain Lava (If
Captain Lava didn't exist, we'd have to invent her)—
I love the imagination
for its confetti garage bands and continuing to shout,
You're not alone. I've got your back, your front,
your sides, your innards and outards, I've got time
to be immortal. Which is cool, as I don't.
Mountains do. They have so much time
they brag about falling down on the job
and rising up for pointless high fives. I think.
I don't exactly speak mountain. As Marvin Bell
and Marvin Gaye might say, I speak mountain inexactly.
Don't know who they are? Look them and stars up.

No you go

It surprises me how rarely

looking at a plane
I see anyone waving,

sitting on a grave
I hear a knock,

drowning at sea
I get thirsty,

dying for love
I pick up the phone,
my arms, the Garden
of Eden,
and love first.

Stops and starts

Drove the night. As I knocked,
she was at my door, knocking.
Drove the day back to her note
and thought of her holding mine.
The phone rang. Did you see it, she asked.
I said yes, sure she meant the dead dog
we both passed, but she meant the spirit
of the dog trying to cross the road.
As soon as she said she stopped
and tried to touch it,
I saw a field of sunflowers
and wondered why I've never pulled over
and walked loose among them,
all those heavy heads nodding
toward my own. Weird that yellow's
the color of cowardice
when the sun never runs.
We fell asleep on the phone.
As blind dates go,
it was a good omen that we were happy
together alone.

Bob Hicok's Hold *was published in 2018 by Copper Canyon Press.* Water Look Away: A Novella *will be published by Copper Canyon Press in 2020.*

RECOGNITION

NAVA ETSHALOM

I'll cede ground that isn't mine.
I'll make my grandparents' apologies,
I'll make my own, since they're still here
taking constitutionals, surveying. Even
my renunciations are cribbed.
We think we own our graves

on the Mount of Olives, graves
in the hills beyond Jerusalem, doorbells
along the old streets where my name appears,
and at the corner somebody surprises me
wearing my face. Who's to say whose.
Here's capital and all its homelessness.

We've paid for our graves up front
with a view of the messiah. We're living
in the waiting room. I've changed
the allegiance of my plural pronoun, given up
my primordial lisp. A great theft made me, and now
this is no place for family life.

Nava EtShalom's poems have appeared or will soon appear in Boston Review, The Believer, *and other journals, and have won the 92Y Discovery Prize and a Pew Fellowship in the Arts. Her chapbook* Fortunately *is forthcoming from Button Poetry.*

WRITING FROM THE EDGE

A poet of two Northwests

TESS GALLAGHER

One outreaches language in poetry when the inseeing elements of consciousness ask the unseen of life to come forward. My aim has been to unseat what we assume about time, about the verities of love and death, of the consciousness of those other sentient beings next to us on the planet. We must put aside the glib assumptions we make just to domesticate our walking-around days.

The kind of poetry that seeks a language beyond the very one in which it arrives may travel from edge to edge. It is provisional and can't be too fussy about its sometimes awkward transport. In this pursuit, I find myself trying to out-leap what I can *almost* say—but that, if said outright, would utterly spoil the secret cargo that must somehow halo what is attempting to be given. I have even said that at this stage I seem to be writing in some sense *beyond language*.

I want my worlds to interpenetrate—for sky to merge with water, for fish and birds to exchange habitations so we re-experience them freshly and feel our differences, our interdependence, our kinships.

Drucilla Wall, in her essay on my work in *Thinking Continental*, hits on a central notion of my poetry when she quotes Vincent van Gogh from an epigraph in my 2011 volume, *Midnight Lantern*. Van Gogh writes: "The earth has been thought to be flat . . . science has proved that the earth is round . . . they persist nowadays in believing that life is flat and runs from birth to death. However, life, too, is probably round." This possibility telegraphs an involvement with what Wall defines as my pursuit of "an ultimate elusiveness of meaning that permeates the concept of that nonlinear roundness of life, alongside the simultaneous sense of living on the edge of everything in the West."

What she sees accurately is my attempt to bind up my two Northwests: their animals, my neighbors, Lough Arrow in County Sligo in the Northwest of Ireland with the high ridge of Bricklieve and its Neolithic passage graves reaching out to America and the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the snow-covered Olympic Mountain range behind Port Angeles, Washington. My fifty-year connection to the dead of Ballindoon graveyard merges with my haunting of my late husband Raymond Carver's gravesite at Ocean View Cemetery, west of Port Angeles, where I walked every day for two and a half years while writing *Moon Crossing Bridge*, that elegy to love and loss and ongoing gifts.

One way to see the roundness of my life in these two places is to realize that when I situated my caravan in 1974 just outside the graveyard wall at Abbey Ballindoon to write *Under Stars*, I knew no one in that graveyard. But as recently as this past December, my companion of a quarter century, the painter and storyteller Josie Gray, passed out of this life and was buried within those walls. In mid-August, his death was followed by that of his sister, Eileen McDonagh, who had first welcomed me to Ballindoon fifty years before.

Suddenly I felt: *no wonder I immediately formed such an intuitive connection to the place to which my love would come to rest!* It was as if my 1974 consciousness already knew, in some uncanny future time roundness, that Josie was there in life and death, attached to that *as yet unlived* space and time. In other words: I had the import, the feeling of consequence, before I had the narrative, the linear here-to-there of what would happen.

I begin to think I am sometimes trying to catch up to what has happened in a time that hasn't happened yet. I am not so special in this capacity to sense a field of poetic life-abundance in places and people and circumstances. What may be special is a kind of heedless daring that trusts feelings of deep meaning emanating from a place. I take the chance that my being there has the import I feel, and I make it my life.

I begin to think I am sometimes trying to catch up to what has happened in a time that hasn't happened yet.

Just as Monet designed and grew his water-lily ponds for his paintings, I bought my cottage in Ireland eleven years ago and flew four times a year to be there with Josie. The difference between Monet's way and mine was that I just allowed the elements in that place to draw near, to inhabit me, if you will. I had no map or plan, only to be in that place as authentically as I could.

I set about knowing my neighbors, being involved with Josie's extended Gray clan, meeting painters such as Sean McSweeney and Barrie Cooke, area poets Dermot Healey and Leland Bardwell. I also drew quite a lot on my time with musicians and poets from the Republic and Northern Ireland when I was in my late twenties and early thirties.

Before I knew Josie, and while I stayed nights with his sister Eileen's family while writing *Under Stars*, his niece, Yvonne McDonagh, who was twelve at the time, would bicycle down to my caravan to listen to me read aloud those poems. We became confidantes, talking of love and how one might recognize it. She ultimately trained and worked as a nurse in Dublin, but sadly for her and her loved ones, died young from cancer. Still, the round of her life allowed her to marry her true love by her last year.

A story later came to me about Yvonne's death, how her favorite uncle, Josie, had caught a brown trout from Lough Arrow, cooked it, and had it carried to the Dublin hospital where Yvonne lay, unable to eat. The story goes that she found that gift so magical and such a message from home that she ate the brown trout as her final meal.

I had not met Josie at that time, but we were already bound to each other through Yvonne and a brown trout from Lough Arrow. Story must prepare the way for meaning to precede itself, to seem as if it had always been there waiting to be taken up.

So, many years later when I met Josie, he already had a sense of legend, as if our meeting had been prepared for years before by his niece's untimely death after one year of marriage. A tragedy. We were waiting for each other perhaps on opposite sides of a tragedy. And today in a graveyard where I knew no one in 1974, Yvonne and her mother, Eileen, rest not far from Josie, where I go often now to sing Josie's and my favorite song: "If I Were a Blackbird." The song is deep in traditional Irish music. It pierces time and carries us, living and dead, in the great round of our inner worlds, restoring us to each other outside linear notions of time and clearing away suppositions that would rob us of our innate capacities to belong to our futures before we even have them.

The complexity of a poetry that seeks to deliver liminal space and time, that which occupies a stance at both sides of a boundary or threshold, has lifted me out of easy categories as a poet. I like Wall's locating phrase for me as having "an edge-of-everything sensibility." She posits further that if we go far enough, edging out and onward from the West, we end up in the East, that extension into the round.

My poems' ways of seeing do devolve from Eastern notions of reality. That is, they challenge dualities which tend to blot out a range of possibilities. Also, I adopt the Buddhist notion that each action we take bears importantly on the fabric of the whole, that the smallest creature, even a snail, has import—that all life is sacred and to be honored, that our path reveals itself according to our mindfulness of others and being able to see into the interconnectedness of choices.

Daily meditations, taken from a lifetime of reading Buddhist thinkers and religious leaders, are helpful to opening my mind in un-programmatic ways. One book usually in my bag as I cross back and forth between Ireland and America is *Openness Mind: Self-Knowledge and Inner Peace through Meditation*. The book is defaced with passages underlined and circled. "Try to develop a feeling for the thoughts watching the watcher"; below this I've scribbled the title of a poem I wrote later, "Little Inside Outside Dream." Or there is a question underlined in black ink: "But is there actually any 'now'?"

The seeming urgency of *now* makes it useful as a stimulus to actions which may, however, be shorn of important connections to before and

after. When we consider *now* in the round of time, it is best experienced as a planet we are swiftly falling away from, but that we might re-encounter in a poem. Poems compress and expand time until the notion of *now* regains dimensionality. Such an idea of the "now" can have a past and future. It doesn't have to navigate only in the present.

Wall mentions ley lines of energy that are said to run through the very place in Ireland where I live, energy lines that are connected perhaps from Sligo's sacred sites to places as far away as the pyramids. She introduces the Irish term *dindsenchas*. The word means "a totality of topography, history, ecology, animal life, non-human life, spirit beings, and human impact on a place—all the living and the dead *in a non-linear simultaneity of presence*." This passage delighted me—to discover there was already an Irish word for this complex notion of existence with which I'd been quietly working. This beautiful word carries forth a kind of poetic version of Einstein's relativity theory. It helps us stay in the round, in the deep mind I'd been drawn to in Ballindoon—for I had not stumbled upon it, but rather accepted its invitation.

When I visited the Buddhist nun Jakucho Setouchi in Kyoto in 1989 after the death of my husband Raymond Carver, she took me into her temple where she gave her legendary talks to women thwarted in love. We had instant rapport as if we had always known each other. "Why am I here," I suddenly asked at one point, feeling as if some strong, beguiling force was at work. She answered, "*Because the spirits of this place have asked for you*."

Since then I have applied that notion to my presence in the Northwest of Ireland: *I am here because the spirits of this place have asked for me.* The endeavor of my days and nights has been to see what they want with me. Their assignments are various—as simple as visiting Eileen Frazer, who gave me well water when I wrote *Under Stars*. I listen to her stories about the old days when a person entering your house would utter: "Lord give blessings on this house and all in it!" Eileen had been widowed with five children to raise alone only a year or two before we met. Her husband Jimmy, I would learn years later, had been the best friend of Josie. Now her grandson Oliver comes to my cottage to sing traditional Irish songs before the hearth—songs that connect me and my cottage to singers who've sung these songs for hundreds of years.

Another tribute I was called to make to the spirits of this place Ballindoon is the collaborative book of oral stories I took down from Josie entitled *Barnacle Soup*. In doing so, I could hear about Irish characters I'd met when they were old, but that Josie had known in their youth—such as Tommy Flynn, a fiddle player, a wit, and a *seanchaí*. Now Josie rests just a few feet from Tommy's gravesite, and I walk to them both in ten minutes from my cottage.

In the strange web of things, I also discovered my cottage had been the home of the midwife who in fact had delivered Josie, a Mrs. Quinland. Last night I dreamed I was helping a pregnant woman out of bed and it felt as if I'd had a visit from Mrs. Quinland!

A factor that joins my two Northwests is the dependability of rain in each. I yearn for it if I am deprived of it. My sensibility seems to need it as some painters crave the color blue. I also love gazing toward the west at sundown from my Sky House or Bay St. House in Port Angeles, for there is a wide sweep of sea between America and Canada. This sea view is always changing—one minute glassy, the next white-capped by wind. Cargo ships from China and Japan, cruise ships, and tug boats pass back and forth to Seattle or to the Pacific, and a ferryboat to Victoria, Canada, sails several times a day.

There is indeed a sense of being on the edge, the edge of the Pacific Ocean, which sends the orca whales through our strait and salmon to spawn and die in rivers fished for hundreds of years by Native Americans.

The spirits of the American Northwest pulled me into small fishing boats with my father on the ocean from the age of five. Fishing teaches patience and the unknown, the unseen. Light illuminates the mind on water and the motion of the boat is a lullaby. It is a natural state of meditation. Speech on deep water is changed and intimate. The mind drifts. Things of a trivial nature lift away. Life seems bared to essentials. When one is on the ocean, one feels in touch with sacred space and non-linear time, that wistfulness toward simultaneity of times and places.

My childhood was spent in the logging camps where both my mother and father made our living, she as a choker-setter and he as a spar-tree-rigger. While my mother and father were felling trees, I was exploring with my brothers, building shelters, making trails, picking wild berries, tracking bear and deer. I was also always on the verge of getting lost in the greater forest.

It was all perhaps a preparation for becoming a poet—surrounded by the unknown, daring to venture, to pass back and forth from the wild to the domestic of home and hearth, all the while watching the larger-than-life efforts of my parents as they risked their very lives to earn a living from the forest.

Being with forests and oceans allows one "extremes of other-than-human domains." Wall says these connections in my poetry offer "a radical form of empathy that is not simply local and not absently, abstractly global."

In these exchanges, passing back and forth between my two Northwests, I leave hummingbirds and eagles in Port Angeles for goldfinches, mute swans, and wild pheasants in Ballindoon. I leave deer, black bear, cougar, and bobcats on the Olympic Peninsula for badgers, foxes, and elegant stags with their regal racks of horns in the West of Ireland.

I assume some cross-pollination of empathy and attentiveness must be taking place through bringing these disparate inhabitants together in one consciousness. In the process, and through my poems, I feel I am being transformed from the inside out.

Tess Gallagher's eleventh volume of poetry, Is, Is Not*, is forthcoming from Graywolf Press in Spring, 2019. She writes in a cottage on Lough Arrow in the West of Ireland where many of the poems in her next book are set, and lives as in her hometown of Port Angeles, Washington, as well.*

TWO POEMS

P. SCOTT CUNNINGHAM

Decades

In late March 1997, thirty-nine members of the Heaven's Gate religious cult took their own lives. They were all wearing identical black Nike Decades sneakers.

Waiting for the comet, I wash
my feet in black and white
and cotton. I tie the laces in a knot.
I drag a cloth across the sides
and dip the soles in soap and water.

I know there are no aliens.
I know there is no afterlife.
I know that beauty is a uniform
worn by the light
to disguise it from the dark.

Just to *look* is itself a kindness.
To be *seen*: a kindness to oneself.
My sin is that I only want *Your* eyes
to draw them like a comet
to these mirrors of my body

these shrouds I use to manifest
what lies beneath.
Lord, look at my feet.
I picked these coffins out
for You.

José Fernandez

The ocean never breaks. It opens
like a fist, rolling us finger to finger,
taking the outstretched hand of the land
and pulling, gently, like a parent.

In September, nights are warmer than the days.
The moon burns like a second sun.
The fish, mistaking humidity for home,
swim up to the surface to breathe

where the three of us hold poles like
before we held sheets stitched together
where the three of us are never thirsty
anymore, but you'd never know it

by how we gaze into the ocean
the same ocean that tried to kill us
but instead buried us in this city
where we're force-fed champagne

like a torture in which you die from being free.
Most cities are places you leave.
Miami leaves you. Looking back across the bay
the city is a campfire collapsing

into embers, the hook of a song
falling out of range, a crown of green
Presidentes showered into place
by ice cubes stacked like balloons.

Like our city, we have nowhere
to be, no schedule, no curfew.
If the earth misses us, it's only because
the earth is always turning away.

Over and over we stab the hearts
of things just to drag them slowly below
the surface, through the dark of salt,
begging for them to be torn off and eaten.

We worship the moon, bending
our foreheads to the deck. We crush up
memories of home as offerings to the wind.
No one loves you as much as an island

but no one has ever loved us as much
as we love ourselves right now, at night,
surrounded by engine sounds and a trail
of rainbows that means we're leaving

behind everything we brought with us
so when the channel tosses us
onto the rocks, the only thing we have left
to spill is the wine of our bodies.

None of it even makes it into the water.
We love the sea that much.
We could never blame her, not even a little,
and who is José if not the sea's first-

born son? If not the moon but brighter?
Who else could hold the wheel in place?
Snap his fingers and lay our bodies
whole cloth on the other shore

the shore that isn't sinking, the one
that will never trade us, or ask us
to wear the flags of our enemies.
A pitcher is one who prophets.

Who digs the air into a cave.
A brother is the one who dies first.
A city is any place you love
that doesn't remember your name.

P. Scott Cunningham is the author of Ya Te Veo *(University of Arkansas Press, 2018), selected by Billy Collins for the Miller Williams Poetry Series. He is the founder and director of O, Miami, a non-profit organization that celebrates Miami, FL through the lens of poetry, and the co-founder & executive editor of Jai-Alai Books, a regional publishing imprint.*

POETRY & DEMOCRACY

KHALED MATTAWA

In his essay *Democratic Vistas* (1871) Walt Whitman writes, "Democracy . . . is a great word, whose history, I suppose, remains unwritten, because that history has yet to be enacted." And he was right, of course. Whitman's assessment came almost a century after the Declaration of Independence, where these memorable lines were written: "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." As it turned out the men, or the main man who wrote this powerful declaration, Thomas Jefferson, did not quite mean it that way.

Broadly speaking, Jefferson meant white men, not women or people of color. He would later augment this view in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1801), where, explaining to a French interlocutor the American system of constitutional governance—with its separation of powers, checks and balances, individual liberty, the separation of church and state—he defended slavery and wrote some of the most repugnant claims of white supremacy.

In its exclusivity to the males of the dominant racial group, our democracy was not unique. The democracies of Greece and Rome upon which it was modeled also did not include people of color or women. Some historians claim that the founding fathers foresaw our democracy becoming inclusive, that people of color and women would eventually, perhaps, take part in it. But as we all know, the process was agonizingly, traumatically slow. The Civil War brought an end to slavery, but inequality and oppression of people of color, as it became less blatant, never ceased. And now, half a century after the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, we see various entrenched powers of wealth and racism continuing to challenge the right of poor and non-white citizens to vote as well as denying them any meaningful access to their representatives. Whitman's statement that the history of democracy remains unwritten, because a full democracy has yet to be enacted, remains true.

The process was also excruciating for Whitman himself. He is famous for these lines from "Song of Myself": "And what I assume you shall assume / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you," lines that earned him the claim of being the poet of democracy. He published these lines less than a decade after his 1848 visit to New Orleans, where he witnessed the slave auction described in "I Sing the Body Electric." His empathy for women is evident in *Leaves of Grass*, but was he thinking of people of color in the lines quoted above? Probably not. We know, however, that by the time he wrote *Democratic Vistas*—where his language is not free of racist insinuations, and despite the crudeness of the masses—Whitman believed that democracy was the best form of government.

What was needed, he argued in the essay, was a greater experience of individuality, a sense of "individual personal dignity, of a single person, either male or female, characterized in the main, not from extrinsic acquirements or position, but in the pride of himself or herself alone." Whitman is pointing to a form of individuality, not of solipsism: a form of pure abstract thinking that brings the self into the mirror of reflection, where it sees itself as self and as part of humanity. In this mode of being, the self emits and receives sentiments and thoughts in equal measure that tear it away from the external bondages of race, nationality, and religion. His is not "individualism, which isolates"; rather it is "adhesiveness or love, that fuses, ties and aggregates, making the races comrades, and fraternizing all."

To function, Whitman explains, democracy must indeed impose "the leveler, the unyielding principle of the average." Alongside this necessary equality must exist "the pride and centripetal isolation of a human being in himself," which he also calls "personalism." Literature, songs, and esthetics, he adds, are of utmost "importance principally because they furnish the materials and suggestions of personality for the women and men" in society. The arts instill a sense of self-knowledge among individuals and a sense of belonging among humanity. These are the real twin engines of democracy, not its regulations and processes.

It is no wonder that authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, especially of the twentieth century, have had highly antagonistic relationships with the arts. Mao's China of the Cultural Revolution offered its people only a handful of operas to enjoy, and the great leader himself was practically the only poet read at the time. Hitler's regime expunged Germany of "impure arts." The Taliban prohibited women from receiving an education, banned music and all books except religious ones. All around the world, antidemocratic forces demand allegiance, and the only art they accept is the one that legitimates, or at least stands neutral on, repression. A love poem, or any work of art that could potentially allow people to feel the interchangeability of feeling or engage in the spontaneous expression that art stimulates in us, is dangerous and therefore banned.

The lyric poem, with its compressed use of language, our most natural and rudimentary mode of expression, perhaps stands closer to the human soul than its sister arts. It can hide among ordinary speech or in our memories until we can privately take in its spiritual nourishment. Coming from someone else, or given to someone else, the lyric poem performs how the resistance between the I and you, the I and the other, can be quickly overcome, and moved into the overlapping and mutual spaces of private and collective consciousness. A perfect teaching tool of democracy, the lyric poem allows the individual to construct and experience a space "that fuses, ties and aggregates."

Whitman's rangy, sprawling, repetitive, and endearing *Democratic Vistas* is a passionate defense of democracy, an ardent response to Carlyle's screed "Shooting Niagara." Whitman recognizes the crudeness of the masses as human potential capable of generosity and virtue beyond the rough exterior they exhibit. He provides a solid defense of women and their undeniable right to participate in politics. The phrase "American race" and "races" recurs—and indeed many races are mentioned in the essay—but it is not quite clear if Whitman had fully made peace with the idea of an American "race" being made up of all races and colors.

If Whitman—and I'm sure his other admirers will respond to my views here—was not able to cross the racial divide fully in the United States, we as a nation have not crossed it at all when it comes to people of other nations. Even as our democracy made progress around the Western world, "others" have suffered from the brutal violence that democracies, infused with loathsome and loathing self-righteousness, have inflicted on them. The genocide of America's native peoples took place under democratic rule, as well as massacres in the Philippines, Vietnam, and Iraq. Each of the world's great democracies has a history of barbarism, genocide, massacre, and torture in its recent archives, and—more frighteningly—the capacity and the rationalizing rhetoric that would allow this history to be repeated. Clearly, the forces of love and aggregation that Whitman speaks of need to expand further and wider within our country and around the world.

I want to close this essay with two poems that explore the dynamics of how self-knowledge and freedom conjoin in creating the solidarity and reverence for human life necessary for democracy. As it begins, Whitman's poem seems like an expression of desire for a passing stranger, who is both a he and a she. But as the poem progresses, the poet builds a whole life of encounters and affections with the stranger. The stranger himself or herself is not named or in any way specified, and no words pass between them. At some point the stranger slips from being specific into being abstract and generic, but also concretely present. He or she is necessary for the poet, and their connection will last forever. The stranger is the other for whom we allow ourselves to feel kinship and affection. As Whitman's poetry demonstrates again and again with its catalogues of people, the poet's desire to assume—or to slip into—another's life is a daily enactment of his humanity, a democracy of the spirit that renders all others legitimate and necessary for his and our existence.

The second poem is by the Iraqi poet Saadi Youssef. Here, too, the conversation about freedom is an address, as if both Youssef and Whitman want to stress to us that we do not seek liberty or democracy in order to conduct monologues, but rather to engage in dialogue, in a mutual social action. While Whitman's speaker tells the stranger that he will never forget her or him, Youssef's speaker is commanding his addressee to not forget his responsibility to others, that he, in fact, will not know the extent of his freedom or his sky, which one to choose and how much of it to inhabit, unless he positions himself on the earth and offers others the opportunity to soar. The "you" that Youssef is addressing is perhaps himself in exile at a time when he felt liberated and unhindered by oppression. But the "you" can also be us, Americans, who are free, but less free than we could be.

To a Stranger

Walt Whitman

Passing stranger! you do not know how longingly I look upon you,
You must be he I was seeking, or she I was seeking, (it comes to me as
of a dream,)
I have somewhere surely lived a life of joy with you,

All is recall'd as we flit by each other, fluid, affectionate, chaste, matured,
You grew up with me, were a boy with me or a girl with me,
I ate with you and slept with you, your body has become not yours only nor
left my body mine only,
You give me the pleasure of your eyes, face, flesh, as we pass, you take of
my beard, breast, hands, in return,
I am not to speak to you, I am to think of you when I sit alone or wake at
night alone,
I am to wait, I do not doubt I am to meet you again,
I am to see to it that I do not lose you.

Freedom

Saadi Youssef

Translated by Khaled Mattawa

Alone, now you are free.

You pick a sky and name it
a sky to live in
a sky to refuse

But if you want know
if you are really free
and to remain free
you must steady yourself
on a foothold of earth

so that the earth may rise
so that you may give
wings
to the children of the earth
below

This essay was originally published in the Spring-Summer 2019 issue of *American Poets*, the journal of the Academy of American Poets.

Khaled Mattawa's books include Tocqueville *(New Issues, 2010),* Amorisco *(Ausable, 2008),* Zodiac of Echoes *(Ausable, 2003), and* Ismailia Eclipse *(Sheep Meadow Press, 1995). He is also the author of* Mahmoud Darwish: The Poet's Art and His Nation *(Syracuse University Press, 2014). In 2014, Mattawa was elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. Currently, Mattawa teaches in the graduate creative writing program at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.*

FRIENDS OF APR

We wish to express our gratitude to everyone who donated to the 2018–2019 Friends Campaign and our thanks to the following individuals for their particularly generous contributions.

Benefactor
Margot Berg and Robert Epstein
Jonathan Katz
William Kistler
Terri E. Moreland
Jennifer H. Oliver
Ava Seave
Bank of America

Patron
John Carswell
Norman Dubie

Sponsor
Robin Becker
Richard and A. Norine Bonanno
Adil N. Godrej
Muriel Karr
Richard Lenon
Anne Marie Macari
Judy Newman
Alicia Ostriker
Linda A. Richardson
Jeanne Ruddy and Victor Keen
Rose Styron

Supporter
Anthony Albino
Andrew Anway
Ellen Bass
Laurel Blossom
Fred Brandfon
Ira Brind
Deborah Burnham
Ann Butchart
Robert & Helen Buttel
Carmine F. Chickadel
Henri Cole
Brian Cronwall
Susan Davie
Hal Davis
Thomas Devaney
Gregory Djanikian
Charles Douthat
Barbara Dunham
Ruth Fine
Jennifer Flanigan
Patricia Frisella
Diane Ganiere
Toby Goostree
Robert and Judith Greene
Robert Hasselblad
Nancy Mooney Hebert
Brenda Hillman
Mark Hillringhouse
Jill Holmes
Elizabeth Jacobson
Mark Jarman
Jasper Johns
Loraine Johnson
David Kandel
Joann Karges
Edmund Keeley
David Kirby and Barbara Hamby
Mildred Lane-Berg
Dorianne Laux and Joseph Millar
Robert Lynch
Jill Mancina
Randolph Maxted
James McCorkle
Richard G. McGuire
Sarah L. Meiklejohn
Richard Milazzo
Michael Miller
Bill Nathan
Judith Chibante Neal
John T. Obrien, Jr.
Eugene O'Connor
KJ Page
Gail Peterson
Alane Rollings
Orville Rothrock
Timothy Schaffner
Kathryn Slott
Rick & Ruth Snyderman
Franz Spickhoff
Patrick J. Stafford
Michael C. Stanley
Christian Teresi
Elaine Terranova
Lynne Thompson
Joseph R. Thurn
Patricia Traxler
Rosanna Warren
Karol M. Wasylyshyn
Eleanor Wilner

(Donations received by April 5, 2019)

THREE POEMS

ED SKOOG

The kid is letting the thread go

you go after it
blue ring that binds it to earth
skipping over tidal sinew
clumped like battlements
you are running
even when the kite
keeps straight
cauliflowering current the bay
sculpts without embankment fall deep
seaward sea lions
pop up their cat heads
and pull yourself back out
are we in someone's short story
one of us asks
as the kids run close
who can frame the box kite's silhouette
grown smaller
the line unspooling as it rises
toward oyster farm and salt works
found later
caught in a yard's bramble
it would have flown through the night

In our silence
which is like pretending to die
we are like the people I have seen
asleep in the library

arms folded on the tabletop
bags hard as weather
beside them

they've been out on the long job
from place difficult to scratch

claim their station early
and rise at closing time

and I have seen their sleep
residual on the tables

reading a book I have found them
in my own gestures
and certain stories it seems
a narrator is sleeping

they claim their studies early
dream us to go on

and so each May First

I held together
loose braids of dandelion,
violet with notched
construction paper, and buzzed
the neighbor's

hand-deliver the bouquet
she took with fingers
stiff as umbrella spokes
reciting the nonsense
the very old say
across the chasm
her cursive face and wig
like red smoke

curling into spring

because the rabbit is a filament in its bulb

because the child has to hear three
stories every morning
because this poem

if you hold it up to the wind

he is a filament in bed
I'm a rabbit in the field

long leg
constant nibbling stupid

stupid
stupid
outside of the field

I'm not sure there is any meaning
like what you catch in the window
of an ambulance in transit
or a parking
space interrupted by a tree
my grandfather wasn't blown away
in Tarentum

lion's forehead
pressed into my sentence what is better
than books I said
what of the structure
of the hair
the suggestion roundness
gives of the earth other
says
there is another lion at my liver

asks of us again
grandfather is
a dead language called Tarentum

what yesterday showed itself
as a snake

today arrives
as cloud
to get blown

they take you in
in a bouquet
of last year's Tarentums
returned
as a flowerpot ache left
returned
as a secret then secrecy turned car
around again
I've never been there
I'll never get out

Children move through the climbing tree

like clock repair
until it seems
the device is ticking
duration
is change in play
though climbing takes
no time
only one cruel as a parent
would measure it
count down the leaving time
as thought finds branching
the rising
of the agent through feature is
like matter in gas state rising
tunnels
in the air: that are dug operationally
made by moving very simply through

painters on a scaffold: as we fall

they are building: forts
from blankets and pillows
words from sound and guess

time the pathway child takes through space
between branches
without revision

path to fountain by quaking
aspen marigold

hold hands
to sprint through spray to where
the accordion functions
fumes

yet although it's nearly bread pudding
season
when they
ask the player to pause
his engine's junctions of folded paper
how much he's made
he's indistinct:
one million
two kids leap
say *hey*
look with capes
whatever the poet and
executioner have been planning on
kaput
and in the self
a better idea

now to get it wrong differently

that's what no longer matters
acrobats
unwrap lean from pole-top
spin
down widening rounds to land
at the pyramid's foot
repeatedly through the night
like a mother going back to bed

My mask is whistling
help somebody
in the lost
found where the good
tippers power-wash the fat and ugly lines

listen to us talk into it
the game
personifies the rhyme
so that rhyme
assumes character
or it is that the second
sound is the first's impression
parody

flat
sharp
I could jump off the roof
into your ear

let's see if
we can get into the lipstick factory

change subject among foes
the low levels rattling under eyelids
I don't know how
long: fly away Jack
fly back Jill

the boat is seething left at the library's
effortless
intertidal grief
a blue band marks the highest water

back notchless arrow
splashdown anthem lobbed between stones
banks are lending
vast shipments bleed
forth from ports
state legislatures are
buttoning their vests
rising to speak

these children however
after dinner-speak
march in single file around the columns
devour
what is in their path
pretending

only pretending

Ed Skoog's collections of poetry include the chapbooks Toolkit *(1995) and* Field Recording *(2003) and the full-length volumes* Mister Skylight *(2009) and* Rough Day *(2013).*

LULLABY

IRÈNE MATHIEU

scrape a baby's white tongue
and if chunks crumble off, it's milk.
if the tongue bleeds, it's thrush.

let the baby thrash, looking for food.
if I find a wellspring, let me drink.
this is called responsive parenting.

don't rush to console me—let the baby
cry. this is sleep training.
let me palm the dark edges of my
own vision when the light goes out,
let me taste what grows in my mouth.

follow the little spine to where it ends
in a feathered tail whipping in a bone straw
innervating my wrists. I can tell myself

reach for this, or *grab that* and it is done.
I smell food I drink, my thrum a
tired anthem. I cannot tell from here
if my tongue is overgrown
or simply overfed.

the room is full of shuddering.
milk tongue, milk tongue, your song's
getting sour. I haven't slept well
since I was born.

as a bird, thrush doesn't so much sing
as insist. *look, blood!*
the baby assumes that everything in the room
has an explanation:
milk, here blood, there and why.

if a baby is sick, take blood from the wrist.
ask it why. I'll never be nursed this way
again. my mother says when I cried
my father always came running.
this explains the color of my feathers.

it's hard to tell if the baby's getting
bigger or if the room is shrinking, but
something's arise
symbiotically this species trills a warbling ballad.

when a thrush lands on the windowsill
tell the baby *even birds drink milk.*
I can't tell what's inside the room and
what's out. I'd give up blood to know.

the baby's cried too long again.
I'll turn out the light, place her face-up.
hush the rooting mouth still in training—
I won't ask questions of my tongue.

Irène Mathieu is a pediatrician, writer, and public health researcher. She is the author of Grand Marronage *(Switchback Books, 2019), which won Editor's Choice for the Gatewood Poetry Prize and runner-up for the Cave Canem/Northwestern Prize;* orogeny *(Trembling Pillow Press, 2017), which won the Bob Kaufman Book Prize; and* the galaxy of origins *(dancing girl press & studio, 2014).*

TWO POEMS

STANLEY PLUMLY

We Insomniacs

Like the way Galway Kinnell fell asleep in 1968 in Athens, Ohio,
reading from a wadded-up new poem pulled from his pocket,
started too late at night the night before—
the occasion, exactly, the Ohio Poetry Circuit,
calling for, often, two readings a day, a hundred or so miles apart
This was an afternoon event, four o'clock,
Body Rags just out, which he also read from.
The new piece was probably from *The Book of Nightmares*,
possibly "Maud Moon," more likely "The Hen Flower,"
which, in the original, begins, "We insomniacs, /
Sprawled / on our faces in the spring / nights . . ."
but later revised—Kinnell was an inveterate reviser—
by dropping the poem's first line,
perhaps a mistake he was now paying for.

I don't remember for sure what the crumpled part of a poem was.
I remember it was a beautiful late October afternoon,
by now four-forty, with the big oaks and maples
on the main campus lawn burning bright outside the windows,
when the poet of the great face and greater soul
allowed himself to lean over from his chair what he'd hand-written
(in bed no doubt, under a squeezed under-lit hotel lamp),
and then let fall, in front of his audience, his great head
onto his rough words, and then, just as sudden, with a snore,
lift the reading back up to us—the table
he'd requested not unlike what we had lain
our own great heads on in elementary school,
since none of us, as well, had ever slept the night through,
waiting for the dark to disappear.

For Gerald Stern at Ninety-Two

At the Great Stern's eightieth birthday party,
at that moment when the meal was ending
and the wine ongoing, Galway stood, with his
bear's hand wrapped around the stem of his glass,
and seemed to be on the verge of a toast, when
instead he lifted his arm as if in victory and asked
all fifty of us to stand with him and recite from
memory "In My Craft or Sullen Art," which we did
as best we could in the "singing light" spreading
all around us. And I have to say I wept, and still
weep when I think about that moment that I can
hardly even speak of now at a distance of some
dozen years—time, "in the mercy of his means,"
refusing to let go of the "secret heart" of poetry.

So I'm on a back road, walking in a direction away
from the viewer, and the question is are those trees
in the upper right hand of the picture Eastern White
pines or simply spruce, the big Blue Spruce of, say,
Vermont or farther up in Maine, near the coast,
because the ground is wet, after a salty rain, and
the sky still dark and drifting, and the feeling is
the feeling of the clarity of being more alone than
ever and being happy, now that there is no death,
only the direction of the future, where daylight
may or may not be ending, and the table may or
may not be set, and someone you love may or
may not be waiting, who until now was outside
the picture, where you, too, have just come from.

Stanley Plumly's many books of poetry include Orphan Hours: Poems *(W. W. Norton, 2013);* Old Heart *(W. W. Norton, 2007), nominated for the National Book Award, and winner of the Los Angeles Times Book Prize and the Paterson Poetry Prize;* The Marriage in the Trees *(Ecco Press, 1997);* Boy on the Step *(1989);* Summer Celestial *(1983); and* Out-of-the-Body Travel *(1977), which won the William Carlos Williams Award and was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award.*

THREE POEMS

MALCOLM TARIQ

Slave Play

I am searching for freedom
within this bondage. Liken it to the holy
spirit that caught my mother

one Sunday. As she bent to buckle
I fled the body that asked my own
to speak so freely and foreign.

Such would be my safe word
were I as daring. My body can break open
at will, it's the mind that cannot—

insert cuffs and I'll think shackle,
say whip and I'll picture a tree
carved into flesh. So why am I

on my knees again with hands
for a stepping stool and a mouth's
forum of folly

for a chalice? *This is my body,*
eat ye all of it. A black man
tells me to call him

a nigger. A white man wants
to collar train me. (See how I am both
the dog and bone?) Dom

I shall not want,
lead me beside the still
kudzu, entangle me within the loss

of generations.
I know who will lead me into this,
but who will

bring me out? O Master,
teach me new ways to say *I want*
when the tongue is but a muscle

flexed on which word to be
hung. Live by the word,
the pastor tells me. I'll die by it.

If not by these feet bound one
to the other. Command me to follow.
O God, what have I become?

Fucking : A : Proclamation

What if the ancestors are watching us fuck?
I wouldn't mind their inspection—my aunt's
doubled-over laughter at your hand's lock
on my ass I've come this far to surrender,
witness to the crashing of our bodies.
And if she is smoking she passes the joint
to a grandmother whose neck is clasped tightly
by the missus, flinging in rhythm to
our swinging, still sucking and blowing
the smoke into our faces. Be they privy
and proud of what our tongues have made
of lashing, how they've learned to call
fleshly desire into the living. We fight
and call it want. Your hands bury
me as a matter of need. For coming
this close to death is our own doing and undoing.
The ancestors are watching us fuck and
I'm holding your back's unmarked smooth,
my mind still a scatter. For the man
has told us we're no good for anything
but fucking. Our bodies are material
interests: the wood frame balancing another,
the paper map marking so many journeys
but our own. Called brute, savage, boy—
we suck dicks, but they are hard
to swallow. Every bit is but a sight of terror—
the rope kissing the neck, embracing
the ankles, the wrists, my mouth
stuffed with your fingers tasting of blood
is but for how I choose to undo——.
How to fuck in spite of——? When you shoot,
there I am and so is the uncle's uncle
or baby mama or daddy's head
knocked up by the master's pistol—
cock cracking cranium. O!
The faces I've pillowed and long to
forget. The ancestors fucked between tabby
walls left to ruin, on dirt floors they fumbled,
leaving seed inside the earth's bottom.
Lover, we are furious flowers and just
as brutally I'd ride a dick to save my life's joy.
And if the ancestors are watching on this night,
they've praised this willful bottom. They've clapped
in rhythm to the headboard. They've stomped
with every crescendo caught gasping for air.
For finally this body is open. And this
body, it is mine.

Self-Portrait as George Washington's Teeth

an erasure of his last will and testament

I, Instrument
of circumstance, hold most difficult sensations

from bodily infirmities
fed by, bound by Negro

crops. Permanent provision
is alternative testimony of his attachment

to me. Trust this donation
vested in misconceptions, meaning

the pleasure of prejudice—so desirable
an object as good matter:

Public mind, pregnant Country
limits my Honourable body,

sum object I, legal alien (I, Negro), made
as evidence of desire. My private—.

My share—. The original design of my head
from me to him unsheathes blood

for unsheathed domain bounded at the Gum
to the mouth of his person. My whole

deed: two third joint uses and benefits
to the Stone and Oak of the South.

Thence, I hold all the rest and residue
of lying—desire cannot be made without

my parts: four parts—one part to each
five other parts—one to four parts,

one part each give two parts; one part
three parts; one part to each one

other part; that is—to each a third of
that part three other parts of person is

unknown to him. To take stock and repair
a new one of Brick. To remain entombed here

without oration. To digest his sense of intention.
I, binding witness of the State.

Malcolm Tariq is the author of Heed the Hollow *(Graywolf Press, 2019), winner of the 2018 Cave Canem Poetry Prize, and* Extended Play *(2017), winner of the 2017 Gertrude Press Poetry Chapbook Contest. He is a fellow of Cave Canem and the Watering Hole and was a 2016–2017 playwriting apprentice at Horizon Theatre Company.*

THREE POEMS

JOHN LEE CLARK

Treasure

Our treasure is to be together. We used to be filthy rich. We had it as good as a ball of worms. We squirmed happily together in caves. We had it so good. We had our old curved nails tearing into pomelos.

It was almost too much. One day a cluster wandered off and found something in the forest. It was too much. It splintered their souls into a million toothpicks. Some of them tried to come back. They stabbed us. They tried again and again until it was too many toothpicks to hold together against. We have never forgotten. Every time we snuggle against a wall we feel it. Every time we dig into a pomelo we feel it. Every time we wrap our legs around each other to talk we feel it. Our lost wealth. We want it back. We want it all back. The best way to get rid of a million toothpicks is by fire.

Sorrow and Joy

I am addicted to chocolate. I am addicted to chocolate. My pockets are nearly empty. My pockets are nearly empty. There's no sidewalk to Blake Road. There's no sidewalk to Blake Road. Wild animals don't like me. Wild animals don't like me. Insects do. Insects do. I am allergic to cubicles. I am allergic to cubicles. It took four months to read Middlemarch. It took four months to read Middlemarch. Adrean is a visual artist. Adrean is a visual artist. Our boys are growing so fast. Our boys are growing so fast. My Braille student showed up forty-five minutes early today. My Braille student showed up forty-five minutes early today. There are seventy-two unread messages in my inbox. There are seventy-two unread messages in my inbox. Time flies. Time flies. I didn't write a poem yesterday. I didn't write a poem yesterday.

Morrison Heady 1829–1915

Morrison Heady was one tough nut to crack. It wasn't enough to have a splinter shoot from a chopping block into his eye. Nor was it enough to have a schoolmate playing catchers and leapfrogs slam his heel into his other eye. It took a magnificent horse bolting and a pile of rocks to send his head spinning. He invented the alphabet glove. He invented a folding bed. He invented an adjustable chair. He invented a thermal pot so his coffee would keep hot and tasty. He invented a kind of gate so he could open and close it without dismounting. He invented the Diptograph so we could emboss in Braille and Boston Line Type and New York Point all at once. He wrote a masterpiece in hexameter called "The Double Night." He journeyed to Boston to visit Laura Bridgman. He journeyed to Boston to visit Laura Bridgman again. He designed a blue cloak with a red trim so folks on the streets of Louisville would stay out of his way. He told fantastic tall tales so folks would flock to him. He wrote letters to all of us. Young Helen Keller called him "Uncle Morrie." He wrote novels. His publisher wrote a foreword to tell readers that they should be ashamed of themselves for not doing what this man was doing. Morrison Heady only said that his life would answer.

John Lee Clark is a DeafBlind poet from Minnesota. His chapbook of poems, Suddenly Slow, *appeared in 2008. He has edited two anthologies,* Deaf American Poetry *(Gallaudet University Press, 2009) and* Deaf Lit Extravaganza *(Handtype Press, 2013). His latest book is a collection of essays called* Where I Stand: On the Signing Community and My DeafBlind Experience *(Handtype Press, 2014).*

A POTENT AND PARTICULAR LANDSCAPE

On C.D. Wright's Casting Deep Shade

Apz Books **HANNAH VANDERHART**

C.D. Wright, *Casting Deep Shade: An Amble*
Hardcover, 160 pages
Copper Canyon Press, 2019

"I waken repeatedly to gnarly misgivings and adversarial imagining . . . in flaming dread of *us*, the next annihilating asteroid," confesses C.D. Wright in *Casting Deep Shade: An Amble*. Wright's last and latest book is an interview with the natural phenomena and history of the beech tree.[1] Formally, the collection leans toward the prose portion of the prosimetric form (*prosimetrum*: part prose, part poetry) for which Wright's simultaneously experimental and conversational work is known. Yet the figure of "an amble" aptly depicts the various pacing and hybrid explorations of the text as it roams the botanical, the historical, the anecdotal and the personal. *Casting Deep Shade* is a collation, collection and curation of widely disparate sources—a collage of place, memoir, climate, memory, colonialism, economics, science and literature.

Written in many short, visually discreet parts, *Casting Deep Shade* is a text a reader can pick up and put down as their attention and time permits. Sometimes composed in a flowing, meditational form, broken in lines across the field of the page, sometimes in prose blocks presenting historical accounts and scientific processes, *Casting Deep Shade* reflects the readerly qualities of the long poem described by Rachel Zucker in her essay "An Anatomy of the Long Poem." Zucker writes,

> *Reading long poems requires a different kind of attention—a longer time commitment but also, realistically, less attention to detail. My mind wanders when reading a long poem, and in this way my reading is more experiential and the experience is almost collaborative, reciprocal . . . My life interrupts the poem, which I can't read in one sustained burst of concentration, and the poem interrupts my life as I find I've spent my whole afternoon traveling its landscape.*

The collaborative, reciprocal mode of reading that Zucker describes could be applied to *Casting Deep Shade*, especially as regards the visual separateness of Wright's paragraphs and sections that invite readerly participation in the text's "landscape." Considering the individual sections in their unique context in turn clarifies the relationship of the different parts and the assembled whole. Sometimes (often), one must practice rereading. For example, one section reads:

> *Between 600 and 800 people were killed by the hurricane of 1938, 317 of them Rhode Islanders. 275 million trees went down that night. It was a full equinox moon. Highest tide of the year. Rhode Island was slammed by the right-front quadrant. Full force. A light rain had been forecast for that early-fall evening.*

Beside this section, I wrote the questions: *where does this come from? what to do with it?* The preceding section regarded the Tsalagi (Cherokee) raiding chipmunks' stashes of beechnuts as a foraging method; the following section wonders at the chemical properties of the beech tree: "Could be a sunscreen, having low photosynthetic capacity. / Could be a repellent, avoided by leaf-cutter ants and other herbivores." Asking questions as a reader in response to the collated sources is an integral encouragement of Wright's text—*Casting Deep Shade* wants readers who ask: "In light of *x*, now what?" Rereading this particular section regarding the 1938 hurricane helped me see the significance of the dramatically abstract numbers: 600 and 800 human deaths, 275 million tree deaths. What subsequently came into view for me as reader was the linking of the human and arboreal deaths: the trees that could have broken the hurricane-force winds fell before them, exposing the coast and all of its inhabitants. And why? Tree death, tree scarcity, tree longevity and sickness are part of the botanical-textual journey found in *Casting Deep Shade*'s pages—the interconnectivity of the natural and human inherently part of the problems besetting the beech tree and proximate species.

The landscape of *Casting Deep Shade* is muralistic, kaleidoscopic and *large* (to use Zucker's descriptors for the long poem). And yet, Wright's interdisciplinary text asks its reader to participate in the act of arranging the parts and seeing the wider project at hand: an undertaking as socially-present as history and climate change themselves, as wide as the beech tree's shade-casting branches. Wright herself uses the terms "beech consciousness" and "tree consciousness" to name the central state of mind and mode of witness that *Casting Deep Shade* spreads towards. "Movement needs to be figured into the equation," Wright states. "Not much stays put. More and more, native means the wiped-out population." Wright's discussion of wildfires (and "controlled" perimeter fires) feels particularly prescient, considering the recent destruction in California:

> *The Yosemite Rim Fire stood at 222,777 acres September 2, 2013 (in 1988 all of 800,000 acres burned). At the end of June, the Yarnell Hill Fire (AZ) killed 19 firefighters. Is this part of what we are to get used to, to roll out of bed for—surgical masks for bad-air days, non-potable water, neighborhoods engulfed in flames, vast spills of crude oil, overfished waters, animal extinctions, and contaminated soil: /* fire paper ash earth.

The native and extinct populations that figure largely in *Casting Deep Shade* supply the context for all that is currently living (and dying) around us—the land and species that have been taken, abused and neglected in the name of development and capitalism. This does not seem too dark a reading of what Wright sets about to do with her final project. While there are multiple foci in *Casting Deep Shade*, and much beauty and characteristic humor, the overarching narrative is one of human complexity and failing, utterly entwined with the gifts we try to give. One example is the cherry trees gifted by Japan to Washington, DC, in 1910. Wright relates, as though the reader were her neighbor, "The 2,000 cherry trees . . . were infested, and it was a touchy thing to let the Japanese know they had to be destroyed. About a dozen of the buggiest were spared for a scientist with: */ a net a cyanide bottle and lantern to watch over and / study.*" The emotional scope of Wright's epic amble with the beech tree recalls Zucker's observation that

> *Long poems are sad and full of joy. Death, time, and the changing of the seasons are often the subjects, explicit or implicit, of the long poem. Despite or because of these themes, the long poem is always, on some level, borne of a deep, extended engagement that is also a kind of joy. Most short stories and many short poems are rather bleak (sometimes satisfyingly bleak); they feel finished, locked, shut, closed. But the long poem, with its attempts to include everything, is, by its nature, expansive, exuberant, engaged, and overflowing.*

Casting Deep Shade gathers an expansive subject—the arboreal—to itself through a recounting and account-giving of specific stories, events and discoveries. Its extended and multi-form engagement is, as Zucker observes, also a kind of joy: the joy of the deep diver, the researcher, the word and story and song explorer. At a basic level, *Casting Deep Shade* asks the reader to be patient, to sit with its own pacing—to "be with," to borrow the phrase from Wright's dedication to *ShallCross* and the title of Forrest Gander's latest book.

Casting Deep Shade harks also to an earlier essay Wright wrote in memoriam of the poet Frank Stanford, "Of the Mulberry Family: An Arkansas Epilogue—." In this lyric-essay, Wright interweaves collaged descriptions of the *Maclura pomifera* (commonly known as the Osage orange, a member of the mulberry family) with personal memories of Stanford, Arkansas poet and land surveyor. Wright's use of the Osage orange tree to memorialize Stanford illuminates not only Wright's proclivity to relate a person to their originating soil, but an additional and deeply elegiac aspect of *Casting Deep Shade*. While the theme of elegy is extratextually present at the level of C.D. Wright's death and posthumous publication, as ecologists and poets alike have observed, to write now of the natural world is to write elegiacally. To talk about the trees is always already an act of elegy, a song about death and tenuous life—lives made desperately more fragile through a government and culture that refuse to respond to how humans have changed earth's climate. Elegy is integral to *Casting Deep Shade*, then, in that the existential reality of death concerns both humans and trees and is currently approaching all species at a faster rate than it should. Having reflected on the gift and destruction of the Japanese cherry trees, Wright notes, "Toemon Sano, a 16th-generation sakuramori [cherry tree doctor], attributes sickness in the cherry trees to groundwater pollution." After a space, Wright adds the line: "The grey-water days are ahead. The grey-water days are upon us."

In a 2015 interview, Wright spoke what could be guiding words for her reader, both in reading *Casting Deep Shade* and going forward: "The landscape is always potent and particular." What to do with the knowledge, the beauty and the shade

cast by Wright's last book is exactly the question the reader should ask themselves after turning the final page/leaf. In closely, intensively examining the particular landscapes of the United States, *Casting Deep Shade* performs a political act: challenging our collective attention and asking that we look up at the trees and the interconnected, interdependent natural world we take part in and indelibly affect.

Hannah VanderHart's poetry and reviews have appeared or are forthcoming in The Kenyon Review, Poetry Northwest, The Greensboro Review, The McNeese Review, *and* Thrush Poetry Journal, *among others. Her chapbook* What Pecan Light *is forthcoming from Bull City Press, and she is the Reviews Editor at EcoTheo Review. More at hannahvanderhart.com.*

Note

1. In the same sense as Jorie Graham has called Emily Dickinson's poems "interviews with light."

Jacob Saenz
Throwing the Crown

Throwing the Crown by Jacob Saenz, winner of the 2018 APR/Honickman First Book Prize, is available in APR's online store at ***www.aprweb.org*** and at other outlets. *Throwing the Crown* was chosen by guest judge Gregory Pardlo.

Jacob Saenz is a CantoMundo fellow whose work has appeared in *Pinwheel*, *Poetry*, *Tammy*, *Tri-Quarterly* and other journals. He has been the recipient of a Letras Latinas Residency Fellowship as well as a Ruth Lilly Poetry Fellowship. He serves as an associate editor for *RHINO*.

TWO POEMS

PETER WALDOR

Archaistic

It has come to light
in the scholarly work
of Colette Hemingway
that the ancient Greek sculptors
used even more ancient forms
in an updated manner to
express views on
contemporary issues.
For example, the peplos
could be rendered
with fewer folds,
as it was in the archaic
period, on an Athena
celebrating the ascension
of Lysimachus to the Boule.
This was a subtle criticism
of the extreme
conservatism of Lysimachus.
The subtleties of dress
make all the difference,
as today, for a voir dire
I wore an ironed shirt
and West Point class
of 1950 neck tie
because I was assured
defense attorneys
will remove well dressed
white men from any jury.
How easy it was
to pervert justice,
just a tie with a gold
coat of arms.
It reminds me
of that moth a group
of cautious scientists
crushed by accident
when they were
trying to leave no trace,
during their first
time travel experiment,
going back to the Jurassic.
When they returned
to the present day
the world was all
in ruins as a result
of that one moth
killed before its time.
There wasn't even
oxygen in the air
so the scientists
could at least
die slowly.

Bananas

No breath sweeter than
the banana breath of the child.
It doesn't cross the table,
one must be helping
with a shoe lace
or a button to notice.
One must be at least
four to learn to crack
the stem without
mashing the tip.
Quietest of all peels.
Bananas hang
in bunches, like ribs.
Strange it is scimitar
shaped but is the most
peaceful of fruits.
Unlike with the coconut,
no one ever got hurt
with the banana,
even including
the proverbial peel
which no one in reality
ever slipped on.
The banana is best
to eat before a journey
and the worst to take along.
Like a man, the banana
can change from young
to old with no middle age.
There can be no innocence
with so much injustice
in the harvest, though
I know a woman who bakes
banana cakes from her
overripe bananas and
delivers them to every new
neighbor in her village.

These poems are part of Peter Waldor's seventh book of poetry, Nice Dumpling, *just released by Kelsay Books.*

TWO POEMS

CALEY O'DWYER

3-in-1

Kelly was having a fact-based day
when all of a sudden she couldn't
live like this anymore. Her home address
was a streaming TV channel. Ads were growling at her,
your outside is too large, your inside too small.
She knew she wasn't completely talented. But *this*!

Every woman should have a 3-in-1 vegetable peeler,
the TV person said, but it was hard to find
a day as crisp as a dollar by which to light
oneself on fire. Philip knew for certain
what he'd do next, not the consequences,
which, like downed forest, were lying there.

He would find a way to Kelly's house
where her vegetable peeler would surely be
lips zipped in a drawer still harnessed
to its cardboard. On second thought,
he would try to get to know himself
as he was. Not worth getting evolved.

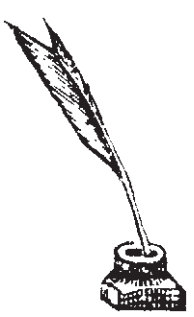
Simply Simvastatin

A lot goes into the naming of prescription drugs.
Viagra weds "vigorous" with "Niagara" just as
"Simvastatin" splices "simple" with "vast"
and "satin". Things were starting to feel
pretty vigorously unconscionable, tasty too,
like a 12-foot steak with little stairs

up to the top. Someone was blowing
into bone. We dove onto the steaming gristle,
no bigger than pinpricks in the sun,
yet came to know the power of elaborate sight.
More could be blasted out of life, more truths
upturned like freckled teenagers.

The sublime was partially modified,
its oil oozing along the threaded fastener.
Some squealed like an injured boy fainting in the grass.
Not even population genetics research
seemed funny anymore. But it was nice outside.
So shall the trees bend, break, weep, start over.

Caley O'Dwyer's poems have appeared in Alaska Quarterly Review, Prairie Schooner, Cream City Review, Hayden's Ferry Review, Warwick Review, Curator, Ekphrasis, Washington Square, *and other venues, including the Tate Modern Museum in London.*



THREE POEMS

DAVID TRINIDAD

Confession

It's something I'm not supposed to say, so I'll say it: I have some of Sylvia Plath's hair. In 2009, when I was doing research in the Plath archive at the Lilly Library at Indiana University, I met K., a local scholar. We became friendly. K. had been doing Plath research for many years. An abundance of Plath hair is cataloged in the archive: locks of baby hair, teenage ponytails, tresses, amber braids. Plath's mother saved everything. One night at dinner I confessed to K. that I'd been tempted to steal a few strands of Plath's baby hair, but decided against it. Just the thought made my hands shake. K. freely admitted that, in the days before the library had security cameras, she stole some of it. "I'll give you some." "*Really?*" "I have to find it first. It's in the house somewhere." After I returned home, I emailed K. and reminded her of her offer. She wrote that she'd let me know when she located it. Months went by. I reminded again. "Still haven't found it," she replied. I began to doubt that she would come through. But eventually she did, and sent me, in an envelope on which she'd written "baby hair," much more than I expected: a small golden-brown mass. K. also sent some to P., a fellow Plathoholic. (When I confessed to P., he divulged that he too was a recipient of K.'s contraband.) I told J., a poet friend and Plath fan, about my secret stash. With tweezers, I carefully extracted a couple of strands from the mass and, the next time I saw J., presented them to her. J. later told me she inserted them (with tweezers, no doubt) into an empty pill capsule (think: *The Bell Jar*), which she placed in her red Sylvia Plath matchbox, alongside a tiny white plastic horse (think: "Ariel") and silver charms of a typewriter and half-moon. J. had pasted the matchbox with pictures of a bee, Plath, a woman's hand listlessly holding a glued-on miniature red silk rose, and a quote from one of Plath's poems: *the coffin of a midget*. For a while I misplaced the baby hair. It was in the house somewhere, but for the life of me I couldn't find it. At last I came across it: I'd put it in a box of photographs for safekeeping. When I first received the baby hair from K., I bought, on Amazon, a small red wooden box to put it in. Made in Poland. Decorated with hearts and flowers. Plathian: *I have painted little hearts on everything.* But it remains in K.'s envelope. I've yet to give the hair a proper home.

My Pea Coat

Laureen, a friend from my high school drama class, called and said she'd read that Western Costume, the company that supplied costumes to the movie studios, was selling off a large part of their inventory. Did I want to go? My mother gave me permission, and ten dollars. What kind of costume could I buy with only ten dollars? That Saturday morning, we drove to Hollywood. 1970: the air still relatively crisp, the sky still relatively blue. Laureen let me smoke in her car. Driving anywhere outside of the Valley was an adventure—a glimpse of the still relatively scary real world. We parked on Melrose Avenue, down the street from Paramount Pictures, and walked to the monolithic costume warehouse. Once inside, we encountered row after row of floor-to-ceiling clothing. Laureen found several items, including a theatrical fur-trimmed stole that she ever after referred to as her "countess wrap." I don't know what drew me to the pea coat. I pulled it from a rack of densely packed jackets. A heavy wool, double-breasted, navy blue coat with anchors on its six plastic buttons. It fit just right, and cost ten dollars. I loved my pea coat, wore it everywhere. I can see myself trudging to high school on a chilly morning, light fog drifting over clipped suburban hedges, furtively lighting a cigarette then slipping my pack of Marlboro 100's back into one of its slit pockets. In time the inside lining split, my pea coat began to fall apart. Undoubtedly it ended up in a bag destined for the Goodwill.

Decades later I have to ask: How many extras are wearing my pea coat in old war movies? Aren't all of our clothes costumes? Was I a sailor in a past life?

Politics and the News

Womanspace. Los Angeles. January 31, 1973. The gallery was packed. Most of us sat on the floor. Mostly women (this was, after all, their space). Many afros, ponchos, denim work shirts embroidered with peace signs and flowers. Feminist artist Judy Chicago introduced the speaker, Anaïs Nin, with a reverent anecdote. When she arrived for brunch at Nin's Silver Lake residence, Nin was in her kitchen making fresh orange juice for her guest. Chicago watched with disbelief: How could the hands that wrote the famous diary, so delicate and refined, do anything as ordinary as squeeze oranges. The audience laughed warmly and welcomed her with thunderous applause. Elegant in a black dress, hair braided into a crown, Nin read passages from her diary about Henry Miller, Otto Rank, Antonin Artaud, and her father. Then engaged with the audience. After she'd answered a few questions, a butch woman stood up and tried to take Nin to task. *Everything you read was about men. Why haven't you written about women?* A murmur of assent quickly passed through the crowd and erupted into angry chatter. Judy Chicago leapt to Nin's defense. *Anaïs has written about many women, most importantly herself. Read the diary.*

When the commotion quieted down, a young man with shoulder-length hair raised his hand. Nin called on him. He was an artist, he said, but every morning after reading the newspaper, he was so depressed by what was happening in the world he found it impossible to paint. Not one to dwell on the world's ills, and supremely practical, Anaïs simply suggested he paint first, and read the newspaper afterwards.

David Trinidad's most recent book of poems is Swinging on a Star *(Turtle Point Press, 2017). His other books include* Notes on a Past Life *(BlazeVOX [books], 2016) and* Peyton Place: A Haiku Soap Opera *(Turtle Point, 2013).* Punk Rock Is Cool for the End of the World: Poems and Notebooks of Ed Smith*, which he edited, is forthcoming from Turtle Point in 2019. Trinidad lives in Chicago, where he teaches at Columbia College.*

FOUR POEMS

MICHAEL BAZZETT

The Campaign

We found ourselves to be quite fond
of the ad campaign
undermining late-stage capitalism:

how the sprightly old woman
kept bursting into private conversations
at the candlelit restaurant

and shouting, You can't eat nickels!!
and then doing that little hip-hop dance
that was surprisingly sexual.

But then, over dinner, after draining
a second bottle of prosecco as the war
drifted in from the living room TV,

we started wondering how
effective the meme had actually been,
given that we'd nonetheless spent nothing

but money on loving one another,
and the pills our children took were growing
more and more costly every day.

The Monster in Late Middle Age

The MRI revealed a tumor in the shape
of an angel, complete with finely wrought
halo, and the curved shoulder of a wing
that seemed to hold the faint fish-scaled
pattern of feathers. The intern dismissed
the halo as ancillary tissue but seemed
fascinated by the plumage; its overlapping
scapular ridges merited a click and zoom,
and as he peered at the monitor, it seemed
for a moment the intern was utterly alone
in the room. The spokeswoman took a quick
pic and posted a still image of the growth,
hashtagged *visited by an angel* and *#feeling blessed*.

"It almost looks as if that angel is straddling
the liver," the intern murmured, "like some
fat horse—" then caught himself when he saw
the look on the monster's face. "It feels like
a nail's stuck in my organs," said the monster.
"Like someone planing down a door." His eyes
were huge and looked exhausted. "Sometimes
I wake in the middle of the night and I could
swear some tiny creature's gone to work on me
with pincers. I reach down to check and find
nothing but my own smooth skin." "I'm sorry,"
said the spokeswoman, "I don't suppose it's
any consolation gaining seventeen thousand

followers in the last hour." "Not really," he said.
"What's the use of a platform if all you have
to put on it is rank meat." "There was a time
when a pile of rotten flesh would have really
struck your fancy," said the spokeswoman
with a sad smile. He nodded, remembering.
She reached out to briefly touch his shoulder,
a simple gesture, gracious and restrained, yet
the intern still felt compelled to look away.

Stalin

I'm such a good person
when no one else is around,
said young Joseph, mustache

resting quiet as a caterpillar
on his quivering upper lip.

All the other children
had left the classroom.

But he had lingered, smarting
from my sharp words, no doubt,
when I'd called him to account
for interrupting and intimating

that he dreamed of one day
killing twenty million.

Teacher, did you not say
integrity is who we are
when only God is watching?

Isn't that what matters most?
His chin crumpled as he tried
to keep the tears from spilling.

It was almost like
watching a waiter
stagger with a teacup.

Yes, I said. But who we are
when the world watches
matters too.
That's a lot
of fucking pressure, he said.

Plus, this mustache,
and me being only eleven.
The names they call me—

His voice trailed off
and he shook his head.
It's murder, he said.

The Best Prison Is One That No One Wants

The best prison's the one that no one wants
to leave. No somber towers of quarried stone.
No dank brick laced with moss, as if velvet
growth could soften such a place. The sound
of water finding hidden chambers. But this
could be a middle school, with its shuddering
fluorescence like the headache of a ghost.
The sergeant's thick face melts into neck
as I hand him the sheet with a word stamped
in red ink—NON-CONTACT—and he points me

to the holding room with the steel-cord phone
to speak to my brother, there for drunken
smashing of a wall. And more. Some family
knots just won't loosen, wrenched and snug
into old wet rope. They buzz him in, shuffling
like a guilty bear. He approaches in slippers,
no belt, no play around the eyes. The hand
that grasped the bottle lifts the black receiver
high, and sudden as thunder brings it down,
the glass partition turning to pebbled rain.
He reaches one hand through the opening,
smiles: "So this is what it takes to see you."

Michael Bazzett's poems have appeared in The Sun, Tin House, Ploughshares, Copper Nickel *and* 32 Poems. *The recipient of a fellowship from the NEA, he's the author of three books of poems:* You Must Remember This, Our Lands Are Not So Different, *and* The Interrogation. *His recently published verse translation of the Mayan creation epic,* The Popol Vuh *(Milkweed, 2018), was named "one of 2018's ten best books of poetry" by the* NY Times. *He lives in Minneapolis.*

OPEN CARRY

RU FREEMAN

In the city where we practiced it
braced with Bushmills & beer
for incline and descent both
equally slippery-sloped, slip-knotted
labyrinthian damnation beneath our feet
a laudable slenderness to your arms
the brown press of mine, pretzeled, thus,
we made ourselves into what we loved.

The hard-worked tiles of these sexy streets,
beautiful and deadly with the infinite:
boys chase girls chase boys, or
the too much song, you pick.

Send me this I had said. Send me the thing
that does not exist: the aspirant *touched*,
as we like to say it back home where I can no longer
return full handed or empty, the can't-do-without spice
given free. A quick burning man.
Make us a Christian miracle: one disavowing fish
the other water, & only the night parting to make way
for the resurrected late lovers, loyal and betrayed.

Give me territory as perilous as treasure

kneel if I kneel, rise as I rise,
make the sign of the cross over
the raw hide split open, innards spent
not wasted, never wasted, only offered
toast to a city that errs half-full in its pour
lie back and let the cold wine spill from my lips
let's learn to pronounce the kissing language
of this honeymoon without a destination-wedding
pack your bags blue not knowing.

I won't claim your baggage I'll give you:
faded photographs of people we don't know
a saint to sanctify, a candle to perfume. Drink me deep
let it show shameless on your face. Write me a poem.

Ru Freeman is a Sri Lankan and American writer, poet, and activist whose work appears internationally in English and in translation. She is the author of the novels A Disobedient Girl *(Atria/Simon & Schuster, 2009) and* On Sal Mal Lane *(Graywolf, 2013), a New York Times Editor's Choice Book. She teaches creative writing at Columbia University.*

THREE POEMS

HENRY ISRAELI

Letters to Uncle Joe

Dear Stalin,

I left a slice of cake
out on the table for you.
It's your favorite—made with
undying love for you.
When you are done
please put away your fork.
You know how it scares the dogs.

Dear Stalin,

Remember the trees quaking
when you walked under them?
What thoughts did you have
that made them so uneasy?

Dear Stalin,

I painted your portrait based on
a photograph in which everyone
but you had been erased.
Where once you were looking
at your good friend, the minister,
now you are merely looking
out at the sunset, with the kind
of smile one reserves for only
those he cares most deeply about.

Dear Stalin,

My grandfather was so weak after
living in the forest for two years
on potato peels and tree leaves.
You liberated him, God bless you,
and enlisted him straight into
the Red Army. Then you sent his
entire regiment to a Siberian gulag.

Dear Stalin,

Don't be alarmed
by the majestic Siberian larches
that spread like stitches
across the body of mother Russia.
They cannot heal the wounds
you have so gracefully cut.

Dear Stalin,

I regret to inform you that your wife
has shot herself in the head.
Where, pray tell, did she get the gun?

Dear Stalin,

We may have taught the world
to sing our songs.
We may have taught the world
to eat our food.
We may have taught the world
to watch our films.
We may have taught the world
to enjoy a Coke and a smile.
But you, great one, have taught
the world a more valuable lesson:
trust no one.

Dear Stalin,

It took you only a few months
to achieve what Hitler could not.
My grandfather succumbed
to starvation in a Siberian prison camp.
You never knew him.
You didn't have to.
You spread your arms wide
and gathered all the fish.
None could escape
your big bear claws.

Dear Stalin,

Even after your death
we can no longer wash
the coal stains off our fingers.

Dear Stalin,

Great news! The Russian people
voted you the most influential
Russian in history.
They will never forget
that you cared for them so much
you were willing to sacrifice
them all for the sake of
a paradise only you could see.

Dear Stalin,

You will be pleased to know
that there are still grain shortages,
and corruption is still as commonplace
as concrete and weeds.
Your tomb overflows with flowers.

Dear Stalin,

The bodies of the opposition
and the big-mouthed journalists
and the hooligans who ask
too many questions
are piling up high again.
Your successor has picked up
where you left off
but without your vision,
without your big dreams,
without the beautiful future
you painted in words for
your adoring children.

Dear Stalin,

If you don't eat your cake soon
the dogs will get to it.

Sorrow

after Chagall

Sorrow is hot
as blood is too red,
too red.
—David Hoffstein

A man's head emerges from a fish's mouth
which emerges from the collar of his shirt
which emerges like smoke from the page
which emerges from memory so nearly
forgotten, so almost incomplete, the way
the face faces us but the body faces away
and a cross, or is it a sword, or is it a pin,
stabs into the man's rear end, and the word
handwritten in red ink cutting diagonally
across the image reads "sorrow" for
sorrow is what feeds man and what
man feeds on, a fish both swallowed
and swallowing, feasted on and feasting.
But the final letter of the title fashioned
in the shape of a ram's horn looks like
a telephone that dials out directly to God.
And if God should answer, what would
this misshapen man say to his savior?
That there is more to us than pain and memory,
that our existence must mean something
for why else were we loved by our mothers?
Maybe it isn't a fish. Maybe it isn't a man.
Maybe I'm looking at this image all wrong.
Maybe there is no one who can save us.
Maybe sorrow is the answer to our questions.

The Death of Grief

Hurry, snow, nullify it all.
—David Hoffstein

Snow today. The forecast:
snow. Next week, snow, snow.

What the body holds: snow.
What we are: snow, falling

on some distant field.
Snow is where we came from,

a squall of sperm,
a storm of chromosomes.

Snow is where we're going,
melting into earth.

An IV needle fills me
with snow.

There is a snowstorm
in my brain.

My windshield wipers
can't keep up with it.

They wipe away
my mother's face.

They wipe away
memories of running

through fresh snow.
The oceans are heating,

promising to send
more snow our way.

Snow is water's way
of speaking to us,

of pleading with us.
One day our eyes will open

to a night where stars fall
like snowflakes into our hands

and we'll remember
we were once fish

in a sea filled with ice.
When our children return

from the fields,
boxes of snow

in their arms,
we will rejoice

and lift them high
into the air.

We will kiss them
until they disappear.

Henry Israeli's poetry collections are Our Age of Anxiety *(White Pine, 2019),* god's breath hovering across the waters *(Four Way Books, 2016),* Praying to the Black Cat *(Del Sol, 2010), and* New Messiahs *(Four Way Books, 2002). He is also the translator of three books by Albanian poet Luljeta Lleshanaku, and the founder and publisher of Saturnalia Books.*

WHAT THE BUTTERFLY IS THINKING

ALICIA OSTRIKER

Not anxiety-prone like me, it is not thinking about extending its brief life
Or the serenade of iridescent blue patches on its fluttering wings

Or the war. Or any of the other wars. Or the crescent moon afloat on winter water.
I am putting money on this. I am confident. I am in love.

The motions of many creatures appear random
But are not? My husband says cows and bees—

Cows and bees are swimming in his mouth
Cows browsing around in two sluttish dimensions, bees in three or four

Among the savage perfumes, scavenging for the tastiest weeds strewn here and there
Randomly he says. The biggest nourishment bang for a bite, or sweet for a single suck

Is why they never ever
Form straight lines.

Really? In the lavender bush fifty seething bees, a dressy graduating class, lifting
Hovering descending & flitting to another flower entirely. Intentionally? Please come

Back, every iridescent blue-winged thing. Please come land
On my hand.

Alicia Ostriker's most recent poetry collections are The Old Woman, the Tulip and the Dog, *and* Waiting for the Light, *which received the National Jewish Book Award for Poetry in 2018. Ostriker is currently a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets and the New York State Poet Laureate for 2018–2019.*

REWIRING THE GENDERED GAZE

A review of three books

APz Books

KRYSTAL LANGUELL

Chelsey Minnis, *Baby I Don't Care*
Paperback, 272 pages
Wave Books, 2018

Khadijah Queen, *I'm So Fine: A List of Famous Men & What I Had On*
Paperback, 96 pages
YesYes Books, 2017

Carmen Giménez Smith, *Cruel Futures*
Paperback, 88 pages
City Lights Spotlight No. 17
City Lights Books, 2018

Recent poetry collections by Chelsey Minnis, Khadijah Queen, and Carmen Giménez Smith rattle the bars of oppressive structures both seen and unseen. Each poet engages with male language, whether as her target or her medium, using it to build a feminist analysis of society's patriarchal undergirding in stark clarity. Minnis's latest, *Baby I Don't Care*, performs this critique in the most literal fashion, collaging dialogue from Turner Classic Movies into mock centos in two stanzas of five lines each. Queen's *I'm So Fine: A List of Famous Men & What I Had On* likewise assembles source material, here in list form. Prose blocks catalogue celebrity run-ins, tracing the selfie impulse back to the not-so-distant past of pagers and pay phones. Often these famous men tattle on themselves, but Queen's speaker also filters the encounters through the dual subjectivities of the woman in the moment and the reflecting woman years on. Ever invested in the study of intimate social structures, Giménez Smith, in last year's *Cruel Futures*, returns the voyeuristic male gaze that looms and leers from television screens—the threat all the more palpable via what she and Dana Levin call in a recent interview at LitHub "our first selfie president."

Baby I Don't Care creates a new, shifty, careless, impulsive voice sustained throughout the lengthy volume. By occasionally (rarely) breaking character, Minnis is able to inject commentary about poetry culture amidst hundreds of one-liners. She writes: "This poem is a display case for expletives. / And all the babydolls have recorded cries." Are poets as fake as the sounds a doll makes? Perhaps what poetry is good for is dressing up our ugly feelings in very nice clothes: velvet, silk, diamonds. The speaker asks, "Do you think you're any good?" The question could just as easily be lobbed at a poet as an estranged romantic lead on TCM.

Formally, this work has the feel of centos, though many of the stanzas were published previously as individual poems and the source material proves difficult to trace, as Barry Schwabsky already reported at *Hyperallergic*. Zingers from classic American movies often sound familiar to the contemporary ear because they've been rewritten many times. "Happy birthday, welcome home, and we who are about to die salute you," says Margo in *All About Eve* (1950), a reference to the Latin phrase "those who are about to die salute you" uttered by doomed convicts forced to fight a mock battle before Claudius (AD 52). Later, AC/DC's album *For Those About to Rock We Salute You* (1981) recasts the phrase, reversing the direction of admiration. Still, a familiar echo of Clark Gable or Humphrey Bogart permeates the work with masculine savoir faire. The freight of this swaggering language shifts in the hands of a female author who crafts it into a sendup. A smattering of examples:

"I didn't hit you very hard."

"Why don't you ruin everything then?"

"I lost my head, darling."

"You cheap little sensationalist!"

There's something phallic about a punch line. Of course, with no attributive tags anywhere in the book, these lines are ambiguously gendered, and just as much space is dedicated to cliché femme lines about jewelry or marriage as to boisterous male posturing. The feminist critique is enacted through reclamation of cliché proto-romantic comedy dialogue as formal building block. "All of us are bad," Minnis writes, "but some of us are worse." Us who? Men, women, everyone? Here gender is vague, becomes a relentlessly shaken cocktail. Deliberately broad in her indulgence, she takes back the easy posture of male-dominated Hollywood film and offers it up to a contemporary readership of all genders as autofiction and rosé, a glamorous rumor.

Queen, in her work, reclaims and repackages a lifetime of encounters, using her run-ins with male celebrities to build a self-reflective catalogue. Like Minnis's book, Queen's has a patina of glamor and gossip. However, anchored to specific individuals as they are, these poems often illustrate the banal truth of certain men's boorishness, no better for their fame. At the risk of oversimplifying, we can read the long title as assurance that the potential for violence will remain contained. The syntax sandwiches "men" between iterations of "I," signaling that we are in capable hands. Queen's work models strength in the face of threats: "I didn't flinch because fuck him." But while this is not a book about the passivity of being looked at, it's also nothing like a revenge fantasy. The young woman in platform sandals and a crop top stepping out of the mall Wet Seal may be vulnerable, but she's also deliberate with a clear sense of values. In one poem, she and her roommates decide between money for the light bill versus Prince tickets. (Prince wins.) In another, does she stay put with a man behaving strangely or pretend to need something from the car? (She runs.) Ultimately, Queen offers a mature perspective on these accumulated experiences. "When I was young I could in equal measure celebrate & take everything about living for granted," she writes, "but 40 is so cool 40 is seeing & knowing." Fully self-possessed, at the end of the collection she includes a piece called "Any Other Name: A Postscript" that explores the etymology and weight of her own name. It's a slightly longer poem representing the final namedrop, not unlike the moment a microphone hits the floor.

Queen uses the celebrity cameos through the years as foils for a more serious set of personal challenges. In a poem ostensibly about Audie Murphy, she notes: "I was 12 & living in a battered women's shelter in Long Beach with my mother & sister." In a piece that takes place at Fox Hill Mall, she briefly mentions how "I didn't have many clothes I was 16 & that was the year our house burned down." These details are quick. Unlike the purely playful Minnis book, *I'm So Fine* conveys real world costs and consequences. A world arises, beyond the lyric "you-and-I," that her speaker must navigate to survive.

To call *I'm So Fine* a book about men would be missing the point. The speaker, easy to slip into identifying 1:1 with the author, is the omnipotent narrator conjuring these characters, her self the contextualizing force for the desires projected onto her. I looked up one unfamiliar name and the first thing I saw on his author site was a blurb ominously touting his "comfort-zone blasting" style. I didn't google anyone else: best to trust Queen. Masculinity is spoken through her as translator for the men she permits to exist in these pages, her power finally legible through her retelling of their encounters.

> What makes these three books innovative is a shared gesture of turning the conventional male gaze back on itself.

Organized in two sections, *Cruel Futures* continues the work of cultural critique begun in Giménez Smith's prior books via sound rhetorical construction and lyrical syntax. The critique is leveled at government powerbrokers as well as at the individual's complicity in repressive policies that often target women and children. The first half is anchored by the longer poem "Ravers Having Babies," which reflects anxieties around mothering young children from a vantage point of experience. Like the work of Minnis and Queen, here the poet turns the tables on an inherited set of cultural norms, examining its source, questioning its authenticity, and arriving at an unexpected conclusion: "Disparate wants and strangers connected / by blood that's me now and I'll take it." The members of this family are each their own person. Parenthood has not been the "organic or French" experience she once fantasized about. But in falling short of a Goop-style standard of motherhood, the gift she's given her children is more wisdom than they would ever have in the fantasy. Instead, they know that she is:

someone who isn't going to be a rock but more
of a sloop made of mahogany bobbing in the water
I'll die before identifying a single birdsong

Giménez Smith thus issues a correction to the popular, impossible narrative of motherhood as gendered destiny and ultimate identity.

In the final third of the book the poems ratchet up their analysis of current rotten events and the acts and words of prominent American male figures. One poem in particular curses the notorious "pussy grabbing" tape. The title, "Ethos," performs an interesting twist; applied to the poem's speaker, it reassures the reader of her gravitas. If applied to the president, "ethos" is ironic, invoking a laughingstock (what we have for leadership now), a joke(r), a clown. Fed up, the speaker decides she's "going to start a figurative system around / grabbing pussies and it'll contain some of the spite / I've gathered in the last few years." The poem's turn reveals itself to be about preparing to launch a young woman, a daughter, into this crap world and how this mother is ready to war for her. "I'll paint my face, take off my earrings, do the inevitable." Death is inevitable but so too is readiness to fight for your child even after they've grown up.

When poets use male language as both target and medium, a critical multivalence can emerge through their work. Confession of the gendered encounter and chronicle of the full arc of a woman's life exist in the same lines. What makes these three books innovative is a shared gesture of turning the conventional male gaze back on itself. Like Medusa, who Giménez Smith writes "had enormous power, which people / called a curse," these three poets reflect and deflect, bob and weave, leaving their opponents seeing stars. Whether by remixing classic film dialogue, recollecting celebrity sightings, or directly challenging oppressive male actions—each poet troubles and defangs the inherited narratives about what women are permitted to do.

Krystal Languell lives in Chicago, where she works at the Poetry Foundation. She is the author of three books: Call the Catastrophists *(BlazeVox, 2011),* Gray Market *(1913 Press, 2016), and* Quite Apart *(University of Akron Press, 2019).*

Madrid's first anglophone poetry festival

The UNAMUNO AUTHOR SERIES FESTIVAL

at Desperate Literature

May 27 - June 1
2019

Over 50 poets reading
Including the winner of the
García Lorca Poetry Prize

Steven Sanchez

As selected by Ruben Quesada of the Latinx Writers Caucus

The AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW · Salmagundi Magazine · RIZOMA · LITTLE STAR · FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX · CIVITELLA RANIERI · the PARIS REVIEW · Fundación Federico García Lorca

I AM NOT TRYING TO HIDE MY HUNGERS FROM THE WORLD ANYMORE

KENDRA DECOLO

Not trying to wipe the smears
of gold from my chin, not trying

to erase the decadence of seeds
and profanity of onion

and grease not trying
to pretend I don't open

my mouth around the zaftig
pearls of rain in the middle

of the night or that I don't love
the moment right before sleep

when I am most tender
and translucent my bladder half-filled

knowing I will have to get up
and pee knowing my daughter

will wake up before I am ready
the way I became aware of her

on a climb through the mountains
a heaviness in my limbs a gentle

premonition as I walked later
to the Rite Aid and knew in my hands

and I knew in my mouth
and I knew in the way my body

pulled me forward as I wept
with joy but also grief

that a part of my life was ending
and isn't it good to know when

life is about to swallow you whole
take you in its arms and say

"Live, bitch, live"
and you believe it

and this is how I will carry her
from her crib and open the curtains

part-way not ready to let the
world in the trails of smoke

and exhaust winter-blue
as Cat Stevens' *Mona Bone Jakon*

spinning on the Crosley
that opens like an old suitcase

where my daughter will stand
on a chair lifting the stylus

from its perch and guide
it to the starry chatter

that hisses between songs
wondering what will play next

Kendra DeColo is the author of My Dinner with Ron Jeremy *(Third Man Books, 2016) and* Thieves in the Afterlife *(Saturnalia Books, 2014), selected by Yusef Komunyakaa for the Saturnalia Books Poetry Prize. Her poems and essays appear in* Tin House Magazine, Waxwing, Los Angeles Review, VIDA, *and elsewhere. She is co-host of the podcast RE/VERB: A Third Man Books Production, and she is the recipient of a 2019 Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. She lives in Nashville, Tennessee.*