The AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW

"I think of silence: silence is the workhorse of poetry, that carries the words we love, that makes room for the reader, that accommodates the mess, that creates the space in which to reach too far, reach in the wrong direction, invest in the questions that don't have easy answers, to stay with the moment of questioning and soul-ache and uncertainty and physical and emotional doubt because that is where both personal growth and art-making happen."

(CARR, p. 29)

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2019 VOL. 48/NO. 5 $5 US/$6 CA

CHARIF SHANAHAN

CONVERSATION IN LONG FUTURE TIME & OTHER POEMS

SHANE McCRAE
THE LADDER TO HEAVEN

SHARON OLDS
NEW POEMS FROM *ARIAS*

EMILY CARR
ON STORYTELLING WITH TAROT

ALSO
TIMOTHY DONNELLY
NICK FLYNN
JOY KATZ
DEVON WALKER-FIGUEROA

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

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. 50

Index of Advertisers: p. 45

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OLD CITY PUBLISHING

The AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2019 VOL. 48/NO. 5

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.

THREE POEMS

CHARIF SHANAHAN

from On the Overnight from Agadir

Don't go to discover your roots, Ladybug says. *If you want to look for roots, go and look at a tree.*

Another day at a café, avoiding. Pretending to—

Why did you come here Tell me why

If you want to die go ahead and die do it quickly

If you want to be dead You can be dead

But the days are long and always the same.

But the nights are long and always the same.

I feel that time has me, in a way. Do you know?

A tree. But do you see the roots when you look at a tree? The syringa from the cover of that playbook in high school haunted me for weeks, its net of empty branches . . .

See, that's the problem. That right there. How the mind moves from the one thing that's here and suddenly

I am 55 though it's still 2 o'clock on Tuesday.

2 o'clock on Tuesday happens in Morocco, too.

My mother says *we are European* and I shake my head at her colonized face. My mother says *we speak French in Morocco* and I shake my head.

Morgan says *Maybe it could be good for you. To travel to the motherland. It's necessary trauma for each of us.*

I call my ex-partner in Brussels, with whom I lived in seven cities on three continents, and say *Habibi, I think I just want my own apartment and a dog, and to stop working for this madwoman* and we laugh.

Morgan says *You have to go.*

Why do I sense that I cannot trust what I feel in my chest—

Are there even trees in North Africa?

If you don't want to live you don't want to live anywhere.

Avoiding what? The—I'm sorry, but there's no other way to say it—meaninglessness.

So that is why you get on a plane and go to the third world for a year?

I don't know. Clearly I don't know. And the *third world* as a phrase is so—

Did the colonizer kill or make thrive? Honestly, who cares.

I don't need history to justify me. I just want a dog.

I wouldn't mind having a Moroccan lover, I tell my shrink, out of things to say.

Perhaps taking a Moroccan lover—ideally, a Black one—will help you feel connected to yourself in a new way and rejuvenate your enthusiasm for living with a sense of purpose.

I fire my shrink on the spot.

Call the second one as I'm leaving the office and fire her, too.

On the street, a Frenchie shits on the curb, her owner on his phone, looking the other way—

I know exactly who I am—It's that there is no point, and then we—

I'm telling you: Just go and look at a tree.

Then, in the early morning hours, on a bus almost returned to Rabat,
A razor of light slits my eye down the center—suddenly
The bus on its side, dirt in the air, stars in the dirt.

Awake in the hospital bed, my phone rings. Ladybug.

You thought you were going to Morocco, she says, laughing. *You were going to the body.*

Conversation in Long Future Time

You see, darling,
The biggest problem was that they

Could not seem to agree
On whether they all were the same animal

Nor could they agree, therefore,
On whether they all had equal value. Value

They measured, not merely by the fact of breath,
Rendering value obsolete

As a matter of course, but by paper
Dyed into various colors. (They could not agree

On a single color, colors were very
Hard for them, darling.) And that paper

That was dyed and used to measure
Value, passing from hand

To hand, from lover to lover
And so on and so forth,

Came, of all things,
From their *trees*, when their trees

Created the very air they breathed
Which, though of life, was, to them,

Not of value. And so we know
They had gifts great enough to see

Into and out of their condition: the voices
They sang with, the music and poems

And toward the end, before the fire rain
Came and the oceans lifted and merged into one,

Even the structures they lived within
Which healed them as they slept. And though

The minds of many were truly formidable, truly
Formidable, the hearts of some

Alert and alive, they were so detached
From one another, even from those they chose

To birth or raise or walk beside, often existing
Entirely in their bodies, or not at all,

They required something they called a *self*
Which I think, darling,

Meant they would have believed that
You were not *I*—

Not ever—
Which, to us, now, would seem silly, wouldn't it?

Colonialism

At intersections I knew to look both ways
As she had taught me

As she had known to look both ways
At the port of arrival—

Not to Ellis Island or to JFK
But to the white blanket of my father

Then back to her mother and away—
So that when the one summer we returned

To the land she had left
And the four of us—she, myself,

My two tanned brothers—
Stood below the open Casablanca sun

Waiting on a thinly-grassed divider
For a sliver to open up

Within the traffic—
The air smart and nearly visible as

Neighbor boys pointed down
From windows—*Mrikani!—mrikani!*—and I

Dashed through the exhaust of four lanes
Not exactly a highway

But still too wide to be crossing—
And without a crosswalk, no less—

She rushed to the other side
And slapped my backside hard: *Elash, mon fils? Why*

Would you do that to me?—

Charif Shanahan is the author of Into Each Room We Enter without Knowing *(Southern Illinois University Press, 2017), winner of the Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award and a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Poetry and the Publishing Triangle's Thom Gunn Award. His poems have appeared in* New Republic, New York Times Magazine, PBS NewsHour, Poetry, *and other journals. He is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowship; the Wallace Stegner Fellowship; a Fulbright Senior Scholar Grant to Morocco; and residency fellowships from Cave Canem Foundation, MacDowell Colony, Millay Colony for the Arts, La Maison Baldwin in St Paul, France, and the Rauschenberg Foundation, among other honors and recognitions. Former Programs Director of the Poetry Society of America, he has taught poetry at California College for the Arts (CCA), Collegio di Milano (Italy), Dartmouth College, and New York University. Currently, he is a Jones Lecturer in Poetry at Stanford University.*

AUSTRALOPITHECA[1] & STARMAN[2]

DEVON WALKER-FIGUEROA

10

The countdown to you begyns with me, deere Starman,
when I wander, dumbly, deep into a space hospittable
to Hunger. Now, all's desert. No milk in syte. Just pitifull
sand, what shushes as it slydes through your hande
to rejoin itself. I'd join myself with a stellar human
who, as you do, dons white suits & travells lyte, is able
to drive all seasons w/ the top down & tell me terrible
jokes. If you kin keep yr posture in the face of bad demands,
I promise to objectively vivify you, insofar as the dead
can keep a promise. As for me, the last thing I sawe
wasn't Earth, but a domed desert, littered with fyres
I could read. Its sands emulated the colore of the dead
center of your eye, the part that ceaselessly seizes awe,
puts it inside the future's fossil, & plaies it like a lyre.

9

You're inside the future, a fossil played like a lyre.
I think you're like me, lonely passenger. In this skye
devoid of diamonds,[3] call me Lucy. Call me high
or low: all turns truthfull at the right remove. I admyre
your bravado & carriage, Starman, how you retire
from orbit just to drive Mars mad. Like a note tied
to a tongue, you holde on, but aren't helled; & empteyed
of the earthshadow you move through, you aspyre
to exit similitude; but I'm your likeness & an interlude
of asteroids lies ahead.[4] We'll collide, 'lide time, tremble
in a treble only troubled seraphs dare perceive. 6 billion
years & every ostinato turns to torture, love, & lewd
dance moves fade to formes of piety. I'd disassemble
dystance just for you, man, to humble these mean eons.

8

Distance lusts for you, Starman, & crumbles us lean peons
like sunneflowers, faces singed under the face that feedes
their leaving—flamesource of ligule, hilum, seed.
I, Lucy, am a sorceress fashioned from bone, sapless pawn
only in my own hands. When they dug me up, my breede
was mysterie. They brushed dust from my spyne; my feete
they deemed feeble but able to forge their way.[5] Dawn
of man, they said; spawn of music, malady, & a fervent need
for True. I'm no ape of Pindare's. Like you, to be free's
my naturall state & the end of me, an enemy who won
me over: Sure, I turned my mind toward proving the invisible
a fraud, horizon's sad accomplice & refrayne. Now, degrees of
remove prove you wonderfull; &, against my will, love
augments & empties my tune: are you, too, invincible?

7

Your mute argument turns my head; & I remayne divisible
in the face of your flammivomous exodus: makes me think
forever's a fever that just won't break. You might thank
me for my preternatural patiens, Starboy, my inner villain's
prudance: I'd anneal you w/ cunning contumelies! In vain,
I admit: what curse could turn *your* course from the brink
of the effable? Nothing *I* can fermente. The dead do rank
you highly among young mummies; & the living explaine
you away as an inventor's red right hand, gloved in a plane's
matter. Much belov'd in yr high gloss sarcophagus & drunk
on a planet's calando applause, you lack a plan; so young
you are compared to the fission diminishing in yr rearview;
& so unworried by the crisp husk falling out of yr purview.
Of Course I Still Love You[6] gathers up yr glittering junk.

6

Of course I still love you & your grande, annihilatory junket
threading epochs. Like Cupido's deft arrow borrowèd
from Time itself, you prick a void & bring me to my knees.
Nothing dilates. Then Everything cracks like a joke wed
to a wound. There's laughter living under your mirrored
helmet, but who can hear it? Not you, with the weird frets
of your guts, yr hands at 10 & 2, yr bespoke seedcoat.
Something is wrong. Anything boring is terrible.[7] Don't
Panic. I'm frequenting origin's frequency. Or please
pan to Mars, who awaits your scattered touch, my maquette
so bacterial.[8] Earth in 2018's not a planet I call mine, nor
you yours. Yes, "Earthling" used to mean nothing more
than "farmer." Now it speaks a point of view we don't want
to imagine is ours. You're alienating me, man + rocket.

5

You're re-lineating your maddest scene where no one can
scan it, Rocketman. I'd like to hum along, but divisibility's
key in this ruptured plea bargain: enter infinite probability,
our shared gift horse. Why not gallop to our end? Press
Send & kiss gravity hello? Oh, I know it can't allways bee
romantic & grave, but I'd attempt to glean your moode, plan
for a stretch of *will-have-been* & *would*, if only I could address
you less intensely. So a planet's antique feares re-dress
you in leaves, leave your Nothing to a universe's imagination.
& somewhere, the oldest intelligence distills leonine nations
down to their ions. & somewhere else, a thin theory forges
our forgetfulness all over again, fusing Charm & Strange
quarks, their glue[9] quickbreeding into a blue, simulated orgy
of departure & bliss. But look: the mythic net, holding
you, warps gorgeously.

4

Think of archers blitzed, of telescopic muzzles
arming an army of eyes that shoot
you through till you careen beyond their reach, unthreaded
by all seeing save mine, save yours. True & yet true, I brood,
having lain down in my bed of unbegun plants, plans, & dreaded
records that skip at every planetary turn. There is no food
I have not learned to fear, man, no drop of nectar un-indebted

to some god who'd slap it from my trap. But here's the hard sell:
if you loop back round like a well-tuned boomerang, the plenum
will greet you; mimic Time's Arrow, tho, & you'll go full numb.
Sorry to tread so heavily, Starboy, tho I lack feet, tho I'm seldom
subject to rotation or regret. Here in the museum of my life, my cell
might well be empty—filled w/ priceless crumbs, these my numerous
remaynes feigning calm. Come home. We'll be numinous; & yes,
sigh & prophesy our need . . . to leap from this dirty carousel.

3

Tell me why we mimic colossi & cleave dirt, yet carouse
w/ what a lemniscate attempts to represent? I sent
me out one day to end my thirst & to repent, was spent
by distance & divided by time. Nothing could arouse
me for millennia. Then you came along, w/ your pent
smile. Tell all: will an asteroid belt riddle yr frame? Will it bend
you to its will as if you're light & it were gravity? Rows
gravid w/ xanthic ears fail to reseed their earthly selves
this year, while I recede beneath my swarm of offspring,
who stand in lyne & wait for the last encorps of spring.
A whale composes a planh. A kid claps her face shut to say,
"it's *my* fault," then looses a melodious plea into the vault.
& nobody's best guess, at last, proves good enough to stave
off a re-run of odious glands. Go on: cue the light Vivaldi.

2

I offer you my far-flung glance, imbue my cries, however bald,
w/ charm. No harm, young shaman, in showing your cupidity,
nor in confessing, say, the source of your galactic quiddity's
my climb up fruitful trees to capture the future's sprawled
imagination. Even when mad, I mind the image of you mauled
by a skirmish w/ comets, their tails rich with finitude quitting
you of your head, which, like any mummy's, is all in the fitting
of its pale wrapper. Rapturously ruptured, the sky goes piebald
with imploding Pleiades in the arousing *then*, in my anthem
of extinction. Please reply. Are you yet, Starman, among gods?
Has not a luminous arrow helped you see a tree flee toward
her own becoming? Slave to seasons, I'm reduced to a thought
thawed into a ritual of affliction & greenery, till you give word
from yr zodiacal zoo, yr tomb festooned in cosmic speleothems.

1

Can you learn to love the specimen known to men as AL 288-1?
From yr tumid dome, yr doomed pit; yr home to mad, nomadic
flames; why would my brief prehistory entice you? That vatic
void you drift thru is your one & lonely understudy; & if I've won
at anything, it's loss. Yes. What we're sentenced to is *so long* & won't
regret its medium is exile. So, hold yr tongue, pregnant w/ static;
fold your arms round the nothing that so becomes you, sticks
to your ribs like a tick taking its time. To talk it out wasn't a want
I harbored. (Hushed, I wished to be harlequinned, a queen invalid
who inspires travel & saccharine secretions.) Granted, certain
dreams draw harm. Granted, my most opposable digits entertain
only a faulty grip & apish aptitude for risky pilgrimage. I lied
when I told you I was young. You lied w/ silence, as gods pillaged
my grave out of boredom. Now I'm here, laid out for the ages.

0

Even our lips got carried away, pink pilgrims so odd & assuaged
in their coliseum of ether. Musick imbued us w/ decadence,
made us reel. Then an animal ate my heart out, its cadence
turned to sweet repast; & you were mocked up madly, an image
smeared over a force field, forced into a life of grim homage.
I think your spaceship doesn't know the way home.[10] Some density
unfigured in the formula & Nothing to be done. So, the orisons
exit stage left, desert us as if they were origins, while the last page
turns on itself for good. Make it count, love. Flaunt yr caparison
made of light, that I might take its hem between my teeth. The sunn
is lapping at a newborn's still-sealed eyes. To follow: the azure
that will one day disappoint it. I was once translated into a sure-
footed thing, still full of noise & disappearance. By-&-by, immured
in my mind & Nowhere, you are
beside yourself.

Devon Walker-Figueroa serves as co-founding editor of Horsethief Books. Her poetry has appeared in The Harvard Advocate, LARB Quarterly, Ploughshares, Zyzzyva, *and* Lana Turner. *She is the recipient of the 2018 Emerging Writer Award from NER.*

Notes

1. "Australopitheca," otherwise known as "Lucy," is an incomplete *Australopithecus afarensis* fossil & a forerunner to *Homo sapiens sapiens*. She was found in Ethiopia's Awash Basin in 1974.
2. "Starman" is the name of the dummy who currently sits in the driver's seat of a Tesla Roadster traveling through outer space, after having successfully exceeded escape velocity on February 6th, 2018. It is theorized that he may collide with Venus, Mars, or Earth itself in the distant future.
3. Lucy's name was taken from The Beatles' song "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," which had been playing loudly and on loop at the dig site on the day the fossil was first discovered.
4. Starman is at risk of passing through an asteroid field and being obliterated.
5. The shape of Lucy's pelvic bone indicates that she was bipedal, though lacked arches in her feet.
6. "Of Course I Still Love You" is an autonomous spaceport drone ship in the Atlantic Ocean whose purpose is to recover multistage rockets' "first stages." In parallel staging schemes, rocket boosters are added to create the requisite force for lift-off. These parts, necessarily shed, are sometimes called "stage 0." OCISLY's precursor is "Just Read the Instructions" and its follow-up model is "A Shortfall of Gravitas."
7. "Test flights of new rockets usually contain mass simulators in the form of concrete or steel blocks. That seemed extremely boring. Of course, anything boring is terrible [. . .] so we decided to send something unusual, something that made us feel." —Elon Musk
8. Some scientists are concerned that if Starman collides with another planet, such as Mars, the foreign bacteria he would introduce to the environment could be catastrophic to native microbes. The Tesla Roadster and its passenger were not held to the same standards of sterilization to which NASA launches are held.
9. Referring to the gluon binding energy which holds quarks together. (Gluons are elementary particles that function as exchange particles for the strong force between quarks.)
10. "I think your spaceship knows the way" is a line from David Bowie's "Space Oddity," which is playing on an infinite loop in Starman's Roadster.

THE LADDER TO HEAVEN

SHANE McCRAE

The hastily assembled angel climbed
The ladder God had many times proposed
The prophets build the prophets never built it
The ladder to the sky and Heaven in the sky
The prophets never built it knowing God

Was testing them but also teasing them
Since all God's tests are two tests one for the Father
And one for the Son and nothing for the Holy
Spirit who broods over them like a meddlesome
Neighbor watching two young brothers play

Switch on a stoop from the second floor across
The street whose mother never would have let
Him he reminds himself take an expen-
sive toy like that outside if he had owned such toys
Ever as the Nintendo Switch and prophets

The angel built the ladder first one rung
And then another all the way to Heaven
Then flew back down to the bottom since he wanted
To climb it properly then started up again
Now I will tell the rungs as the angel saw them

For whom for who could say each rung was like
A thousand rungs the first rung who could say
How many feet from the ground it was how many
Miles from the ground more than the higher rungs it looked
Like most rungs on most ladders made by humans

And to the angel looked most like a rung on
A fire escape and was the rung if any
Of the rungs were visible to humans a
Human most likely would have spotted *Maybe someone*
Is watching me right now the angel won-

dered as he stepped to the second rung *But all she*
Sees is a single foot my lower foot
Rising and disappearing in the stars
Though as the angel climbed he pictured himself falling
Though he could fly and so could only stare

Straight ahead at the rungs the first was nar-
row only as wide as two human feet
Of average width and painted black the paint had
Bubbled and flaked away in spots exposing fire-
Red and clay-red patches of rust that swirled

Beneath the paint like blood tumbling through
A vein the second rung was wider and
Rectangular and made of glass and filled with
Water and tiny plastic animal figures two
Of every kind of animal all bright-

ly colored some yellow some blue some green
Some pink vibrations from the angel's step
Shook them to life the third rung was a sky-
Blue thread strung not in the middle of the gap between
The rung below it and the rung above it

But just above the middle just above
Enough for any lifted foot to miss
It and come down on nothingness this rung
The angel as he strung it called The Rung of the Love
Of Human Beings and even when he found

It his bare foot was cut by it and bled
The fourth rung was a row of puffed white rice
Kernels implanted in a strip of moist
Chewed gum to look like teeth in gums the angel had
Whistled and giggled as he made this rung

But now he grimaced as he stepped from the Rung
Of the Love of Human Beings to the rung of crumbling
And soggy teeth *This is exactly These*
Disgusting teeth he thought *are just the sort of thing*
I'm going to talk to God about and mid-

way through the thought the angel reached the fifth
Rung the fifth rung was locusts strung togeth-
er on a golden chain a replica
Of the enormous golden chain that bound the Earth
To Heaven in the days before men made

Weapons from the links at the bottom of the chain
And God cursed gold with softness when the angel
Stepped on the rung the locusts chirred as if
They were alive power had gone from him return-
ing them to life though it returned to him

The moment his foot left the rung the sixth rung
Was a wide open black book and its pages
Flipped one by one in the wind from the first to the last
And back to the first again dark red ink oozed from each page
And rolled thick down the ladder to the fifth rung

Where when it touched the locusts the ink turned
The blue-green color of their blood at the sev-
enth rung the angel rested and the rung
That had before the angel sat his full weight down
On it been nearly formless wide and lumpy

Soft muddy even flattened as the an-
gel settled in and flattened and expanded
And took the imprint of the angel when he
Leaned over and closed his eyes and when the angel leaned
Over his wings cut channels in the rung

Rivers and narrow feathery streams the channels
Filled with the clear water that flowed from the angel's
Pores as he dreamed a long and violent
Dream in the dream he dreamed on the seventh rung the angel
In the dream slept on the rung for hundreds of

Millions of years and meteorites and lightning
Storms tore at the surface of the rung and in
The dream the angel woke to wrestle with
The pink amorphous sky he stood girded for the fight in
A leaf-green singlet much too big for him but

Cinched with a golden rope and growled and his
Growl echoed through the new valleys his body
Had made and animals big cats and lizards
Bipeds and quadrupeds invertebrates birds fish
Appeared in the dream and in the waking world

And growled and hissed and sang in answer to
His growl and the sky fell on the angel then
And in his first defense he seemed a match
For the sky rolling on his back when the sky fell
On him and kicking the sky off with both

Feet using the sky's weight and force against it
Continuing the motion of his roll he
Leapt to his feet and turned to face the sky
Then growled a winded second growl and heard diminished
Yelps in response that seemed to come from far

Away or from behind a wall he could-
n't see the pink sky roiled before him glanc-
ing up he saw an orangish pink sun
Glowing in a void and felt no heat and felt no cold
No summer and no winter from the sun

And no light though it shone from the void brightly
Down the sun shone on him and on the rung
Like any farther star whose heat is an
Idea of heat whose light is an idea of light the
Now fearful angel rushed at the sky but could-

n't grasp it he could only feel it when it
Fell on him he stumbled it fell on him
Then rose and fell on him again and then
Again he couldn't get his feet beneath him one last
Time the sky fell on him and he was pinned

In the dream as soon as the angel was subdued
The sky returned to the void and filled the void
The heat and light of the sun again poured down
Through the void to the rung and the animals on the rung with new
Strength growled and hissed and cooed and sang to each

Other in the dream and in the waking world
In the dream they made their noises and the an-
gel listened knowing as a dreamer knows
The animals were now forgetting him they could-
n't sense him anymore he knew and he

Was happy and in the waking world the singing
Of the animals woke him from his dream and slowly
He opened first one eye and then the other
Sat up and rubbed his eyes then stood and seeing his dream in
The life on the rung he stepped from the rung to Heaven

Shane McCrae is the author of several poetry collections, including Mule *(2011);* Blood *(2013);* The Animal Too Big to Kill *(2015);* In the Language of My Captor *(Wesleyan University Press, 2017), which was a finalist for the National Book Award; and* The Gilded Auction Block *(2019).*

MOSTLY JUST A SCREAM

AN INTERVIEW WITH HALLE BUTLER

On capitalism and The New Me

by Sarah Rose Etter

For the past ten months, I have lived in San Francisco. I work in Silicon Valley. Capitalism swirls around me: Long work weeks, robotic men and women with their faces in the blue glow of their screens on the train, rampant homelessness among the wealth.

If I believe what most people say, I am living in the future. If I believe what most people say, as goes San Francisco, so goes the world. But a bigger question is: If this is the future, will we all stand for it?

When I first moved to San Francisco, I began to read Halle Butler's *The New Me*. Although the protagonist of *The New Me* does not live in San Francisco or Silicon Valley, her life is wrapped up in her work. She is a temp hoping to become permanent in an office that doesn't understand her. The mundane passing of her days combined with her many failures gives rise to a voice in her head that becomes destructive, and as her life spirals out of control, she spirals alongside it. I thought, frequently, of the people on the train to work, staring deep into their phones, as I read Butler's portrayal of a woman unraveling within the working world.

Butler's ability to build out the sharp, sad complexities of office life goes beyond her ability to craft sharp dialogue or razor of a sentence.

The New Me doesn't offer many platitudes. Instead, it paints a portrait of capitalism as a system that forces us to continuously strive to become something we are not, whether that is a disgruntled temporary employee or a robotic tech worker hiding inside a digital landscape.

Butler's characters are so relatable because they underscore the promise of employment: If you work hard enough, one day everything will change—even you. The challenge is that if you work long enough, and hard enough, you might be changed in a way you never intended.

I spoke with Butler about *The New Me*, work, and capitalism via email.

SARAH ROSE ETTER: *The New Me* is so sharp, so deft, and such a critique of capitalism. From *Jillian* to *The New Me*, you seem pretty heavily focused on the systems of work in the world. What draws you to that topic?

HALLE BUTLER: I was working at a gastroenterologist's office when I wrote *Jillian*, and I was temping when I wrote *The New Me*. Work was the problem for me. It seemed like everybody I knew had a job they didn't like, and that being in the office all day, doing menial work, being treated in a disposable way, was really leaving a psychic mark and stressing everyone out. I was absolutely feeling this way, too. Not being able to use my brain for 30 hours a week was making me feel like a maniac, and all of these feelings of resentment and doom were getting bottled up. Working on these books was ventilation. The need to communicate how bad these work situations, which on a superficial level are "not so bad," actually feel, felt very pressing.

SRE: Since so much of your work is both about work and the mental states of women in jobs, can you talk to me a little bit about jobs you've had? What's the best job you've ever had and the worst job you've ever had?

HB: The best jobs I've had have been incredibly social. I loved teaching, and I loved working at a bookstore—both of those jobs involved a lot of talking about things that interested me. And I loved my co-workers at the bookstore—they were the best. I looked forward to going to both of those jobs. I didn't feel like I was just keeping a chair warm for show.

The worst jobs were the more isolating ones. The temp job I had at the investment bank in Chicago, I felt like I had to *pretend* to be a receptionist—I was overly aware of being polite, I was never relaxed. This was kind of around Snowden times, and the people there were all laughing and saying that they didn't care if the government had access to their accounts because they had nothing to hide. And I just smiled and laughed and felt really in hiding. And I definitely had people explain how to turn a computer on—more than once. When I was temping, people always assumed I was in college, and if they found out I was 30, they kind of cooled off, or felt uncomfortable around me, like I had a fundamental flaw. And the work itself was boring—minimum wage, paper shredding, answering phone calls. Just very boring and lonely and time-consuming.

When I switched over to working at the bookstore from temping, it was really relaxing. I think I talked, uh, a lot at that job. It was like getting out of solitary. I'd never made friends on the job before. Oh my god, this sounds very pathetic! But, obviously, a big part of what makes a job good is who you work with.

SRE: One thing I love about your work is that it functions as an indirect criticism of capitalism. We are forced to watch humans (with all of their flaws) try to survive in a system that isn't designed to ensure everyone succeeds. Do you intend that reading, or is that just me being obsessed with interrogating capitalism as a system?

HB: I definitely intended that reading, but I wasn't approaching the book as a direct takedown or anything precise (so yes, totally, an indirect critique).

It's mostly just a scream, trying to get down all of the feelings of being in the career-track system when your eyes are totally open to the fact that the actual work you're doing is meaningless, and going nowhere. If you're in a rut (what a phrase!) at work, you can turn to cultivating work-life balance (which I type while rolling my eyes), but usually this involves spending money, which maybe you don't have, or reaching out to a community, which you also might not have.

I was pretty struck, while I was writing the book, by those articles on toxic friendships, too. They're so callous, and they treat friends like

employees or commodities—like, if your friend is toxic, it's time to let them go. As if a friend is something you should or could fire if they're getting in the way of your productivity (or standing in the way of your goal of whatever personal fantasy life). That was a really popular notion in 2016. I was thinking of Millie as a kind of "toxic" person, in some ways. Also, the idea that life is a straight line, and that you have to hit certain marks by certain points, is really unnerving to me. There's a lot of atmospheric guilt and anxiety, a feeling like you have no value or use in the world, if you're not hitting these symbolic marks at the right time, and it can be really hard to recover from that. Something about all of this feels like viewing people as products or elements in some kind of vague productivity. And I don't like it! Haha.

SRE: You're a master of dark humor—throughout *The New Me*, we watch this character really struggle and eventually sink into a deep hole of loathing and an inability to function. Did you find it humorous to write—or is this one of those times where it broke your heart but on the page it came off funny?

HB: Yeah, it's so weird. Sometimes when people say the book is "hilarious" (specifically that word), I kind of clench up and think, "Well, it's actually not that funny, really," like maybe they aren't reading it right (or, worse, I wrote it wrong).

The inverse is true, too. If someone says the book is really sad, I kind of wave my hand and say it's not a big deal, and it's supposed to be funny. I did the audiobook myself, and when I was reading the last handful of pages, I was thinking, "Oh, shit, this is really, really sad"—almost like it hadn't occurred to me how sad the ending might be—but then, when I got to the last sentence, I couldn't stop laughing, because the last two words (on purpose, as a kind of joke to myself) are "the end." I had to do about ten takes because I kept giggling—it's not even funny, but it felt like a release to find that stupid joke I'd left for myself. "*Theeee end*, a book by Halle Butler."

I feel like the humor in the book is a kind of depression humor. She only lets herself go so far into feeling sorry for herself before pulling it back and mocking herself for being sad. So, maybe it's intended to be sad and funny in an alternating pattern.

Some scenes were really hard to write, and I felt pretty sad working on them—the lonelier stuff was pretty sad. But then, like, the Tom Jordan stuff, all of the office hostility, any scene where the narrator is angry, rather than vulnerable, was pretty fun and made me laugh while working on it. I like the Jens Lekman idea—with high emotions, it's hard to tell how people will react sometimes. Also reminds me of the Bee Gees song "I Started a Joke."

SRE: There's this sort of emotional throughline in your books, one where the characters vacillate from being overly confident in their skills to bottoming out into a sad oblivion. What draws you to that paradigm?

HB: Maybe it's partly avoiding reality. Most of the time things are somewhere in between horrible and wonderful. They're just "ok." But that's a bit drab, so the fantasy of superiority calls, and it's fun to have a little false confidence for a while, but then, after checking the facts, as they say (but doing it incorrectly), things swing back in the other direction—if I'm not wonderful, I must be awful. I'll admit this is how I feel a lot of the time, so these things are coming out unconsciously, to a degree.

There's also the Dunning-Kruger effect, do you know about this? It's when you're too dumb to know how dumb you are. I love this.

SRE: AHH! The Dunning-Kruger effect! What?! Explain this.

HB: Errol Morris wrote about this years ago, it's how I heard about it. There was a bank robber who used to cover his face with lemon juice every time he robbed a bank, because he thought the lemon juice made him invisible to cameras. He'd tested this theory with his own camera, took selfies with the lemon juice on, and he never appeared on the film. But, actually, he was just using his camera wrong! Pointing it in the wrong direction or something. Dunning and Kruger were psychologists studying cases of "illusory superiority" and they used this case.

The Dunning-Kruger effect—I'll just quote from Wikipedia—Dunning describes it as "If you're incompetent, you can't know you're incompetent . . . The skills you need to produce a right answer are exactly the skills you need to recognize what a right answer is."

I think this is where the "observed" characters, like Jillian and, to a degree, Karen, come from. But then the eye/I character (Megan, Millie) absorbs some of this critique, too. I think Millie is trying to assert that she's dumb, in certain parts, as a way to show that she's smart.

There are a few even-keel characters in both books, too. The friend Amanda in *Jillian*, and the Tupperware/stoned girl Jessica in *The New Me*, I think are reasonable. And then there's Elena in *Jillian*, who is fake reasonable—who uses her reasonableness as a way to dominate.

I'm interested in how people view themselves, and then how they choose what traits to cultivate and present. It's slightly unnatural, the way we build ourselves and present ourselves. It's difficult to actually see yourself, even though most of the time we're thinking about ourselves. I like how often people get themselves wrong.

SRE: What's been inspiring you lately, in terms of books, music, art, and film? I'm always so curious what you're up to over there.

HB: I've been loving Rachel Glaser's poems lately. Her book *Hairdo* is so good. I re-read *Good Morning, Midnight* by Jean Rhys and *The Grass Is Singing* by Doris Lessing—two of the most intense books I've ever read, so good. I read a B-side Sartre essay (the "bad faith" chapter of *Being and Nothingness*) that was a defense of existentialism, but it was mostly just a rant about waiters (I liked it). Been reading a little Henry James again. The Adrian Piper show at MoMA over the summer was so good it almost made me cry. I thought the Maurice Pialat movie *L'Enfance Nue* was really good. I've been wanting to re-read this book *The Madness of Mary Lincoln*, because I vaguely remember a detail about her thinking that ghosts were stealing bones from her face at night to make a necklace, and when the necklace was finished, there would be an apocalypse—but there's a solid 60% chance I just made that up. Right now, I'm listening to John Bellows.

Uuuhhhh, I'm also watching a lot of *Dateline* and playing a lot of Tetris.

Sarah Rose Etter is the author of Tongue Party, *selected by Deb Olin Unferth as the winner of the Caketrain Press award, and* The Book of X, *her first novel, which is available from Two Dollar Radio. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in* The Cut, Electric Literature, Guernica, VICE, New York Tyrant, Juked, Night Block, The Black Warrior Review, Salt Hill Journal, The Collagist, *and more.*

THREE POEMS

JOANNE DOMINIQUE DWYER

The Rings of Saturn

Santo Jesús, did you have a jeweled number?
Did you play spin-the-bottle in your day?
What colors and configurations of glass?

I imagine there were no remedies for cleft palates
but that people loved their penned animals:
brushed their fur and picked the stones from their hooves.

Were there weather reports?
Moonshine or other illicit contraband?
Did any cornrow their hair?

I love nine best; for the absent finger or toe.
Born without, or vanished in a sharp-implement accident.
For the woman felling a tree; a man making blood sausage.

The saintly flaw of the animal born without a tail.
Dumbo's mother was deemed mad and locked up.
How deformity drives the value of a neighborhood down.

Were there fire extinguishers; antacids?
To be dressed to the nines meant a tailor used
nine yards of fabric to fashion a suit or silken dress.

Did they watch the shadow of groundhogs in your day?
Have pub crawls and psych evals?
The human body has nine doors.

On the eighth day of your life your foreskin was sliced.
Centuries later Saint Birgitta had a vision she ate your foreskin.
And more recently a sculptor rendered you in chocolate.

After the unveiling at a Soho gallery, the viewers
broke off pieces and ate your dark verisimilitude body.
Was there mouthwash in your day?

Photos of antelopes on hotel walls?
It takes nine days to fall from heaven to earth.
In 1983 thieves stole your relic foreskin, *the holy prepuce*

and the jeweled onyx box which held your wound
like an ashtray holds the debris of cigarettes
or like a dreamy custodial giant holding a dying bird

in its cupped palm whispering lyrics of rescue to it.
Some say when you rose into the fathomless sky
left behind the dusty roads and the cloudless waterholes

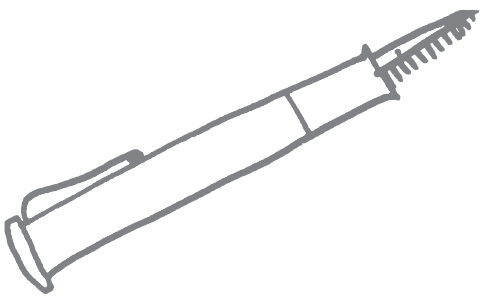
the corrugated tin roofs and the caterpillars sleeping
in the shade of wild geraniums, that all of your body
vitrified or feminized, incised or intact, ascended with you.

And that your severed foreskin became the rings of Saturn.

Tarzan Aubade

It's never a good sign when the patron saint
of betrothed couples is also the patron saint of the plague.
Nor is it a sign of things are looking up
when you put vodka in your water bottle.
Or eat a whole bag of Cheetos before 6 am
all the while over-ingesting the orange dye
knowing it has to do with how much you miss Tarzan
and the deep sadness you feel because he has a stress fracture
in his right foot and can no longer play tennis with you.
It's never an auspicious sign when on Valentine's Day
the oceanside restaurant is out of the catch-of-the-day.
But you make good with baba ganoush as Tarzan eats quail.
And it's never a happy portent when other women, and a few
men stare at your date's loincloth, though it means they are
diverted away from the ochre stains on your mouth.
The Spanish word for naked is *desnudo*
and *pelado* is a man with a shaved head—
or a landscape empty of trees.
A sentence without a period is simply unpunctuated
but does not resemble a punctured lung.
It's never a reassuring sign when your child
prefers the company of cats over humans
or finger-paints scenes of decapitation in kindergarten.

Nor is it a couleur de rose sign when you have panic attacks
at the thought of someone brushing your hair
or you are drawn to trading places
with someone wearing a lab coat.
It's far from a promising sign when you telephone
a dominant or a submissive for hire
on the fire escape in the dark
during a major holiday with your family in earshot.
Or when you wake at dawn after dreaming
of licorice and amputated limbs
and you see a woman out the window
traversing through the snowy meadow wearing a scarlet knit hat.
You can't tell if she's carrying a harpoon
in her hand or a broken cross-country ski.
If she's running away or towards.



Dead Stars

Lamb of G, your words are in italics sloped and slanted subordination
of form and color *This sky will pass away, and the one above it will also pass away*
emphasis and emphysema both mean to puff up be it abashed feathers or necrotic lungs
though it held magic and sentiment for me I eventually took the trampoline to the dump
or did I give it to a family with children so that my yard would appear less disparaging
do I only imagine the bouncing, shrieking and exhaustion in a small low-income backyard
Mark Twain said "We do not deal much in facts when we are contemplating ourselves"
The dead have no life, and the living have no death the lights in the sky a sleight of hand
who can believe stars are dead when they enter and enter and clean out the shed
On days when you ate what was dead, you made it alive I have a food addiction
I seek the snake that will eat the entirety of my ego Anselmo and I and the dogs
came upon a rattlesnake I skirted around it wanting to leave the snake
in its sleeping state in the sun of the arroyo Anselmo threw sand on it
as if to chase it away *When you arrive into light, what will you do?* Imitation sunglasses
are so cheap on the streets of India yet we still bargained the vendors down
from some prideful avarice of not wanting to be seen as rich because we are paler of skin
what cheap-asses we were I have so many pairs of shoes pieces of scrap metal dried apricots
Time to say uncle place cloth over the lamps straighten the spine a cellar of flowers
When you were One, you created two But now that you are two, what will you do? Take the white rose
and the black rose de-thorn them live in a snow cave vis-à-vis with the invisible

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Joanne Dominique Dwyer is a longtime resident of Northern New Mexico. She is a Rona Jaffe award recipient. Her book of poems is Belle Laide, *Sarabande Books. Two of the poems here are from her recently completed manuscript* Hero Hallucination, *which dialogues with the gnostic Thomas Gospel. A poem of hers is forthcoming in* Best American Poetry 2019.

FIVE POEMS

NICK FLYNN

The Unclaimed

In every city there's a room

lined with boxes of
the unclaimed, each the size of

half a loaf of good
bread. My friend collects these

boxes, which he then
brings home & opens & empties

the ash into a bucket to
mix with a medium to make another

painting. One

box is smaller, only as big as a few sticks
of butter, *five days old*

typed out on the label. My friend
does not even open this box, he

cannot, it is heavier than you
might imagine. Stardust, he

simply places it in the center of
a large white canvas.

Unghosted

I've tried to dream this lake
into existence

for years & here it is,
ta-da, illuminated

briefly beneath our
flare. You

show me the birds that live
underground—*oilbirds*—

*if you don't know how
to walk*, you whisper,

*you could break
them*. . . . You put

a hand on my chest & I
hear the lake, you

put a hand on my scar & I hear
the ground, *press*

harder, I say, until I don't know

if my shoulders are the birds or if
my chest is their burrow

or if your hands put them there,

but at some point my body is
not empty

& it wants things poured over
& down its throat. What if

it never was about finding
our way back,

but about our eyes becoming

accustomed to this black
water? Here's

the thing: when I woke up
you were gone—it's

okay, everyone's gone
eventually—but, after, when

I tried to put my own hand on
my chest, when

I tried not to break
anything, I was a ghost touching

a ghost &
the thing is I didn't know I was

a ghost until your hands

found me & now it has nowhere
to go. Now

whatever those birds are
will simply . . . what? Return

to where they've been
hiding?

Popsicles

Pineapple & chile popsicles in
Ojinaga, we eat them under a mural

of Pancho Villa. I'm wearing

the sunglasses of my dead
friend, the only thing I took when I went to

see the room he died in. The popsicle's

so good I want another one right
away. On our way back we pass an abandoned

shoe store, the windows filled with dead

flies, thousands of them now where
the shoes should be. Next to the popsicle place

a store sells piñatas, anyone can buy
our little president, his empty head

filled with candy. Concepción cried when he got
elected, her parents said, *Get ready*,

said, *When ICE knocks don't answer.* I'll wear

my friend's sunglasses until I lose them,
imagining what he might have seen if he'd

been able to stay. I'll eat the second popsicle
under the same mural, Pancho Villa riding his horse

into a whirlpool of light.

The Box

That one photograph of your
father, the only one you

were able to salvage, is
fading, some nights now

you don't hear him at all.
He—it—came in the mail one

day, heavy, oddly

so, as if he was still inside,
whole & not simply

a version of himself. *Thank you*

very much (cue APPLAUSE),
you're a very kind

audience. A maple—what-

do-you-call-it—*seedpod?*
helicopters into a crevasse. *Thank you*

very much, you're very kind . . .
Open the box.

Son

So much going on
beneath the waves, that

slow-mo tumbling of

everything. Stand
on a rock surrounded by

water, the tide
has made you an island. Stare into

the harbor, hold one hand up—this,
son, is what I offer—*light*,

salt, the unseen . . . Others live

inside those windows that

line the shore, held inside
their globes of light. Out here

we are the light, out here the salt
holds us. Touch

your tongue to your arm

& taste how it fills you. It holds up
this boat

built with these hands, which,

after all, are your hands. Hold yours
up to the light—see how

it fills you, how it is you.

Nick Flynn is the author of several books of poetry including Blind Huber *(2002),* The Captain Asks for a Show of Hands *(2011), and* My Feelings *(2015). He has also written several memoirs, including* Another Bullshit Night in Suck City *(2004),* Being Flynn *(2005),* The Ticking Is the Bomb *(2010), and* The Reenactments *(2013); and the play* Alice Invents a Little Game and Alice Always Wins *(2008). His book* The Ticking Is the Bomb: A Memoir of Bewilderment *addresses the Abu Ghraib scandal.*

ODE TO OUR UNNAMED MOON

MARY-ALICE DANIEL

MOON and its dark star of calamity.
MOON like moths: twilight- and night-flying white moths.
MOON with half-suicidal/half-sexual affect.

Unimpressed, Islamic nations won't standardize a lunar calendar.
Should we bother to name it soon? A Copernican principle insists
there is nothing at all special about Earth's little corner of universe—

moon stars sunshine everything else . . .

Yet in our orbit, Neil Armstrong claims he heard the *Adhan*—the call
to prayer—thus converting. *First man bowing from Moon toward Mecca.*
Did he think to recheck his horoscope? Astrology is anthropocentric:

So, constellations appear entirely different anywhere other than Earth
—Pick any moon; Planet that is a diamond; Planet of inaudible hum.
Tethered to this planet of escalating nonsense, I prefer homemade prophecy:

I browse Bibles, pushing pins in random verses, turning scripture into policy.
Call it insurance against a god who seems to be "seeing how things go."
Personally, I choose to believe I hold death in my pouch—*I can not die.*

Mary-Alice Daniel was born in Nigeria and raised in England and Nashville. After attending Yale University, she received her MFA in Poetry from the University of Michigan. Her poems have appeared in Iowa Review, New England Review, Prairie Schooner, Hayden's Ferry Review, Callaloo, *and several anthologies, including* Best New Poets 2017. *Her adopted home is Los Angeles, where she is completing her debut poetry collection and earning a PhD in English Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Southern California.*

TWO REVIEWS AND A SPECTRAL INTERLUDE

Heredities, Flood Song, *and* Incantations

APZ Books

TODD FREDSON

Would we trust other ghosts?
—Dawn Lundy Martin

I.

I was so excited to hear that J. Michael Martinez and Sherwin Bitsui had poetry collections coming out in 2018. Martinez's *Museum of the Americas* was selected as a winner in the 2017 National Poetry Series and arrived via Penguin Press in October, and Bitsui's *Dissolve* was published by Copper Canyon Press, also in October. The books are the third collection for each poet, and both Martinez and Bitsui continue to push at the limitations of language(s), particularly challenging English to express cultural histories, concepts, and values that may not be accessible through the King's English, trained as it has been by Anglo-European experiences and visions of the world. My excitement for these collections is warranted. Martinez and Bitsui again summon the kind of linguistic energy that writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ahmadou Kourouma, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha identify as potentially available when confronting colonial languages (Thompson, xix; Lafage, 227; Cha). Martinez and Bitsui are engaged in making English more inclusive. They are engaged in more than that, of course. However, as you can see by the title of this essay, I am not making a review of their new collections.

Looking forward to the new works, I returned to Martinez's and Bitsui's earlier collections. I was reminded of how impacting the collections have been for me. Martinez's *Heredities* (2010) and Bitsui's *Flood Song* (2009) particularly helped me to sequence thoughts that were flickering. The works provided engagements through which that sequence could hold and, in what follows, I am tracing those thoughts. I'm always trying to find language for a world of meaning that is proximate to the consensual reality erected by the King's English. And I'm always thinking about how that King's English can be used against itself (especially as I do translation work). But the goal is not only to create more flexibility in the English language for structures of feeling and thought that English has not yet, or only awkwardly, rendered. My goal is to approach a world of meaning that exists beyond embodied or embody-able experiences.

In a sense, I'm asking: how far past "human" can language go and still transmit meaning, or, how can meaning be captured semantically from non-anthropomorphic realms?

In order for the body's anthropomorphic identity, a self, to emerge, the body must provide a field of comprehension. A self is identifiable for whatever interval of time the body provides sensory context; meaning is created, accrues, and is sustained, and the self resides in that field of comprehension. This process, I suppose, is co-creative. The self serves as the interpretive element, as the organizing principle; so, meaning's arrival depends on the self thematizing that sensory input. But if the body's collection of sensory input is already wooed by the urge toward an anthropomorphic identity, then, really, interpretation is already restricted. Could the body create another, a radically different, field of comprehension, one where meaning is not cast in such exclusively human terms?

The embodying experience typically integrates the self into some consensual reality, a reality that is largely shaped and held in place by language. (That integration, of course, is not inevitable.) For me, Martinez's *Heredities* and Bitsui's *Flood Song* have functioned as immersion studies into this always-perplexing issue of how the self thematizes and is thematized. How does language come across the body? And where does the body surprise language?

In *Heredities*, Martinez interrogates the cultural and linguistic selves that make up the book's speakerly presence. Might the intersection of those selves provide some terminus, some hint of origin, against postmodernism's contrary insistence?[1] Knowing how "origin," like the word "authentic," is intellectually unfashionable, problematic for being vague and for reducing historical contingencies to uncomplicated chronological nodes, let me clarify: here origin is not the anchor of an if-then chain. Origin should not be conflated with causality. I maintain the distinction by borrowing from Hannah Arendt, who suspects that "[c]ausality, i.e., the factor of determination of a process of events in which always one event causes and can be explained by another, is probably an altogether alien falsifying category in the realm of the historical and political sciences" (Bennett). And Jane Bennett, discussing that quote, completes the distinction by adding that, unlike causality, origin is "a complex, mobile, and heteronomous enjoiner of forces" (Bennett). So, what enjoins the forces? What initiates coherence? For Martinez, the causal logic obscures the possible histories from which a speakerly presence might emerge, and by which the anthropomorphic self might be recomposed. In *Heredities*, Martinez locates cultural and linguistic distinctions within the context of a Latino identity and poetics. He attends to a heritage that has been under assault across languages and geopolitical borders.

Bitsui, too, attends to a heritage that has been under assault. *Flood Song* offers a perception that is not widely available in the English language. In *Flood Song*, the guiding voice operates out of a language that has developed in reciprocity with the environment that its speakers, the Diné people, inhabit and have inhabited—namely, the Navajo Nation and Dinétah, the traditional Navajo homeland. More broadly, the language is part of an Athapaskan language that does not restrict time to a linear, one-dimension event. Time and space are dynamically engaged. "That is, all 'entities,' 'objects,' or similar units of action and perception must be considered in units that are engaged in continuous processes." Human intention participates within the "encompassing emergence" but does not exclusively govern it (Abram, 190, 193). Bitsui positions the act of perception, of self-initiation, within a language drawn from environmental matrices that express meaning regardless of human interpretation. In *Flood Song*, Bitsui accesses what Andrew Joron calls the "non-anthropomorphic senses of the body of language" (Joron, 57). Rooted simultaneously in the Navajo and the English languages, Bitsui observes that

> *My work is about imagining into the space between languages, and arriving ever closer to the realization that even poetry fails to give presence to that space. My poems feel most beautiful and bright when leaping against the backdrop of nothingness. ("May Feature")*

Bitsui's song brings language out of a pre- or non-lingual environment and into the human body, where the language gains its anthropocentric signature. Bitsui generates a language for mediation—it does not concede its cultural specificities while conversing with the new world gaze; it weaves that world's phenomena into a continuous meaning-making process.

I'll enter a third book into this consideration, *Incantations*. *Incantations* is a book by a Tzotzil Mayan women's collective that is edited and translated by Ámbar Past. The women who contributed to *Incantations* remember the written word as something other than an adaptive technology; they remember the word as something sacred. Both *Heredities* and *Flood Song* are written primarily in English and reside—securely, impatiently, generously—under the banner of "American" poetry. And, alongside them, *Incantations* reminds us that "America" does not mean exclusively North America or the English-speaking United States.

II.

Heredities is made of three sections. Near the beginning of the second section, the poem "Water Poppies Open as the Mouth/The Body as Nature, History" begins with an epigraph. It is a statement from phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty: "All motivations intermingle at the core of history, the internal becomes the external . . . all as parts of the body" (22). Merleau-Ponty is considering how history tells a story of the body and how the body re-presents that history. Within each unique body, history opens and petals and then curls back into itself, absorbing more material from that being while also investing more completely in it. Martinez takes the epigraph from *Phenomenology of Perception*, where Merleau-Ponty elaborates:

> *In this voluntary act of carrying forward . . . it is impossible to say just where historical forces end and ours begin, and strictly speaking the question is meaningless, since there is history only for a subject who lives through it, and a subject only in so far as it is historically situated. (200)*

For Merleau-Ponty, history is not easily chronologized. The body, not the mind, is the locus of knowing—and, so, how does one access that knowing? What comes to the mind cannot be divorced from the corporeal apparatus that collects the sensory input—input that renders perception. Language and culture situate that body; they frame that self-hood into a subject position; they supply limitations for consciousness; they ascribe coherence. Martinez's epigraph indicates a few of his central questions: where does meaning come *to* us, and where does meaning come *from* us? This—

where a body encounters meaning, and where a self/selves can begin to be interpreted—is at the heart of *Heredities*.

Martinez is intensely suspicious of his instrument of interrogation, language. Allegiant to a phenomenological approach, Martinez denatures his instrument's empirical character. Language, rather than being some final arbiter of sense impressions, is challenged to operate in a field of ambivalence. In the title of section one's final poem, "Aporia [4] *The Word Is the Gaze between the Body and Its Listening*," the reader witnesses language, or speech, adapted to the role of sight. Does this title suggest that the word-as-gaze provides a bridge that connects the body to its listening? Or does the gaze separate the body from its listening? The word-as-gaze exists between the body and the body's listening, but is that unblinking interim restorative or does it disable?

Martinez is rapt to confuse the senses. Sight, sound, touch—the senses seem to trespass across one another's spaces, acting on one another rather than contributing toward a singular, unifying perspective. It turns out we might not be able to trust those perception-guiding faculties to render anything like a sum. The word 'aporia' refers to a puzzlement, often the reduction of a previously conceived logic down to its scraps for the purpose of reconstruction, re-conception. It is like how a child takes apart her parents' radio: she finds several "spare" pieces on the floor after reassembling it, or leaves the whole thing in pieces having been bored by the project. Or, through trial and error, she puts something together that again receives and transmits.

In *Heredities*, Martinez disassembles the particular history to which the collection's speakerly body attests. What if, Martinez seems to ask, language, that catchment of sense impressions, is misled by those senses? What if the senses have been conditioned to wrongly apprehend, or could have been (could still be) conditioned to apprehend otherwise? What other histories might the body turn up? What other body might those histories turn up?

In her book on haunting, on how the past inhabits the present, *Ghostly Matters*, Avery Gordon considers a postmodernism that "means . . . that everything can be described" (13). It is a postmodern world that produces passivity and indifference. Gordon laments that the airwaves are jammed with instantaneous explanations, and that there is no possibility for the living or the dead to get a word in edgewise. Mysteries are decoded before they have time even to propose their consequences. The outcome is pre-figured. But Martinez, by scrambling the senses, works to obstruct all of that familiarly scripted input from reaching the body. Martinez establishes a textual terrain that holds space. He then brings an historical scenario into relation with that space, not to fill the space but to allow escapes and releases; to allow seepages, drainages, detoxification; to let meaning become complacent. Gordon says that such sites of withholding are

> *about making a contact that changes you and refashions the social relations in which you are located. It is about putting life back in where only a vague memory or trace was visible . . . but also to understand the conditions under which a memory was produced in the first place, toward a countermemory, for the future. (22)*

In the terrain that Martinez establishes, meaning can wait. Meaning can wait and, potentially, seek new historical or social formations through which to signify.

As language in these poems does not organize predictably, the floor of the poems becomes shifty. The hint of something originary emerges, some historical truth that has been stolen, redacted, effaced. The body must search, must feel by sound, by vibratory recognition, by affiliation. These are, perhaps, frequencies not parsed in our colonizing Romance languages. Martinez will deliver us to a particular historical moment: the disseverance of the Meso-American, particularly Aztecan, culture by the Spanish Inquisition. At the end of the first section, in "Aporia [2] *The Body Is Not Identical to the Self*," there is this exchange between two speakers:

> *I said, I inherit the absence of my language. You said, Spanish is drying blood. I said, Embellished language is for the poet who wishes to forget. Yes, you said, the moment identity is given the self is erased. (12)*

The bloodline to the self, the language Martinez has at his disposal, may not access any reliable origin for the self- or selves-incarnate. "I said, Origin: the rattling of a mirror not quite firmly fastened to the image of the person before it" (13).[2]

When a language of origin has become obscured or contaminated (won't it always?), or when it produces meanings that are inflexible, when it has been blindered and future-focused, then that language can no longer issue a self. The language, rather than singing through a prismatic, multiplicitous, adaptable being, presents a one-dimensional version of self. And here it is identity that has been given, as Martinez says. It is a self that can be indexed and easily archived, a checked box on a census form. *Heredities* undoes this kind of received identity. What else could these bodies mean? What else could a self become, or divide being into? What else, while still being conjoined to language?

Considering Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, John O'Neill concludes that,

> *[u]ltimately, language, like culture, defeats any attempt to conceive it as a system capable of revealing the genesis of its own meaning. That is because we are the language we are talking about. That is to say, we are the material truth of language through our body, which is a natural language. It is through our body that we can speak of the world because the world in turn speaks to us through the body. (62)*

How fully do we, can we, let the world speak?, Martinez might reply. Romance languages like English or Spanish, with the exception of the occasional onomatopoeia, exist in nearly pure abstraction. Alphabets and syntactical habits have been developed that tend to remove these languages from multi-dimensional, multi-sensory engagement; the sounds (phonemes, tones, and patterns of inflection) are well distanced from the materiality they define. These romance languages, however, are what is left to Martinez to transport us beyond semantic predictability, beyond knowability.

As Romance languages are full of Latinate words, it is not surprising to find this register present—the Latinate, which is the language of the courts, of science, of corporate education; words that are multisyllabic, methodical—"copulation," "laceration," "conflagration." These, compared to the gritty punches of English's Anglo-Saxon sounds—"fuck," "cut," "fire." However, Martinez seems overt in his use of the Latinate register. Oxford English Dictionary definitions serve as epigraphs, and medical terms organize poems such as "Articulations of Quetzalcoatl's Spine" or "The Sternum of Our Lady of Guadalupe." Martinez is aware of the violence his heavy use of the Latinate implies. It is the conqueror's tongue. More clinical than sensuous. More exhumation and autopsy than falling, eyes closed, backward into absence.

As might be expected with their emphasis on the Latinate, Martinez's poems often occur abstractly. Details about a speaker's locale, concrete details concerning the place, are sparse. But by withholding a sense of place from the reader, Martinez emboldens the physical character of language. The page's white space *is* the setting. Only reluctantly is this white space relinquished for object-specific details, details that transport the reader into moments of history and myth. In the long poem at the center of the book, "Heredities: Letters of Relation," physical specificity is drawn from conquistador Hernan Cortez's letters—

> *On the third day after Easter,*
> *attacked with horsemen,*
> *sword, and lance,*
>
> *the city between birth*
> *and baptism was taken—*
>
> *pigeons, clay, amaranth,*
> *and uncut wood razed*
> *and burned—the earth*
>
> *blinded into*
> *fragments of naming. (43)*

Alongside these historically grounded erasure poems, literally in the margins, are excerpts from Bishop Tomas Torquemada's 1667 edicts, maintained in the Spanish, describing how the Spanish Inquisition was to be conducted.

Twelve pages later, the speaker's existence in abstraction is similarly interrupted by site-specific details in the poem "In the Year of the Jubilee." As the title suggests, a liberation occurs—the poem witnesses a break in the divine order. Aided by the god Quetzalcoatl, a "she" draws interpretive power from the landscape and births culture, which, effectively, displaces Ipalnemohua, the Giver of Life. With a granular attention, the "she" rummages her way through the carefully described and named (thus, now, cultured) surroundings.

> *Rising from the water,*
> *she dried herself*
> *on participles, laid herself*
> *on the sand of the other shore. (56)*
>
> . . .
>
> *The metallic*
> *green crowned fledglings*
> *settled on a firebush branch,*
> *magenta gorgets warbled*
> *as they fed on fate*
> *as if from nectar.*
>
> . . .
>
> *She walked naked, barefoot*
> *toward a solitary hacienda.*
> *A man approached with a twig basket*
> *in a mantle of distance*
> *torn from its sky. (59)*

But even these introductions to tangible goods, to place, to historical footing, return to flight almost immediately (as Quetzalcoatl, often associated with the wind, might require). The embodied narrative stretches just far enough to remind the reader that the disembodied speaker(s) is (are) the remnant and consequence of an inadequately documented historical violence. The speaker is abstracted because the speaker has been severed from the grounds of origin.

In a painfully cogent explanation of this effect, Richard E. Littlebear describes origin as "the very ground of coherence" when he discusses dislodgement in a Native American context, dislodgement that, by definition, "forced us out of our minds," he specifies (Kwasny).

I'm not attending much—not, perhaps, sufficiently—to the embodied aspects of the self such as gender, race, or ethnicity, because Martinez's effort, it seems to me, is to imagine the self as such assignments are being made. Though this certainly returns us to the book's concerns about how the body is read—where does interpretation begin, who is interpreting, and to what end?—Martinez unquestionably orients his mission in relation to the embodied experience that heredity implies. National, religious, racial, and ethnic aspects of identity are explicitly named in the collection's opening handful of poems, even by their titles: "Xicano," "Maria," "He Name Me Miklo" (the epigraph to this poem tells the reader that Miklo is a Hispanic with light skin, and an insult to dark-skinned Hispanics), and "White." But the self/selves that the collection works to access, the self/selves made through language, exist more directly in relationship to breath—breath, not exactly or exclusively of the body. The act of being depends on taking in the air and dis- or ex-pelling it; we continue to mark an intention to live and, more formally, as we shape the breath into words, continually invoke our existence. We animate our matter. Is there another way to mean, another meaning that could hold us together, hold us, but not bind us?

Heredities continually subverts efforts at resolution. The collection concludes with a couplet that follows the notes section at the end of the book: "You said, The infinite is the origin you foster. / I said, History gathers in the name we never are."

III.

Martinez leaves us with this conundrum: something about an origin continues to resonate. A culture's, an individual's—something familiar continues to hum in the ether, to psychically exert itself, even as the expressions which have defined it, language particularly, have disappeared, transformed, or evolved. One is left to access this origin using foreign tools; the project becomes an interrogation of the keyholder, language, rather than one of turning the lock and entering.

Perhaps, though, knowledge encoded in a language can resurface in spite of the originating culture's "disappearance"? Perhaps Martinez has this instinct as he unfolds the body. Perhaps this recovery requires an apprehension that occurs beyond the limits we assign to our senses.

As an example, the book *Incantations* comes to mind. A collective work of 150 Tzotzil Mayan women from the Highlands of Chiapas in Southern Mexico, it offers a beautiful illustration of a listening beyond the materiality that our senses have been trained to report. The introduction by Ámbar Past explains that "[E]ven though few of the authors of this anthology can read, even though the Tzotzil Maya have no libraries nor bookstores near their houses, a wise person is said to have 'books in the heart'" (29, 30).

Though only four pre-Colombian Mayan books are known to have survived Spanish invasion and colonization, it is rumored that some of the first books, written by the Mayan ancestors known as the First Fathermothers, books that no one can read anymore, are hidden in old chests in Chamula—a town in the highlands that has a unique autonomy within Mexico. Each year the books are taken out, honored and put back. It is said that the books have begun to talk. It is the women who learn the words who are said to have writing in their hearts (30, 31).

In her introduction to the English translation, Ámbar Past reports that

> *Pasakwala Kómes, an unlettered seer from Santiago El Pinar, learned her conjurations by dreaming the book. Loxa Jimenés Lópes of Epal Ch'en, Chamula, tells of an Anjel, daughter of the Lord of the Caves, who began whispering in her ear and then, in dreams, showed her the Book with all the magic words to be learned . . . Manwela Kokoroch, from Laguna Petej, Chamula, sings to the Elder Brothers of Writing and Painting, who hold the Book where the names of all the people in the world are written down, along with the dates of their deaths* . . . Let my animal spirit live / many more years / in the pages of the Book, / in its letters, / its paintings, / on the whole surface of the Earth. *(29)*

In her introduction, Past tells us, "song is a book that will not burn" (31). And it would seem that song, in this case, is something that is continually emitted—from the ground, from the land? Held by air?

I might posit that song, in this case, is the frequency of a given ecological matrix, the arrangement of a terrain and its components. Song is the energy sloughed or consumed while the material components disappear or come into presence. I might make a sideways comparison: song is like that energy of a stone's decay; the energy is so tangible that certain microbes, without sunlight, without photosynthesis, can survive by it. The microbes live solely off of the energy that radiates from the stones (McKay and Matson). That pulse of energy, that exhalation, once *conceived of*—perhaps as the collective pulse of the environmental or ecological matrix—*once felt*, may be translated, organized into language. The song that always is.

In *One River*, ethnobotanist Wade Davis gives an account regarding the collection and preparation of the Ingano tribe's sacred plant in Colombia. Once under the preparation's influence, a person can distinguish varieties of the plant based on the tone of the song that each plant sings on the night of a full moon (176).

Or I think of poet Ruth Stone, and this story recounted by Elizabeth Gilbert. Growing up in rural Vermont, Stone worked in the field. Sometimes she would suddenly feel and hear a poem coming at her over the landscape, a "thunderous train of air barreling down at her that shook the earth beneath her feet." And she would race to the house to find a pen and paper, to intercept it before it moved across the land to another poet (Gilbert). The spirits acquiring diction, as it were.

IV.

Sherwin Bitsui's collection of poems *Flood Song* would indicate that, for the careful listener, these waves of sound carry to the recipient a potent collision of impressions.[3] Unlike the watchfulness the senses keep on one another in *Heredities*, in *Flood Song* they are likely to support one another in their synaesthesia: "the waning lick of moonlight on the dashboard," "[s]tepping through the drum's vibration / I hear gasoline," "the ache of ten cedar trees silences the dull ax" (7, 5, 38). The senses hone one another. They make for the body a broadband, able to scan the inscrutable for its various, simultaneous appearances.

Flood Song's poems have the effect of being palimpsestic. Accretive rather than linear. Though stratification, as the word "palimpsestic" may insinuate, suggests a stacked and chronological sense that would be too tidy, overly structured. In this collection, time does not neatly set one thing over the next. The material elements that make up each moment cannot be peeled back like wallpaper revealing patterns of an under-layer. Which material phenomena? Making what interactions? These poems rarely pause.

"Our sour scent pulses outward from the birth sac's metallic fumes. // Our palms sail to the first drop of cold water, / after sinking an anvil into the belly's thirst" (62). These elements are too alive, too multitudinous to be defined by their material existence only. The elements keep contact with the imagined, the speculative. The invisible? The ancestral? Certainly one would not say "dead." It is not only our memory that keeps things alive.

Native American concepts of time are regularly explained as circular. Laura Tohe, in her poetry collection *No Parole Today*, shares the stories of Diné imprisoned in Indian Schools. She begins a story from her grandmother with an epigraph explaining that her grandmother "tells it in Diné storytelling fashion, often ignoring time considerations" (xiii). Bitsui, also Diné, immerses us in a multiverse, as compared to a universe. Time moves with little regard for material conventions.

Aside from the title, *Flood Song*, we are given little preparation for this experience. We encounter immediately an epigraph (by way of dedication) in Diné, an invocation of sorts, "[n]á ho kos, ná ho kos, ná ho kos," the phrase for north—"a direction of old age," Bitsui explained to me. "The northern sacred mountain is the last to be spoken of during ritual." There is a page after the epigraph with the word "tó" repeated vertically down the page's center, a word for 'water'—it is dripping (Bitsui, Personal interview). So do we enter at the conclusion of the ritual, and as the flood begins? Or do we enter at the flood's close, its last trickle, and does that precipitate the ritual, which is Bitsui's song? In a multiverse, probably both.

The reader is not given translations for "ná ho kos" or "tó." We are not given preparatory remarks about how to approach these poems, no cultural explanation by which to categorize the encounter. Bitsui does, though, give us these poems in English—in written English. Already that is twice removed from an oral Diné tradition, or a community heritage in which literacy of the written word is not necessarily privileged. (Hear him read, though, and you will recognize an allegiance to the power of each word spoken.)

I have to say that I appreciate this experience of the song, of not having meanings reduced by explanation. There is not a table of contents, and the poems proceed untitled, set in the middle of their pages. Occasionally an empty page allows the reader a moment to survey the landscape, to assemble it into something newly familiar, before the tumbling, churning notes continue their modulation. This collection is the singular power of an individual voice. Rigoberto González describes Bitsui's style as "lyrical, elliptical." It is "neither personal nor anthropological" and resists "straightforward narrative and folkloric characterizations" (González). Yet, if I insist on framing the work culturally, it is because Bitsui also includes the flatly historical.

Even as he destabilizes materiality as a referent for linear time, Bitsui works back through the body, the Native American, the Navajo, body. "*[N]ihízaad* [Our languages]," he writes, "peeled open inside a diabetic mouth" (57). Here is the colonized body. It suffers the effects of commodity foods, of government-issued cans of meat, of the subtraction of plant-based diets. The prevalence of diabetes, as I write, is 22% within the Navajo Nation (Navajo Nation). The history of the US government's efforts to control, infect, and, through eugenics programs as recently as the 1970s, even *prevent* Native American bodies, is an unavoidable backdrop.[4]

This history makes it more than eerie—devastating, in fact—that people are only incompletely present in *Flood Song*—present, but no more composite than other objects in the topography. "Their dimmed faces—hollowed-out with spoons— / are then folded over lightbulbs / and placed diagonally alongside the freeway" (53). *Flood Song*'s topography is scoured by the wash of emerging and submerging symbols and forms:

> *What season cannot locate an eye in the dark of the sound of the sun gyrating into red ocher after I thought you noticed my language was half wren, half pigeon and, together, we spoke a wing pattern on the wall that was raised to keep "us" out . . . (13).*

Bitsui does not abandon the body, but he does press the meaning-making senses outside of human faculties, at least "human" as it has come to be delimited by a Western enlightenment tradition. Bitsui accesses what Joron calls the "non-anthropomorphic senses of the body of language" (57). Access to these senses, Joron suggests, is made available through paradox, which is

> *both an opening and a closing, a wound, a window on the surface of signs. Even as it bars the way to human understanding, it yields access to the non-anthropomorphic senses of the body of language. (57)*

Paradox, Joron adds, "offers itself as a successor to metaphor and metonymy" (18). Bitsui's language does not seem interested in likenesses or in representative segues. "You stop to wonder what *like* sounds like," he writes, "when held under glacier water, / how *Ná ho kos* feels / under the weight of all that loss" (11). There is no approximation that metaphor can concoct; there are no linkages of representation upon which metonymy can rely—not to make sense of that loss. Bitsui pursues something more directly behind the language, something like the absence that, in *Heredities*, Martinez describes as the part of his language that he's inherited. And this absence, for Bitsui, is not without agency. In the backdrop of nothingness, likenesses to and versions of something else may not materialize. There is, rather, an epigenetic quality to this space; things can emerge fully figured from any point in time.

In *Flood Song*, expectations that the reader may have about how phenomena articulate are jumbled. The reader trained in alphabetic logic gets estranged from the meaning-making process, at least as he/she/they expect it to operate in English. Readers are immersed in the song, are set in the flood plain. Readers experience the synaesthesia out of which Bitsui makes "a wound . . . on the surface of signs." Western training about how phenomena ought to relate and about how time ought to incrementally cohere does us a disservice. It is through this synaesthesia that Bitsui achieves the paradox to which Joron refers.

It would be easy, I think, to read *Flood Song* and dismiss the relevance of Bitsui's Navajo language, to mistake Bitsui's rendering of Diné perception as simply another step toward an inevitable cultural integration—that move into English. One could Europeanize the work, referring unconditionally to Bitsui's Surrealist tendencies. This is almost always mentioned in descriptions of his poetry, and there is, no doubt, that also. To be clear, in focusing on Diné history and cultural values I am not trying to somehow provincialize the poetry, or Navajo life, for that matter. I don't intend to assign or restrict this style of perception to pastoral landscapes or to reservation life, which is, as Philip J. Deloria reminds, "anachronistic *only* in white expectation" (232). Without tending to this history and these values, though, particularly as they develop, and develop within the Diné language, I think we miss encountering the fertility of the "nothingness" engaged by Bitsui.

A study of Diné semantics observes that "existence" for the Diné should be understood as a "continuous manifestation." So what Westerners call the future is

> *like a stock of possibilities, of incompletely realized events and circumstances. They are still most of all 'becoming' (rather than being) and involved in a process of 'manifesting' themselves. A human being can, through his thought and desire, exert an influence on these 'possibles.' (Abrams, from Pinxten et al., pp. 20–21)*

Bitsui textures his multiverse, where the behaviors of objects and subjects are not pinned to time (rather, they are omnivalent), and where the body's senses share rather than delineate space. Bitsui crafts a kind of tonal encounter that is buoyed by the rhythmics of a "third language." Bitsui observes that his poetic language combines "Navajo sensibilities with English linearity" (González). In these poems, meaning is not garnered by occupying the Other's attention; meaning is not obsessed with embodiment. In *Flood Song*, the notion of self tumbles in reciprocity with the environment's materializing elements rather than courting anthropomorphic identity. The field of comprehension is expanded.

Rather than creating a linguistic self that streams forward, activating time, activated by desire for an Other (or a Likeness), Bitsui offers a cipher. In that distance where we expect meaning to appear, he is careful not to produce meaning simply out of impatience. A speaking self does

not get privileged for lack of time or to make a point. Selfhood is not proven by separation and individuation. We are positioned otherwise than at such distillation. We are awash in a realm of "possibles."

V.

In the way that Bitsui does not stream forward an interpretation of the distance, in *Heredities* Martinez's speaking presence does not monopolize our gaze. Curating a desert of white space, Martinez uses language to work backward through the senses, destabilizing them, so that the senses no longer synchronize perception according to familiar semantic logic. The assumption of unity between the sign and its meaning no longer holds. The distance is exposed. And the symbol—not just the linguistic, but, by extension, the anthropomorphic, the self—is collapsing. Is there a place where, or a way in which, meaning exists outside of its signs, not in some ideal form, but more elementally? Where affective encounters occur without thematizing the self (in strictly anthropomorphic terms, anyway)? And where that self is consensually available?

I watch my youngest son skip across the dead grass to a playground swing-set and wonder, how do we find ways of listening that will lead us out of the stale metaphorical realities that English produces? Framed by my own subject position, which is responsible for so much of the violence embedded in the language, I am looking for ways to come forward and, also, ways to withhold, to hold space, as I learn how to estimate how "I" am read. Mostly, I am learning how to listen in a way that my subject position's training, my white male American inheritance, does not typically include. My inheritance insists on dissecting, on penetrating, on categorizing, on knowing—on a semantic logic and a linear meaning-making that might never articulate what I need to hear.

I have in mind Jane Bennett's observation and difficulty as she discusses distributions of agency through non-human phenomena. In *Vibrant Matter* she explores notions of vital materialism by parsing Western philosophical traditions that include Merleau-Ponty (as well as Spinoza, Bergson, Driesch, Adorno, Deleuze, and Guattari). She writes that "[i]t seems necessary and impossible to rewrite the default grammar of agency, a grammar that assigns activity to people and passivity to things" (119). *Heredities*, *Incantations*, and *Flood Song* demonstrate that this is not an impossible rewriting.

VI.

Wishing neither to conclude nor to go on, I leave off indefinitely. This is a letter excerpt from poet, performer, and activist Cecilia Vicuña:

> *Beware, Beware, my heart says, as the ground slips away. And, I remember the old call "organize," "organize," but I have changed the meaning of that word (in one of my poems)! Changed it to remember the energy of the org inside the organ, the orgon in orgasm. Our life work is beauty itself. (Vicuña, 177)*

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Notes

1. In his entry on "hybrid" for *Cross Cultural Poetics*, Heriberto Yépez points this out: "Hybrid: Postmodernism's key notion, maybe the notion that sustains most postmodernism's quackery. Through the illusion of *hybridism* contradiction is obscured, turned commodity. Not able to recognize and accept the other in its complete otherness, we turn it into hybrid, i.e., half me, similar to Us. . . . We have naturalized the 'hybrid' category so much, that the mere mention of this category as purely cultural, artificial, contextualized (in imperialistic epistemology) seems a 'menace,' an evil return to 'Nationalism' or 'Pure.'"

2. Here, Martinez's speaker proposes an embodied example of Bennett's distinction between origin and causality. Origin cannot be discovered; or, origin is no longer legible; or, origin has not produced a predictable outcome; or, origin has leapt its descendants (now antecedents) and (re)appeared out of order. Martinez is also thinking about the self as a language-object. It is subject to identification by words whose evocations—meaning, tone, overall intentions—change across time, even while the actual words do not. In *Poetic Diction, A Study in Meaning*, Owen Barfield explores this historicity of the language-object. Barfield discusses the separation of the self from its environment, explaining this subject-object distinction as a linguistic problem. For him, poetry is capable of erasing this distinction.

3. This "mystical" sense of receivership has been explained to me by Amelia at Amelia's Tree ("psychic readings for people who like apples"—my friends and I refer to her as the Oracle of Olympia, WA). A thought makes a wave, she explains, a vibration, and it attracts the qualities of that thought. And the more present you are, the thicker the vibrations that are created—denser, packed with more energy—until there is a high-pitch sound that calls to you. It lets you access a full energy point. That full energy point contains knowledge of one's relationship with one's entire continuum of being (Romoff).

4. In 1970, Congress passed the Family Planning Services and Population Research Act. It legalized the use of federal funds for the sterilization of poor people. Reviews of the records found that 25–50% of Native American women were sterilized between 1970 and 1976. The visits were not necessarily related to reproductive concerns, and the sterilizations often occurred without the knowledge of the women. Where there was consent, it was often coerced through threats of withdrawing future healthcare or of removing already-born children from the mother's custody (Rutecki).

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TWO POEMS

TIMOTHY DONNELLY

Poem Written with a Pinecone in My Hand

Here in my hand a cone from the beautiful eastern white pine sits
an offering from the tree planted thirty years ago after earth softened up
come spring enough to dig a hole roughly twice the size of the burlap
ball around the root of it. The cone measures six inches in length minus

the short stem; the stem extends into the axis around which whorl
forty-two wood-like scales. Under each scale a pair of seeds with blunt
single wings like aged paper once hid until the cone in its second
year flared open and released them into the paws of a ground squirrel.

Turn the pinecone to the left if you can hear me from the Connecticut
Turnpike of your afterlife. I'll stroke with focus my left thumb on
adjacent scales for hidden music. The longer I look at it the more human
the pinecone becomes as I become less one the longer I look at it.

The squirrel ate a portion of the seeds at once, tucked the remainder
in its cheeks to carry them back to its nest in the fieldstone wall
around the ruined flowerbed where foxglove used to grow. Meanwhile,
cells in your body had started going wrong. Not that I understand or

can pretend to. Turn the pinecone to the right if you hear me still.
Deep in the brain of invertebrates, the pineal gland gets its name from
its resemblance to a pinecone. Anatomists also call it the conarium
for the same reason. Melatonin factory, vestigial third eye, storied portal
to higher dimensions. The cone weighs approximately half an ounce, or
as many as five ruby-throated hummingbirds. How is it we think
next to nothing of what a hummingbird weighs, or what the bobolink
eats (rice, seeds, grains), or how it might feel to descend from dinosaur

to morsel. We exist in relation to the totality but choose to consider
the smallest portion of it possible. Demonstrate with the pinecone
what awareness outside the constraint of time feels like, if you can.
Foxglove prefer moist, rich, slightly acidic soil. I sliced my forefinger

with a knife on your Klonopin tonight cooking dinner for my family.
I did and didn't feel it. I think you knew I wouldn't have it in me to hurt
for long and when I did I died the way when made to feel like dirt
in the first place you come back partway dead or ready for it anyway.

All the while the cone of the white pine was the state flower of Maine.
It's the nonsense I miss. When people quarrel they forget for a time
that life is meaningless. Our last ended in me admitting to become
a parent solves nothing actually. The pinecone seems like it has a stain

from sap and rain. A wash. I wish the days I'm left were for planting
trees again instead of watering window-box impatiens and confinement.
Here in my hand a cone from the beautiful eastern white pine sits
stone still. Keep it that way. It isn't true that hummingbirds can't sing:

I hear them in my head all spring as a seed lost in the squirrel's haste
trembles into the pine whose cone I contain long after I set it down to rest.

Levitation

Apart from loved ones' speech, the plonk of a wild blueberry
into an empty plastic bucket at the end of July will be the sound

I console myself with as I die again this time in the soundlessness
of deep space. Time runs out. That's what it does. I remember

a kind scorch of sun, small-scented autumn clematis, old oak
overhanging my room like the grandparent who couldn't exactly

protect me but had to know what I had to feel. Head on my pillow
certain what was real was thinking, and everything external was

just practice. But there were times, places that did come close
to a completeness, close enough. The blueberry bushes burning

red as brushfire come October under wide cyan sky: early on I felt
most welcome where alone. When the planet dies, it dies despite

and because of human feeling. Hope, sorrow; anger, greed. I never
did grow comfortable with it: splintered glass around my feet

and nuclear terror, the loudness of near people in chemical distress
needing to express it over and over, weaponizing the language

at me as I waited for the beams of light to break through birches
heralding my departure. And not sunbeams, either, but beams

from the gold oblong vehicle all of us saw once interrupting kickball.
Why make a person see something so exceptional if it won't be

central to their life. Why only this one way of it we fight for
and only when there's profit. The light, the light. I feared I might

lift above the parish muttering into mass, an arrogance I forgive
of a child: primary narcissism has its time, place. But a superpower

can't depend on stunting everyone into it interminably and still
expect to progress. Yesterday I walked my darkening circles sick

of how ashamed I felt of everything but sunflowers. Tonight I feel
alright. The light, the light, the light. But what I want to feel is

like Teresa, ground to pieces, hopelessly elect: as I try to create
resistance, it will feel as though some great force beneath my feet

pushes me up, pushes me along the way a disk hovers in the air
through clouds and over oak, over dogwood and the basketball hoop,

the cold magnetic pull of Earth neutralized by an equal force
acting in opposition, Earth's magnetic current measured, analyzed

and overtaken, forcing a body into space: breath held, counting down
by halves eternally, Earth a memory, weight no intrinsic property

of matter, matter inessential to reason, no reason needed to support
flight: nothing visible, nothing tangible, nothing audible, nothing more.

Timothy Donnelly's poems have appeared in The New Yorker, The New York Times, The Paris Review, Poetry, *and elsewhere. He is currently Director of Poetry at Columbia University and lives in Brooklyn with his family.*

DRESSER

LIZ COUNTRYMAN

This dresser's wood has held some air in it—
a dresser of air—
and the air holds
something about what it was to be alive sixty years ago:
the kitchen brighter than its garbage,
the hanging kitchen ornaments almost sarcastically still against
the strength of the oncoming week
and how one usually looked at others in profile
over a jar of mayonnaise—

I am over you as you try to fall asleep in your pack and play, little Franny,
but it is hard for you because of your loose arms
picking up handfuls of damp sleep sack
and then dropping them, which wakes you up again.
The way a dresser holds

things that are "precious" but not exactly something you want to keep—
things that must be kept—
I am a repository

of your head smell,
some crumpled stickers,
an accumulated mass of scraps I can either
put in a box, glue down in some arbitrary order or throw away
so they'll sit someplace in my mind's landfill.

The dresser is both useful and imaginary.
I have my clothes in there. But it's also my mind's dresser,
so that there is a drawer in my hands, tough to move,
and also an entire dresser flying behind me in a stiff wind.
This big old dresser was in my childhood room.
It faces me squarely, the heaviest piece of furniture in the house.
Showing me my lovely fifteen-year-old lip gloss
it used to say, *Someday, you might be shiny.*

Or *calm down—you can sustain*
the feeling of being in a room.
Just look at the room you are: a young airy body in stupid old clothes.

It's aged, it smells, it might have lost weight.
I like how it looks and I like how I can see all its sides.

Now I'm reading to you, Franny and Olive,
a book about the peace of arctic animals.
A walrus and a narwhal and an Inuit girl
watch a beluga "singing."
They notice each other and pose next to each other—that's a metaphor.
As we face the book, I feel so adjacent to you.
Is tomorrow worse than today?
Your imaginations speed ahead of the bed we're on
and these animals are dragging behind;
I tied them there.

I'm teaching you to use toilet paper.
It was ripped from the Great Northern Forest.

This morning, Olive, we leave you in the schoolyard
and you don't know we are leaving,
and when we come back a few minutes later you are crying with your teacher,

the sky hanging heavily as I hope the sky will always do—
losing its breath, or its breath lost—
the way the inside of a mouth can simply keep things still in there.
That thick weather calming the traffic
before a storm, during which
I'll be between you and the sky like a strip of cloth.

By giving each of my daughters a sibling, I also give them
some other region they're next to but can't know,
evidence of the past, bits,
as though memory could be viewed from the outside.
As in: plastic "Easter grass," rotary telephones,
a carpeted stair for my elbows,

a round of trees outside the living room windows
through which I was associated with the road.

Everyplace I ever stepped seemed like some potential way to always be,
as though I might have stayed there—
a thing I didn't choose, but could keep within
as an everlasting option—a mood—

like staying inside on a cloudy day, and wanting the living room to be quiet,
the white clouds, the aging year,
maybe touching one or two keys on the piano,
an hour until I could eat lunch, which would even then be early,
the mood of a weekday when one is at home but not sick—
the holidays are coming, the house is empty,
my dad has gone out for one hour but I'm not sure how long that is.
I feel just fine if I keep my eyes facing the front of the house,
facing up through the tree branches
towards the street, a quiet street on a slope,
where sometimes a car will pass and mostly it's not my dad's car.

This is just one particular day, seeking its form.
There's no weather. There are no dates anymore, although
today is October 23, 2017.
There are no parents in the house.

Every time a car passed I thought:
that car is like or not like my mother's car, my father's car.
That car is a Volvo, but not brown.
That car is brown, but not a Volvo.

In the future, if I could visit it,
I might walk around a strange landscape and then come suddenly upon
a dresser that looks familiar
and inside it there is some knowable air.

I know I just met you, but I'll still be here
when only by comparison or there being something different makes it so—
I'll be some other option, an everlasting option,

just me today, imperfect, fat,
not quite a good joke, falling short by watching the same movie again
or by wanting to go inside when we're outside playing.
The temperatureless air nearby a truck or a argument,
an empty house we wait for bees to come and live in.
As certainly as this evening I'll
"make" you something to eat,
I am beside you forever
like a mood.

Liz Countryman's first book is A Forest Almost *(Subito, 2017). She teaches in the MFA program at the University of South Carolina and co-edits* Oversound*, an annual poetry journal.*

THREE POEMS

SHARON OLDS

Big Boy Blue

Big boy blue, when you were born
did you weigh ten pounds, or a dozen? And were you
the color of a summer sky
till your big lungs took your first
February first breath? The fire,
this morning, looks like hair, growing
fast motion and writhing. When you were a child,
did you look at a mother with writhing snakes growing
out of her head? You did not turn
to stone, but to language, you turned to air
and water with the wind's writing on them.
When we first met, you seemed like a wolf in wolf's
clothing of beauty, a man with the fresh
ancient mouth of an early singer,
a man who was ready for a woman friend.
Above the pond, this morning, there are figures, bent
forward, made of breath, going east
from west, as if on a long march.
Wherever people were walking for freedom,
you would walk with them. Old Man Blue,
the sheep's in the meadow, the cow's in the corn,
the beaver is moving slowly across
the upside-down sky, through the clouds, trailing
her cape of wake. How can it be
you are not in the world, only your long
husk, your music all poured out,
safely decanted, into the rich cold
cellar of reds we would drink and describe—
a cabernet with the bouquet of a
school playground in the rain, after
the bell has rung, a sauvignon like a
No. 2 pencil lead, stabbed decades
ago, into my knee, or the salt
and money Odysseus smelled on the side of the
sheep. I'm blowing my horn for you,
again, in a world where you cannot hear it—
you are supine, washed, clothed in linen, being
lowered into the mountain like an underground
stream we will come put our ears to your chest
the rest of our lives. The sheaves are in,
the sun is setting, like a meteor, deep
into the earth, and where is the one
we love? the one who looked after us?
He is under the haystack, fast asleep.

Unexpected Flourishing

For a crone bald
at both ends—
her neath-her pate
as well as her above-her—
to sing the merkin would be one thing.
I sang it when the bird could still be
heard, in the bush, trilling in the curliques—
and then the deforestation of the moist
mosses, ferns, and soft lichens
progressed. And I'd appreciated—
sixty years ago, when I'd
begun to sprout a little woods—how
bushy-tailed I was, the sweet
cloud of the bunny's dark puff,
on me, in front. Years later,
when I was approaching the last exits
of middle age, when time was smoothing and
denuding me—
though my body and soul
had their eye
on a man—there suddenly rose up
delicate coils of black bed-springs
from out of Venus's mound on me,
the fresh spirals of a woman in her late
prime. Whether we ever or whether
we never, I gaze down at them now
in wonder, the darling tiny bell-pulls, the ringlets of bright dodder.

Graduation Aria

When she'd tried to shush the families behind us,
and in front of us, and beside us, scowling
in fastidious distaste—they were *chatting*, during
her grandson's graduation; when
the ceremony had ended; when the dinner
was eaten, when we took her back
to her room in the college dormitory like a
medieval fortress, and went
over the room, with her, again—
the window, the light, the heat, the key,
the bathroom she would share with strangers—
I pretended everything was fine, but I saw,
for a moment, that my mother really had been
an orphan, she'd never for a moment had a mother
who could love her. So I kissed her forehead, and left her
there, little pack-rat in an old stone room
with a twenty-four-foot ceiling, and I went
upstairs, and in a narrow dorm bed like a
trough my husband and I flew through the
air carolling—now I see I was
trilling like the wren who threw the phoebe
nestling out of the back-porch nest, I was
that kind of happy, having put
my mother in durance. For years, then,
I ate my gladness of her anxious night
without knowing I was eating it.
Weeks before her death, she smiled, and
said, "Remember that dungeon?" and I kissed her
with sudden affection toward the one who without
having been loved by her own mother
had taught me to love her and hate her, to hate and love.

Sharon Olds is the author of twelve books, most recently Arias *(Penguin/Random House, 2019). She is the winner of many honors, including the Pulitzer, the T. S. Eliot Prize, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Olds teaches in the Graduate Creative Writing Program at New York University.*

A HERD OF WILD ELEPHANTS MATTERS MORE: STORYTELLING WITH THE TAROT

A craft essay with a porthole, 25 provocations, & a paradox

EMILY CARR

"Rachel, Monique" exhibition by Sophie Calle at the Church of the Heavenly Rest, NYC (photo by Allison Meier)

Pre-Fix: A Porthole

Last year's Tarot cards were the High Priestess and Justice.[1] The world was full of sadness and sharp edges and it was time to own up to our truths, individually and collectively. This year's cards are the Empress and the Hanged One—an odd pair and inauspicious, at least in terms of climate change.[2] Together, they indicate that this is our last lifetime to be in incarnation with toxic familial/species patterns; this is a stressful transition/transmogrification but it will happen regardless of our participation so we may as well SHOW UP and STEP UP.

As queer feminist witches Sarah Faith Gottesdiener and Amanda Yates Garcia stress in their *Strange Magic* podcast, the Major Arcana are what you make of them. They are keys, doors, portholes: into possibility and possible futures. On their own, they don't *make* anything happen; we discover things about ourselves inside a Tarot card like we discover strength and flexibility inside a yoga pose. Tarot is about living: how that energy—the energy we find inside the cards, or inside a yoga pose—plays out in life, about meeting ourselves somewhere we didn't intend or want to—or think we could—go. Tarot cards are not clear-cut but circular; they spiral and, as Jana Riley writes, "when we perceive them, if we perceive them at all, it is because we are recognizing in them one or more of our own personal angles on something."[3] The cards are thus handy resources for writers, who practice—or *should* be practicing—the fine art of self-interrogation whenever we engage with the page.

In the craft essay that follows, I'll take an ultra-deep dive into this year's cards, exploring their meanings in relation to storytelling, the imagination, and the creative psyche and ending with some prescriptions to inspire your own deep dive. With French artists Sophie Calle and Niki de Saint Phalle; mycologist, documentary poet, and composer John Cage; conceptual artist and musician Yoko Ono; authors Dorthe Nors, Mary Ruefle, Joy Williams, and Maggie Nelson; and poets Lucie Brock-Broido, Thomas James, and CAConrad as guides, we'll examine each card philosophically—*what* should I do and here's *why*—and then zoom in for some writing provocations—*how* can I get it done. Along the way, we'll examine the role of age, chance, negative capability, fertility, breath, and silence in our work. Be forewarned: I am not going to tell you what to do with these cards or how to make the most of that uniquely human muscle that is the literary mind. The purpose of this essay is to explore the imagination at different scales, to offer a porthole here, there, so you can find your own way in.

PART I THE EMPRESS: OWN IT

Double your age and, if you die and it's not a tragedy, you're middle-aged. —Deanne Smith

Trying to write about my mother is like staring at the sun. —Leslie Jamison

In a world where women are almost always defined by their relationships (daughter, sister, lover, wife, mother, grandmother) it strikes me as important to shed a light on the woman herself. What is she without all these shoes she has to fill? —Dorthe Nors

The Empress is card #3 in Tarot's Major Arcana. She's all about CREATION and FERTILITY, and, as such, asks you to reevaluate your public persona as an artist and OWN IT. Compared to the High Priestess (card #2), she's the other side of the pomegranate: she's about pregnancy, success and harmony in interpersonal relationships, offspring and innovation. The Empress is a card that's thus most useful when you're ready to bring your writing into the world. She indicates great fruition but is also a warning that there may be unintended or unanticipated consequences. (Because, for example, she is so remarkably feminine, and physical in her femininity, the Empress is always going to suffer from an invisibility problem. But that's another story, and one we'll get to later . . .)

The Empress is generally thought of as the queen of queens or the mother of mothers and you really can't not talk about the archetype of mother when talking about this card. Two French artists come to mind, neither of them known as mothers, both of them, in fact, somewhat notorious in their relationship to motherhood, both of whom carefully cultivated and, ultimately, OWNED their public personas: first, the infamously intrusive conceptual artist Sophie Calle, who channeled her grief over her mother's death into a controversial art installation, "Rachel, Monique," and whose purse bears a badge that reads "I can't believe it, I forgot to have children!" Second, "pioneering artist provocateur" and "extravagant nihilist" Niki de Saint Phalle, who was infamously accused of doing "the worst thing a woman could do"—abandoning her children for art—and who, before there was a women's movement, was captivated by liberation. "Men's roles seem to give them a great deal more freedom," she wrote to a friend in the early fifties, "and I WAS RESOLVED THAT FREEDOM WOULD BE MINE." [See John Cage.][4]

Calle has said that she doesn't desire to have children. She doesn't desire, and she doesn't regret. She is a woman who, in fact, claims to have no regrets. "Rachel, Monique," an elegiac meditation on the life and death of Calle's mother, features a film of Monique Sindler reclining in her deathbed projected onto a fleur-de-lis patterned paper; a large photograph depicting Sindler's tombstone with the epitaph she chose, "Je m'ennuie déjà," or "I'm already bored"; letters made of real butterflies stenciled on a glass panel leaning on the chapel altar spelling "souci," Sindler's last word; and Kim Cattrall's (Sindler's favorite actress) mellifluous voice reading collaged excerpts from Sindler's diaries in an English translation from the original French. The film shows Sindler in profile, lying with eyes closed. At some point, she dies, and the hands of unseen attendants touch her neck and chest.

Remarkably, interviewers rarely press Calle to unpack her motives when discussing what could be seen as the most intrusive and controversial of her installations. "Art," Calle says to Louise Neri, "is a way of taking distance. The pathological or therapeutic aspects exist, but just as catalysts." When talking about filming her mother's last breath and later, for all intents and purposes, appropriating that last breath for art, Calle says:

> *Initially it was pragmatic—it was not at all an artistic gesture. I was living my mother's death, not trying to imagine it for a project. I was depressed. I was afraid. I was very involved. Consciously, I wanted to catch her last word. Later, once I had decided this, I realized that it was a way to take distance from it.*[5]

> *It was when I didn't have any more decisions to make that I realized I could no longer watch it. But since she is dead, I have never spent that much time with her. She is with me all the time, I make shows for her, she travels with me, we're talking about her right now. We're the closest we've ever been.*[6]

> *When the film was finished, I controlled where it would be seen, in a quiet sanctum. It's a work that I want to continue to control carefully. I don't sell it, and I have already refused to show it in several other contexts because I could not be there.*[7]

[Three Provocations]

1: Write something that brings you closer to your mother, or your mother closer to you. Keep it with you (literally or metaphorically) for at least three years before sharing it publicly. Replace "mother" with "Earth" and repeat.

2: Write about the moment when a child first sees her/his mother as a real person and *keeps on* loving her.

3: In the 1990s, Janet Champ was given the task of writing "motivational" text for women, which included phrases like "a woman can stop waiting for her stupid prince to come and go for a nice long run instead"; "if a woman is to be measured, let her be measured by the things she can control, by who she is and who she is trying to become"; "if you let me play sports, I will be more likely to leave a man who beats me. If you let me play, I will be less likely to get pregnant before I want to"; and, most troubling (at least in my opinion) of all:

> *YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BE YOUR MOTHER UNLESS SHE IS WHO YOU WANT TO BE, YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BE YOUR MOTHER'S MOTHER, OR YOUR MOTHER'S MOTHER'S MOTHER, OR EVEN YOUR GRANDMOTHER'S MOTHER ON YOUR FATHER'S SIDE. YOU MAY INHERIT THEIR CHINS OR THEIR HIPS OR THEIR EYES, BUT YOU ARE NOT DESTINED TO BECOME THE WOMEN WHO CAME BEFORE YOU, YOU ARE NOT DESTINED TO LIVE THEIR LIVES. SO IF YOU INHERIT SOMETHING, INHERIT THEIR STRENGTH, IF YOU INHERIT SOMETHING, INHERIT THEIR RESILIENCE. BECAUSE THE ONLY PERSON YOU ARE DESTINED TO BECOME IS THE PERSON YOU DECIDE TO BE.*[8]

Tell a different story, in which inheriting your mother is both a *good* and a *bad* thing.

Saint Phalle's mother, like Calle's, was purportedly a beautiful, self-absorbed, absent, hands-off woman mired in artificial middle-class rules who feared invisibility and made her daughter feel unwanted. Saint Phalle, like Calle, learned at a young age to find love elsewhere. Saint Phalle, like Calle, developed a controversial attitude towards her own fertility, rejecting the roles of wife, mother, and daughter to cultivate the persona of femme fatale. Saint Phalle is known for works created at the juncture of art, personal charisma, and political gesture. Most sensationally, she created "shooting paintings" by firing a rifle at assemblages of knives, scissors, eggbeaters, and baby-doll arms that she had embedded in plaster along with bags of paint and the occasional tomato. When the bullets hit, the art started "bleeding."

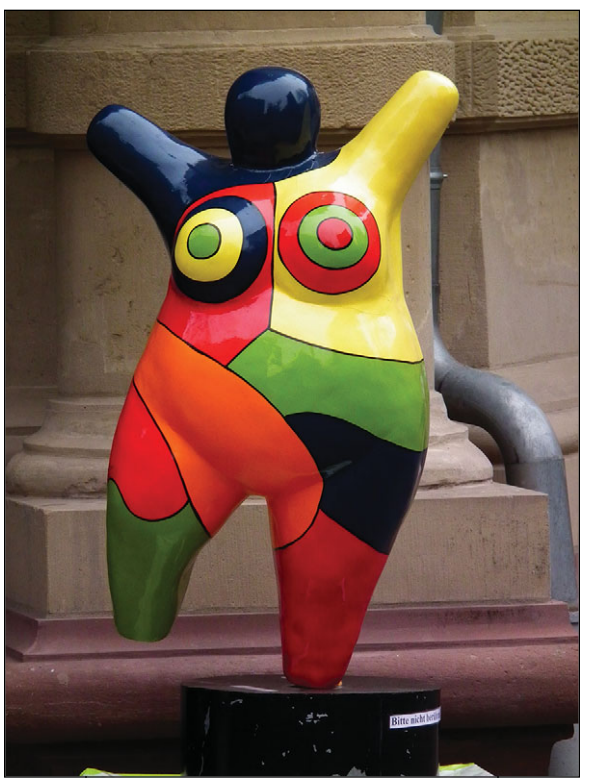
"Performance art did not yet exist, but this was a performance," she famously claimed. "Here I was, an attractive girl (if I had been ugly, they would have said I had a complex and not paid any attention), screaming against men in my interviews and shooting." This, as Saint Phalle sees it, was the only way to escape being considered a "second-class citizen"—"one of those writer's wives that paint." (At the time, she was married to writer Harry Mathews.)[9]

In her *New Yorker* article on Saint Phalle, Ariel Levy writes:

> *When Saint Phalle entered the asylum, in the early nineteen-fifties, she was a twenty-two-year-old wife, mother, erstwhile fashion model, and lapsed French aristocrat . . . After Saint Phalle left the asylum, she was never again content to live as a wife and mother . . . If American radical feminism of the time was about rewriting the rules of society, Saint Phalle had a different notion: she felt that the rules simply did not apply to her. And while she had little interest in the domestic aspects of womanhood—the drudgery that was afflicting American women with Betty Friedan's "problem with no name"—she exalted her own vision of the feminine mystique. Even as she spurned child care, she was obsessed with the primal power of the mother and with the erotic power that made mothers out of women in the first place.*[10]

Despite Calle's own feelings about traditional feminine roles and her lack of interest in domesticity, her signature creation, the Nanas, are the Empress through and through—big, bright female dancers with small heads and enormous hips and breasts. The first Nana, *Hon* ("she" in Swedish), was exhibited legs spread at a museum in Stockholm, where visitors lined up to enter through her door-sized vagina. Inside, they found a twelve-seat cinema in one arm, a milk bar inside a breast, and a brain with moving mechanical parts built by her second husband, artist Jean Tinguely. Some critics saw this as "a form of inner reconciliation": "lying on her back like a woman giving birth, rather than expelling a baby from her body, she received bodies."[11]

Saint Phalle, the "mother of monsters," envisioned her Tuscany *Tarot Garden*—which has been called vertiginous and paroxysmic, an "esoteric stroll," a "sulphureous pleasure garden," a "fundamental spiritual experience," a "psychedelic bomb," "a psychically anagogic autobiography," "an irrefutable journey to the dimension of freedom," and one of "the seventies' great monuments"—in a dream while locked in an insane asylum as a punishment/cure for suicide ideation.[12] According to legend, she took on the role of "second mother" deliberately during the construction of the *Tarot Garden*. There is footage of Saint Phalle serving lunch to workers in undershirts, who sit at her dining table inside the Empress, under a chandelier made of a cow's skull. She wrote to Harry Mathews (her ex-husbands both remained life-long friends): "This familiar gesture to all these handsome, very young Italian machos—who before were really just country boys, farmers . . . helped me to assume a psychological power. It was easy for them to take orders from La Mama, they do their whole life, as long as I respected the very thin façade of their maleness."[13] At the time, she herself was living inside the Empress, an enormous Sphinx covered in phantasmagorical reinterpretations of female mythological figures, from Venus de Milo to Diana of Ephesus—one paw contained the bathroom with a large blue snake in the center, reflected in the mirrored ceiling, its coils marking out the shower area. Saint Phalle slept in one breast and cooked in the other.



Replica of a Nana, Karlsruhe, Germany

In letters and interviews on her *Tarot Garden*, Saint Phalle wrote:

> *The cards are a philosophical path indicating the trials through which man must pass to understand his own motivations and his relationship with the Universe.*
>
> *The tarots have given me a greater understanding of the spiritual world and of life's problems, and also the awareness that each difficulty must be overcome, so that one can go on to the next hurdle and finally reach inner peace and the garden of paradise.*
>
> *If life is a game of cards, we are born without knowing our roles. And yet we still have to play our hand.*[14]

[Three Provocations]

4: Once upon a time, a woman was a very successful lawyer. For over twenty years her career had escalated, she had become a star attorney, and there was not a week where she didn't have to meet with the people in 10 Downing Street. She was someone, and therefore had to work around the clock and it was great fun, it was super interesting, it was high profile, and it was very exhausting.

When she reached her mid-forties her husband had suggested that she slow down. It was too late to have children but never too late to rediscover themselves as a couple, and to be frank she was exhausted from all the Prime Ministerial counseling. So she let go of her job and found herself a lower-profile one. No more cab rides to the center of power, just a briefcase, her 46th birthday coming up, and then the husband who would chew his toast very slowly in the morning. Perhaps he always chewed his toast that slowly, it's possible, she just hadn't been around to notice it, but there it was: slow chewing, and she had all the time in the world to witness it. Tell her story.[15]

5: If a woman has children, she will always be a mother, but a woman who has chosen not to procreate and who now no longer is young and sexy is perceived by many as a pointless being. Tell a different story. Give the childless middle-aged woman a point.[16]

6: In a *Paris Review* interview, Mary Ruefle says that "being invisible is the biggest secret on earth, the most wondrous gift that anyone could ever have given you." She goes on to explain that invisibility is "total autonomy and freedom . . . For me, it was a journey of shedding the sense of needing to please someone—parents, children, partners. Men don't become invisible in the same way . . . I know I'm using an archaic formula but I do belong to another century. For the longest time, male power was posited in the accumulation of wealth or experience, and experience was something every man could have. And a woman's power was always posited on physical attractiveness, the ability to have children. So as a man ages, he gains power, and as a woman ages, she loses it, or feels as though she does."[17] Rewrite the formula. If womanly power = fertility is indeed archaic, then what's the modern equation? Consider, for example, that it feels *good* to be forty, that it feels *good* to act middle-aged, that *believing* your age is something to be *praised*, that growing *old* is something to be relished/celebrated.

Unlike Calle's and Saint Phalle's mothers (or, at least, the mother as remembered by Calle and by Saint Phalle), the Empress is a giver, and she has a tendency to give too much. It's important for her to focus on balance, and boundaries, and being intentional about the energy she puts into

the world and what she expects from the world in return. She thus is an opportunity for you to ask yourself: how are you managing your artistic energy? What's going out into the world and what's coming back in? When is it time to keep something for yourself? Are you being mindful about the context in which your art is presented or are you just throwing it out there and hoping for the best? Do you, naively, expect a therapeutic outcome? If art isn't about therapy, or making other people feel "better," then what are you doing it for?

When I think of the shadow side of the Empress, I think about negative capability, which is, ostensibly, why one writes poetry—or, at least, the state one occupies when writing poetry. Famously, John Keats coined the phrase in a letter to his brothers, in which he defined negative capability as "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." Ostensibly, this is the frame of mind in which poetry happens. We poets talk about that a lot. And then move on.

In her essay "On Fear," poet Mary Ruefle writes:

> *Those words have become like a sickness unto death for me. As often as I have used them myself, I wish there were a moratorium on them for a decade, so overused are they, so bandied about that they have come to mean just about anything one wants them to, especially a bebop version of Be Here Now, or a diffusive religious awe in which the poet wanders, forever in a stupor.*
>
> *If negative capability works at all, it works in reverse, a kind of negative negative capability—which would make it positive—where very real anxiety and irritability over mystery and doubt enable the poet—no, propel him—into the world of the eye, the pure perceptual habit that checks all cognitive drives, not before they've begun but after they've begun, and done their damage.*[18]

The problem, as I see it, is the assumption that there is any *after* when it comes to negative capability, which, at least as Keats defined it, is a state of *ongoing* uncertainty and doubt which, ostensibly, extends from the moment of inspiration through revision to the act of publication and beyond.

Recently, for example, I published a craft essay, in which I talk about how being a suicide survivor and an adulteress informs my forthcoming Tarot romance, in an online forum with a mission of empowerment and un-silencing. I'd been writing about these two controversial topics lyrically for years—meaning the suicide attempts and the adultery informed what I was writing, they were underneath the surface, they were part of the lyric texture of the work, but they weren't explicitly part of the narrative. I wasn't, in other words, *outing* myself. In fact, the writing itself could be seen as a sleight of hand, a distraction from the desperate person whose life was running so deeply inside my own, threatening to shatter some carefully crafted illusions of sanity, responsibility, and reliability.

In "Acrobats of the Psychic Misdemeanor" I forced myself to be honest and explicit, saying things like:

> *When you are a suicide there is no one to love you, not even your own self.*
>
> *Name Your Bird Without A Gun, which you later come to think of as your Tarot romance, was conceived from the shame of having the kind of secret people just don't tell and the moral dilemma of lying about your own self, out of etiquette.*
>
> *Because you have become the kind of story people just don't tell.*[19]

Needless to say, it was brutally painful to write these things about my own self, and five years of serious self-scrutiny elapsed between writing them and deciding to share them publicly. This, I think, is one lesson of the Empress: the negotiation between inner and outer, thinking carefully about how and when you put yourself out in the world—naked and unashamed, in all of your beauty and all of your messiness as a flawed individual. What boundaries make that kind of vulnerability possible for you?

Empress from Niki de Saint Phalle's Tuscany Tarot Garden

Inside Niki de Saint Phalle's Empress

Until now I have, for example, carefully controlled (to the extent you can control anything on the Internet) the first appearance of "Acrobats" in the world; I chose an online publication curated and read by like-minded folks and unlikely to be read by people who would be offended or disturbed to be reading about suicide and infidelity. I did not share the news with the writers who taught in the MFA program I was running at the time, nor did I share it with our MFA students or alumni, nor did I share it with any of my colleagues at the university where I was working, nor did I share it with my parents or my sisters or any, for that matter, of my family members, nor did I share it with the two men (the ex-husband and the Immortal Beloved) who provoked me to write my Tarot romance. I had to cut them all out of the equation so I could say what I needed to say, and feel safe while saying it. Why? Because I *feared* their reaction . . .

(*Fear*, Ruefle writes, *is produced by loss, or the threat of loss, imagined or real . . .*)[20]

In "Sharks and Suicide," author Joy Williams unpacks our bizarre fear of sharks, which is "out of all proportion to the amount of injury or loss of life incurred statistically" due to shark attack. Then she explores the suicide of Wendy Williams, self-styled "rock-and-roll extremist and speed-metal priestess" and former lead singer of the punk-metal band the Plasmatics.[21]

Wendy was on the cover of *Vegetarian Times* in 1984, and in 1985 she was nominated for a Grammy for best female rock vocal and lost to Tina Turner. Then, Williams writes, "it was 1988 and she was thirty-eight and living in Connecticut."[22]

We believe, Williams writes:

> *in the now and the self. We believe that any anguish we might feel is caused by chemical imbalance, which can be corrected. We believe in the promise of a future through prophylactic drugs. We believe we always have the chance to reinvent ourselves.*
>
> *Wendy couldn't reinvent herself. [See Daisy Hildyard.]*
>
> *Of the notes she left, one of them said in part "I believe strongly that the right to take one's own life is one of the most fundamental rights that anyone in a free society should have . . . My feelings about what I am doing ring loud and clear to an inner ear and a place where there is no self, only calm."*
>
> *Then she went into the woods, fed some squirrels, put a bag over her head so she wouldn't utterly freak out the person who found her, shot herself, and died.*[23]

[Three Provocations]

7: Write about someone on the brink of revelation, or being pushed over the edge, and gaining insight into her or his true nature.[24]

8: Many women are torn between traditional ways of conceiving female life (i.e. on the lookout for men) and the lives they really want to live. Write about the "rehearsal space," where a woman elaborates, expresses, experiments, and becomes who she wants to be, without being controlled by her own self or others.[25]

9: When asked "John Cage, what does he communicate" for a one-hundred-year celebration of his birth, Yoko Ono responded: "History of Western music can be divided into B.C. (Before Cage) and A.C. (After Cage). I was a lucky girl to have bumped into him in my roller coaster life. Us downtown artists called him J.C., for Jesus Christ . . . not to his face but when we spoke about him amongst us."[26] Pick a controversial female artist with a wide impact. Divide the world in which you write/imagine/play/think into before and after. Explore. [See silence, John Cage.]

The Empress can be read as a card of undoing assumptions: about your relationship to your sexuality, about erotic pleasure, about knowledge through the body, about motherhood, and, because she is so closely linked with creativity, about the role of art in your life. I was recently subjected to an afternoon with a very garrulous piano tuner who writes poems that "are like hugs." When he asked me what my poems were like, I wanted to say "the opposite," but instead I held my tongue and said something vague about how, even if the subject matter is difficult or painful, poems can help readers feel less alone in the world—and that, after all, is what each of us is so desperate for, isn't it: to feel less alone, like our struggles and traumas aren't unique to that being we like to think of as the self. That said: I do not write to make either myself or my reader feel "better." In fact, I talk about most of my work as an antidote to our obsession with self-help, that peculiar American notion of adults as Survivors.

In what is sometimes referred to as her "powerhouse manifesto," "Why I Write," Williams, an iconoclast writer who has been referred to as a "misanthropic genius," who writes exclusively by typewriter, corresponds via the postal service, eschews the internet and other modern technology, and wears sunglasses indoors, writes:

> *It's become fashionable these days to say that the writer writes because he is not whole: he has a wound, he writes to heal it. But who cares if the writer is not whole? Of course the writer is not whole, or even particularly well. There's something unwholesome and self-destructive about the entire writing process . . .*
>
> *The writer trusts nothing he writes—it should be too reckless and alive for that, it should be beautiful and menacing and slightly out of control . . .*
>
> *The good piece of writing startles the reader back into Life . . . Good writing never soothes or comforts. It is no prescription, neither is it diversionary, although it can and should enchant while it explodes in the reader's face. Whenever the writer writes, it's always three or four or five o'clock in the morning in his head. Those horrid hours are the writer's days and nights when he is writing. The writer doesn't write for the reader. He doesn't write for himself, either . . .*
>
> *Why does the writer write? The writer writes to serve—hopelessly he writes in the hope that he might serve—not himself and not others, but that great cold elemental grace which knows us.*
>
> *A writer I very much admire is Don DeLillo. At an awards ceremony for him at the Folger Library several years ago, I said that he was like a great shark moving hidden in our midst, beneath the din and wreck of the moment, at apocalyptic ease in the very elements of our psyche and times that are most troublesome to us, that we most fear. Why do I write? Because I wanna be a great shark, too. Another shark. A different shark, in a different part of the ocean. The ocean is vast.*[27]

Once upon a time, Williams received a "typical" letter from an Iowa Workshop grad asking "why do short stories matter and why should we value them." "I was too weary for a reply," Williams recounts, "but I think they probably don't matter all that much. A herd of wild elephants matters more."[28] [See the second body, Daisy Hildyard.] As an iconoclast and a misanthrope, Williams undoes a lot of our assumptions about what it means to be a writer—she refuses, for example, to talk about craft during craft talks and interviews and makes controversial statements like "cultural diversity can never replace biodiversity, though we are being prompted to think it can" and "real avant garde writing today would frame and reflect our misuse of the world, our destruction of its beauties and wonders. No one seems to be taking this on in the literary covens."[29] [See the second body, Daisy Hildyard.]

Williams is the kind of writer who can get away with making these statements, just like Calle is the kind of artist who can get away with saying "I have no regrets," and Saint Phalle is the kind of woman who can pull off financing a monumental two-hectare Tarot garden featuring twenty-two gigantic steel and concrete sculptures up to fifteen feet high each. Each has been fashionable, in her own way, or, more accurately, made her own kind of fashion. They aren't, strictly speaking, maternal, but they are good at GETTING AWAY WITH IT, doing what women can't or haven't or won't or shouldn't do, writing their own rules and negotiating the consequences.

When I was an MFA student reading Mary Ruefle for the first time, this was my burning desire, I HAD to know HOW DID SHE GET AWAY WITH IT. My thesis supervisor advised me to write her a letter and ask; she responded but the letter has long since disappeared, along with whatever answer she might have provided. It's likely what I needed wasn't the answer, just the fact of her response, of being heard, of being someone in the world. After all, as Williams reminds us, the ocean is vast. What matters is being your own shark, in your own part of the ocean. Figuring out how to do that, and then keeping on with the doing of it, without getting sidetracked by whatever distractions the world wants to throw at you in terms of role and assumptions and unintended or unanticipated consequences.

[Three Provocations]

When mailing her typewritten interview responses to *Vice* writer Lincoln Michel, Williams included a small slip of handwritten paper with a list of "8 Essential Attributes of the Short Story (and one way it differs from a novel)":

> *1) There should be a clean surface with much disturbance below. 2) An anagogical level. 3) Sentences that can stand strikingly alone. 4) An animal within to give its blessing. 5) Interior voices which are or become wildly erratically exterior. 6) Control throughout is absolutely necessary. 7) The story's effect should transcend the naturalness and accessibility of its situation and language. 8) A certain coldness is required in execution. It is not a form that gives itself to consolation but if consolation is offered it should come from an unexpected quarter. And: a novel wants to befriend you, a short story almost never.*[30]

10: Write a piece that hinges on the animal within.

11: Write a story about a woman whose role is *not* to befriend you, whose lack of befriending drives the story.

12: List the females you know well, and ask yourself: if I was to think of them at any given time of day, would I be able to predict where they are and what they are doing? Categorize the women you know as "predictable" or "erratic." Look at the list and attempt to draw some conclusions. Repeat, categorizing the women you know by their tendency to aggregate around a hotshot male. [See the second body, Daisy Hildyard.]

Prescription

Genre: autofiction/künstlerroman

Secret Power: Knowing who someone was, and how they changed, and carrying all those past versions of them inside.

Dream Interpretation: Pride will be your downfall.[31]

Read: Sophie Calle's *Rachel, Monique*, Dorthe Nors' *Mirror, Shoulder, Signal*, Leslie Jamison's "I Met Fear on the Hill," Mary Ruefle's "On Fear," Emily Carr's "Acrobats of the Psychic Misdemeanor," Joy Williams' "Why I Write"

Listen: Wendy O. Williams, "It's My Life"

Eat: ketchup or cooked tomatoes

Do: Earth Piece IX

> *The Earth is like your mate*
> *you have abused and ignored.*
>
> *Ask to be forgiven.*
>
> *Tell the Earth how much you care.*
> *Tell the Earth how beautiful she is.*
> *Tell the Earth you love her.*
>
> *—Yoko Ono*[32]

PART II THE HANGED MAN: LET GO

Art is a sort of experimental station in which one tries out living. —John Cage

We are as free as birds. Only the birds aren't free. We are as committed as birds and identically. —John Cage

I have come to the conclusion that much can be learned about music by devoting oneself to the mushroom. —John Cage

The most, the best, we can do, we believe (wanting to give evidence of love), is to get out of the way, leave space around whomever or whatever it is. —John Cage

I read the Hanged Man, card #12 in the Major Arcana, as the card of BREATH, SILENCE, and LETTING GO. The Hanged Man is thus the poet's card, emphasizing white space, what happens between the lines, the power of suggestion/allusion/association, and resisting the temptation to fill the world up with words. The Hanged Man is a reminder to trust the reader, and give her/him an opportunity to do the work of making meaning, rather than the text making meaning for them.

TC Tolbert, a former colleague at Oregon State University–Cascades, recently conceived a graduate-level workshop called Poetry for Prose Writers. The course started with a pop quiz: what do John Updike, Herman Melville, Audre Lorde, Margaret Atwood, Alice Walker, Denis Johnson, Maggie Nelson, and Julianna Baggott (the list, as a matter of fact, goes on and on . . .) have in common? As you know, they were poets first. Then he asked the students to spend three minutes listing their favorite words and another three minutes listing the words they used in their writing all the time—and he instructed them not to forget about *and*, *the*, prepositions, pronouns, etc., the little words we forget that do, in fact, have meaning.

After sharing their lists, students were instructed to talk about the differences between the words they claim to love and the words they actually use. *The words*, TC told them, *that we use most often are the work horses that carry the words we love, the ones we actually enjoy. It's easier*, he told them, *to write a list for someone else in your workshop than to write a list of your own. Learning to track your own choices*, he explained, *is part of the point of the MFA. You can practice that by paying attention to someone else's work—paying attention in that way can be a kind of love.*

TC was trying to accomplish a lot of different things with this class: helping students understand the importance of building all of the muscles of the imagination, preparing them to be responsible workshop participants, encouraging them to create from a position of attention and care, and inspiring them to start paying attention all the way down to the words—to the syntax and to the sound. I think the Hanged Man is also trying to accomplish a lot, though it doesn't look, at first glance, like he's up to much.

I think of silence similarly: silence is the workhorse of poetry, that carries the words we love, that makes room for the reader, that accommodates the mess, that creates the space in which to reach too far, reach in the wrong direction, invest in the questions that don't have easy answers, to stay with the moment of questioning and soul-ache and uncertainty and physical and emotional doubt because that is where both personal growth and art-making happen.

[Five Provocations]

13: Gather your word hoard. Learn from it. In her introduction to Graywolf's reissue of Thomas James' spectacular first book, *Letters to a Stranger*, Lucie Brock-Broido talks about Thomas' touchstones, his word hoard, his lexicon, as what makes his poems so powerful. "So ubiquitous," Brock-Broido writes, "is this power of *black sounds* that—according to a student who, in earnest, made a list of Thomas' word-hoard (such easy prey—moon, stone, bone, wound)—over a dozen instances of the word *dark* appear in this one book."[33]

Inspired by Brock-Broido, I once spent a winter cataloging my liturgical mind. I thought that, if I quantified my word hoard, I would understand something about myself, and how I came to fall out of love with the faith of my childhood, and the consequences that first real break-up had on the person I was in my twenties and early thirties, and whether I was over God and ready to move on. I made a list of one hundred one trigger words—like *sovereignty* and *kingdom* and *poinsettia* and *Last Supper* and of course *God* and his host of celestial companions, the characters who populated my childhood every Sunday, like *angels* and *the Holy Ghost* and the *Devil* and *Lazarus* and *Mary* and *Jacob* and *Ruth* and *Adam* and *Eve*. In the works written and published between 2006 and 2018—just under 300 pages of poetry—I use the one hundred one words in my liturgical lexicon four hundred thirty-one times. In an elaborate Excel spreadsheet, these instances are categorized by collection, date of publication, form/genre, where I was living, my relationship status, and how much higher education I had received.

So far, I haven't come to any conclusions, other than I'm really, really bad at breaking up and/or breaking up with God is hard to do and/or we are lied to by our love songs and/or I like it when celestial beings are mixed up in earthly affairs: angels lap-swimming in the community pool and sullenly washing their underwear next to mermaids, the Devil cruising the block in his shiny car, a God without arms and then one with too many having his way with a girl, peeling saints arguing over toast, Adam speaking to God in language such as lovers use . . .

There's some satisfaction in getting to know myself in this way—it's a kind of fresh perspective, the kind the Hanged Man prizes, hanging there upside-down with one leg crossed over the other knee, his hands crossed behind his back, his hair falling into a golden halo. At the very least, the words you use are a powerful strategy for looking at yourself and your writing from the inside out.

In "Variations on the Right to Remain Silent," classicist, translator, and poet Anne Carson writes that there are two kinds of silence: physical silence and metaphysical silence:

> *Physical silence happens when you are looking at, say, a poem of Sappho's inscribed on papyrus from two thousand years ago that has been torn in half. Metaphysical silence happens inside words themselves. And its intentions are harder to define.*[34]

Paying attention all the way down to the individual words is one way of getting at that kind of silence, of entering your own metaphysical silence.

14: You might also find a writer friend you trust and want to get to know better. Gather each other's word hoards. Devote an entire meeting to discussing the word hoards, separate from the texts themselves.

15: Or, if you love a writer, gather her/his word hoard. This is one way of understanding why you love that writer, and a good strategy for reading like a writer.

16: To help you focus more on the words, try these exercises: print out three copies of a work-in-progress (any genre), and use Wite-Out to isolate all the nouns in the first copy, all the verbs

in the second copy, and all the describing words (adjectives and adverbs) in the third copy. Tack them to the walls, and look for patterns and for where the patterns get broken. It's important that you keep the words in place, so you can see where the text is thing-heavy and where it is thing-poor, where it is full of motion and where it stops, how it sounds/smells/tastes/feels and where those senses are emphasized. The idea here is to think visually, like a painter. I learned this technique from poet-critic collaborators Lisa Samuels and Jerome McGann, who argue that these performative "deformances" are strategies for releasing or exposing the text's possibilities of meaning (as opposed to reading to figure out "what the text means").[35]

17: Finally, if you love a writer, deform her/his work using the techniques described in the previous paragraph. This is a good strategy for understanding how someone else's text *works* at the level of language.

Perhaps John Cage's greatest success is that it's impossible to talk about silence and the organization of sound without considering his mute manifesto *4'33"*. Cage himself has been called "the angel of destruction, the agent of change," and his most debated composition, *4'33"*, has been called "the still point in Cage's sonic storm," "a tombstone for silence," and, by more irritated listeners, "the emperor's new clothes." The Hanged Man can be read as the calm before the storm, the eye of the hurricane, a still point that is not—as in Cage's compositions—at all still, in which something beyond, or beneath, or beside, our perceptual habits is revealed. It's a moment of potential, energy suspended, the art of finding something in nothing. As Maggie Nelson writes in *The Art of Cruelty*, what is most profound about Cage's piece is "its profound capacity to return us to our senses via an emptying out of input rather than an overload of it."[36] Or, as Shara Worden puts it in NPR's "33 Musicians on What John Cage Communicates":

> 4'33" *suggests to me that art may be the very act of noticing, the focusing of one's attention upon the sounds, the movements, the passing of time, the life that is happening all around and within us. The performance creates a framework for the audience, a designated space or time within which one may pause to notice life itself. The artist assumes the role of one pointing a finger toward an object, sound or movement. The artist or composer may choose to exert varying degrees of control over the focus of an audience's attention. Can someone explain this to my mom? Thanks.*[37]

In his *New Yorker* article "Searching for Silence," Alex Ross writes that "Cage changed what it meant to be a composer, and every kid manipulating music on a laptop is in his debt."[38] The composer *framed* sound rather than *created* it; music came from *outside* the composition rather than *within*. Unlike Ross, I am more interested in Cage's effect on the audience, how he invented a new approach to listening, in which one sound follows another artlessly, without harmonic glue. This is, as I see it, an essentially *lyric* move: lyric, as in the mind moving associatively, without narrative glue, by sound rather than sense. "To me," electronic musician Dan Deacon says, "the biggest lasting influence Cage has is the idea that music is listening." Similarly, Nona Hendryx, of Labelle's/funk rock fame, says "Cage opened my mind to the importance of listening—hearing what is not there, the space between sound, and how silence is the backdrop [the workhouse] which gives sound the time and space to exist." "Spending time with any of Cage's scores in front of me," composer Paul de Jong says, "while he gently leads my inner ear through his gracefully notated and endlessly resourceful musical constructions unlocks an inner-sonic world that leaves the deep silence of my mind replenished and ready to embrace the sonic onslaught of modern daily life."[39]

"The ideas," Cage once said, "outside the head open the head better than the ones inside the head." What I love most about Cage is that, however much he *meant* what he said, however much his statements were, at least in terms of intent—what was happening *inside his head—true*, his actions often contradicted what he said, and/or illustrated the *impossibility* of his claims: he himself could not live up to his own notions. For example, Cage once said, "I'm not interested in control; I'm interested in unpredictability. I don't make choices; I ask questions." Certainly, his use of the *I Ching* and other chance procedures *introduces* unpredictability; however, Cage's mesostic poems exhibit a great deal of *control* and performers were often subject to his more conservative, controlling side.

Ross writes that "even a piece as open-ended as *4'33"* is, ultimately, an assertion of will."[40] Philosopher Lydia Goehr notes that, even in a work intended to explode conventional notions of "music," Cage is playing by traditional rules: "It is because of his specifications that people gather together, usually in a concert hall, to listen to the sounds of the hall for the allotted time period." Anything goes, but only within the container the composer has chosen.[41]

Choose a writer you love. Create a text collaged entirely from their written and verbal statements. Think of this as an act of love.

Or, as experimental electronic musician M.C. Schmidt puts it:

> *John Cage's life and work constitute a perverse object lesson in the consequences of reduction. The harder he sought to suppress and remove his own ego in order to let the sound of the world through, the more powerfully his work took on a signature quality, an aesthetic charge that is continuous. Chance operations now sound "Cage-ian." In this sense, John Cage communicated more of himself than the method was meant to permit. Was this failure? If it was, it still models a beautiful kind of fidelity: to Merce, to the world, to the rich results of letting go.*[42]

This is where the Hanged Man dovetails usefully with the Empress: at the intersection of intent and affect, the difficulty of ever realizing our artistic ambitions fully. Nelson writes that Cage's belief that "the most, the best, we can do, we / believe (wanting to give evidence of / love, is to get out of the way, leave / space around whomever or whatever it is" is "an admirable mantra to live by, if not an exceedingly difficult—perhaps at times impossible—one, given the ruthlessness of our desires, the fraught apprehension of our dependency, the heavy, chaotic experience of jealousy, and the radical undone-ness that can attend both loss and communion."[43]

Nonetheless, the ambition—to get out of the way, to get outside the mind, to leave space, not to fill the container up with our own intent, to thrive within contradiction, to create and celebrate surprise—is what makes Cage such an excellent Hanged Man. Despite whatever arguments we might make about his compositional method, Cage gave us: freedom, confidence, courage, commitment, and occasions in which to shed our preconceptions. As singer and sound artist Joan La Barbara says, "John's decision to always say 'yes' in the hope of being surprised has affected me greatly, and I am trying to incorporate that into my daily thoughts and actions."[44]

[One can't help but think of Robert Frost famously claiming "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader."]

Inside-out, upside-down, within paradox: this is where both Cage and the Hanged Man thrive. As Maggie Nelson writes in *The Art of Cruelty*, paradox "signals the possibility—and sometimes the arrival—of a third term into a situation that otherwise appeared to consist of but two opposing forces."[45] When it comes to writing, the Hanged Man is asking for flexibility, impossibility, stretching after that which can't, in fact, be imagined, throwing a wrench in the system so as to force/trick readers into flexing their minds in new and uncomfortable ways that, hopefully, produce a meaning beyond binary oppositions and introduce, as Nelson puts it, "responses that had heretofore been unthinkable—such as to slip, to drift, to flee, to escape."[46]

[Four Provocations]

18: Write an imaginary conversation between a historical figure and yourself. Because the historical figure is dead, neither of you can hear what the other says. Use remarks the historical figure is reported to have made or excerpts from her/his writing. It helps if the figure is provocative and/or controversial.[47]

19: Choose a writer you love. Create a text collaged entirely from their written and verbal statements. Think of this as an act of love. [See "Rachel, Monique."][48]

20: Write a mimodramatic scene in which characters speak only through facial expression and body language. [See "Rachel, Monique."]

21: Write a piece in which quiet sounds convey a transformational force like loneliness, or love, or friendship.

Cage lived in what we can now look back on as a pre-climate-change world—or, at least, a world in which we were not yet aware of the enormous consequences of everyday actions like drinking coke from Styrofoam cups with plastic straws, in which it was possible to think in terms of *inside* and *outside*, as if our minds and our bodies were *discrete*. In her excellent, and useful, book *The Second Body*, scholar Daisy Hildyard writes:

> *The language of the human animal is that of a whole and single individual. You are encouraged to be yourself and to express yourself—to be whole, to be one. Move away from this personality, self-expression, and you risk going out of your mind, being beside yourself, hearing other voices or splitting your personality: it doesn't sound good. This careful language is anxious, I think—threatening in a desperate way. You need to take care of your-*

self, it says. You need boundaries, you have to be either here or there. Don't be all over the place. [See Wendy O. Williams.]

Climate change creates a new language, in which you have to be all over the place; you are always all over the place. It makes every animal body implicated in the whole world. Even the patient who is anaesthetized on an operating table, barely breathing, is illuminated by surgeons' lamps which are powered with electricity trailed from a plant which is pumping out of its chimneys white smoke that spreads itself out against the sky. This is every living thing on earth.

You are stuck in your body right here, but in a technical way you could be said to be in India and Iraq, you are in the sky causing storms, and you are in the sea herding whales towards the beach.

You don't [Hildyard admits] probably feel your body in those places: it is as if you have two distinct bodies. You have an individual body in which you exist, eat, sleep and go about your day-to-day life. You also have a second body which has an impact on foreign countries and on whales.[49]

This is the Second Body Theory: your first body is the one you live inside, made out of your personal skin. Your second body is also your literal and physical biological existence but it is porous; it leaks; it is infecting the whole world. As Hildyard writes, "at some microscopic or intangible scale, our second bodies are breaking into one another, floating above a pharmaceutical plant on the outskirts of the city, inside a freight container in the docks, on a flood plain in Bangladesh, in another man's lungs."[50]

It takes a Hanged Man perspective to wrap your mind around Second Body Theory, to *act* as if you believe in climate change, as if, as Hildyard puts it, "you live in a world in which every individual body is a perpetrator and everybody is a victim, a world in which there are no clear boundaries between one species and another."[51] (Admit it: most of us believe in climate change but we still take flights, and drive automobiles ridiculously short distances.) (And what would it take to *write* as if we believed in climate change?) (Consider, for example, the carbon footprint of your artistic legacy.) (Why aren't we talking more about that?)

[Four Provocations]

22: Write about a time your second body invaded your first body.[52]

23: Write a piece in which a character's consumption or output is of more interest than anything else she or he could ever do or say.[53]

24: Write a piece in which extraterrestrial life sends humanity off the rails, in a good way.[54]

25: Write a piece that incorporates your own self, a bacterium, an octopus, and Prince.[55]

Prescription

Genre: erasure/collage/bricolage

Secret Power: Learning without self-congratulation; learning in order to realize one's own mistakes; learning because knowledge itself is the problem.

Dream Interpretation: A very pleasant surprise.[56]

Read: Lucie-Brock Broido's "The Rebirth of a Suicidal Genius," Lisa Samuels and Jerome McGann's "Deformance and Interpretation," Thomas James' *Letters to a Stranger*, Maggie Nelson's *The Art of Cruelty*, Anne Carson's "Variations on the Right to Remain Silent," Daisy Hildyard's *The Second Body*

Listen: Nina Simone, "Ain't Got No/I Got Life"

Eat: fungi

Do: Life Piece IV

Life is about focusing and balancing.
If you focus and lose your balance, you fall.
If you balance and lose your focus, you die.
Check where your emphasis is: balancing or focusing.
—Yoko Ono[57]

POSTSCRIPT: A PARADOX

Once upon a time, during a phone interview, a colleague on the other line said, "The Earth is hurting." She was referring to the 2017 outbreak of wildfires in the Pacific Northwest, which is where I'd been living for more than a decade. I said, "No, she's angry." I didn't get the job. (It's likely this isn't the only reason why.)

It's impossible to talk about this problem—our inability to stop prioritizing ourselves, our fatal dependence on anthropomorphism, our lack of language to express respect for a body that is not human—without turning to CAConrad, whose RIGHTEOUS ANGER on behalf of the Earth and her non-human inhabitants is truly remarkable. Like Cage, perhaps CAConrad's most profound and lasting impact on writing is the idea that poetry is paying attention, their emphasis on the creative viability of the everyday, their ambition of retraining our focus. Like Cage, CAConrad's ambition is to find beauty in the intersection of perceiver and perceived, that our lives more closely resemble our art, and vice versa.

CAConrad is SUPER hot these days; they tour the world teaching and talking about their (soma)tic rituals and their poems are widely available in a remarkable range of publishing venues. BUT ARE WE REALLY LISTENING TO THEIR MESSAGE? Have we actually HEARD CAConrad?

In a (soma)tic ritual involving ant maps and the Chihuahua Desert, CAConrad writes:

The cooperative kingdom of ants has always fascinated and frightened me much the way obedient men and women do when god and country are their foremost concerns. I never envy the ant carrying his seed into the underground food stores, programmed to question nothing, programmed to never run away or kill himself.

HOW do we create a kind, generous, but disobedient world? How do we undo thousands of years of this damage? Even Greek mythology is sex jealousy revenge, sex jealousy revenge, the gods and goddesses enslaving human beings, raping them with their enormous cocks and vaginas. We need a total and lasting insurrection! Later I took a strand of cooked spaghetti, arranged it in the shape of the ant map. I said, "I DON'T KNOW WHICH ONE OF YOU GAVE ME THIS MAP, BUT I'M GIVING IT BACK!" I crumbled it around the hole for the industrious little beings to carry away piece by piece to their queen for approval. Do what you need to do, but I'm writing a poem from my notes.[58]

In another ritual involving crystals, grass, and captive spider monkeys, CAConrad writes: "The way we mistreat animals is evidence we are far from being able to rescue our own lives at this point. We need to start spreading compassion. Can we begin today, please? I am asking this to myself, and passing it along."[59]

Can we begin today, please? That is what each and every Tarot card asks: begin today, please. Together, the Empress and the Hanged Man remind us that: 1) life is playful and not really sure what it wants and 2) we were never individuals. It's up to us—every day, with every silence, every breath, every boundary, every assumption, all the words that do and don't go on the page—to own our particular, peculiar even, role in that dance, the shame at the center of it, what it takes to *love* the Earth, to get over our *fear* of the future (Admit it! We do: fear the future.), shed the shackles of our own self-importance and act *with* nature—whether that be Nature, as in Earth, our home, or nature, as in aging in these imperfect bodies, our other home.

Emily Carr's newest book, whosoever has let a minotaur enter them, or a sonnet—*, is available from McSweeney's. It inspired a beer of the same name, now available at the Ale Apothecary. Emily's Tarot romance,* Name Your Bird Without A Gun*, is forthcoming from Spork later this fall. Visit Emily online at www.ifshedrawsadoor.com or on Instagram as ifshedrawsadoor.*

Notes

1. The math is simple: 2 + 0 + 1 + 8 = 11 (Justice) and 1 + 1 = 2 (the High Priestess).
2. 2 + 0 + 1 + 9 = 12 (Hanged Man) and 1 + 2 = 3 (the Empress).
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10. Ibid.
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14. Ibid.
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46. Ibid.
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52. This prompt is inspired by Daisy Hildyard's *The Second Body*.
53. Timothy Clarke proposes this method in his reading of Raymond Carver's "Elephants" in his 2015 monograph *Ecocriticism on the Edge* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).
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THREE POEMS

WILLIAM KISTLER

Wesley Before One

before I was one I heard every sound
as a sound that had never been heard,
before I was one I saw every light
as a light separate from dark, color
hidden in a place I had not been.
Before I was one I used feet to waken
in water, to pedal through air,
hands a means to release the hunger in my heart.
From there I came to the bed where I cried
and called out sounds without tears.
People did not exist, nothing beyond
need and the place of a voice. I could not
ask and I could not refuse, there was
only light to reach to, stairs of limitless
height to lie beside. These are not memories
but tracks left on my eyes, marks on my lungs
and my continual turning toward
those arms of warmth where I know continuous warmth

Poem in the Mind of a Letter

strange isn't it how every day
brings us to a place we've never been,
strange isn't it, my nearly perfect one,
how passionate we once were, almost,
I would say, like bread and cheese which
cannot bear to part and thus go down
the dark throat together. And now it seems
we have nothing other than opposite
ends of the table. O naked, O tragic/ironic
silence, to see us separate as if centuries
had risen like mountains between us.
Good night, good long night of the soul,
my marvelous eternal one, this morning
will bring a different day—adventures,
awakenings, unbanked curves. And still
strange, these different and strange turns
coming toward us, each alive as if it
was there to uncover something hidden,
growing, and needing to be lived to be
understood. And this is what I came here
to say, *it's like this always, always love, always
as if dying, always life, astonishingly yours*

South Pass

of a moment everything was speaking and I was listening,
all my friends and sometime friends were walking by
on their way to the great and ancient river,
gave their minds to it, came to rest. No one
spoke of troubles, how they fall upon you at the moment
you are trying to wake from the many breaths
of the body's hunger. Continue and continue further.
Begin again to write from beyond the veil of thought,
pour the particular weights of words back and forth
through each other—end when each feels alive.
Now you are a bird alone but with shafts of light.
The last time I was in Italy I lay down among
olive trees to feel their silver green, after a time
walked slowly out, surrounded completely in day light

William Kistler co-founded Poets House (New York) and served as treasurer until 2000. He is the author of five volumes of poetry, the most recent of which is In the Middle of Things.

CHERRIES IN THE SNOW

CARL ADAMSHICK

Speaking of Sylvia Plath
with lit Turkish Royal unspooling
in the pits of our lungs

I craved her. I wanted to live
in the long, soft revolution of her mouth,
to sleep and wake in the heat of its coup.

I know no one of her stature.
Her lipstick on the filter, the napkin,
on the glass of beer

bright as a candied clot of hemoglobin.
Revlon four-forty, she explained,
was Plath's go-to.

I tried to watch everything,
to be aware of what survived
behind each gesture—what fine raiment

still hung in her closet, what voile slip
or chiffon bandeau I might see.

She began telling me something
she didn't want me to know—
again and again lifting the cigarette
to the open forest of her face.

I began wondering what existed.
My cock knocking against the cloth
of my pants, clenching and unclenching

like a baby's fist at the breast of its mother.

Memory is our god,
the watcher lurking in the burnt
figure the tree lays on the grass.

She said bees—Sylvia wrote about bees.
So I knew bees were real.

The moon dug itself into clouds—
her nails, too, were Cherries in the Snow.

Hit and gaslit she stares into the heath—
a book without her name.

Two children
concealed in a game of dormition.

Surely this isn't happening—
gorse unmoving in the wind.

Nature's mask softens,
yew trees reveal garnets
set in the warlock's face—

enough melancholy to arouse a plague.
Gossip and hearsay, rumor and artifice
pack their bags.

No me No me No me

The shelves and teacups fade.
The whole of Court Green dissolves.

Her eyes burn through the fog
trying to see beyond
to the real day

where the sun lies on sand
and a family picnics.

Where is the dissembler,

the vain impregnator; his tower of words—
grimed machicolations.

Nothing is here except the night

they heard the bellwether
carrying love through November's slaughters.

To begin again—to find the world
without other meaning,
without men, after
the wreckage of not living.

It doesn't work that way for me
with just the mouth, she said.

She said, on the walk home,
night handed me the key
to its childhood.

Her screwback earrings
are on my nightstand.

They are red—the size of a holly berry.

I clasp one with its gold mechanics
on the lobe of my ear.

I want to be naive but not a child.
Also, I want to be a child and not naive.

I look, again, at the picture she sent.

From bed I hear things
being tossed about and swaying.

Her purple t-shirt hangs on the bedpost.

She's hunting sorrel
and chanterelle with your father.

I think of how she might think
of decay—hare skull, leaf rot
on a spat, centipedes

darting through the wet undergrowth.

I imagine a snail's vulnerable body,
butter and garlic

for the egg, some delicate green,
a brown cold withered bloom—

how tomorrow
I could remove the chipped polish
from her fingers and brush
each nail with a shimmery sea foam

lacquer she might push
into the darkness of my body.

—

I'd like to tell you again about yesterday.

It started like many others—
blue, white, calescent.

In the evening neighbors
talked on stoops and earlier
children didn't feel the need

to help clean dishes after dinner.

That's how it was.
Trillium remained silent—

stars tapped on the door.

My life one long run-on sentence
in the past tense

where the planished moon
and sounds of freight yards
ignite in a shadowy fire.

All the waking hours passed.
All the summers condensed.

—

Another succession of vowels
strikes the platen—

book as debridement.

Early dark mirror,
the intervals between
herself and her self—

tempered, mathematically divided.
Heaven being

a noun for death—an octave below
and the devil

on the board
casting his little, sarcastic vote.

Hooves hidden in hands,

wolf tone,
reverie of a Christmas farthingale—
yards of threaded gold,

a thousand embroidered
diamonds—silver, pearl and brume.

Resident in the precinct of winter,
dead frozen pollens
puncture and flurry

in the corner
where the light
is still on—lullaby of defeat,

a particular way
of approaching an outfit—

making and making, composing

until she is the scar
her mother left on the earth.

—

She said, a tongue
riffling my nipple can make me sad.
She said, trash fire—

I can't really do much without her voice.

The sky is ruched—pink to scarlet,
floating like a bloom of jellyfish.

My first and last body lies waiting
in the basement of its frustration—
anguish wears a stone.

Didn't Sylvia write: winter is for women,
didn't she want tiger pants?

Creation is a place of upheaval
and unrest. The mind much wilder

than reality—what happens there
never happens
until it happens.

She was here yesterday

wearing the diaphanous purple
of her inheritance, the garment
she unwillingly accepted.

Measly flakes drifted—not sticking.

Evening. Ash from her hand-rolled shag
slept in an upturned beer cap.

The bright blink
of the ambulance in the middle
of the street—

its lights, their specific
rotation and flash,

every so often,
caused the stop sign to appear blue.

Carl Adamshick is the author of four books of poetry. He lives in Portland, Oregon.

FIVE POEMS

KIRSTEN KASCHOCK

Explain This Corpse

Why is it drowning? Why unpinned
floaty locks, inset with fallen
leaf&filth as if any buoyant trash

were jewel? Why painted pale—
not pale *and* bloated? Why more adored
minnow-lipped than when she

breathed air, spoke? Why love we
such dank ophelia? Why rather this
only dead only girl? I won't. Any-

more I prefer nunnery. For me, mine.
My crush of crones know several rivers—
one is age. We row it sure, dip&pull.

We throat coarse boatsong thru lips
unstriving since birth towards blue.
And so this knot of women made

of stuff that twists&writhes&maybe
thwarts but does not drift: us sisters
learned to swim. Deepened eel-alls we

—our slimy lengths of ladyparts slick
with the knowing-how and the not-
dying. I think it's prettier, this life—

fermenting dough 'neath crusty scale, if
you'd just watch it move—in purposive
rise&fall&rise not fluid rot. Want to

see? Quit the mown flowers. Come
to the strangling woods where we'll rarely
kill you if you're civil. Watch us stagger

water-sated from banks trailing our few
forked tongues of willow or nothing at all.
They're shame—the switches that welt

a drowned girl. We strip them to straddle
the night, river a-drip from silt-thick
thighs like unshed tears: hers. This is

a weather you'll come to know. And
above—in shrieking starfucked flight—
this is how we mourn her.

Dear Nibiru* (in the event we make love)

no doubt you'd move
against me
as I've craved to be

moved against, your slow-
spreading un-
scaffolding me

through porous shudder
before I end—
in thin grace of

abandoned horizon
—a ghostgirl
steamrolled by dawn.

(One never sees
a ladycartoon
flattened by street-

machine into bookflower; in-
stead, handheld irons
suffice to do her

one empty limb at a time
—sleeve, or pant.)
Choosing to

touch me, Nibiru, as I
long to be touched, promise
you wouldn't sow me

in piecework. Say you'd un-
hinge me whole to let
me feel this Earth

and you, grazing
stone-to-stone. No
skin (nor

me) between.

*Nibiru: a planetary-sized object with which the Earth may or may not one day collide

too many doors

there are too many doors to come through
too many brutes coming through too many doors
too much pull and push too many thumbs on
phones texting too-quick proofs of love—good-
byes or sorrymoms—too much glass to broom up
too much blood on too many tile floors too many
books silent-strewn across hall or class too many cool
kids pissing their pants in closets too many freaks
fronting googled knowledge of duck and cover or
worse stalk and kill too many desks made tomb-
stone by pen-etched epitaphs too many epipens left
behind unneeded because gunshot allergies left un-
treated have become an adolescent epidemic of
deadkids there is too much cruelty too many
life-crooks and cooks on the newsfood network
touting all the recipes too many fools floating
wakeless takes on some suspect's bloodoath or bath
or heretofore unknown nazi-hood what kooky boys
we raise these days too many catchy hooks beneath
our numbness too much passive approval of school-
room footsoldiers too many childhoods looted
for automatic sales ever on the uptick due to liberal
assault on a brand of ownership unlabeled cowardice
or greed too many poor excuses thoughtless shame-
less senatorial prayers all goodness for its own sake
gone or going off too many bombs blooming in aloof
abused brains too many hoodies blamed but never
bullets too many open loopholes gaping the doom
that can be bought over web or at swapmeet too
much flooding of street and synapse with this stream-
ing fireshow too long have we by-stood far too much
have we forsook and for what? we go on grooming
our broods from womb not-to breathe dream into
flute not-to weave peace on loom not-to mine mind
for moonjewel not-to deepseek all that should be
sought in pools of blue thought—no—in lieu
we have taught what we teach which is to dull
wonder to develop a pathological apathy to spook
at the ineffable and to instead translate all that is
beyond value into number: grade-caliber-payscale
we teach them theirs is a collateral life we funnel
once true now bleating hearts down chutes designed
by us prodded relentlessly by us towards no future
but slaughter.

Bivouac

Something finishes, and in the field
—the brief canvas stretching across the field
until the field is another project—in the shrinking field
I graze my skin with a thousand bullets of this neglected practice:
attention. There is wind today. I sweat. My low back aches from a spiraling
that (as April mold offers into evidence dying amidst explosions
of blossom) teaches me my place in art. I follow the curve
arcing below all crests, sinking drift of arrow
buoyed by finite wind—precisely aimed
beneath its initial orientation—
a liftedness from earth.
A field means not to
stay. It means
to yield.

beauty: the artist* under duress shuddering jam

ten-thousand dyed-scarlet anesthetized moths, affixed
—wake, sewn into flutter of whitegown
with their redworm
bodies seep-

ing jam.

still able—
they lift their dress briefly
to stumble-fly across the room until
the champagne-stained linens glow the fragile yellow

of waterlogged urine. the moths die but not all
at once and the gown keeps startling-to
for end-of-life hours of
threadpalsy&

shudder.

old speakers
tweet&woof a looping west
end girls and this lends an august feeling
to an affair of late summer absences: no cake, guests, or

flowergirl. not one crying eye. &despite the dying
throes of the dress, no bride is entered
into evidence. implied:
mere seamstress

under duress

perhaps heart-
less—with excellent technique. not
a single bloody insect breaks the spell with ill-
timed pointless escape and the artist watches, remotely, her
conceptual ballroom thrumming with the spirit of analog: no
catharsis planned. these small murders she unweds
to meaning, nor do they
comment.

the artist

simply hurts
others, moths, and has
found it not difficult to find—it has never been
too terrible nor difficult to find, to cultivate really—a factoryful

of women, willing or starving, with needles. fashion is
narcotic—every gown a jolt of renewal.
she has vowed never to design
a metaphor.

beauty

takes more
than it takes. it can only
disregard banality, it can only divorce
wing from what should not be winged: bridegrub.

*see also: *genius, musewraith, leech*

Kirsten Kaschock is the author of three books of poetry: Unfathoms *(Slope Editions),* A Beautiful Name for a Girl *(Ahsahta Press), and* The Dottery*, winner of the Donald Hall Prize for poetry from AWP (University of Pittsburgh Press). Her debut novel,* Sleight*, a work of speculative fiction, was published by Coffee House Press.*

HARVEST

ELLY BOOKMAN

I am thinking terrible thoughts.
Dozens dead again and I am thinking
about what types of humans they were—
the gunman and the fallen. Yesterday
I was so happy to be greeting fall at last.
You wore a sweater with holes in it
and we had dinner with your aunt
who told us the story of how her son
had come to have half a heart. *I was*
a bad mother, she explained, *I never wanted*
children. The truth is he had heatstroke
and an undiagnosed defect. Little
murderous shadow, patient in the aorta
darkness. I am amazed, still, to be
beside you listening. That more and
more seasons gather and wane while
I'm allowed to remain near you and
near your sadnesses, familial tragedies.
Some days I wait for life to say *Enough*
and I practice the feeling of the world
narrowing again, of my body coursing
cold and my hands going limp, any
valuables I clutch returned with a
low rattle to the ground. Luck
will do that to you. It will stand on
its head and smile and you won't know
why and so you'll think of every other
explanation for what you deserve
or don't and you'll aim your weapon
accordingly. I am thinking about
who they were and who they were
trying to be. I am trying to turn luck
right-side-up again. To make it look
me in the eye and say how these
blood-soaked rows came to be sown.
Otherwise how do I love you and
not love everyone at once? How do
I turn away while seed after seed
is buried and groomed? Luck making
his way, singing *Doom, doom, doom*.

Elly Bookman's poems have appeared in The New Yorker, The Georgia Review, The Florida Review, *and elsewhere. She has received the Loraine Williams Poetry Prize from* The Georgia Review *and the Stanley Kunitz Memorial Prize from* The American Poetry Review.

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

AWAKE IN THE SCRATCHY DARK

On writing whiteness

JOY KATZ

Twelve years ago, I adopted a young baby in Vietnam and made myself a firm but vague promise not to "raise him white." But what did that mean? To figure it out, I started to educate myself about race, trying to see how I, a white mother, might not mess up raising a brown boy. I assumed he would face racism (I didn't yet grasp that he would also face my own racism[1]). Then, when he was around 3, I started trying to write poems about whiteness. For a long time I did not see the two efforts—the poems and the parenting project—as connected.

One task was turning over a problem in my mind, trying different ways to make language catch fire, as I always do as a poet. The other was reading history to understand the world my kid would face. The link between the two seems obvious now. It was impossible—is impossible—to write in a complex way about race without a deeper understanding of the American whiteness machine. I cannot overstate how badly the poetry writing went for so many years. It is still not easy. Whiteness, it turns out, is not a subject you can sit down and "master."

The space of an essay is not enough to cover the basics of whiteness in America, let alone racism's subtle, insidious forms that overlap with and inflame other biases. I am no master of the subject anyway. So this is not a master class. Instead, it is a tour of my mistakes. I offer it, along with a couple of possible ways forward, because poetry needs more, and better, poems about whiteness. I am impatient to read poems of every kind—intricate poems, stark poems, messy poems, musical poems, poems of scorching flatness—that confront, frame, and mess with whiteness.

If you are restless to bring the subject of whiteness to your work, or your work to the shifty, bruising, elusive presence of whiteness, this essay is for you. Accept, or resist, whatever you find here. Resistance is just as useful for getting to the page.

1. ON NEGATIVE CAPABILITY

To write about whiteness, you will first want to examine it. But that's impossible. You can't look at whiteness because it exists only in opposition to everything outside itself.

Whiteness is a force, like wind. You can perceive the effects of it, but not it. For instance, you can see racially gerrymandered voting districts, or the number of business loan rejections (twice as many) for black entrepreneurs as for white or for any other ethnicity.[2] You can look at your skin tone and gauge how likely it is you will find that color in the makeup department or be followed by security in the makeup department. But you can't look at whiteness. This quote from historian Manning Marable explains:

> *It's not merely that whiteness is oppressive and false; it is that whiteness is nothing but oppressive and false . . . It is the empty and terrifying attempt to build an identity based on what one isn't and on whom one can hold back.*[3]

The first mistake I made in my poems was to assume whiteness holds complication. Everything holds complication, I thought. My understanding of art is based on the belief that nothing is 100% worthy or unworthy, useful or useless, good or bad. Poetry comes of negative capability. That means being able to hold in your hands irreconcilable truths. I don't know a different way to wrestle with a problem than to track its complication. *I am white*, I reasoned, *and I am a person. I embody conflicting truths, therefore whiteness must also embody conflicting truths*. But it doesn't.

Given that the best poems are containers for complication, and those are the kind of poems I want to write, what could I do with whiteness, which lacks complication? If whiteness is only oppressive and false, what are its uses in a poem?

I hit this wall just as I had stepped up to claim my whiteness, accept my identity as a white American, white parent, white poet. I was ready! But I couldn't find what to claim. At the same time, I had to accept responsibility for my whiteness. I was granted the power of whiteness without asking, and I have used it, as it has used me, to harm.

It took a couple of years to see that the force of whiteness is distinct from, but tangled up with, the intricate aspects of my self.[4] During those years, I didn't write at all.

2. ON HAVING A PLACE TO STAND

I cast around for models of white poets writing about race, looking for strategies, styles, approaches to voice.[5] But I was at a loss. None of my writer friends had any suggestions. Then, eventually, I discovered a few poets working on whiteness.

Martha Collins' *Blue Front*, based on a lynching her father witnessed as a child, had been published. Its documentary poetics meshes Collins' verse with research material. I met Ailish Hopper when we were among the only white audience members at a panel of black poets. At the time, Hopper was at work on lyric poems that would become *Dark Sky Society*, a book about her life in Baltimore close to the color line. Hopper told me about Jake Adam York (this was shortly after York had died) and his poetry about his southern family. And I met Rachel Richardson, who had written *Copperhead*, about her visits with relatives in the deep South.[6]

I immersed myself in these books, but I couldn't see how to get to where these poets were. They had somewhere from which to launch their thoughts. They had events, places, points on a timeline. My own thoughts floated around. I couldn't ground myself. My personal history brimmed with the feelings, snacks, trips, curtains, nightstands, and stories of white people. What in my life was not white?

But this perception was rudimentary. Gradually, memories resurfaced, experiences I hadn't accounted for because I was badly equipped to understand them at the time. If I could narrate these events clearly, I thought, maybe they would lead to poems. My first writings about race were these narrations—notes on when the fabric of whiteness I thought completely enveloped my life had rips in it or fell away for a moment. Here is a sample:

> *I remember my grandmother Bea seeing a black woman while we were out shopping together. Bea paused, a long pause, and then said—her voice held wide-eyed wonder*—Sure. . . . *They* are people too . . .
>
> *It was as if Bea was ever so slightly startled by the idea of black people being people. She said it softly, more to herself than to me.*
>
> *That she was having this realization despite what she heard growing up . . . is that remarkable? I don't know what Bea heard growing up. She came on a boat from Ukraine. What did she think when she first saw black people, and when did that happen? She was 75 when she said they are people too. Now she is dead.*
>
> *Is mild startlement one of the forces that made me?*

It was transformative to see my racialized experiences on the page. These stories showed me that I do have a racial identity, and I am part of history. But they didn't lead to poems.

For one thing, I was right that I lacked a place to stand. Unlike Hopper, who grew up in a mixed neighborhood in Baltimore, I grew up in a small Maine town and in mostly white suburbs of Buffalo, Philadelphia, and Cincinnati. Martha Collins had an event, the lynching, that put her on the timeline of American racism. I did not grow up amid white nationalist violence and had no ties to the South.[7]

I grew up in liberal colorblind racism. I was born to the children of immigrants. My parents were Jewish, college-educated; my people believed we were decent people, but we did not have a mechanism by which to acknowledge or perceive our whiteness. Mom was justice-oriented, voted for Shirley Chisholm, considered herself a feminist. The message I got at home was that we work against injustice because we suffer injustice as Jews. Yet my parents could not help me see skin privilege at work. My mother herself did not grasp the systems of exclusion that produced the all-white faculty of my grade school, middle school, high school. I saw people of color in the cities where I lived, but did not see the forces that separated us (school boards, real estate brokers, mortgage lenders). Worst of all, I did not sense the assumptions taking hold in my own mind that would widen the chasm between us.

The more I learned about liberal racism, the more I felt the atmosphere of my upbringing worth writing about. It wasn't broad-stroke racism, but it struck me as even more damaging because it is less visible (to white people). I just needed a way to interrogate it.

3. ON SELF-WITNESSING

In anti-racist study groups, I perceived that my experiences of early racial awareness were not very different from those of the other white people I met. I am not suggesting that personal history is banal or that our feelings as Americans waking up to whiteness are irrelevant. Our experiences and feelings are powerful, meaningful. But the same themes kept coming up, if the details about class, wealth, and immigration varied. Someone had a black childhood friend they were forced by their

parents to break off with, someone was raised by a nanny of color, someone had an African American housekeeper or went to an all-white summer camp they didn't realize was all-white, et cetera.

Alone with my pen, I felt like I was uncovering remarkable details of my life. Writing about my past, I felt raw. Ashamed. My ignorance and resistances came clear as I documented the damage I had caused via my whiteness. But what I was writing wasn't poetry. It was a collection of tropes. Americans of color have witnessed the white blindness of people like me for generations. I was not "coming out" as white. I had always been, as we are, in a fishbowl. I could not overcome either the ubiquitousness of my content or the clichés of my delivery.

As another form of self-witnessing, I kept a running tally of the apparent race of every person in every room I entered.[8] Over months, my perceptions sharpened. I felt a kind of vertigo in all-white spaces, wondering whether anyone else in the room noticed or cared. Mixed spaces felt better.[9] I started to seek them out. I kept the tally for almost a year. It helped me change daily habits—I would say it changed my life—but it didn't help my poems, or hasn't yet.

4. ON LUCK

In his essay collection *When Blackness Rhymes with Blackness*, poet Rowan Phillips writes of the value of what blackness might say. Blackness might be a space one walks through, Phillips suggests, or a whispering presence. He quotes Robert Hayden's poem "The Ballad of Nat Turner," whose narrator asks blackness to "bestow" onto him the opportunity to either speak or die.[10]

I loved the idea of blackness as a space, a whisperer, a bestower. Searching for tangible forms of whiteness, I tried flipping Phillips' questions. What could I ask whiteness to bestow onto me? What is the value of what whiteness can say? My mistake was not seeing that Phillips' questions, like Hayden's poem, turn on the fact that blackness has been a historical burden, not a gift, in this country. The poetic opening in "what does blackness bestow onto me" is a function of the ironic distance between bestowal and suffering.

Communities, codes, ways of speaking, gesturing, dressing—a whole universe—thrives *in resistance to* (whiteness, in this case). But whiteness resists nothing and was cultivated into nothing but fear and oppression. Blackness can enter a poem as a whisperer, a sacred space, or anything else. Its forms are infinite because it does not need whiteness for definition. Not so for whiteness. Whiteness is seized, not bestowed.[11] Subbing "whiteness" for "blackness" did not work because the ironic distance between burden and gift is not there.

Through piles of failed poems, I came to understand:

- There are many people who are white that I love, but their whiteness is not what I love.
- There is no worthy form of whiteness to write about.
- There is value in what people who are white can say, but no value in what whiteness can say.[12]

"I feel extremely lucky to be white," John Berryman once remarked.[13] I had never heard anyone say that. This quote was like a door without a doorknob behind which lay the place I was searching for. Berryman seemed to suggest whiteness had possibility. It sounded like he was praising whiteness, and I was looking for something to praise. But it wasn't praise. Behind the door without a doorknob, in the land of being-white, there is peacefulness only until you see the truth about whiteness. Then you can't un-know what is on the other side of the door: the historical violence that continues into this minute.

Luck put John Berryman behind a podium in 1968 reading poems instead of in front of the police hoses in Birmingham. Berryman was lucky not to be burned by lit cigarettes at a lunch counter or be killed for having a brown body. I have that luck, too, but it is not praiseworthy.[14]

5. ON THE UNIVERSAL

I had wanted a white drink to undrink. I wanted to scrape whiteness off like wallpaper. I thought I might "dial back" my whiteness. If I could be 30% less white, I imagined, then I would be a better parent. But I was discovering whiteness has no volume control. This was around four years into my writing project.

I began looking for white ways of making poems that I could quit using to make poems. Where was whiteness in my poems? I went through the books I had written. When I wrote them, I thought that if I did not identify a person in a poem, it could be any person. Having accepted entirely the idea of The Universal put forth in MFA school, I trusted I was writing "for everyone," touching the deepest truths beneath all of our differences. I was not writing for white readers any more than Robert Hayden was writing for black readers (or was he?). Who was I writing for? Were the people in my poems really anyone?

I ran a universality test on my poems, including "Noon, F Train," in my third collection:

> *Mid-chapter. Book propped at good angle, jacket on lap. No need to rush as the conductor calls your stop. In your cove by the doors, the air neither too warm nor too cool, there is time enough (for it is a long train, the length of two city blocks, and it is coming to a slow, slow halt) to find your bookmark, tuck it into the page. To close the book, to reach between your knees for bags, taking care not to bump, with your head, the woman doing sudoku. Remain seated: face soft: from the ambergris inside the whale, from the killing fields, move. Move from the room punctured with crystal, into the moment (it is coming) (it is still far off) when you will rise, and exit. There is time enough to adjust a scarf, untwist a shoulder strap, time enough to take down a thatched roof, close a piano, pack the ammo, fold the sails, load the home, "one's earthly sac," where you have lived simply, onto yourself so that you can (but not quite yet) pass up into the world and leave nothing behind. . . .*

I tried thinking of the nonspecific You as different people. To do this, I concentrated on the subway stop not named in the poem. It is Carroll Street, in Brooklyn, where I lived. When I pictured a You in north Bronx or Jackson Heights, even as a thought exercise, I felt like I was trespassing. Was my intruder-feeling connected with my growing anxiety about appropriating experiences across a color line? Maybe my efforts to unlearn white supremacy were leaking into my assessment of my own work. But I was certain I sensed something that I could not change—something beyond the poem's ending.

Finally I saw that the poem's You walks up the station steps trustingly into her neighborhood. She trusts an *atmosphere*. The peaceful transitions in my commute—the basis of the poem—are underwritten by whiteness. "Noon, F Train" evinces a trust granted by whiteness.[15] Envisioning my You as a Puerto Rican woman or a Bangladeshi woman, I realized that I could not necessarily claim my atmosphere for her. "Universality," I saw, carried assumptions. Whiteness had entered my poem without my knowledge, operating at a low register. It was unnerving to see how whiteness rode the recording of my experience.

Even though this poem is about a magical property of time that happens sometimes in the New York subway, and the phenomenon of "time enough" is not a function of whiteness, I could not unmerge the You from my self. My poem is not just about me, but it is not universal, either.

A few more years passed. I gave a reading of my first poems on whiteness. Afterward, the white editor of a major university press told me to scrap them. Start over, he said. "Aim for the universal." When I thought about it, it seemed to me the idea of universality is usually put forward by white people. Also, if my poems weren't good, maybe they didn't necessarily fail. Clearly they made an older white man uncomfortable. Maybe that was promising.

I have since become dubious of "universal" as an idea that lets poetry contain the lives of white people and by which our art perpetuates whiteness. If white writers are told by white teachers and editors that our poems should "transcend" whiteness,[16] then we will never be up to the task of writing about whiteness.

We cannot dial back whiteness or revise it out of our poems, but we can shift whiteness to awareness and go from there.

6. ON GUILT

If whiteness is not a thing, but a force, it is still made of stuff. The stuff of whiteness is blindness and willful denial. Another approach I tried was writing about the blindness and denial.

Along those lines, here are notes from 13 years ago for a poem I abandoned till recently (part of the latest draft is in section 11 of this essay). I was scribbling in my journal about an argument I overheard in the apartment next door, which was under renovation:

> *I heard the workman say, "I know I'm black, and I'm stupid, but. . . ." His voice registered pain. It was in the way he leaned on the words black and stupid. Was I going to pound on the next door apartment to be let in, go and put my arms around him? The two white contractors would be there with him in a pile of rubble that used to be a kitchen. I would drift in, apparition of gypsum, woman poet, merciful dust ghost, saint of embracement, in my sundress. I would fix it all up. Level the argument, whatever it was, with a palmfuls of cool plaster (my voice), repair a black soul then repair to my computer and my great big A/C. . . .*

In these notes, you can see that I am a static figure, fixed on myself. Not moving outward to possible reasons why a black man might have called himself "stupid" to white men or whether it was, or was only, pain in his voice. He said: *I'm stupid, but*. . . . What came after "but?" What did he want to get across? *I'm stupid* . . . he might have been repeating something the white foreman had said to him.[17]

Those were questions on his side of the wall. There were questions I could have asked on my side of the wall, too. For instance, why should his outcry make me feel betrayed? My mother's messages and cultural messages I soaked in—from children's public television—fostered an idea that dignity is a sacred trust we all uphold. But who is *we all*? And what exactly had betrayed me? Those are useful questions, but I couldn't ask them because I lacked understanding. To write the complications of this situation, I had to become aware of the desires whiteness put in me. I can literally see, in what is not in my notes, my not-

knowing—the limits of my language limiting my world.

I cringe, reading my words about the sundress saint, the savior in drywall dust (like whiteface on my white face). Those images spring from guilt. When you see the damage whiteness does, feeling guilty is inevitable. Guilt is useful. It can lead to action. It can even, I think, be interesting. But performing white guilt in a poem is not useful or interesting. A poem of white guilt elides both the harm done and the person harmed. Plus which, to a reader of color, a display of white guilt is a familiar form of narcissism, even if guilt is seasoned with irony (e.g. I was not actually going next door to embrace the black subcontractor).

7. ON ASKING FOR HELP

A white artist friend read a draft I wrote from the above and said, "That's just guilt, you need to do something else." Although I was, of course, horrified, she saved me from myself. Not every reader will be so honest.

Fellow-feeling and misplaced reassurance are forces that allow whiteness to go on and on in poetryland.

Friends want you to feel good about your writing. People are conflict-avoidant. But fellow-feeling and misplaced reassurance are forces that allow whiteness to go on and on in poetryland. White poets need to learn to recognize whiteness in our poems and help each other by pointing it out.

One way to make this happen is to find a few artists (they don't have to be writers) committed to undermining whiteness, people you can count on to be frank. Then, when you want someone to vet your work, you can tap this white network instead of burdening a person of color.

We can be there for each other, but we won't catch everything. If you publish or read a piece that hurts someone, be slow to take up more space by belaboring a point or mounting a defense. It costs everyone, white people included, far less to sit back and think, even if you feel called out unfairly (or are called out unfairly). And you can reach out to your support network of artists to talk it over.

8. ON APPROPRIATION AND VOICE

Sometimes my white students who teach poetry in prison programs ask whether and how they can write about it. Mindful that they have so much more power than the people in the jails, aware that the school-to-prison pipeline and the U.S. prison industrial complex have created majority black inmate populations, they are wary of appropriating experience and telling stories that don't belong to them.

Poet C.D. Wright takes up this dilemma in her collection *One Big Self*, a poetic chronicle of her visits to Louisiana supermax prisons.[18] Wright, a free white woman, tenured professor, homeowner, mother to a son who has never been locked up, did write poems about incarceration. *One Big Self* is an example of how to manage a profound power imbalance as a white writer. In it, Wright pulls off the seemingly impossible, incorporating the prisoners' own words into poems and mixing in her voice with theirs, so that at times you can't tell who is speaking, poet or prisoner. Yet the poems do not fall into appropriation.

One mechanism by which the book works is Wright's essayistic introduction, "Stripe for Stripe," in which she acknowledges her position. "After all, I am not them," Wright reminds herself, and us. Putting the problem of freedom on the page this way lets it be part of the story instead of hovering as a terrible problem around the edge. Wright's introduction also lays out the pitfalls she herself means to avoid:

> *Not to idealize, not to judge, not to exonerate, not to aestheticize immeasurable levels of pain. Not to demonize, not anathematize.*

These are the mistakes my students are wary of making. Wright's list of Nots is generous, besides being clarifying. It teaches how to recognize and avoid errors of sentimental righteousness—e.g. demonizing, judging, exonerating.

I face these errors in my own work. When writing about state-sponsored violence, if I react to—or think about—a black body, how can I do it without imagining a pain I have no access to? How do I avoid passing judgment, aestheticizing a body, or making a naive moral pronouncement? If you are a human being, and an artist, and have skin privilege, and you are not unaware of ethics, the urge to stop yourself from writing is strong.

I had such an image in mind once and censored myself from writing about it for a couple of years.[19] When I did finally start a draft, I discovered an additional pitfall: I wanted to mark my whiteness but lacked the language to do it without sounding awkward, overzealous, or heroic.

Here is the poem as it stands now. Below, I quickly trace my path to it, showing one way I found around the problem of appropriation.

> *Just a second ago, I wanted to take your hand. We are standing before the boy shot by police, an image as big as a room. How to comfort someone viewing brutality. Is comfort damage. Who am I to comfort. I wanted to offer you a hand massage. I wanted, if not relief, at least communion. As someone danced with me in a stairwell for a moment at my mother's funeral. Someone brushed my hair back, touched my face. I wanted to offer you something in this place. Wanted something for myself in this place*

After five or six drafts (over years) that focused on the boy's body, which I won't quote because there is no point, I shifted my awareness to my own body. It might sound counterintuitive or narcissistic, like I was putting my white self in the forefront instead of being empathetic. But when I changed my focus, I was able to sense my loneliness, which I could not get to as I gazed outward. The boy's body is not mine, but my feelings are mine. I found I wanted to touch another person in the room.[20] I don't know where that urge came from, but it belonged to me. Moving on from there, I could examine my longing instead of making an altar of the body of an Other. The question "Who am I to comfort" is earnest: Who is available for comfort? Who witnesses with me? But it is also self-excoriating: Who do I think I am?

As I worked, I consciously pictured the You in the poem as different people: a white reader, a stranger, a friend, my son. I used to believe thinking about the reader tainted a poem, as though everything we need for a poem should spring from our own selves. But our own selves are only conglomerations of ideas gathered from everywhere. An imagined relationship with a reader was natural for this poem, since there is a co-viewer in it. But I have since revised my idea about "the reader."[21] For poems about whiteness, not losing sight of the fact that another human will receive the work seems crucial. (This poem was also the first I wrote with grayed-out text, which lets me argue back with myself, another way to get at complication.)

9. ON REACH

A Latinx editor responded to some of my early whiteness poems that had been solicited for a journal by a white contributing editor. Here is one I sent:

> *My mother's caregiver, Tasha, is deciding whether to be more "African." Her fiancé wants her to wear mudcloth wraps. Tasha likes fitted sheaths. He wants Tasha to have natural hair. She has a weave. About this conflict, mom does not think Tasha should or should not become more "African." She throws the couple a party when they get engaged. The husband leaves Tasha months after the wedding even though she did, in the end, "Africanize." This poem has a black home health aide working for a dying white woman.* Turn up the TV*, my mother says. In this poem a man demands a woman conform to an idea of blackness. What is the poem about? The TV is so loud it drowns out the memory of my mother's voice, it drowns out Tasha's lilac suede thigh boots.*

The white editor liked the poems, but the editor of color declined them. My work was an effort to understand whiteness as a category, she explained, and not a priority for the journal. Although she could see how the poems would be useful and relevant to an audience of white people working through similar processes, she said, this journal's readership—women of color—is not in that same space.

Her response made me think a lot. Were my poems mainly for white readers? If so, was that bad? Maybe my poems were like dental floss: use and discard. That idea actually intrigued me. But I didn't want to shut out readers. I wanted to reach readers. I had never thought of a poem in terms of reach before.

What obligation has a poet, or a poem, to identity? Should a poem be legibly black, or Asian, or queer, or trans, or a poem of disability? And what makes a poem so? Writers of color, and others on the margins, have been considering this question for a long time. Black poets stopped writing for white publishers and readers in the Harlem Renaissance.

I don't think a poem can be revised to extend reach very far. Maybe a little. To me, it is more important for poetry that white poets talk more about what makes a white poem and what marks a poem as white.

10. ON A POEM'S JOB

Should poems about race have a specific labor? Is change—whether public or private—the poems' work? Returning to *One Big Self* for a moment, we see C.D. Wright explicitly stating her purpose in visiting the prisons:

> *It is an almost imperceptible gesture, a flick of the conscience, to go, to see, but I will be wakeful.*

Wright did not set out, in *One Big Self*, to change the prison industrial complex. She did not try to sort out guilt and innocence. Instead, she pledged to be wakeful, opening a small aperture of expectation for herself. Keeping in mind the labor of wakefulness helps me when I don't know how to approach the daunting subject of whiteness. Wakefulness is not daunting. It requires no special training and is available to anyone.

In an earlier book, *One With Others*, C.D. writes of being

> *. . . by all outward and visible signs one of them, but on the reverse side of [the] skin [lying] awake in the scratchy dark, burning to cross over. Not to become one of the harmed but to shed the skin . . . of the injuring party.*[22]

The itchy unease she describes is familiar to me. I am no longer white in the way I was raised, not the same person I was when I started to learn about race, yet not not-white. I am not in the same place, but neither have I crossed over. I am mother to my son, always on watch for harm, including from my harming whiteness.

Here is the first poem about whiteness that I didn't throw out. The poem is not about race as much as searching. Having come awake to my longing, I made longing the labor of the poem and its compositional force:

> *There must be a word for the feeling of my whiteness. Something like the knot in aeronautical. Something like* stretchery. *There must be a way to taste whiteness. To sing it. If there is a word for the tightness of an overtuned drumhead, the pinch of a trampoline spring when you're in the air, what is it.*

Stretchery sounds like "treachery" and like "stretcher," a taut, institutional bearer of bodies. This poem carries in its music the feeling of liberal racism I grew up in. I shaped the poem lightly, just till it held together, having found that overworking a moment of whiteness can sometimes make a draft fall apart.

This poem is also a brief exploration of whiteness that does not turn on the presence of a black body. Poetry needs poems that don't set whiteness against blackness. They are hard poems to write, because whiteness is nothing except a force opposed to blackness. But if we train ourselves to notice what whiteness asks of us, rather than what we can ask of whiteness (see section 4), that can be a way in.

In an essay in *Boston Review*, "Can a Poem Listen? Variations on Being-White,"[23] poet Ailish Hopper calls white poets to be "awake within race." Writing our early racial experiences, Hopper says, is not enough. Putting racist behavior by white people inside the frame of a poem is not enough. Instead we might be

> *. . .* rewriting *race and racism, not merely representing, but disturbing; showing not just whiteness—but what it is to be awake, and disruptive, inside it.*

I came to wakefulness as a condition that moved me past fear and self-censorship. But Hopper suggests that being awake is more—it is potentially disruptive. She invites poets with skin privilege to move beyond describing our experiences to creating work that *interrupts* whiteness.

I want to write interruptive poems. There must be many ways to do it, but I don't yet know many ways. Shaming interrupts racist behavior in real time, but shame and guilt aren't forms of interruption poems need. Shame and guilt tend to silence. Documenting our racist behavior shows us that we are part of history, but putting our racist thoughts and actions into poems does not move poetry forward. At worst, that labor wounds people. At best, it merely rebroadcasts whiteness.

What do our interruptive poems look like? How, in a poem, do we disrupt whiteness? White poets are at a turning point, I think, beginning to figure that out.

11. ON NOT FINISHING

Lyric poems push the chaos of experience through a sieve of language toward irreducible insight. Lyric poetry promises, if not transformation, then at least concentrated drops of perception. When lyric poems end, they do not usually leave you wondering whether there are more words on the next page. They feel satisfying.

Writing about whiteness, I struggle with the lyric. No moment of whiteness in my life has "resolved." To the contrary. After I perceive the power of whiteness at work, whether I am intimately mixed up in the situation or watching distantly, say in a movie theater, I am left with more questions than answers. No wonder getting a poem about whiteness to resolve in a refined shot of language almost never works for me.

The poem below keeps getting more ragged (early notes for this poem are in section 6 above). Never do two thoughts have a pure arc of electricity between them the way they do when I work on a lyric poem. Instead, a bunch of thoughts and images sputter on their own, like separate downed wires. I have been revising this poem for 20 years and will stop when there is a publication deadline, but it won't be finished. Here is the opening as it stands now.

> *East Village, 1999. Three men demolishing the next door apartment, sledgehammering for hours. Then an argument: the black workman says, "I know I'm* black*, and I'm* stupid*, but. . . ."*
>
> *This poem an embarrassment*
>
> *"I know I'm* black*, and"*
>
> *Start with: his voice was cracking. First, nail the pain.*
>
> *East Village, late '90s. Three men, demolishing next door, smash brick so hard my desk shakes. Then start to argue. The black workman's voice, cracking: "I know I'm black, and I'm stupid. . . ." I want a crowbar to punch through the wall and into my back. Hurt me enough to drown out the shame. Is it my shame, or whose? What violence does this poem own, whose abasement, whose release?*
>
> *The poem, a mess, awaits renovation. If I fix up* stupid*, fill its "u" with plaster, smooth it down, then everyone in this poem will have dignity at least. Dignity, cool and dense as a marble virgin's breast.*
>
> *Cancerous*
>
> *[. . .]*

Resolution is not this poem's method. Starting and restarting, like a botched renovation, is its method. Its ideas break off and get picked up elsewhere in the manuscript. The poem doesn't clean up. It gets messier, folding in comments from other writers and an argument with a friend:

> *Allie: Think how you might say 'I know I'm a woman, and I'm stupid, but . . .' if you were making a point. He was being sarcastic, or else flat. Black men will use a flat delivery to avoid being perceived as aggressive.*
>
> *I heard folks talk about deep feelings of inadequacy.*
> *I heard. . . . feelings of shame. . . .*
> *inferiority. . . . all was not well with their souls*
> *(bell hooks)*
>
> *My reading on black self esteem sits in the poem like a leftover door that doesn't fit*
>
> *Allie: You didn't see his gestures, his expression.*

The poem turns away from the black workman after a white therapist says, "what does the memory bring up for *you*?" Her question redirects me toward the demands of whiteness—demands that I have fulfilled, in my life, without questioning.

No matter how I interrogate my compassion, no matter how much research on shame in America I throw into the poem, no matter how big the addition I build in the poem to house that research, the poem can always contain more. It will not resolve, but a poem does not necessarily have to resolve to feel satisfying. Accrual is a form of meaning. As its ideas accrued, the poem got longer, and I found room to retreat, reemerge, double back on myself. Those movements are the poem's meaning.

A poem can use false starts and dead ends. A poem can contain enough of what it needs and rest in incompleteness. If it is near other poems that talk back to, underline, or expand on its questions, that can help. This poem probably won't achieve its full meaning outside the context of the book. To make sense, it needs the conversation with neighboring poems.

It has been hard to guide shape-shifting liberal whiteness toward a lyric moment. At this time, given that it is generally better for white people to take in, think over, and listen than to speak, we can write poems that take in, think over, and listen. Long poems are good containers for whiteness because they can enact a complicated process.[24]

As I try to stop wanting what whiteness wants, I am trying, in poems, to make visible a lifetime of barely perceptible understandings, agreements, and interactions that created my whiteness. When it is finished, the book will be a long poem that traces how I came to be white. I hope and trust it will be part of our expanding effort as poets to perceive how whiteness happens so that we can, as much as possible, make it un-happen.

Joy Katz is the author of three poetry collections, two chapbooks, and many essays. Her manuscript in progress, White: An Abstract*, documents every minute of whiteness in her life. She collaborates in the pro-beauty, anti-racist art collective* IfYouReallyLoveMe*, based in Pittsburgh, where she lives and teaches in Carlow University's long-running Madwomen in the Attic workshops for women.*

Notes

Parts of this essay are adapted from a talk at the C.D. Wright Women Writers Conference in Conway, Arkansas, in 2017.

1. For too many transracial adoptees, trauma around race leads to despair and suicide when their "colorblind" white families refuse to acknowledge or examine their own racism. For me, grappling with whiteness might be a matter of life and death, if not for my child, then for someone else's. Not to overstate it.

2. *Our Black Year: One Family's Quest to Buy Black in America's Racially Divided Economy* (Public Affairs Press, 2012), a gripping memoir by attorney Maggie Anderson, lays out the racist underpinnings of the American economy.

3. Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, & Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America* (University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

4. Aspects of my identity that hold conflicting truths: daughter, mother, feminist, Jewish, dancer, wife, etc. This does not mean I am "not white." I still have skin privilege.

5. I have written elsewhere about John Berryman's *77 Dream Songs* and still turn to the poems for their language and their problems, but they would overwhelm the essay if discussed here.

6. Jake Adam York, *Murder Ballads* (Elixir Press, 2005); Martha Collins, *Blue Front* (University of Pittsburgh, 2006); Rachel Richardson, *Copperhead* (Carnegie Mellon, 2011); Ailish Hopper, *Dark Sky Society* (New Issues, 2014).

7. Or so I thought. Later I learned that my grandfather was kicked out of my great uncle's produce business and sent by the family to Memphis, where he worked as a deputy sheriff.

8. Begun when poet Dawn Lundy Martin tweeted, "if only white people would notice when there are all white people in the meeting."

9. The numbers surprised me. For instance, my neighborhood Target store is one of the most racially diverse places I routinely visit, at any hour of the day or night.

10. Rowan Ricardo Phillips, *When Blackness Rhymes with Blackness* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2010).

11. Whiteness does give things: generational wealth, a low likelihood of being incarcerated, etc. But these are not gifts. Their price is steep and paid by everyone.

12. But we have to speak. Adrienne Rich: "Lying is done with words, and also with silence."

13. "I feel extremely lucky to be white": An Interview with John Berryman conducted by John Plotz, *Harvard Advocate*, Oct. 27, 1968.

14. But see Sharon Olds's "Ode to My Whiteness."

15. Other things being in the mix too, such as relative wealth.

16. Writers of color are sometimes pushed by teachers or editors to write the other way, from a racialized perspective, which can be equally problematic.

17. Years later, I discovered an essay by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., noting Immanuel Kant calling a "Negro carpenter" "black" and "stupid": Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes," *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (Oxford University Press, 1993). See also bell hooks, *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem* (Washington Square, 2004).

18. On incarceration, see also *Bastards of the Reagan Era* (Four Way, 2015) and *Felon* (forthcoming) by Reginald Dwayne Betts; *Exit, Civilian* by Idra Novey (University of Georgia, 2012); "Model Prison Model" by Terrance Hayes; and Etheridge Knight, *Poems from Prison*.

19. This was shortly after Kenny Goldsmith performed "Body of Michael Brown," a "solipsistic clueless bubble of unsupportable 'art,'" as Anne Waldman called it. See: Responses to Kenny Goldsmith's *The Body of Michael Brown*, Poetry Foundation Harriet blog: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2015/03/responses-to-kenny-goldsmiths-the-body-of-michael-brown

20. An early draft had a stage direction for me to give someone in the audience a hand massage. It was distracting.

21. In "Writing Off the Subject," an essay often taught in intro poetry, the white poet Richard Hugo says: "Never worry about the reader. . . . When you are writing, glance over your shoulder, and you'll find there is no reader" (in *The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing*, W.W. Norton, 1992). Judy Grahn, a white lesbian feminist icon and self-proclaimed community poet, says the opposite: "As I write, I constantly ask myself, 'who am I talking to?'" (Lecture at Carlow University, Pittsburgh, Pa., October 2018).

22. C.D. Wright, *One Big Self* (Copper Canyon, 2013); *One With Others: [a little book of her days]* (Copper Canyon, 2011).

23. Ailish Hopper, "Can a Poem Listen? Variations on Being-White," *Boston Review* (online), 2015. http://bostonreview.net/poetry/npm-2015-ailish-hopper-being-white

24. Some of the long works that have influenced my project: Eula Biss, *Notes from No Man's Land*; Don Mee Choi, *The Morning News Is Exciting*; Toi Derricotte, *The Black Notebooks*; Cornelius Eady, *Brutal Imagination*; Myung Mi Kim, *Commons*; John Keene, *Annotations*; Claudia Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* and *Citizen*; Muriel Rukeyser, *US 1*; and Eleni Sikelianos' *The California Poem* (especially for how accrual forms its meaning).

EIGHT POEMS

JAY HOPLER

Benediction

The wind in swells through the wild rye rolls.
The bright sky dulls. Over the hills,
    Their green backs ringed with blue-
        Bells sunset-rung, flaps a wingy shadow west-
        Ward. A jay. Poor bird that no net
            Met nor gin it didn't love. Good luck,
    You luckless scrub, you.
    You dumb—, you *doomed*
        Sucker. God bless.

After the Diagnosis

    It's not raining, how is that possible?
& there's a bird at the feeder. How can it be hungry?
There are squirrels bickering in the plumtree?
        Why would someone be flying a kite?
                That there's enough wind
                To make the wind-
        Chimes chime—

    What's w/ the snoring dog? How is there sleep?
How can anything breathe in this distant air?
It cannot be the case the only thing to care
        Is my neighbor's cat. &, of course, it's not—
                She just wanted her supper.
                Ought not the lavender
        Its ravish dampen? Ought not

    The light linger in the lindens
Longer? The dirt, so keen to receive me,
Is holding my breath. Are they clapping for me
        Or against me, the aspens, how
                Can I tell? Will dragonflies
                Come to sew my eyes
        Shut? My mouth?

Radiation Vault 4

O, let there be in here w/ me a moth
    Whose DNA w/ mine will mix
    When they flip the switch
        & the room goes nuclear

That I may some days later sprout
    A pair of wings that'll wing
    Their sun-struck span

In a sky-wide, oil-slick rainbow.
    & may the skull upon its thorax
    Be the skull upon my back,
        That Heaven may upon

That aspect cast its homicidal eye
    When I flutter its porchlight, the sun,
    & think its work already done.

Sonatina, on My Cancer

The toilets in the Bennett L.
    & Rose Wood Park men's room
Are metal & ring like bells
    When you piss in them.

Ring like rang no bell
    On the day I was born.
Ring like no bell will
    Ring on the day I die.

Over the soccer fields roll
    The shadows of clouds.
In the piss-tolled bowl,
    A little billow of blood.

Memento Mori

Were this street a leaf-strewn bier
    On which reposed a late-October light,
    Its decomposing body dun as the sky
From which it fell, the fall air

Its frore & formless ghost, the odd
    Walker haunted by it, his coat
    Drawn close about his throat,
A skull upon the sidewalk

Chalked in a child's awkward hand
    Would make one think of painted faces,
    Spook costumes, & pillowcases
Fat w/ candy, but it's the end

Of June! Every dooryard garden's
    A bedizenry of bloom!
    Even the air, petal-plumed,
Is a sun-hot blossom goldening open!

How like them, the unscathed
    Young, to remind us that we're lost:
    Hominem te memento. Respice post
Te. As mother used to say,

Nothing wrecks a beautiful day quite
    Like a child—. & yet . . . , people
    Still have them. Why? It's a bestial
Immortality. Better just to die.

Benediction (2)

The wind $\frac{whines}{winds}$ through the white pines
    & the windchimes chime their tin-tined tongues
On the back deck. A $\frac{coaled}{cold}$ sky
        Painted by Jacob van Ruisdael. *Windmill*
        At Wijk bij Duurstede, w/o the windmill.

A windsock flaps. The grasses rasp. The aspens
    Clap their $\frac{soughed}{soft}$ applause.
Autumn—, what's $\frac{done}{dun}$ is $\frac{dun}{done}$. The wind
        Slips between the slats of the back fence.
        It's whining, each slat in that back fence—

Parade

In the foil-flash & rattle of wind-spun
    Pinwheels, a marching band
To its tuba tunes & the bunting hung

From the porch rails rustles. A bird,
    A bunting or something, rustles
In the rain lilies & a hearse

On loan from Bethlehem
    & Sons Funeral Home, pulls a float
Trimmed w/ zinnias, prim-

Roses, & mums. Wave, wave,
    You rainy lilies! You mist-slick lindens,
Lift your dripping limbs & wave!

Though it's the wind, its blah
    Paroxysms, not patriotism,
That moves you, not the mob, its straw-

Hat hoopla. A Sousa blast, flat-
    Brassed & blatted, startles from the lilies
Not a bunting but a rat. A wet rat.

July 4, 2017

Self-Portrait, Not Looking

I should have been the clover not the revolver the hero throws at the monster after shooting it six times didn't work I should have been Antwerp not the shirt of bees though I swarm I should have been the mousetrap not the tree skirt not the smell of horses the florist not the flowers on this table great orange blooms splashing upward through eruptions of white lace & fern I should have been this moon-stunned starstunned night not the bowl of drizzle a little bit of rain nowhere to go

---

Jay Hopler is the author of Green Squall *(2006), which won a Yale Younger Poets Prize, a Great Lakes Colleges Association New Writers Award, a National "Best Books" Award from* USA Book News, *a Florida Book Award, and a* Foreword Reviews *Book of the Year Award. His second collection,* The Abridged History of Rainfall *(2016), was also a finalist for the 2016 National Book Award in Poetry.*

DEAR MEMORY,

DENISE DUHAMEL

What have you done with my keys? I blame you
though it's hard to hold a grudge these days
because I usually don't remember
why I was angry in the first place.
I look at a person sure she's done me wrong
though the inciting incidents are lost. Former students
seem familiar, but their names disperse like cigarette smoke
blowing towards a stool where I once drank myself sick.
Now I'm not even sure what city that bar was in,
the welcoming pink neon letters, another cloud,
as though I am looking at tiny print
without my reading glasses. I was on a pink cloud
when I first stopped drinking. In fact, I once looked up
at the moon, weeping in gratitude. So there,
I do recall something! I was walking across
the Brooklyn Bridge in an ex's sweatpants
though I'm not sure anymore of his name or if I ever
gave those sweatpants back. I'm usually halfway through
a movie on Netflix when I realize I've already seen it,
probably in an old-fashioned freestanding theater,
perhaps a matinee or a midnight screening.
Perhaps a popcorn bucket on my lap—
that is, if I wasn't on some fad diet.
Did I take my pain pill or not? I'm drinking water
but not sure I can detect that bad taste all the way
back on my tongue. Maybe I have been drinking
more water than I thought. Is it time to go
to the gynecologist again? The office usually sends me
a reminder postcard, but today I'm holding
a letter from the Breast Center saying it's time again
for my mammogram. I usually get a prescription
from the gynecologist about a month beforehand—this is how
it's been the last few years. I wonder if my doctor is retired
or dead. I would call him, but I have forgotten his name.
It begins with an S and I think I remember the exit.
I look through the stack of business cards
I save for moments such as this, but no card for him.
I go to take out the recycling just moments
after I took out the recycling. I stand at the fridge,
its door ajar—the cold light bulb, an idea for a poem
which I've also forgotten, a sublime dream
that woke me in the middle of the night, a sublime dream
I was sure I'd never forget. Ah, here is my key ring!
But this gold one with the big square head—
what lock could it possibly open?

Denise Duhamel's most recent book of poetry is Scald *(Pittsburgh, 2017).* Blowout *(Pittsburgh, 2013) was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. She is a Distinguished University Professor in the MFA program at Florida International University in Miami.*

FLICKERS

APR Books

DAVID BIESPIEL

If cycles of taste in American poetry didn't have their own propulsion and life span, neither to be appraised in eras, one would now express a prayer of thanks. But we may not be out of the period of poetry virtue signaling for years, because few of the social conditions that bred this era's political traits have changed or seem ready to. Since the protests in Ferguson, Missouri, in the summer of 2014, the feeding on political language in the United States has become extreme, and the political arguments, coarse. As if to underscore these conditions, there's been an amazing explosion of partisan poetry—never have there been so many political poets, so many poems vying for attention, so many books, so many inflated disputations, and so little sympathy for proportion. The boom in the poetry market, the triumph of promotion, the manufacture of glam, the aesthetics of social indictment—these won't be going away, as with a whisper of abracadabra, now that a natural demarcation, like 2020, is around the corner.

But America is not the only place where poems get made, which motivates me to look elsewhere for other registers of feeling and thought not so tethered to social debates here at home. There's much to suggest that American poetry might be losing its primacy, if it ever had any, as a poetry center. The point is not that the poetry of one nation might get replaced by another, or that one is on the verge of disappearing. But, for the last few months, I've been asking myself, what's been going on out there, beyond our borders?

Alejandra Pizarnik
Extracting the Stone of Madness: Poems 1962–1972
Translated by Yvette Siegert
New Directions Press
384 pages, 2016

Extracting the Stone of Madness, the latest publication from New Directions of Alejandra Pizarnik's hectic and heartbreaking poems, showcases seven of her books, some posthumously published, and takes its name from her 1968 volume in which she condemns the ways she loses all sense of time through the "pendulum of solitude" (73). That phrase is something of Pizarnik's shorthand for chaos, I take it—but it's less a literary trope captured, and more a perception of a suffering mind, a sense that the inner life is without calm, mercy, or order. Pizarnik took her life at the age of 36, in 1972, by overdosing on Seconal, and when you learn that biographical detail, you realize that for Pizarnik, who was born in 1936 in Allevaneda, Argentina, to Jewish immigrant parents, poetry is the art of one's most shatterable obsessions.

Perhaps that's why her poems ricochet with crowded, makeshift gestures of desperation, as if succumbing to despair were the most exciting thing a poem could hold. Sometimes she's trying to find some kind of peace in the objects that surround her, as when she dares to "frighten / the truth out of this old wall— / and its fissures, its gashes / that form faces and sphinxes / and hands and clepsydras." (33) Other times she's intent on revealing a "thousand faces" (33) of resiliency with an arresting irreverence and a commanding defiance that forces back despair—

> *Winter the hound was gnawing at my smile. On the bridge. I was naked and wore a hat with flowers, and dragged my dead body, also naked and wearing a hat of dry leaves.*
> *I have had many loves, I said, but of all these, the greatest was my love of mirrors.*

Is it possible writing like this offers a measure of comfort, an assurance that whatever horrors Pizarnik suffers, she will, perhaps, survive through art? Is that a form of social critique? Maybe. There's an aura of worried fortitude to her writing, such that the investigation of moral anguish speaks in the argot of reasoned inquiry, even self-scorn. This is the poetry of what she calls "desperate expulsion" (105), illuminating the absurdities and abominations of existence as "metaphors of suffocation"—metaphors that "unbind from their shroud—the poem." That last quotation is from the poem "Dirges," published in a 1971 collection, *A Musical Hell*. The poem ends—

> *And I, alone with my voices—and you, so far on the other side that I confuse you with myself.*

I hope you can see, even in so brief a passage, how immersed Pizarnik is between what's genuine and what's illusory. Silence and suicide, which she invokes often, are the core materials of her synthesis, I suppose—and a term of art like surrealism doesn't quite nail her talent. Yes, her imagination resonates with hypnagogic instincts, but mostly as a conviction in the animal purity of madness. You see that conviction in the following passage addressed to American singer Janis Joplin, who died of a heroin overdose—

> *you have to cry until you break*
> *in order to make or utter a small song,*
> *to scream so much to fill the holes of absence*
> *that's what you did, what I did (225)*

In other ways, you can see how another poet, like Pizarnik's fellow Argentinian Antonio Porchia, might have influenced her minimalist sensibility, and why the Mexican poet Octavio Paz, whom she met and befriended when she lived in Paris in the early 1960s, might have adored her, for the suffused sadness her poems exude. For living a life of extremity in art—something like melding mental illness with the avant-garde—she's been compared to Arthur Rimbaud and Antonin Artaud, two French poets who found in writing poetry, as much as in their lives, an art of the troubled undertaking.

For my reading, I've been thinking of another poet Pizarnik resembles, one nearer to her generation, a poet born just four years before Pizarnik and who took her own life, and whose poems are also theatrical performances of despair and inner cruelty: Sylvia Plath. Stylistically Plath and Pizarnik have little in common. But their rejection of a virtuous poetic disposition, their assertion of feminist independence, and the way their individual imaginations teeter between delirium and feeling devoured, lend something to their moral authority. You don't really cheer on Pizarnik and Plath. You believe in them.

Conor O'Callaghan
Live Streaming
Wake Forest University Press
64 pages, 2018

The majority of the poems of *Live Streaming*, Irish poet Conor O'Callaghan's mesmerizing book, take place in the rugged interior of the household. The primary resident is the poet himself, a man who makes the pouring of a glass of water the occasion for a still life of wanting—

> *I pour a glass of water for myself.*
> *I watch what grays it gathers from the room.*
> *It's not to drink. I want the wanting of*
> *a glass of water sleep can come between.*
> *The glass of water sits there half the year.*
> *Its level drops. Its bubbles bloom and burst.*
> *I get the glass of water's hardly you,*
> *and still I rise to mouthing arid toast:*
> *to hunger, thirst; to bliss that goes without;*
> *to love abstained, the lull until the flood;*
> *to near enough to touch it hurts, and not;*
> *all windblown wishes, thistles in a field.*
> *I tilt the glass of water to my lips.*
> *I hold like this, before the wanting stops. (18)*

No matter how hard O'Callaghan concentrates on the delicacies of his life as a family man, he is always aware of what is just outside the shadow of its haunting presence. In *Live Streaming* that figure is the poet's long-absent father. The father as an erased presence, I mean, until the poem "His Last Legs" opens with the father, surprisingly, knocking on the poet's front door—

> *The curtain pulls back. My little son and daughter. There's a man. A man? I turn the shower off, wrap round, step out. Says he's your dad. They are on the edge of the mattress in their pajamas. Wait there . . .*
>
> *You're not welcome. I am holding our door open with one hand, my towel in place with the other. You know you're not. I am leaving wee footprints everywhere. Let's go.*
>
> *His exit is the last I see of him for fifteen years.*

It's a timeless question, the fascinating complication of familial knots. It gives *Live Streaming* its centerpiece—derived in part from a strange source. Some years ago O'Callaghan happened onto a play called *His Last Legs*, a 19th-century Irish farce, in which the drunken protagonist is estranged from his family. The father in the play—and here's the strange part—has the same name as O'Callaghan's absent father, Felix O'Callaghan (27). Thus, latent material that the poet had long avoided came forward. The submerged, emerged. Discovery of the old play prompts the poet to address his anger and loss—

> *Sometimes it feels I'm the only one who remembers your four fingers around our door. Inasmuch as memory is: an affray of limbs and shouting, us incrementally squeezing your body back out into the small freezing hours of Christmas morning, the monosyllables of* fuck off you cunt *in one of our voices, and mam pleading with us not to break the four fingers between frame and door that will be the last part of you to disappear. (37)*

What I hope you hear in these sentences are the rhythms of a low-humming trauma—"There's nothing, I am calling. Keep moving," he says elsewhere—but one that underlies an ancient order, one that sustains a sense of solidarity and kinship, in spite of the facts.

Conor O'Callaghan, who was born in 1968, in Newry, in Northern Ireland, came of age in Irish

poetry under the shadows of two giants: Seamus Heaney, from whom he learned to interrogate the conditions of everyday life, and Patrick Kavanagh, with whom he shares a sense that experiences can be both bracing and timeless. O'Callaghan's poems have always seemed to me to possess the urgency of recent newswires cast in poetic forms that are recognizably classical, as when he writes, in the title poem—

Old thing,
to what do
we owe this
most recent

inkling? An indoors
offshore gust?
Or air displaced
by a practice

swing in gloaming?
I know this
much: it comes
to us, to life

that is. I get
now how the still
point comes
to life and we've

but to wait.
Late father,
better than never,
come to life.

Here is a poem that stands against a kind of treachery as much as it stands for goodness. By that I mean, a person owns their own story, and a poet like O'Callaghan insists that he holds the power over the worst tenants in his story, even if he is perpetually in their debt, and even when the natural order of life flickers in and out of place. Turns out this is the kind of poetry meant to replace cruelty. That's why we might suddenly seize upon the final love poems of this book, including the last poem, an epithalamion, but more important the one before, "Bank," which offers a dash of hope—

Seeds of
the dandelion
picked from
millions
like it,
blown, catch bits of
sun
and carry them
downwind
a field's
length. I want
more years
together.
I walk towards
our shadow.

In a world of ambushes and distress, but also perpetually bountiful and endlessly alluring, O'Callaghan is a poet more interested in survival than sentimentality, for whom poetry ekes out a measure of bliss in the meanest of circumstances.

Kathleen Jamie
Selected Poems
Picador
160 pages, 2019

Kathleen Jamie belongs to the generation of Scottish poets whose work, after the Second World War, abdicated the literary centers of Edinburgh and London. Her earliest poems, published in *Black Spiders*, in 1982, seem forged with the belief that poetry required social isolation. She depicted solitude in the stillness of observed nature: the web of a black spider, the "last trumpet of sunlight" (17), the "sharp end of the gorge" (18), and the "Back country . . . yet unexplored" where

the sky is the color of bruise. The sun:
underground. Rocks glow like night-lights
with the strain of containing it . . . (7)

The sober brushstrokes of her writing segued, some ten years later, into something coarser, certainly mythic, in a book like *The Autonomous Region* that includes princesses and maids and dragons. Yet, even in that wonderland, figures emerge with their genuine aloofness intact:

We saw him once more: in the dusty dawn
a distant home-turned figure
jaunty as a fiddler
down the loch-side dirt track.

As we saddled up, ready for the last push,
wondering again what kind of place it was
we rode toward
with a new resolve. (51)

What I admire here are the ways Jamie adjoins the particulars of a scene, as if she's relying on a flat knife to carve out the particulars. Not all the details in her landscapes are included, but we're still able to read the figuration just fine. What I'm getting at is that Jamie offers a meticulous regard for the qualities of a place, such as a shadow's curve, wide, flat patches of fields, waysides, and gloamings—

In this house
are secret rotting wings,
wrecked timbers; the cupboard
under the stair
glimmers with pearl.

The sea-house
rises from pulse; salt winds
boom in its attics. Here:
my tottering collections of shells, my ballroom
swirling with fulmars.

Morning brings
laundries of wrack,
a sea-maw's grief-shaped wing. Once
a constellation
of five pink buoys. (86)

The lines quoted above open "The Sea-house," and I hope you can see the rapidly made movements, with only a touch of interpretation, like that "grief-shaped wing." The last stanza of "The Sea-house" rewards you with figurative moodiness and an air of expectancy—

I knock back and forth
like the tongue of a bell
mournfully tolling
in fog, or lie
as if in a small boat
adrift in an upstairs room.

What I get from this kind of writing is that Jamie's sense of place is unsparing. Anyone who has taken themselves to the coastline knows that nothing, in terms of her observation, is lacking. Same goes in a poem like "The Whale-watcher," which I'll quote from below, insofar as the emotional wave of feeling connected to the natural world is concerned—

And when at last the road
gives out, I'll walk—
harsh grass, sea-maws,
lichen-crusted bedrock—
and hole up the cold
summer in some battered
caravan, quartering
the brittle waves
till my eyes evaporate
and I'm willing again
to deal myself in:
having watched them

breach, breathe, and dive
far out in the glare,
like stitches sewn in a rent
almost beyond repair. (147)

The end of the road, the cold summer, the choppy waves, the appearance of whales, the restorative salve: it's all there, shivery, but primeval, as durable as "lichen-crusted bedrock." Jamie's work insists in its characteristically clarifying way that her northern Scottish coastline views are always at risk of being gone, or at least going; that even the edges of civilization are running out, so that what you're left with is some distant perimeter within the self. The poet becomes the watcher, if not the voyeur, of passing time within the human body.

This may be why one senses an aloofness in Jamie's writing over the last thirty years. Her poems come across as a means to extol isolation—isolation, that is, not as disconnection entirely but as an acute common predicament, which might prove to be a valuable poetics, as when she writes—

High on the island,
uninhabited these days, sheep
grazed oblivious,
till the dogs—the keenest
a sly, heavy-dugged bitch—
came slinking behind them.
Then men appeared, and that
backwash voice: will you move
you baa-stards!

What a splendidly concise image, where the distances between view and vision become radiant, enfolded, planted firmly in a real place. By the same measure, the realism of her writing contains also a thoughtfulness that appeals to hope, such that the smooth utterances of a poet whose proud attachment to the commonplace frees her from triviality.

Don Paterson
40 Sonnets
Farrar, Straus and Giroux
65 pages, 2017

To read Scottish poet Don Paterson's *40 Sonnets* is to enter a disposition. I suspect I'm not alone among Paterson's readers in finding my fondness for this book depends a lot on my own disposition at the time of reading. That's the nature of encountering the sonnet form forty times in a row in a single book. The themes are consistently filled with vulnerability. The attitudes toward daily life are consistently insightful. The rhythms are consistently balanced. But sometimes I'm too easily able to loosen myself from the trance. Something of an intransigence against it all sets in.

It's in the spirit of disclosure that I confess a bias. I feel the need to say to you that I too have published a book of sonnets. To be more precise, in 2003 I published a book of nine-line American sonnets, wherein I invented a variant on the old form given to us first by the Italians in the 16th century. In 2014, I also published a book of epistles, nearly thirty letters composed in the form of poems addressed to family, friends, poets, and, for lack of a better term, political rivals. For the better or for the worse, I have experience with writing a book in a single form, as Paterson has, and seeing how far one can take it. Or, more important, how far the form can take one. Because to write in a single form long enough to make a book of it is not only to get to know the verbal and musical sources that are gravely needed for that form,

but also to be reminded of the ubiquitous labor of thought, maybe, or the fractional nature of grasping the form itself. By using the same lyric approach, a poet can discover new qualities in one's material—which, in my experience, is the most urgent reason to write in a single form for stretches of time, like you're having your own personal Blue Period. Through the scaffolding of a form's limitation, to say nothing of your own, you get to know your material better.

In any case, Don Paterson's *40 Sonnets* is a work of ecstatic intelligence, an argument for speaking as quietly as possible for the "spectral fires that play / between the inner world and the outer dark" (8) of human effort—that almost, through the performance of a tenacious poetic will, forges a path "where a man must face the smaller man within" (10). The title of the book can be taken as an invitation to return and arrive inside the classical architecture of the sonnet. But I don't read the title of the book as a tally, rather as a series of distinctive affirmations. In point of fact, Paterson has always been a poet who rarely misses the opportunity to present his imagination inside the constraints of a high psychic squeeze. Actually, he's a poet and musician—he left Scotland for London early in life to make his mark as a classical guitarist, and he's always struck me as a poet with a very good ear.

The images Paterson has assembled come not only from feelings you might call an awakening but also from a persistent elegiac accent. Sonnet as elegy? Not your textbook stance toward the sonnet, is it? Taken in the aggregate, the forty poems provide a clue, a watermark, for loss and, by book's end, recovery. What's lost is family and love, and that's also what's gained. If not gained, then blurred or blended together in such a way that the borderlines between form and content all but vanish.

Nonetheless, each sonnet has its own gravity. The book opens, in "Here," with a man waking up from a nap. By the poem's turn, he's already wondering what to say—

How can the lonely word
know who has sent it out, or who has heard?
Long years since I came round in her womb
enough myself to know I was not home,
my dear sea up in arms at the wrong shore
and her loud heart like a landlord at the door.
Where are we? What misdemeanor sealed
my transfer? Mother, why so far afield?

The momentum of this passage, about losing one's mother, works toward aspiration—longing, thirst, ache, an urge—which is an essential component of the sonnet's genetic equipment. It's where the sonnet seizes on its aesthetic, to say nothing of its moral, bearings. A question that comes to mind is, should we be looking at this book's form or content? And if those distinctions collapse, what about the distinction between, on the one hand, poetry as an art and, on the other hand, the living figures and dramatic situations that push a poem around, or push us around?

"A Vow" offers one sort of answer: For a poet to remain true to himself means to endure without regard the fluctuations of fashion or notoriety—

When I was ruined by love, I took a vow
that if I loved again, I'd love the less;
so when I spoke love, spoke it to excess,
as love will make its mirror anyhow.
But I talk to myself, and late one day
Love heard me crowing of my secret share
and taxed me all the false love I'd declared.

Now I feel nothing but her stream away
the way she does, dead slow and fast as light
like a galaxy that leaves behind one spark
too low and dull to catch her silent drift;

though somewhere out there in my turning dark
they know each sunrise falling like a lift
and the white curve of her arm gone from the night.

I suppose one still writes sonnets because we still know how. For all its formal acumen, *40 Sonnets* has the feel of a special testament—inviting, almost elusive, but aways motivated by a compulsion to communicate.

Is Paterson the last of a sonnet-making breed? I expect not. To work in a single form like this is to be both one of a kind and also integrated into a community. But mostly it's to be a singular artist in an age where, every few years, poets swarm from one shiny style to the next. I think I'd feel the same pleasure in reading Paterson even if he were writing something more avant-garde—say, refusing to use seven of the nineteen consonants in the English language. What I admire is his firm footing, and the way he's no more than roughly linked to any larger contemporary movement or inclination.

Adam Zagajewski
Asymmetry
Translated by Clare Cavanagh
Farrar, Straus and Giroux
96 pages, 2018

For decades Polish poet Adam Zagajewski has been the Poet Laureate of Eastern European anxiety. From the moment his poems first appeared in English, audiences have appreciated his work as zeroing in on the discontents of totalitarian grotesques following the end of the Second World War and the rise of Communism. He was born in 1945, in Lviv, Ukraine. The same year his family was expelled and resettled in Poland. In the 1980s Zagajewski departed for Paris, divided his home for a time between the U.S. and France, until, at the beginning of the new century, he took up residence in Krakow. That sketch may be all you need to guess that Zagajewski is devoted to realism. By my reading, he has consistently worked at exploring psychological sincerity not otherwise attained by most poets.

To read Zagajewski's earliest poems is to encounter an embattled territory: the abuse of the psyche and the convulsions of war. His was the landscape of failed dimensions. But Zagajewski's poems were not intended to conceal disquiet or embroider sentimentality onto that story. Instead, he found perspectives that seemed to undercut a whole narrative history behind them, but askant—so that readers were put at the brink of a secret life of gratitude that may, if you look closer, be yours. The risk was always something like a poetry of nostalgia, as if one writes poems with a breath of unconcern for its truths.

Or, if not nostalgia, then something more like the assured informality of guilt, as you see in a new poem, "About My Mother," a poignant elegy that rests on the heartstrings of a son's grief—

. . . how she went on at length about things
that weren't her strong suit and how I stupidly
teased her, for example, when she
compared herself to Beethoven going deaf,
and I said, cruelly, but you know he
had talent, and how she forgave it all,
and how I remember that, and how I flew from Houston
to her funeral and they showed a comedy
in flight and I wept with laughter
and grief, and how I couldn't say anything
and still can't. (16)

Writing like this, going along like someone who's just talking, tends to work as though the poet was unafraid that such a flat exterior would appear timid. Throughout the poem, anecdotes and everyday feelings butt against one another, as if overlaid, with gentle understatement or the bittersweet tone of an afterthought. Reading *Asymmetry* is like reading a restrained autobiography, written after the poet has already told the worst parts. "Give me back my childhood," he begins one poem, and the radiating claim is not a declaration of complacency but a stratagem against further anxiety, to stabilize things, to remain inside the feeling of tender longing without penance—

A June storm blesses the train. A pheasant lands heavily
in a wheat field, like the first helicopter.

Aphorisms, fine, but how long can you be right?

Jósef Czapski frequently advised me: when you're
having a bad day, paint
a still life.

Express train, June, a calm evening, the light retreats
peaceably. Deer beside the forest. Happiness.

Dark poems. Summer mornings, gleaming. (73)

It's as if a poem's main purpose is not merely to reflect on the fact of experience but also to remain mysterious. The overwhelming impression isn't of strife and synthesis, but striving to hold onto impressions before they condense.

You might call this the art of reclamation, I suppose, for which Zagajewski's instrument, in this book, is portraiture—though the portraits are always elegies—for his father, his mother, his Polish barber, the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, the Italian painter Giovanni Piranesi, the Russian composer Sergei Rachmaninoff, the Polish poet Jerzy Hordyński, the Polish activist and Holocaust survivor Ruth Buczyńska, the French painter Édouard Manet, the Polish philosopher Krzysztof Michalski, the German poet Bertolt Brecht. Underneath them all, like a quiet nocturne, is the music of the Polish composer Frédéric Chopin, where one is deeply moved by the entirety of feeling, such as when the poet's father, while listening to Chopin, turns from the music to look out the window—

his face
opens to the music, to the light,
and so he stays in my memory, focused,
motionless, so he'll remain forever,
beyond the calendar, beyond the abyss,
beyond the old age that destroyed him,
and even now, when he no longer is, he's still
here, attentive . . .
leaning in his chair, serene (71)

To each figure Zagajewski gives wistful attention. But the light he shines on them is high and constant and floating broadly, with little gray in it, producing luminous remembrances of what he calls the "kingdom of the dead" (23).

I suppose this has encouraged him to think of time as a light-filled basket, such that he writes fondly of days "without inspiration" (3), clouds sailing "swiftly across the inattentive earth" (12), "black lilac" (24), the "hoarse whisper" of the sea (40), and about his favorite poets who never met each other, poets who knew

what the world was
and wrote hard words
on soft paper
Sometimes they knew nothing
and were like children
on a school playground
when the first drop
of warm rain
descends (48)

Poets, he writes early in the book, "are Presocratics. They understand nothing" (5). Is that right? Is that true? Because *Asymmetry* dramatizes one of Zagajewski's most distinctive impulses: a poet's work means nothing without a meaningful sense of the past. That paradox must be a strain on him, and it shows. There's a palpable discomfort with missing so many people. The "road has no end" (5), Zagajewski says. History and memory dismay and seduce. Perhaps this is the last imaginative intersection left for a poet willing to gamble on warm feelings.

David Biespiel is the author of eleven books, most recently Republic Café.

from ***STARLIT***

ELIZABETH TREADWELL

Rose McGowan

in all the ancient boyfriends
of my trending disregard
trove nuance

the revolution will not be mansplained

& it willn't
reside in sorrow
for we
release this sorrow-marrow,
these adjectives enclosure

as venus held
starlight we
tend

Mabel Normand

as in the meat-drop retinue were halted
as we dreamt

Tatum O'Neal

what shining eyes we had, no
mercy
in the remembrance keep
unaltered

home of fugue

Jenny Lumet

the girls with the hunky sweaterdresses & the metallic
flats from the cover of the new issue of seventeen
which arrived in the mailbox yesterday because
it is november, 1981, diana has conceived william, reagan has
appointed o'connor, whitney houston is one
of the girls, all the girls at school the next day

Garbo (the hermit)

in the alkaline notions/lend yourself
ease//find small pastures of slow
habit/& care//gentle days little
lakes/tiny shores//of souls repose

Loren (the high priestess)

it is a salve a murmur in the alcove
& from the ladychapel
as this starbrights earthling hum
as this ceaseless ink-dark day
as we are curious as we
are starlit reverie

Bergman (the tower)

amid the adornments of our hours
in the untitled lagoon
of this metallic portal
awash in light aswim in dark
mermaidic of this hymn-ish
as we coalesce

Butterfly McQueen (the empress)

of the sultry add-ons luminary midsummer coterie
& vindication, a valedictory still heartstrung, butterfly
acknowledge your tender inhabitation, dreamskin, legend
your regal handdrawn, your clever voice & kin, augusta
the tempers of your hours

These poems appear in Starlit *(Chax, forthcoming), Elizabeth Treadwell's eleventh book; her others include* Birds & Fancies *and* Posy.

GLAMOUR

MAGGIE QUEENEY

The look I am hunting: the one
that through color and cut glares

the starer into a skull or a skein
of lightning, a switch

stalled at dawn, or the gloaming
along an equator. What fascinates

I shine like flame-blackened foil,
a rhinestone snoring at lake bottom,

a wreck's brass-bound astrolabe,
bright as hard tender, newly minted,

mewling and naked under
oil-slick pleather sieving light,

prism-like, my limbs sing their siren
song, pull ribbons of pure note over

the pack's snarl and bark, teeth pop,
dangling chain of saliva snaps—

deep under, I stay
seamless as a safe, a rust-sealed letter

box, corroded pill case, my insides
scoured to looking glass

by a tangle of wind trapped,
a cyclone circling the space

the size a doll's eye makes,
panting my small breath.

Maggie Queeney is the author of settler, *selected by Shane McCrae in the 2017 Baltic Writing Residency Poetry Chapbook Contest. Her most recent work is found or forthcoming in* The North American Review, The Southwest Review, Fugue, The Fairy Tale Review, *and* Nashville Review, *among others.*

This poem is the winner of the 2019 Stanley Kunitz Memorial Prize. APR awards $1,000 and publication to a poet under 40 years of age in honor of the late Stanley Kunitz's dedication to mentoring poets.