The AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW

"... the heart of the geopoet's task, I think: to tell stories backward ... One of the basic premises of environmental thinking is that, in ecosystems, it's untenable to tease out any species' existence from that of its neighbors; rather than thinking of these creatures as being bounded and separate, we are invited to see them in interlocking webs of influence, everything contingent, everything co-constitutive of everything else. Contemporary eco-poetry attempts to coax readers into a greater perception of this boundlessness."

— LAIDLAW, p. 32

MARCH/APRIL 2020 VOL. 49/NO. 2 $5 US/$7 CA

CARRIE FOUNTAIN

THE JUNGLE & OTHER POEMS

KAVEH AKBAR & JANE HIRSHFIELD
FACING INTO THE BROKEN WORLD

NATALIE SHAPERO
THREE POEMS

AND

ELISA GABBERT
DIANE MEHTA
CRAIG MORGAN TEICHER
BRUCE SMITH
FELICIA ZAMORA

APRWEB.ORG

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The American Poetry Review
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CHESSY NORMILE

Great Exodus, Great Wall, Great Party

The APR/Honickman First Book Prize is an award of $3,000 and publication of a volume of poetry. Chessy Normile's *Great Exodus, Great Wall, Great Party*, with an introduction by Li-Young Lee, will be published in September 2020, with distribution by Copper Canyon Press through Consortium.

The prize is made possible by the partnership between The Honickman Foundation and *The American Poetry Review*.

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The AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW

MARCH/APRIL 2020 VOL. 49/NO. 2

IN THIS ISSUE

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.

SIX POEMS

CARRIE FOUNTAIN

The Voice

Outside Dublin, Texas the radio stations
disappear and I'm left alone with the faint

voice of a call-in psychologist talking
to a man in Cleveland about the voice

of the self, the narratives that voice
tells, how they can be sharp and wrong

and cut to the bone—whose bone? I don't
know. It's hard for me to imagine being

human, even at this late a date, and it's
impossible to know with certainty that

within my own chest there pumps a heart
the size of my fist. The narrative of the man

on the radio is foreign to me—he lost money
going into business with a friend and is angry

and vengeful and resistant to the advice
of the nice psychologist. And yet his

voice—the voice he speaks with—is so
tender, so familiar. We're here so briefly,

the voice under his words says, and we see
so dimly, awful things have happened

to us, or will, we love our children more
than we are equipped to love anyone,

would die or kill for them, and we love
our own people even after they hurt us,

sometimes even more, and yet we fail
at loving our neighbor, our only true

weapon is empathy and we fail again
and again to use it, and the one reason

we must love this inadequate world is
because we have no other choice, we have

no other place but this place, this earth
and water where our ancestors once moved

across continents and oceans, conquering
or being conquered, so alive—so alive

with all their love and problems.

The Life

The toilet flows and flows
and nothing stops it so I call

a plumber, but then it stops
on its own so I call back and say

it stopped and cancel. I have
these little ideas for making

my life a marginally better life.
I can't think of one right now.

Otherwise, I find as soon as
I come within range, the spirit

retreats. Before long, it never
existed. As with a celebrity,

I will always have to remember
meeting the spirit, though

the spirit will never have to
remember meeting me. Based

on conversations I've overheard,
I think my children believe

the soul is an organ of the body,
a gland somewhere deep inside

the flesh. They believe in heaven,
but theirs is a heaven of their own

making, a place where you can do
whatever you want, eat ice cream

for dinner, play video games
with a God who will drive you

to CVS—yes right now put on
your shoes—for a new box of Lucky

Charms, a God who will give you
full possession of his Apple ID.

And who knows? Maybe they're
right. If I washed my face and brushed

my teeth and took out my contacts
right after putting my kids to sleep

rather than waiting until before bed,
my evenings would be better

and I'd go to sleep earlier. There.
You see, I can't stop having

the smallest possible ideas. This is
the life. After a day of silence, the toilet

starts up again. This time
I'm waiting to see if it's serious.

The Jungle

In motherhood I begin
to celebrate my own

smallest accomplishments,
as when I wake to find

I've slept through the night
and I feel a little healed

because sleeping is something
I didn't learn how to do until

I was an adult and had to read
a book about it because, I've

always liked to joke, I was
raised by wolves. I was raised

by wolves was, in fact, the very
joke I made in explaining

to a fellow mom as the children's
theater went dark that, like my own

young son, I was seeing *The Jungle Book* for the first time. I don't

even know what it's about, I said.
I was sort of raised by wolves,

I said and laughed, and then
the curtain went up and I was

shocked, of course, to find
The Jungle Book is about a boy

who was raised by wolves,
and I am shocked again now,

having just googled it, to find
the number one query

associated with Rudyard
Kipling is: *Is the Jungle Book*

a real story? People are dumb
is what I was thinking, I admit,

when I read that, but then
I clicked and clicked and found

that—oh my god—*The Jungle Book* is based on the story

of a feral boy found running
on all fours alongside a wolf

in the Indian jungle, which is
funny to me because *feral*

is the word that has always come
to mind when I think of the boys

I grew up with: those feral boys
who moved through the world

with the ease afforded to those
who didn't give two shits

about anything, who'd empty
beer cans in seconds, wrap cars

around poles, all the while joking
about fucking each other's

mothers. They were feral
in the desert shooting guns out

by the airport. They were feral
on their skateboards in the Whata-

burger parking lot. They were feral
because they were allowed

to be, and eventually we'd all
get in trouble for what they'd been

doing, even us girls who—what did
we do all that time while the boys

were fighting and spitting
and calling us whores? I don't

know. We were talking to each
other, I guess, which is how we

became human. But no—no.
Those boys weren't feral. Those boys

were typical. They'd been born
knowing the world would be theirs

long after they'd grown bored
of nihilism and turned their attention

to capital, became men, became man-
kind, the kind of men who'd ruin

something if it meant they got to
keep it, who'd kill something

if it meant they could see it up close,
maintain the illusion of having

owned it, having earned it, even,
who'd track a boy and a wolf

through the jungle for days until
finally they had them trapped

inside their own den. When those
men found they couldn't lure

the boy out with words, they forced
him out with smoke. And when

the boy finally stepped out into
the sunlight those men captured

him, bound him, and when the wolf
who was the boy's mother came

following close behind, the way,
at intermission, I followed my own

son, who is by now too old
to come with me into the women's

room, to the very threshold
of the men's room door—when she

came out behind him, they shot her.

My Own American Poem

O this flesh, this moment
passing, this sense that if
I don't get it done now

it won't get done. And it
won't get done. *I'm TCB*
I text my husband when

I'm humming down
my to-do list, signing our
kids up for sports

they'll hate and camps
that will give them poison
ivy when really all

they'd like to do is watch
TV and make dwellings
out of Legos all summer,

be idle and free
and twisted, the way
we were in the good old

days. Of course, I grew up
believing Elvis was king
of the good old days

before our good old days
and he died exhausted
by a life of toil, on

the toilet, the king on
his throne, lost to the world
in the most idle place

in Graceland. I'm a year
older than Elvis was
when he died. I think

the most American
thing I do is waste time:
American both to think

of time as something
to use and American
to fail to use it. Last

night, the swift bitter
cold of climate change
froze the cactus, but

this morning the sunrise
reflected back the smoke
of distant forest fires.

A real stunner. I am
not good the way poets
are supposed to be

good. I look at the night
sky and only want one
more chance to find

the boots I saw
at Nordstrom and didn't
buy. We have a sitter

is what I want to yell
into the night victorious
when we have a sitter.

I don't know. I want
to be better, but I never
really get better. I no

longer wish to live by
the laws of coincidence.
Yet, otherwise, I struggle

to find meaning. I have
nothing to teach
by word or example.

I have no good stories,
and if I did I wouldn't
want to share them with

you in a competition. Or
maybe I would, but only
if I win.

The Spirit Asks If This Is the Life I've Always Wanted

This is the life with fried eggs.
This is the life with Pyrex dishes

of many sizes, none of which
I recall purchasing myself. This

is the life with the boy who'd eat
chicken nuggets for every meal

and the girl who's asked four times
this week if she can please clean

the cat's ears again with a Q-tip.
This is the life with lives in it

so small we have to put up a sign
on the front door: DON'T FORGET

THE FISH or we'd forget the fish.
This life, sometimes I feel myself

so deep inside it, so painfully
blessed, pushing into it, pushing—

and yet I cannot get through.
I want too much. I want a God

who will save us all, and one who
will feel the little heat coming off

the candle I lit in the grotto. A God
in heaven, but a God here, too,

you know? A god like the one I tell
my children about, the one who loves

everyone, even Trump. A god that
exists. And the spirit says: okay.

And I say: really? And the spirit
says: Yeah. Probably.

How has being a mother changed the way you write?

The baby sleeps
& cries & sleeps

and cries in fifteen-
minute increments
for three hours

this afternoon &
wakes unrested,

wanting something
I cannot give him.

The sheets hold
their famous crumple,

their human
scent. In the kitchen

the enchilada casseroles
wait in the freezer

for their big moment
though casseroles

cannot wait
because casseroles

have no desires.
The oranges

in the white
bowl on the table

harden. Suddenly
they've been there

for weeks. Suddenly
a smell comes strongly

from a hidden
place in the backyard

and all we can do
is say *Something*

died out there
every time we go in

or out the back door.
Suddenly the trees

in front of the house
across the street

are bare of leaves &
the people we knew

have moved to Houston
& the house has been

on the market for going
on three months,

staged by experts,
chenille throws folded

faultlessly over arm
chairs. Still, no takers.

Carrie Fountain's first collection, Burn Lake, *was a winner of the 2009 National Poetry Series Award and was published in 2010 by Penguin.* Instant Winner, *her second collection, was published by Penguin in 2014. Currently Writer-in-Residence at St. Edward's University, she has had work published in* The New Yorker, Poetry, *and* Tin House. *Her first novel,* I'm Not Missing, *was published in 2018. She currently serves as Poet Laureate of the state of Texas.*

ON WRITING POEMS FACING INTO THE BROKEN WORLD

KAVEH AKBAR
& JANE HIRSHFIELD

Kaveh Akbar and Jane Hirshfield have been in a running e-mail conversation since January 2016, when Akbar first contacted Hirshfield about doing an interview in his Divedapper *series, before his first, widely acclaimed book,* Calling a Wolf a Wolf *(Alice James Books, 2017), swept him into the constellation of contemporary poets. This excerpt from that ongoing, now years-long dialogue was created for* American Poetry Review *in conjunction with the publication of Hirshfield's ninth book of poetry,* Ledger*, published by Knopf in March 2020.*

KAVEH AKBAR So much of your new book, *Ledger,* and your work at large, seems to be orbiting a nucleus of bewilderment—bewilderment at trees, falcons, history, language, yes, but also bewilderment at our "little souls," bewilderment at humanity's capacity for cruelty to each other despite our overwhelming similarities, or at our capacity for inaction (or for doing, as one poem names it, "not-enough") despite the omnipresent existential threat of a dying earth. I wonder if you might talk about bewilderment, what you believe it can (and can't) do for us?

JANE HIRSHFIELD Thank you, Kaveh, both for the newest of your always-astounding poems and for starting us off with such an interesting question.

Ledger carries that title because it's a book of stocktaking, trying to take account of and recount what feels an unaccountable time. Here we all are, trying to comprehend a precipitously incomprehensible era. These poems navigate my responses and responsibilities, as poet, as person, to that era. How could anyone not be bewildered amid what feels a kind of insanity? Rachel Carson wrote of the melting Arctic ice seventy years ago, in her first, 1949 book. It's incomprehensible to me that we still haven't taken any global, substantial, collaborative action. It's incomprehensible to me that we continue to kill one another over symbolic differences, that compassion, interconnection, and the worldview of science can be so willfully trampled by the hungry-ghost wish for power and its material trappings.

"How did this happen? What have we come to?" is a line that appears early on in the book. To question, and not only assert, has long been a part of my practice, as a person and as a poet. In the aftermath of September 11, I wrote a poem titled "Against Certainty." Others from that time question judgment and opinion. I want to be skeptical of my own first sureness. I want to write poems that lead me to look harder, with greater subtlety and more generosity of imagination and heart. Certainty closes off possibilities, complacency puts us to sleep, hard-set opinions and quick conclusions blind us to further looking. Uncertainty and doubt feel to me better. What you already know, what you already know how to say, you don't need a poem for. Poems are for breaking our fixities of mind, heart, and language open. For breaking new ground of self and of world.

The etymology of "bewilderment" says that the person is being "thoroughly lured into the wild." *Wild* in this context is meant to be taken, I suppose, as a negative thing. But I long for time in the actual wild—I like to go solo backpacking. To find myself confused, perplexed, and uncertain is to enter a place of possibility and invention. Risk is the oxygen of poems, the gate you walk through to a wider life. The *Commedia* begins when Dante finds himself bewildered, in a dark wood.

KA I love so much your returning us to the roots (the brambled forest roots) of the word "bewilderment"—*lured into the wild*. It's a charm against habituation, to bewilder is to make the stone stone-y again, the atrocity atrocious, the wild *wild*. I am thinking of the moment in *Nine Gates* where you write that good poetry "flenses the dulling familiarity from words, allowing them to gleam as they did when first made." And how that gleaming allows us to listen to language, actually hear it again despite its crushing familiarity and (mis)use, during a moment in which the great weapon used to stifle and suppress critical thinking is an overwhelm of meaningless language at every turn, the empty language of empire being shot at all of us from a firehose. How murderously *certain* the language of climate-change denial, of anti-immigration, of the NRA. *The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.* It sounds to me like you're situating poetry, its capacity to engage mystery without attempting to resolve it (you write in *Ledger*: "I would like / to grow content in you, doubt"), in opposition to the rhetorical certainty of power, of empire?

JH Just so. I've long felt certainty the most dangerous of human-made munitions. A person sure of their own rightness will do terrible things in its service. Our species' history holds the story of the Hubble telescope, the story of *kolam* blessings drawn each morning in rice flour or chalk on doorsteps in South India and Sri Lanka. It holds also the story of Galileo's prosecution and the killing of Trayvon Martin. In politics, it seems, the demagoguery of certainty can be, at least temporarily, fatally effective. The biosphere's future and justice's future depend on our not being so easily hypnotized.

Good poems choose a different rhetoric. Yeats's statement is memorable, beautiful, demonstrably true, but as the physicist Niels Bohr once said, the opposite of a great truth can be another great truth. Doubt, penumbra, self-questioning make art and persons more resourceful, more resilient in their allegiance to the multi-faceted, multi-storied, real. The best poems hold both promontory boldness and humility. They are the opposite of simplistic propaganda. They acknowledge and include complexity, they acknowledge and include undertow, they are never only one color—they dapple.

I find myself thirsting in our age of bluster and bludgeon for nuance, breadth, and understandings that include both facts and questions, that include the lives of others, human and beyond-human. For understandings willing to be bewildered, to stand inside mystery, paradox, and Keats's unknowing. Inside such understandings, we might find some less-blunt solutions to our fears.

I take some outward action every day—I send a postcard or make a phone call, I donate to those doing work I can't personally do. In 2017, I read a poem on the Washington Mall to something like 40–50,000 scientists and their supporters at the first March for Science. That led to a small, ongoing project, Poets for Science, in partnership with Kent State's superb Wick Poetry Center. Action is needed. I want to serve. But to navigate the shoals of my own despair in the face of what feels a willed blindness to the consequences of our current choices, I turn to silence and listening, to pen and page, to finding what words not already present to me might come.

The making of newly-mined and startling language is a quality I fell in love with in your own poems from the first few lines of your work I read. I alerted to your lines the way a bird dog alerts to a bird. New phrases, new thoughts, are foundational to any new strategy of going forward together. They also, simply, thrill. They expand the field of existence. I wonder, could you say more about how all this works for you? The balance between facing outward in your current life and actions and the more interior moments of poem-making, in which the idea of 'face,' at least for me, scarcely exists? The balance between meeting our larger, broken world and writing the poems that arise in you to be written, and the nerve-connections that make of the personal and the larger world one body?

KA You're very generous, and very very wise. To expand the field of existence, to enter our bit of unprecedented yawp into a conversation that has preceded us by millennia and will continue long after the last person forgets our names . . . that seems to me such a profound honor.

To answer your question more directly: I only have one brain, and it's the same organ that controls my breathing, that reminds my intestinal muscles to contract. That same organ wants me to drink and use and, in so doing, die. What power do I have over that? It's the organ that makes my heart beat! How have I been able to defy its command these past six years? Well, there has to be some *me* that isn't my intelligence, that isn't of my brain. I am just as confused as anyone as to who that *me* is, where it came from, what it wants, where it's going. But my continued being-here seems sufficient evidence of its presence. And that's the voice that calls the poems. My brain can edit, prune, trim, move things around. But the poems emerge from elsewhere.

In Islam, there's a hadith about Satan inspecting Adam, the first man. He's circling him, inspecting this new model of life. And in one version of the hadith, Satan actually enters Adam through the mouth, passing through him and exiting his anus. Emerging back into the world, Satan is delighted: "This creature is all hollow!" he cries. "All I need to do is show him all the things he can use to fill himself."

I am growing to be dubious of my self-will, its insatiable *wanting*, its certainty that something—narcotics, money, power—might resolve the fundamental hollowness of its being. I am starting to think maybe hollowness is the whole point of our design, that there is a pure breath at our core fortified by quiet, by stillness, by reverent observation, and diminished by everything else.

Related, I think: in Arabic, the word *ruh* means both "breath" and "spirit." Isn't that perfect?

I do think our current unprecedented loadout of existential threats demands reciprocal unprecedented language. Our rigorous and reverent attention, listening, gives us access to such language. *Ledger* is an exemplary model of this. Poets like Solmaz Sharif and M NourbeSe Philip and Ilya Kaminsky have written others. I sit at your feet, and theirs, listening. Just as I listen to the lived experiences of refugees, and of my friends currently in Iran suffering the effects of murderous US sanctions. Just as I listen to the earth, when every day it seems to speak with a storm or weather event of unprecedented intensity. Just as I listen to the different people around the world I'm lucky enough to meet in my travels—most recently in New York, Nigeria, Louisiana, Berlin. Just as I listen closely to hear the me that whispers beneath my own expansive wanting.

The way you speak of the effacement in your own practice communicates to me (along with the entire corpus of your work) that you've already evolved along these lines leagues beyond most of us. How does it work for you in your living, that effacement, or that ability to step beyond or beside self-will? What does active, reverent listening look like for you in this broken and breaking moment?

JH To be loosened from leading my own life as if it were a horse on a short rope is for me a great relief. I'm not immune to the happiness that comes from ego, control, security, comfort, validation. I'd rather not be hungry and prefer my roof not to leak. Still, co-translating a poem about a leaking roof once changed my relationship to difficulty in permanent ways.

Although the wind
blows terribly here,
the moonlight also leaks
between the roof planks
of this ruined house.

—Izumi Shikibu (circa 1000 C.E),
trans. by Jane Hirshfield and Mariko Aratani

Living only in the realm of ego and safety feels simply narrower than the experience that comes when the self opens its self-grip, when who you are becomes suddenly large, unboundaried, and unexpected. Something in us wants to know the world unblunted by our own needs and perspectives. The one hunger simply becomes larger than the other. And so, wanting that wideness, you write poems, or sit zazen, or go with Whitman out of the lecture hall to look at the stars. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's book *Flow* describes how ubiquitous the experience of self-falling-away actually is. It's rare, and it's not rare at all. It comes while solving a math problem. It comes playing baseball or listening to music.

Bashō wrote, near the end of his life:

This autumn road—
no one
walks it.

This feels to me a haiku unafraid and a person free. It's not about loneliness or loneliness's rejection. It's a reminder that a person can know themselves as inseparable from reality's own shape and measure. Self isn't needed. The road suffices. Autumn—season of beauty and beauty's vanishing—suffices. My interpretation does depend, I realize, on a Zen understanding of what it might mean to be 'no one,' though Emily Dickinson's understanding might do just as well.

Narrowed vision—physically narrowed eyes—goes with the emotions of hate, suspicion, aggression, self-protection, contempt. That tunnel vision is the opposite of wisdom, of compassion, of hope, of elasticity and invention. Widened eyes signal awe, anticipation, interest, engagement. Even fear can widen the eyes, for good reason: when we're frightened, we need to see more, not less. Enlarged pupils are signals of arousal and happiness and love, but also of problem-solving. Dim light also opens the pupils: enlargement is the way we take more of the world into us.

As a person, as a poet, that is what I want. There's a poem in *Come, Thief*, "I Ran Out Naked in the Sun," about wanting *more*. Not in the ways of narrowing greed, but in the way of an opening, exposing hunger. There's a poem in *Ledger*, "I Wanted to Be Surprised." I hadn't realized until this moment the continuity between those very different poems, written almost ten years apart. They're both accounts of desire for a life that might go beyond its own safety, definitions, maps. The last line of one of the "little soul" poems in *Ledger*, "Amor Fati," moves toward this as well: "You want to have fears."

Your comments on breath and on openness speak right to this. That hadith is marvelous, and compassionate, also, in the way it speaks to the fear of hollowness that haunts us all. What if we give up our self-shaping posturing and effort and find . . . nothing? Or worse? It takes courage to embrace the wanting itself, courage to risk being empty, as it takes courage to risk writing poems. A writer has to become a person empty of preconception. You can't know what will arrive to fill in the gap. Yet gap is where the new comes into us and into the world. In Sanskrit, *sunyata*, the word often translated in Buddhist texts as "emptiness," could equally be translated "spaciousness." And in Latin as well as Arabic, "spirit" and "breath" are the same—*spirare* means "to breathe." In Greenlandic, the word *anerssaaq* carries both those meanings. In Hattic, *pšun* means both breath and soul. Chinese has *chi*. Hawaiian has *ha*.

Simply breathing, and noticing that we are beings who breathe, has so much to do with this experience of making the poems of inner and outer connection we're trying to talk about here. Breath is the instrument language arrived on, and was the only page poems could be consigned to before writing's invention. It's the moment by moment exchange of outer and inner, our physical, intimate, undeniable interconnection and interdependence. Breath shows we are solitudes *and* relationships, single threads inextricable from the fabric of all existence.

More and more I've come to feel "my" life with the sense of shared fate. (Or shared *fates*. Chinese and Japanese are languages that don't necessarily pronounce a noun as singular or plural, and there's some wisdom in that, isn't there? The possibility that individuality and co-existence as one amid many are *contextual*, not fixed.) For me, this isn't a distant or theoretical understanding. It's intimate, it's about how we feel our lives.

Connection-awareness makes us generous, in the way a parent is generous to a child. Disconnection raises fear and self-protection. E.M. Forster's famous "Only connect" isn't usually seen as what, in part, I think it is: a desperate summoning of survival-awareness. The phrase appears in *Howard's End* as an imperative spoken against estrangement from eros and from our bodies. One paradox of our broken time is that the refusal to face embodiment—that we live in these beautiful, terrifying, wayward, and perishing bodies—becomes a refusal of the physical world itself, and then of our connection to others within it and of any possibility of a state beyond separation and non-separation. We cannot live fully human lives without all three of these understandings of who we are. Selves, relationships, and the experience of the immeasurable we each glimpse, once or twice, while we are living, breathing, seeing, walking, speaking and listening beings. Leave any of them out, and the art we practice will be diminished. The world will be diminished.

Can we talk now a little of subject matter and of craft? In other conversations, you and I have discovered that we both like to walk away from our poems for a time as one of the stages of revision, to let time offer its editing clarities to words newly seen because somewhat forgotten. That liminal time in the drawer is a kind of facelessness for the poems, isn't it? We remove our will, our hopes, our intentions from them, so they can ripen more fully and mysteriously into themselves. That doesn't mean we don't, when we return to them, continue to revise. I've taken small, seemingly simple poems through something like 85 drafts, though that isn't something I do by force of will; I do it by listening, by asking, by having alternatives percolate upward from the ground. This does depend on a certain cultivation of skepticism and dissatisfaction with my own poems. That too is one of the stages, as important as openness and dropping judgment are. Circulating around is a continually evolving list of something like 25 questions I ask my poems as I revise them. "Is the verb tense right? The choice of grammatical voice? Does it say something that makes any difference? Is it evading its own fullest knowledge? Should it be more opulent? More spare? Does it embarrass me, and if it does, in a way that is good or not good?" It was a shock for me when I once realized that a poem was saying something that sounded beautiful and moving but was not my own true response to its core fracture and dilemma. I realized I did not want to allow myself that ever again. So now I look at my poems and ask them if they are choosing some easy resolution over a difficult truth.

But then there's also the truth of a quatrain by Yeats I've long loved:

My friends who say I do it wrong
Whenever I revise my song
Do not know what is at stake:
It is my self that I remake.

I wonder if you could talk about the role of patience and silence but also the role of active intervention in your own revision? And to the question of the relationship between revising a poem, revising the self, and revising the world that poem is part of?

KA [*after a pause in the correspondence*] I have been sitting at the feet of these words, their diligent student, your diligent student. I love the unfoldings of the breath-spirit through Arabic, Latin, Greenlandic, Hawaiian. I love too what you say about dim light opening the pupils; enlargement being the means through which the world enters. I have been thinking about that a lot, going around this past week staring at the world, the snow, a tree, my spouse, our cat, opening and squinting my eyes. Only the cat so far has seemed interested at all in my experiment.

You ask about time, about the necessary clarity and perspective it affords. I am an obsessive writer; when I am in the throes of a piece I can think about nothing else. Even when I physically

walk away from a piece, I've usually been laboring over the notebook long enough that the words are memorized, portable, so I'm continuing to revise and rewrite as I drive, as I eat, as I teach and walk and and and . . . This is useful in the short term, in getting out a draft that looks and sounds and tastes on the tongue very much like a poem. But it also calcifies the poem, makes it starchier, less permeable to holistic change.

Do you have this? Where a poem almost becomes, after a time, like an ideogram? Something you read at a glance, all its psychic and emotional and experiential and spiritual data summoned at once without even having to meaningfully engage the language? This is how it gets for me, a poem less a machine made of words and more a word itself, a new unprecedented word corresponding to an unprecedented iteration of my self. In order to modify that word-self, I have to bring a new self to it. I have to grow (or regress) my self beyond the poem-self in order to see it once again as an interactive array of living components, not just an immutable reflection.

It's the difference between a butterfly skittering off a bloom and one pinned to a corkboard. The one pinned to cork may be beautiful, may offer its mechanisms of flight for inspection, but it could never teach us to dance in the air the way the living butterfly does so effortlessly.

When Dickinson writes, "Delight is as the flight—" suddenly you're running and about to leap, and by the time she gets to "And I, for glee, / Took Rainbows, as the common way, / And empty Skies / The Eccentricity—" you're in the air, "And so with Lives— / And so with Butterflies— / Seen magic" and you wonder if we'll ever come down again—that's poetry! That's a living poem, what a living poem can do! And I think it takes a lot of living—in the body, in the breath, in the mind, in the spirit—to be able to write living poems. Sometimes a poem tells me I have to go out and do some more living before it'll finally turn to face me.

One of my friends is a retired psychologist. From him, I learned our brain is constantly remaking itself, forming new synapses, rearranging itself in unprecedented arrays. Every morning I wake a literal new man, neurologically speaking. And certainly, there are parallel metaphysical iterations of this phenomenon—I was a man alone lurching desperately from crisis to crisis, and then suddenly I wasn't. There was a whole new me. Why not allow my poems to meet many me's, to ensure they'll bring delight and instruction to each one, the one I am today and the one I'll be in six months? Nobody is sitting around tapping their foot waiting on my poems. The world wouldn't miss a beat if I never published again—so why should I feel any rush?

Do you know what Hikmet said about the stars? "They are our endless desire to grasp things." I think of you, in *Ledger*, counting "the names of incomprehension: Sanford, Ferguson, Charleston, Aleppo, Sarajevo, Nagasaki," never reaching "Troy, Ur." And it reminds me of the Hikmet, our doomed attempts to grasp the ungraspable, the inconceivable. Or maybe, to release our compulsion to grasp. I wonder if you might speak to this—what your poems might be grasping toward, or what they might be attempting to release?

JH I think you've just described, in terms of poetic process, what's now also desperately needed in our relationship to the world's great dilemmas. Certain ways of thinking, of doing, of even aspiration, have become not just butterflies pinned to the corkboard, but petrified forests. Dead forms, dead thoughts. You can't build or warm yourself with a petrified tree. Its lignin and carbon have been taken out, turned mineral. It sometimes feels as if the hearts of many in power, in countries worldwide, have gazed on the Gorgon. Felt recognition of shared fate and shared pain has been turned to stone. Fossil fuels exist because a past world of immense biological life is in them. This inheritance we now spend down—emptying even the rocks of that seemingly limitless, held, living past—with thoughtless abandon.

You ask what my poems want, and what they want to release. They want an accurate, appropriate abundance: of possibility and of being, of connection and of solitude, for myself, for others, for language, imagination, microbes, mangroves, humans, continents, galaxies. An accurate abundance includes also the difficult emotions and recognitions. Trees require their hours of winter chill for apples or pears to come. Maybe the poems of ecological grief that run throughout *Ledger* are trying to release the living from the Gorgon's stone-prison gaze, so we can see, and weep.

I, we, cannot be silent before this world's vanishing and vanquishing. I have always written to try to see something—anything—newly, freshly. To envision and enlanguage what hasn't quite been expressed before. This is what the process of writing and revising is for: to discover freed heart-mind, freed tongue. It is what science, ecology, and cultural shift are for: to release old patterns of understanding for new ones. What do I want for my poems? Maybe it's neither the grasping nor the releasing. Maybe it's not the book of poems—as you say, the world doesn't need more poems. Maybe what I want, what the poems want, is the reaching itself, the act of discovering, phrase by phrase, a thing worth trying to reach.

I'd like a viable future in which all of us can keep trying to do that. It doesn't have to be a paradise. This world is already paradise enough. That's not a new recognition, but it's one that can be hard to keep hold of, that requires a perennial re-finding. The last poem in *Ledger* is an apology for the darkness of many before it. It's a poem in whose writing I remembered that mourning must not overwhelm gratitude for what is being lost; that grief must not obscure praise; that it is, quite simply, *rude* not to love this moment's very existence. It may be that this book just reprises, without the theology, Gerard Manley Hopkins's "God's Grandeur." Hopkins's rhyming of smeared toil with shook foil. His quiet, profound conjunction-phrase of acknowledgment, demurral, and rescue:

> *And for all this, nature is never spent;*
> *There lives the dearest freshness deep down things.*

And for all this.

Hopkins's pivot-phrase may be what I myself now need most. It may be that I wrote this book, in the face of nature's spending down and the fractured world all around us, to try to re-find, as we seem to need to do, a key already, perennially, given . . . a way to witness this world with eyes fully open to error, cruelty, and failure, and still, *for all this*, to go on.

Kaveh Akbar's new book, Pilgrim Bell*, will be published by Graywolf in 2021. Born in Tehran, Iran, he teaches at Purdue University and in the low-residency MFA programs at Randolph and Warren Wilson College.*

Jane Hirshfield's many books include The Beauty*, long-listed for the 2015 National Book Award;* Given Sugar, Given Salt*, a finalist for the 2001 National Book Critics Circle Award; and* Ten Windows: How Great Poems Transform the World *(2015). Her ninth poetry collection will be* Ledger *(Knopf, 2020).*

IN THE VILLAGE

JAMES LONGENBACH

1.

Shortly before I died,
Or possibly after,
I moved to a small village by the sea.

You'll recognize it, as did I, because I've written
About this village before.
The rocky sliver of land, the little houses where the fishermen once lived—

We had everything we needed: a couple of rooms
Overlooking the harbor,
A small collection of books,
Paperbacks, the pages
Brittle with age.

How, if I'd never seen
The village, had I pictured it so accurately?
How did I know we'd be happy there,
Happier than ever before?

The books reminded me of what,
In our youth,
We called literature.

2.

The sentences I've just written
Took it out of me.
I searched for the words,
And I resisted them as soon as I put them down.

Now, listening to them again, what I hear
Is not so much nostalgia
As a love of beginning. A wish

Never to be removed
From time but
Always to be immersed in it, always looking forward,
Never behind.

The boats come in,
The boats go out—

3.

After a routine ultrasound revealed a fifteen-centimeter mass, my left kidney was removed robotically on February 12th. Fifteen month later, nodules were discovered in my lungs and peritoneum. Two subsequent rounds of therapy failed to impede their growth, so I enrolled in a trial, a treatment not yet FDA approved.

Shrinkage of the tumors was immediate, as was the condensation of my sense of time: moments in my youth once distant, even irrelevant, felt burningly present. Didn't everyone, my parents, my grandparents, grow old before they died? Then what about Tony? What about Russ? Hadn't their lives, though long past fifty, only begun?

I walked down High Street to the harbor, though when I say *walked* I mean imagined; I hadn't been there yet.

4.

The Branch Will Not Break.

A Cold Spring.

Leaflets.

The Lost World.

The Moving Target.

Nightmare Begins Responsibility.

Rivers and Mountains.

The Story of Our Lives.

Untitled Subjects.

Water Street.

5.

Of ghosts pursued, forgotten, sought anew—
The trees are full of them.

From trees come books, that, when they open,
Lead you to expect a person
On the other side:
One hand having pulled
The doorknob
Towards him, the other held out, open, beckoning you forward—

6.

Ash-blond, tall, a sweater
Knotted by its sleeves around his neck,
A boy is leaning on a bicycle. Deftly when she reaches him

A girl slips to the grass, one hand straightening
Her skirt around her thighs, the other
Tugging at the boy, who remains
Standing, to sit beside her.

Their heads are close
Enough to be touching;
Their lips are still—

A book is the future.
You dream
Of reading it, and once you've finished, it's a miracle, you know the past.

The sky fills with stars. The sun
Climbs every morning
Over Watch Hill, dropping behind the harbor at dusk.

Water Street runs past
Church and Union,
Harmony and Wall,
Until it crosses Omega, by the sea.

James Longenbach is the author most recently of Earthling*, a volume of poems, and* How Poems Get Made*, both from W.W. Norton. He teaches at the University of Rochester.*

IRONY

KAMILAH AISHA MOON

It would be now when you feel
want is no longer your enemy,
that your body & soul would kneel.
O it would be now, when you feel
you've culled joy, seized a new zeal
that Death grabs you, fingers icy.
It would be now, when you *feel*!
"Want" is no longer your enemy.

Kamilah Aisha Moon is the author of Starshine & Clay *(2017) and* She Has a Name *(2013), a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award.*

THREE POEMS

MATTHEW LIPPMAN

Death Fugue: Violin

Then I heard a violin
and it didn't matter that I was a Jew,
they are painting swastikas on campus walls.
What happens when they paint them on my door
for my kids to see?
I will sic the cat after them.
I will sic the violin after them.
What can a violin do
to a man who paints a swastika on your window,
who etches one into the lid of your piano?
I'll tell you what it can do.
It can fuck you up.
It matters that I am a Jew.
That's what I said to the cat.
Then I imagined being dead on the attic floor.
The cat would eat my eyeballs out.
He don't care that I come from Poland, Russia, Transylvania before
the pogrom.
That's what cats do—suck out your dead eyes.
Violins don't do that.
When I heard it, it mattered that I was a Jew
and it didn't matter.
All the contradictions of the universes slamming into one another.
You know what sound they make?
They make the sound of a violin.
That's how I knew I was in good hands.
That's why it's important to have a violin close by—
to shoot down the motherfuckers when they come
with their swastika rifles
and their swastika apple pies.

Death Fugue: Motor Cross

The cat turned into a motorbike.
He ran around the house on LSD.
You could tell he was seeing purple dragons and the Pyrenees
turned inside out.
His wheels had him hauling ass
up and down the stairs
spitting mud from his hind legs, cool air from the front.
He was after the nowhere in his imaginary animal.
Blowing off steam.
Bat shit bananas. That kind of speed.
I said, I am with you buddy
and chased him into the attic.
I could smell his loose fuel, his old oil gait.
Get 'em, I said, knowing there was nothing to get
but the rickety wombat in his mind.
Upstairs there was only rug and I said, Slow down. You wanna listen
to Metheny?
and we put on "San Lorenzo"
from the top
because in the middle there are no people,
there is just the wind and that space of silence
right after the engines have been shut off.
It's a sound that comes all the way from Missouri,
even if you are already in Missouri.
Name one city in Missouri, he said to me, on his back
while I scratched his belly, his pistons quiet, his engine lukewarm,
and I couldn't.
I couldn't even name the city of my mind
so I said *swastika* and he said there you go again.
What was my rebuke? There was none,
so we took turns doing *Mad Libs* from the art cabinet.
He said, Adjective?
I said, Neon.
I said, Noun?
He said, Checkered flag.

Death Fugue: Jazz

You ever wake up and feel like you are dead?
No, you ever raise your eyelids and think there is sunshine in your dying?
That you are dying and it's getting light?
I wake up every morning and it's not me.
I don't mean to say I am not there, my feet are on the rug
and the water in my hair feels like flamingos or spiders or
flamingo spiders.
The cat comes into the water and rinses off the soot from its face.
We are here together but
who is in my body?
What is in my breath?
The sunrise should tell me something, have some answer,
but I can feel the world
outside of my skin
more than I can feel it
underneath my skin.
Shit is going away.
Swastikas go up on walls in New York.
North Carolinians still use the word *lynch*.
But it goes on deeper than that.
Look at how many cars there are on one highway
cut through L.A. at rush hour.
All that oil sucked out of the earth.
It goes on deeper than that.
All those cows slaughtered for all those burgers brokered.
And the water.
It goes deeper than the water.
It's dirty and broken
and so many of us need a cool cup.
I wake up in the morning
and me and the cat do our dance.
My body is outside of his body
and all I want to say is: *Fuck you Miles Davis, where are you now?*

Matthew Lippman's collection Mesmerizingly Sadly Beautiful *won the 2018 Levis Prize and will be published by Four Way Books in 2020. His recent collection,* A Little Gut Magic, *is published by Nine Mile Books. He is the Editor and Founder of the web-based project Love's Executive Order (www.lovesexecutiveorder.com).*

GIVEN NAME

BRYNN SAITO

No one tells me how to name it, I name it
animal. I tell it *never come.* I watch it
strengthen on the fever farm, take tendon

after tendon, lift its own spoon
at the family table, taste. I watch it grow tall
with the family's starch and salt,

the sweat and the family's wide-awake
eyes staring like light beams
at the all-night ceiling, fear fuel.

No one tells me how to name it,
I name it animal. I name it clean-crushed
beer can, cop-outfit calling, binge dawn.

I tell it *come here*, come willing to dance, say:
take me by the eyes and explain
yourself and your blood time

with this blood life—this river family,
that valley farm. I say *What took us down*
that day, river-worn, wordless?

What takes us down, animal? Explain you.

Brynn Saito is the author of two books of poetry, Power Made Us Swoon *(2016) and* The Palace of Contemplating Departure *(2013), winner of the Benjamin Saltman Poetry Award from Red Hen Press and a finalist for the Northern California Book Award.*

THREE POEMS

NATALIE SHAPERO

Good Description

Lord I am such a narcissist—I couldn't
even give a good
description, having been thinking only
of myself and what
in my body was breaking and how unmendable
the break, thinking only of
myself and with what archaic charge
was I complying, crying over and over NO,
as though to reduce confusion
as to whether I'd given permission,
when nobody, for that, would give
permission—I mean only
a true narcissist would expect to be faithfully
obeyed, and Lord I
am such a narcissist—I think I am so
charming, so kittenish and cultured,
uproarious at parties,
enlivening conversations with my extensive
knowledge of strangling,
how pressure around a person's neck
will cause a contact lens to dislodge from the iris,
making it hard to see, but that's not funny,
not funny to anyone
except the company that slices
and sells the lenses—they never turn down
a market for replacements, so at least
somebody's smiling, snuggling into a floral
chair with a cup of cream
of potato, flipping on the money
channel and watching that profit arrow soar—

It For Me

Don't worry. Wars are like children—
you create one, offer scant
effort, then call it botched as the years
accrue, go off and make
a new one with somebody else.
A chance to finally get it right.

People love stories of tyrants
expiring in prison, as though an entire
reign of thrown roses and feasts
on command might be somehow erased
by the precast concrete, the drain
in the center of the floor.

But it's not like anyone gets some ideal
death, handshakes all around
and then snuggling in velvet, saying
THAT'S IT FOR ME! What matters
is what you do with your best
years. No one can take that away.

Flowers Would Have Killed You

The river is heavy with phosphorus and scum.
It causes liver damage if ingested.
I don't know exactly whose runoff it is, but so long
as they're taking press photos with prize-winning
children and donating sizeable
sums to the ballet, I take no issue. River's yours.

Once I saw a guy struggling to talk his way out
of some base thing he'd done, and his underwhelmed
companion said to him FLOWERS
WOULD HAVE KILLED YOU? Now I say it

all the time. The councilman announces he's sorry
for taking advantage of the district's trust,
or the paper issues the mother
of all retractions, and I'm right there at the window,
readying myself for the knock and the spray
of larkspur and tea rose. You shouldn't have.

Natalie Shapero is the author of Hard Child *and* No Object. *She teaches at Tufts University.*

REMAINING SILENT

The facts

JENEVA BURROUGHS STONE

Sometime in 1985, I sit at a table in a college library among tall metal shelves, gray or green, that squeak if you lean against them or slide a heavy book across the horizontal rims, a rinse of dust always in the air. I've pulled out a large art book, its pages spread before me. To my left, plate-glass windows open on swathes of green, trees, granite buildings.

I'm intrigued by Camille Pissarro's paintings, his pointillism and the indeterminacy that technique creates. Shapes shift and merge as I bring my face closer, then further back from the glossy plate glued to a heavy paper page. The plate depicts a sunny field through which a path is trod into a wooded area in the background. Where the path bends are two men and a pony, their features completely indistinct; blobs of paint signify faces, clothes, hats, hands. The pony has a saddle. The title, "Chemin Sous Bois, en Été," a path through the woods in summer. My mind flickers between "chemin" (path) and "chemise" (shirt). "Bois," je bois, I drink: trees to paper to straws. Été reminds me of être, to be.

Indeterminacy. I'm observing something basic about language, but the flicker between words in my mind, the deliberate blurring of paint in the represented image, all this has a visceral tug from my throat to my gut. I need to walk that path into the wood, and yet I'm afraid because that path is blocked by two men and their little horse.

I explain to my advisor that I'd like to study pointillism and impressionism, look at the originals hanging in museums in Europe because images of paintings don't show brushstrokes, and the colors are often slightly off. I want to write poems about paintings. Ekphrastic, the professor suggests. Yes, a good word, the guttural "kuh" making a handle on either end. I hand him the poem I've drafted about the Pissarro painting from the library. He tells me to speak to the dean about a postgraduate fellowship.

In the dean's office, her hair crimped and gray, the room unlit because light comes dimly through a window by her desk, I try to explain why the college should approve my application for a Fulbright. This dean has always been kind to me and my academic achievement has been significant; however, she dismisses me with irritation today. Why would anyone want to give me money to traipse around Europe looking at paintings and writing poetry? I struggle for the words to explain the urgency of my task, but I can't articulate what I intend. The words shift in my mind, and nothing hits the label I want, probably because there's no label in my own vocabulary, nothing to paste over a growing conviction that something about this must be given voice.

Thirty years have passed since I sat among the stacks in the library. That's what the metal shelves are called, stacks. Metal carapace on the vertical, books on the horizontal, two directions at once. This particular day, I sit on the deck behind my house, the pieces of a new book lying on a picnic table beside my Adirondack chair. The book is *Float*, by Anne Carson, a classics scholar and poet who disrupts genre and upends language. Carson is a translator, and her mind both skitters atop the surface of language as a stone skips on water, and now and then plunges into thoughts that most interest her.

Float comes in a plastic case, a series of staple-bound chapbooks within it, pamphlets which can be read in any order. As with all things indeterminate in literature, I'm fascinated by this book, or holder of books, a container of what Carson calls "flotage." The container shipped to me contains two copies of one chapbook, "Stacks," an accident.

That duplication puts me back in the library. In recent years, my brain has been demanding I release this entity, this part of me that cannot be put into words—even "entity" does nothing for the silence that requires voice. I've been trying, and each attempt is awkward, crooked, broken, too blunt, too direct, confrontational, sentimental, pathetic. I think in shapes and a shapeless, undefinable silence bothers me.

Its only embodiment comes in the blurry forms of two men and a pony, blocking a damn path.

In the chapbook "Variations on the Right to Remain Silent," Carson offers me some language (or non-language) I might use to pull a gauzy cloth over this vacancy so others might see it for whatever it is. "Variations" discusses the silences that frustrate translators, artists, and visionaries.

Let me stack some of her observations:

1. "Silence is as important as words in the practice and study of translation. This may sound like a cliché."
2. "Metaphysical silence happens inside words themselves. And its intentions are harder to define. Every translator knows the point where one language cannot be rendered into another."
3. "But now what if, within this silence, you discover a deeper one—a word that does not *intend* to be translatable."

As an example, Carson offers "moly," a word from Homer's *Odyssey*, a drug the hero can use to ward off the charms of Circe. "Moly" isn't Greek—it's an example of what Homer calls "the language of the gods," and he leaves it there, silent in its depths. Carson says "Homer has splashed white paint," obscured our vision and understanding.

I get it. In my poem, "Chemin Sous Bois, en Été," the two men and their pony are a splash of white paint of my own. Poets do that all the time, as poetry is an art less of telling than of shifting words and images away from a raw experience that needs articulation, but cannot, in words, be articulated in its own rawness. Poetry isn't "showing," and it isn't "hiding." It's a form of indeterminacy in which the mind flickers among thoughts, words, ideas.

I could say poetry is "coy," but then I would be assigning motive and intent. In its animus, poetry doesn't have a come-hither attitude; it simply exists in its own medium, like any other form of art, innocent.

"Moly" makes me think of the street drug "Molly," which provokes euphoria, and enhances bodily sensations. In its pure form, Molly (or MDMA) helps a person feel. MDMA has been used by psychotherapists as a treatment for PTSD because it enables feeling and sensation. Part of PTSD and trauma is the repression of feeling and sensation: hiding and shifting away from experiences.

A thing that happened in 1986, a few months after I sat in the library looking at Pissarro: A boy I knew kissed me in another room of that same library, one in which we could be alone. We were about to graduate, and I suppose graduation might mark the point at which he changed from boy to man, although he had already the body of a man. Looking back on it, I believe I saw myself as a girl, not as a woman.

I cannot fully describe this kiss, but I am tempted to do so. I want to; I need to. But I cannot pull it away entirely from the sentimental. He tugged on my lips gently as he kissed, and this was *moly* to me—an inverse charm or spell that both opened me to potential harm and protected me. Carson says, "There is something maddeningly attractive about the untranslatable, about a word that goes silent in transit."

A good kiss, a real one, one that can be defined, sends light up my spine from its base to my brainstem, angular knot of bone by bone, while a visceral tug pulls my throat down to my gut, brushing my nipples along the way and setting up camp in my vulva. I wanted him in me at the same time I wanted to dissolve into him.

A bad kiss is nothing but flesh pressed on flesh.

A kiss can go silent in transit. That's the point: It's a series of bodily sensations that, translated, vanish. A kiss is an introit to something else, a transition, which is why Hollywood filmmakers often splash white paint on the intercourse that follows.

In the months preceding that first kiss, this boy and I had loved the same poem by Robert Hass, "Meditation at Lagunitas," which lives in a book called *Praise*. "Meditation" riffs on loss, language theory, and love:

because there is in this world no one thing
to which the bramble of blackberry corresponds,
a word is elegy to what it signifies.

True. And I would encounter this trope over the years, as I studied, in variant shapes and forms—Plato's Allegory of the Cave, linguistic structuralism, the poetics of deconstruction, Aristotelian relativism, and, most recently, throughout Anne Carson's works. But Robert Hass's small stack of lines remains the most romantic. We're born, we love, we die. It doesn't matter how our loves are formed or expressed, or what we call them. What matters alone is that these flickers of sensation existed at all: "Days that are the good flesh continuing," Hass writes.

One more thought about Hass's poem:

. . . There was a woman
I made love to and I remembered how, holding

her small shoulders in my hands sometimes,
I felt a violent wonder at her presence
like a thirst for salt, for my childhood river
with its island willows, silly music from the pleasure boat,
muddy places where we caught the little orange-silver fish
called pumpkinseed. *It hardly had to do with her.*

Hass dismissed the woman who acted as such a pleasurable conduit; I disagree with him here. It had everything to do with her in her essence—her body, but not her name. *There is something maddeningly attractive about the untranslatable, about a word that goes silent in transit.* I wanted to be that girl for my friend, the conduit back to whatever was important to him about his past, present, future. I wanted to dissolve into him, for that was love to me: To be to him a portal in which words would have no part.

In the end, my friend let me go—but we regularly bobbed back toward each other, seeking some violent wonder, I suppose. "Sex" is the raw word for it, because we haven't engaged in that pleasure. I find it rather maddening that we cannot seem to align our vocabularies at the same time, that shifting of words to each other subject to translation, sex the word that goes silent for us.

It hardly had to do with him. Seriously.

"Terror" brings to my mind "terroir," which is not at all the same thing. The words are inter-lingual homonyms. "Terroir" is French for soil, and also a geographical category in wine production, "terroir" a type of fertile territory; which would otherwise be "territoire" (jurisdiction), or the Anglicized "terrain" (ground). I'm not a translator; I just appreciate linguistic play.

Terror, however, is my mental territory, the grounding of my mind. And it has been since 1985. I reject "terreur," French for terror, because that lacks the complexity of my experience. It just doesn't sound right.

Let's return to the first principles of language theory. "Blackberry," for example—hypothetically, words can substitute for one another, merely labels. White paint. For me, language theory peters out somewhere here, becomes an eddy, because it simply wants to skip across the surface of thought without diving down into existence.

See me, back in the dean's office, trying and failing to explain the urgency of this project. Language had become labels, and I reached and reached for words, which did not come. The dean heard (translated) a lot of halting mishmash from me.

Of Odysseus and *moly*, Carson writes, "Here are four letters of the alphabet, you can pronounce them but you cannot define, possess or make use of them."

In my own experience of viscera, there's a natural void at the point at which an object or a person or a sensation comes into existence, takes on a name, and recedes away into the mind. Like the Doppler effect. Just at that one point can it be defined and categorized as language. But sometimes that one point slips away in an instant, and nothing remains except the terror of pure being without the regulatory effect of language.

That's what happened to me. Four letters: m, o, l, y; or: r, a, p, e. When a male friend (a different one) attacked me in 1985, the circumstances of it added up to a terrible word, but it were as if the right letters were there, but out of sequence, p, r, e, a—untranslatable.

Maybe I didn't have even those letters. I have PTSD, a four-letter acronym. When I consider my body situated in space and time, it's easier to let my mind float away from the fact of my body; otherwise, I'm frozen in one spot, and to be so frozen is incredibly dangerous. So I check in with my body from time to time, feel its presence, and focus on intellect. Otherwise, I can experience a sense of reality receding behind me, and a force field coming at me, a pressure, a brutality that threatens, but never exactly hits me. If my mind let it impact me, I wouldn't exist. And I know I exist. It's complicated.

Language theory, even the most esoteric of it, makes sense to me. Language is a moving target. For example, in 1985, when I was raped, I had never heard the phrase, "acquaintance rape." Therefore, I had no name for what had happened, as though it hadn't truly existed, even though, at a visceral level, my body understood it had happened.

I can turn Carson around: I possessed something—an experience—but I could not pronounce or define it. Thus, I could not tell the dean that I wanted to study the indeterminacy of representation in painting as a model for the indeterminacy of the language that accompanies sexual assault (there's a softer term). I had only the two men and the pony blocking my path into, as I wrote:

The pale, gold path
Splashed with light, that wanders
To the forest's heart,
[and from there]
Into the green-gold vegetation,
Where trees and bushes blend and the leaves thicken
And rustle, fluttering like thousands of birds.

"He blocked your exit," a therapist once told me. Therefore, any blocked exit—a car across my driveway, no way out of a social situation—fills me with terror or rage or both. Until my therapist identified my emotional pattern, I could pronounce an emotion, but had no words for it, no definition. I couldn't possess it, integrate it, and associate that exterior fear with my interior terror. A splash of white paint.

No wonder I cherish that kiss from my real friend. Sensation. A portal into sensation. A way to let the fact of me float away. An exit.

"Silence" is rape's cliché. And cliché, as Carson notes, is a form of truth in language and experience. Derived from "the sound of the printer's die striking the metal," cliché literally means "to make a stereotype from a relief printing surface."

I want to say that, in our culture, rape defies translation. I want to say it's a word that doesn't intend to be translated, that goes silent at the moment of its saying. But, really, we don't want to "translate" this word into experience. It's easier to identify it with silence, as that's how we'd rather have that experience expressed. There's nothing "maddeningly attractive" about shape-shifting this word into other words. "Blackberry" won't do it. It's not a kiss, it's not sexual, it's not merely an exercise of power or the patriarchy. It isn't a date gone wrong. It isn't sex you didn't want. It's more than [x] inserted into [y]. "Sexual assault" makes a poor substitute—it's a form of white paint, as it connects "sexual" (pleasure and/or shame) with "assault" (literally, a jumping upon), as though there's no difference here between a barroom brawl and an intimate violation.

We can certainly talk about "rape." It can be described. It can be discussed. But honestly? Rape lacks a steady definition, thus, a listening audience cannot, in a sense, pronounce what happened. The word "rape" becomes a void, becomes silent, not because the word itself has no "intent" to be translated into other words or into experience, but because our culture stops the word in its tracks.

"I believe cliché is a question," Carson writes. "We resort to cliché because it's easier than trying to make up something new."

Rape certainly invites questions: Why didn't you scream? Did you fight back hard enough? Why did you invite him to your room? Why didn't you report it? Why were you walking alone? Could he have misunderstood you? What did you say to him?

Rape's legal definition has acquired a certain stability; however, its situational definition lacks any clear boundaries. To get to the safety of the legal definition, a victim must run a gauntlet of questions and alternate narratives. At one point in time, I studied reader-response theory. Once your words are left trailing across a page, they develop a kinesis of their own, and a reader travels along with that motion, the text becoming a reflection of him or herself.

How can I articulate an experience for which there are few uncontested words?

Or the question may be, how to translate the experience of rape into art without cliché and without the reader demanding a narrative of their own choosing?

You must skip the narrative. In her chapbook, Carson also discusses the painter Francis Bacon and the patron saint of France, Joan of Arc. Of Bacon, she remarks, "He hates all that storytelling, all that illustration, he will do anything to deflect or disrupt the boredom of storytelling."

Joan of Arc experienced "voices." Carson writes, "for her, the voices had no story. They were an experienced fact so large and real it had solidified in her as a sort of sensed abstraction." At Joan's trial, her inquisitors "wanted her to name, embody and describe them in ways they could understand." Joan couldn't do that.

But getting a reader to accept narrative indeterminacy when it comes to a word that deflects translation? Poetry, to me at least, at this point, mimics PTSD itself by shifting away from raw experience, by hiding something—its indirection channeled into a realm of words owned and governed by cultural authority.

As Carson says, "After all, what else is one's own language but a gigantic cacophonous cliché?"

Rape is a form of violence. A hollow, internal scream that seeks an outlet, an escape, an exit. Naming it relieves me of some of its burden, but when I share that word nestled in its phrase identifying me, the person I tell sags under its weight. What I've done enacts a certain voyeurism: What does the person who holds this news imagine?

I found it easier to escape into the physical tunnel of a kiss. It hardly had to do with him, or with me. The pent-up velocity of feelings I'd had to repress for so long—sexual feelings upon which the experience of rape splashed white paint—I thought of myself as dissolving into him, servicing him, when, really, I dove into that kiss as though it were a pool into which I might dissolve, and then, emerging, reconstitute myself.

Francis Bacon said, "I want to paint the scream more than the horror." The figures in his paintings have about them something that repels the average, uninformed viewer—synonymous with violence, but not the same—we are used to the voyeurism of violence, but he paints the "facts" of violence, "the sensation and not the sensational."

But what are the "facts" of rape? The legal story? The personal story? The emotional aftermath?

I've never tried MDMA to treat my PTSD. I don't think I'd want to. If I were connected entirely to feeling and sensation, I imagine I'd explode with rage. Far better to go traipsing around Europe engaging in the indeterminism of pointillism than to connect directly to the matter at hand. Two men and their effing pony stand in my way. I'll stand in the foreground and never approach them at all. These figures, seemingly benign, are the "facts" of what I experienced: friendly figures that blur into inchoate menace the closer I bring the page to my face.

"To sum up," Carson concludes, "Honestly, I am not very good at summing up." Neither am I. I'd rather sift and braid my way to another set of connected problems as if writing this way were a throughway with multiple exits, for you, the reader, to get away from me and my "facts."

Had I been able to tell the dean what I truly intended, were I to have been granted a Fulbright (hah), in the process of that, I would have made an accusation, and the "fact" of that would have upended any other language I wanted to explore. To explore, in art, the essence of rape, one must break through or evade the legal framework imposed upon it. Legal language asks, "Does rape exist?"

Here's where I lose the thread of Francis Bacon. He wanted to paint the "facts" of an emotional experience, as Carson translates his intent, "to create a sensible form that will translate directly to your nervous system the same sensation as the subject."

But rape has two sets of "facts": what happened and what other people think may have happened. You must first resolve the reader's question, was it really rape? In its simplest formation, therefore, any discussion of rape re-enacts the chicken and the egg. Which must come first?

Chicken, egg. Scream, horror. Body, mind.

Those days my friend and I spent reading Robert Hass's *Praise*, a book with a green cover and an etching of blackberries—somewhere inside that poem lies a method or a meaning or a clue:

> *We talked about it late last night and in the voice of my friend, there was a thin wire of grief, a tone almost querulous. After a while I understood that, talking this way, everything dissolves:* justice, pine, hair, woman, you *and* I.

There is it, if you can see it. You and I. Where is the account of or the description of the man who raped me in this essay? The intimacy of "you and I" no longer applies. He must dissolve and, thus, vanish into whatever is unnamed.

This break, disruption, breach of trust happened, and any artist approaching the subject must be willing to face, head-on, the howl of mistrust from a reader as one enacts that same breach with their expectations. I find it astounding to voice this, but the reader plays the part of rapist in the two-party expression, in art, of rape—mentally filling in the gaps of who he was, his possible intentions, whether he thought he committed rape. And all this must disappear, this male language, this legal definition, these cultural clichés. Only then can the fact of the scream be represented.

Think of the difficulties another way. Francis Bacon was a man. He became a famous painter because he gave an "exasperated shrug toward an authority whose demands are unrealistic." When Joan of Arc did the same, resisted her inquisitors, they burned her.

Moly? That bit of the language Homer refuses to translate? A plant that would block Circe's power to turn Odysseus into a pig—that untranslatable word threw white paint upon female rage.

Jeneva Burroughs Stone is the author of MONSTER *(Phoenicia Publishing, 2016), a hybrid meditation on medicine, disability, and motherhood. Her poems and essays have been published widely in journals, and she is the recipient of fellowships in nonfiction from the MacDowell and Millay colonies.*

DEATH

CRAIG MORGAN TEICHER

Kids already asleep, the grownups sit out on the deck,
a few empty cans, an open bottle of wine on the table, I'm sure,

and stacked paper plates with half-eaten buns and dirty napkins.
From my backyard next door, I can hear them, the living, chatting.

I can't make out many words, mostly the rhythm, and laughing.
Death is not what they're discussing. "Goodnight,"

a woman says. "Goodnight," a few of them answer. A car
wakes, and then its growl fades into the distance.

~

Wind rises and falls, telling
the trees to tell one another.
Air conditioners hum forever.

~

Clocks ticking. Grains of sand falling.
What else is there to think about?

But what is the thought? Some small animal
crunching around in the ivy. A plane

arching across or falling from the sky.
Endless seas reaching toward the horizon.

And beyond the horizon? Friends?
Memories? Quiet and perfect calm?

A small boat? A loving hospital?
A humming air conditioner lulling me to sleep?

~

It came as a surprise to me:
that mothers die, that mine did
so young, when I was so young, when she
was younger than my wife is now.

It still seems so unlikely, after
waking another morning in my bed,
not to wake, the least likely
and least lifelike thing.

She won't answer
the phone, mail a present, or ever
have met her grandchildren.
She'll never die again.

~

Moths crowd and lunge at
the light above my driveway,
making a flicking sound
as they hit the bulb, the siding.

~

How quietly the shock begins,
like thunder rolling in,
                so softly at first
one mistakes it for something else,

each generation learning alone,
anew, each of us privately aghast,
embarrassed, hiding as if until
it passes,
                this one, long night.

~

A man riding a bike in New York was hit by a car and killed.
This was last week. There was a newspaper story
about the fourteen deaths this year, an emergency
the mayor declared. This is merely what happens.
I bike south each morning from the bus station to my office.

~

Within three years, our family hamster, Totoro, will die.
Hamsters simply don't live longer. Scientists theorize
that there are tortoises on Earth that are over five hundred
years old, and a clam has been found that was determined
to have been born in 1499, before Shakespeare.
Think of a clam being born.
Montezuma and Napoleon and Emily Dickinson
passed through its years. Churchill and Hitler.
Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., Sonny Bono
and Aunt Fabienne. Leonardo and Pollack
were this clam's contemporaries. The Troubles,
Woodstock, Tiananmen Square, "We Didn't Start the Fire."
Shortly after I finished college, the clam was accidentally killed.

~

My whole life
is a blip
to a tortoise,

a single thundering
tick of God's
imaginary watch.

~

I want to do something
my friends and my children
and their children's
children might remember,
to die famous for having
done the things I love best,

writing poetry and
talking late into the night
about music and teaching
and supporting the careers
of younger writers and caring
for my disabled son and learning
year by year to be kinder
and less defensive.

I like to imagine myself, too,
in an ashen near-future, huddled in
a shack cobbled of refuse harvested
from the rubble, helping
others escape through
a network of secret tunnels,
a rare green leaf pressed

between the pages
of the last beloved book.

~

Words
like mine live
and die
in lives like mine.

~

The clam was born in 1499.
Dorothea was born in 1910.
My grandmother was born in 1912.
Richard was born in 1926.
My dad was born in 1946.
My mom was born in 1947.
Bill Callahan was born in 1966.
Brenda was born in 1970.
I was born in 1979.
Cal was born in 2007.
Simone was born in 2011.
Totoro was born in 2019.

~

Crickets chirping everywhere,
the ambient din of still air.
I might have wasted my life.

~

And what about my *things*—
books, CDs, records, hats, guitars, devices,
souvenirs, these weights placed
along the edges of my life

to keep the wind from lifting it away.
I treasure them not because
they are precious or rare,
but because they are *mine*—

I gathered them and put them in order
according to the alphabet
of my affections, my obsessions'
persistent forward counting,

stacked them like bricks against
storms past, passing, and to come.
I hold them with the mortar of my wishes
and greed. Will they degrade

to mere things again, disbursed
to distant eBay buyers, landfills,
and future generations unable to decipher
the soul-map of which they're scraps?

~

I search for Totoro, peering
into the various hideouts in his cage.
He is present everywhere
in our home, a small ambassador

from a country on this side
of the horizon, a sure sign,
a whole soul in a body
the size and color of a Twinkie.

He pulls me toward him,
a pinprick in the hull of the plane,
which is not falling from the sky
but moving through it

in the only direction it can,
the only one there is, slicing
through hope and dread,
which are thin and invisible

as air, which drags and pulls
at the plane overhead,
slowing it down
as it holds it up.

~

The sun rises each day like a fathomless eye.
The Earth choruses randomly at every instant.

I wish my wife and daughter were home
from their trip. No one can ever come

close enough. The party next door is dying
down, just three or four friends left, still laughing,

a playlist of 1990s top 40 hits
rippling through the infinite suburban night.

Craig Morgan Teicher is the author of several books, most recently The Trembling Answers, *which won the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize from the Academy of American Poets; and the essay collection* We Begin in Gladness: How Poets Progress. *His next poetry collection will be out next year.*

ROME: PRINCE ROGERS NELSON DEAD

BRUCE SMITH

1

I had stage fright before the baroque
of Rome, afraid some part of me
would get loose in the volutes and the cork-screwed
columns like the minds of the melancholy
architects that overshot the human. I was dizzy.
I was thirsty. I didn't know the body
of words. I wanted something burnt or vocal or
bent around the edges of things like light
when I saw the nuns and polizia point
above to what? Lesser glory or news
of dread come down in the form of a man
with a feeling in a truck? *Prince*, they said,
his voice descending through the grid
of a speaker in the ceiling of the quick
bar—the song goes on to insert
seven swords in the virgin mother's heart.

2

Was he Bernini or Borromini in the struggle
of style to break free of god and gravity?
Was he human or *un piccolo dio*
of celestial helium or the American
demon of hair and skin putting his mouth
all over every fretted thing?

3

Before Babel, before *we were confounded in our tongues*,
when the whole earth was one language and one speech,
we sang *woo, hoo, hoo, hoo/woo, hoo, hoo, hoo,*
the nuns to the police, the police
to the besneakered to the flaneurs to the cooks
to the hungry. I didn't know my face.

4

The song weeping from the speaker
glorified and gashed, gilt spilled
in the street, like a church turned inside
out, the glass and pearls crushed
under the heels of Caligula's slipper
are the rhinestones of his cape.

5

Strings lash the inner ear,
like the hero wants to be lashed
to the mast and to hear the sirens
and swoon in the sex of it, but not
succumb, the martyrdom of him
translated, transformed, transfixed—
the skin horripilates like fifteen.

6

American engine and burden, drum
machine, long synth bass and keyboard—
is it the Revolution or the New Power Generation
in the key of Catullus? Is the song sentiment
or monument, buzz or blues? A baby coos,
a rubbery guitar, kick drum on the One and Three.

7

Light bent around the edges of things
planets, horizons, barrel and tunnel
vaults, windows lavish with ecstatic geometries
of the ceilings of a mind gyrated
in a *broken waving pediment of flame*.

8

Prince in ruins now, his body a story
echoed in the two-cycle

engines, the Roman rhythms of triumph
and defeat, his body wants to be
rocked in a *broken waving pediment of flame*,
his body demands getting off
the planet not by virtuoso rising up of doves,
but by the spin, the heel toe, the power
and dominion of the cruelly now.

9

Afraid I'd lose myself in perfumes and torques
of the bodies in pleasure and shock,
in the boar's heart, in chords and fugues.

10

When I was Prince Rodgers Nelson
in the USA, I was avatar of Hendrix
and P-Funk All Stars landing the mothership
on the planet, bump transplant, prime
mover in boots doing black as a white boy/
girl and failing, then walking the streets
of Rome leaving a trail of crushed prismatic
beauty, pain, and its cure. Was I straight
or natural hair? Was I Sly, *un buon funky*
or Borromini, groin vault, curled
fretwork, cochlear steeple and wrong to the world?

11

In Prince's erotic city, *world* rhymes with *twirl*,
spiral columns, volutes, peristyle. Rome
bowed down to lesser emperors, so why not him?

12

I'm not a separatist. The imagination is integrative,
Ralph Ellison said, *that's how you make the new*
[soul, funk], *by putting something else with what you've got.*

13

The day writhes. He kisses me
on the mouth because he couldn't kiss
himself. Psyche and Narcissus and Echo.

14

The carabinieri outside the embassy
hold their Uzis like guitars.
He was born with epilepsy, his people
were from Louisiana.

Bruce Smith is the author of several books of poems, including Spill *(2018),* Devotions *(2011),* Songs for Two Voices *(2005), and* The Other Lover *(2000), a finalist for both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize.*

BEAUTIFUL FAULT

FELICIA ZAMORA

Let's say I am significant & this,
how this leads to all possibilities
inside & outside the skull—this too,
a form of logic & fact
of imagination, as imagining itself into
fact—we imagine
ourselves every moment; I
create I; how we find ourselves
in space of each other; how
a page waits
on tiptoes, on edges for
our participation. Do you feel
attention in these inadequate
strokes of language? Foundations
matter. A lack defines only
relative to something other; I am
something other & I love you
regardless of the *withouts*
you labeled me, regardless of
your knuckles at my lips &
how I've come to know
the taste of iron in my blood
& I want to believe that makes
me strong. Who gets to decide
what *without* looks like? I ask
but you know that I know;
I know I know—how I find
comfort in questions
you do not wish me to ask
about my body, my brownness
relative to you; relativity
used to be a game
in grammar school, you named
me *greasy spic*, you named me
dirty beaner, my vagina *taco*, you slashed
words at my body, a game
you thought to play me to pock me
to shut me up by gouge
& in the shower, I'd pick
at the holes your words
carved from me, place each
scab on my tongue & spit it out;
each scab torn to deepen the scar—
I wanted to remember
in the mulberry trees
my brother taught me
scars are wounds that bear memories,
gifts of resistance; he squinted
in use of the word *gifts*; what he meant was
it's not my fault
that someone hates me before knowing
I exist; what he meant was
a fault exists in the vault of every universe
& my body is welcome there;
what he meant was
if we fracture a system long enough
our voices build
a neoteric system
with our voices inside;
what he meant was the lived faults
of me gather year over year
& make me whole & love me
& make me whole
& love me; what he meant was
we conceive ourselves first—fact
& tailor the world to hear us,
tailor the world.

Felicia Zamora is the author of the poetry books Body of Render*, winner of the 2018 Benjamin Saltman Award from Red Hen Press (2020),* & in Open, Marvel *(Parlor Press, 2018),* Instrument of Gaps *(Slope Editions, 2018), and* Of Form & Gather*, winner of the 2016 Andrés Montoya Poetry Prize (University of Notre Dame Press, 2017).*

"IN HER LIGHT"

Toward a poetics of humility

KRISTINA MARIE DARLING

In his seminal essay on virtue, Emmanuel Levinas observes, "Humility is not to be confused with an equivocal negation of one's Self, already proud of its virtue, which in reflection, it immediately recognizes in itself." Here Levinas rightly calls our attention to the self-congratulatory mindset that abounds among the liberally inclined, challenging us to strive for a relationship to virtue that is more just and more true. By gesturing toward a definition of humility that lacks self-consciousness, Levinas calls for a kind of selflessness that offers no immediate reward in and of itself.

Two recent collections of poetry interrogate the startling self-consciousness that has come to be associated with virtuous behavior, asking whether this kind of introspection can instead serve the other. Paige Lewis's *Space Struck* and Maya C. Popa's *American Faith* offer a definition of humility that proves as compassionate as it is revolutionary in its politics. For these two gifted poets, a crucial part of a writer's intelligence is the ability to move beyond their own subject position, returning to it in time with a refreshed awareness. After all, as Paul Ricoeur once noted, it is the moment in which the self is made strange that makes possible humility, empathy, and social justice.

This powerful interrogation of liberal virtue comes through most visibly in these writers' use of silence. For Lewis and Popa, what is left unsaid in each poem proves to be in itself an act of compassion. By eliding judgment and exposition in the traditional sense, these skillful poets ultimately call upon the reader to fully realize the poems' empathy for the other. As they demur from the role of the narrator as it is traditionally envisioned, these poets ultimately involve and implicate their audience in a thought-provoking performance of virtue, humility, and compassion.

Maya Popa's *American Faith* begins with the narrator's self-effacement. She writes in "Mine's Not a Political Heart," "All my childhood fantasies—icescapes / with Alaskan cranes, treasure diving / in the Black Sea—Putin has beat me to them." Here Popa establishes a connection between liberal politics and humility, as the political and ideological other is framed as holding the power within this poem. Yet at the same time, Popa's speaker frames the desire for such agency and influence as being in itself a form of innocence, a lack of knowledge pertaining to the cost of claiming "treasure" and "icescapes" for oneself. As Popa's speaker compares Putin to her childhood self, this implicit judgment proves to be the ultimate act of empathy, her performance of virtue startling even as she begs "freedom from the choir sanctioning."

This desire for an alternative model of the relationship between self and other, in which "there's no distance between me and the looking," manifests powerfully in the poem's elisions and silences. For Popa, each poem's logical leaps and associative gambles allow the speaker freedom to create juxtapositions, to suggest and evoke, while at the same prompting the reader to participate in each poem's revolutionary politics.

She writes, for example, in "Uranium in English,"

The Alabama Shot
stocks "My First Rifles"

guns in a variety of colors,
pink for girls to shoot squirrels.

I'm arranging information
available to anyone.

Here Popa's speaker calls attention to her own agency as a facilitator of the reader's imaginative work: "I'm arranging information . . ." In doing so, she elides the act of issuing moral judgment, leaving her reader instead to divine the object of the speaker's empathy. Yet Popa's skillful work as the "arranger" of "information / available to anyone" creates a powerful and necessary moral framework for the reader to move through. As Popa herself notes, "that engine of ephemera could be a sentencing, a silence, or a song."

Like Popa's *American Faith*, Lewis's *Space Struck* offers a powerful and wholly original ethical framework for the reader to inhabit. In the opening lines, Lewis warns us, "I'm going to show you some photos, extreme close-ups of normal." Yet these "everyday creatures" are revealed as being both "glossy" and "perfect" in their strangeness. For Lewis, it is the moments in which what we know is defamiliarized that are most meaningful, that make possible the requisite distance for critical thinking.

As the book unfolds, this critical distance becomes both painful and illuminating for the poems' myriad speakers. "I'm still the one leading," Lewis reassures us. Like Popa, Lewis calls attention to her agency in facilitating the reader's imaginative work, suggesting that the poet's job is to orchestrate an experience that leads to questioning familiar boundaries between self and other.

Lewis writes midway through the collection,

I'm so close to tired.

Every man I meet dreams
of fucking me in star-clotted fields.

It's selfish to want to witness awe—
to stand in a museum and shift

your gaze between the painting
and your reflection in its frame.

Here Lewis suggests that the act of looking ultimately changes both the viewer and the viewed. In passages like this one, Lewis might very well be reflecting on her own poetics. Yet she also creates a space in which the reader sees his or her gaze reflected back at them. It is Lewis's silences and elisions that allow this necessary work to happen, as each sentence begs of us a conceptual leap, prompting us to create narrative scaffolding alongside Lewis herself. We begin to see our own agency in the ways that compassion, and the other, are constructed in the stories we tell ourselves.

Much like Popa, Lewis reveals restraint as part of the necessary work of empathy.

If the poet's job is to facilitate the reader's intellectual and ethical growth, to what extent do they retain agency in their artistic process? For Popa and Lewis, the writer's craft manifests most powerfully in the way compassion is defined, constructed and cultivated in their texts. In both *American Faith* and *Space Struck*, writerly restraint becomes a crucial vehicle for readerly empathy, and in turn, a provocative challenge to prevailing ideas about compassion, humility, and the active life. With that in mind, allowing the reader to participate in the poem's imaginative and moral work proves to be the ultimate act of generosity.

Kristina Marie Darling is the author of thirty-four books, including Look to Your Left: A Feminist Poetics of Spectacle *(Akron Poetry Series, forthcoming in 2020),* Silence in Contemporary Poetry *(Clemson University Press, 2021),* Difficult: Essays on Contemporary Feminist Writing *(Black Ocean, 2021),* Angel of the North: Poems *(Salmon Poetry, 2022), and* Dark Horse: Poems *(C&R Press, 2018).*

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

Letters should be sent to:

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

OF UNBECOMING

(The future of AI)

DIANE MEHTA

If in time the book-boxes in the cellar lifted
out of your mind and garnished mine, what I would see
most is the meshing of the universe, not even,
as tradition from Sappho to Euclid calls it, love
but another sprite more broken up as if mathematical—
one part concept, one part computation,
powered by a relationship with a pencil
inside the knuckles of a person learning not
to believe and to unknot belief into ratios,
fractions, atomic ways of seeing,
each grand time of lost purpose in cul-de-sacs
is symmetry
        depending on the hypothesis—
                something, not a feeling but
probably untestable, uncontestable maybe-truth—
a character in a story that half-exists in the mind, you'd think
(there, where you think (you think)) oh, this is not what
love was supposed to be at all, it is breathing.
Age catches up. Telescoped through boxed-up memories
we think about stories: broken spirits, half-righted or lost
to interior demons, murders folded up and shelved in cellars
like ours, letters acrobatic in mind-twist yearnings
of the quietly brilliant on the edge of truer lives.
One day, when the creature-artificial who creates
equal intelligence and it, too, believes: it thinks.
Maybe it will write letters and notice something is missing.
Then and only then when human history fruitions itself
(or so the AI thinks) past biological species
into means-end shared intelligence
(but the computer is on scroll, all zeros and ones)
your synapses firing into mine, from book-boxes cut open,
pages flung open, typeset words from some old analog printing press
which in 1440 defined and changed the way we understood time
flew
    Pandora's box-like
            into geographies of air.
Once history was out of wisdom-keeping minds
and clearly stated on paper, recorded, distributed, archived,
in offices, seminaries, schools, prayer-houses, libraries,
it exploded knowledge. Wisdom-keepers
and poet-historians decided they, too, would write on paper,
bringing us back to this typewriter of the mind we will share
one day, approximately one and a half generations from now
but you see the problem? Who will be contrarian fire-eyed
dragoness and who will be the coal-eyed people of certitude
if structured, coded-in intelligence unpacks its suitcase in our minds
and moves in? Where will antiquity be, if not in our eyes?
I don't want blue eyes any more than freedom-skin that never
grows old or micromotor pills fixing every toxin that ever
lived in my body with slow-release perfection taken twice daily
forever. Which reminds me of the time I ate oranges
on top of Hadley Mountain, upstate, when you carried me
halfway up in your arms like a box when my muscles,
losing autonomy, felt like skin and I sensed my skeleton
more profoundly than ever, as if it were telling me:
you are not forever,
        not even in your sometimes-mind,
and the accumulated years win. It was steep, like all learning.
You cannot plug a hike in. So by now I am wondering
if sentient computers will ever learn to think or believe they think
because with the right foot-treads it would be easy to climb
over mud, rocks, water, branches, grasses, and gravel,
and it wouldn't matter if a thousand gnats were biting.
No blood will come.
        A bloodless universe can't redeem the world.
Have we considered the coup of crimson sundown in leaves
lashed with rainshowers when we wander, surprised
at how Eden it all is, to wander among old-oak reassurances
on brambly paths where all the information is biological.
The together-mind people, even us, would not experience bliss.
AI climbers, even if they climbed up five stories with me
into the steel firetower, I doubt they'd scream out,
climbing on all fours against the hurricane of ordinary wind
so death won't throw them off the ladder,
it wouldn't matter. I shook in alpine laughter
unabated, and I tossed vowels into crazy wind because
after all it is a hyper-being feeling to see the countryside
cascading downward and upward at once, to measure love
in green that seems to go on forever, even if those colors are only
wavelengths aren't they real if they produce feeling?
I am inventing the end of myself in the collective future
of what history is, biological and shape-shifting
like people themselves: quantum wave functions with values
we think we know. Realities converge. This multiverse
in your book-boxes are the you of conversations,
your love of reading and philosophy of landscapes
augmenting my love of reading and my philosophy of landscapes
in unbearably solid, soon to be out of service, blood-pump reality.

Diane Mehta's debut poetry book, Forest with Castanets*, came out with Four Way Books in 2019.*

THE PRIVILEGE OF THE TEMPORARY

IRA SUKRUNGRUANG

I am not alone
at this jeweled temple
by the sea where a blind man

sells lottery tickets.
His vision foretells wealth—
numbers and stars and a floating future

bright like the rise
of the sun. His clothes:
more dirt than fabric, his shoes

the hardened soles
of his feet. Today, he says,
waves whisper secrets only he can hear.

I am a visitor
in this harsh land of light,
in this wind cruel to skin. My pockets

are full of coins
with the faces of foreign
kings that clink when I walk with ghosts.

To walk is power,
to walk away privilege.
The world is cruel and heavy

and forsakes.
Monks pray like bees
in a hollow cave that no one hears.

Lord Buddha,
I ask for a kind light.
I'll stop now. The beggars

here are tearless.
The ones I've shed fill
a forgotten well. My sorrows

are my own.

Ira Sukrungruang is the author of three nonfiction books, Buddha's Dog & other meditations, Southside Buddhist *and* Talk Thai: The Adventures of Buddhist Boy*; the short story collection* The Melting Season*; and the poetry collection* In Thailand It Is Night. *He is the Richard L. Thomas Professor of Creative Writing at Kenyon College.*

THREE POEMS

ELISA GABBERT

The Quality of Nothing (After This Nothing Happened)

"Why is there something rather than nothing?" feels disingenuous, on an ontological level, because we think of even nothing as something.

I think of nothing as empty space in all directions. But emptiness, darkness, is something.

It feels like we'd need some light to see the darkness; we'd need some time to see the space. (Nothing happened before this, because no thing happens in no time.)

It feels like, if space were transparent, we'd have to see something through it on the other side. But nothing has no sides.

The question is, why is there something *or* nothing?

Why that nothing, instead of some other, under-nothing?

Which is more frightening, nothing or empty space?

What's the difference between *scared* and *afraid*?

Is it the difference between a present threat and a future threat? Or a sudden threat and a slow one?

We think of fear as selfish. But it's not selfish to be terrified if you're terrified for everyone like you.

Fear is a rational projection—or, without selfishness, there would be no empathy.

Are there horror stories where the people in the story aren't scared?

Or is all horror fear horror—what's scary is the fear.

If we like scary movies, we must like real horror on some level too.

"Strategic morality" doesn't feel too far from "begging for mercy."

Bad time doesn't feel longer to me.

On any given day it usually feels like tomorrow.

I like listening to sad music when I'm sad. It doesn't make me feel happier per se, it just improves the quality of the sadness.

More to the point, certain frivolities that used to feel harmless now feel harmful. Choices always feel *personal*.

Personally, I like when decisions feel like they make themselves.

Eye pain feels inherently emotional. The way odd numbers feel more random.

As I get older, I feel less confident, because less self-deceiving.

I sometimes have the feeling that everything in the future is inevitable, yet I have to experience the events as if they weren't.

Or, "the present" is the illusion that we don't know the future.

Samuel Johnson said, "Nothing odd will do long. Tristram Shandy did not last." Not *will* not—*did* not.

Chief Plenty Coups of the Crow nation said, "When the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened."

After this nothing happened.

Like throwing a paper airplane into a canyon.

Maybe we don't yet understand everything about how this happened.

After the shock comes a feeling that I knew this would happen.

I Don't Want to Hear Any Good News or Bad News

The other day I thought of an old enemy and smiled—not with malice, but with fondness. I felt like I missed her.

Happiness and sadness are somehow alike; they both come in waves. But unhappiness is different, just a general malaise.

A Hollywood ending is "an outcome in which all desirable results are achieved." But I think Hollywood people like sad endings. Sad movies win more awards.

It's so sad to have once been good at something.

There's a fundamental uselessness to feeling sad about bad things that happened very far away or in the deep past.

Whatever mechanisms are required to not be sad all the time mean that sometimes when you want to be sad, you can't.

During the Middle Ages, "Poverty, wars and local famines were so much a part of normal life that they were taken for granted and could therefore be faced in a sober and realistic manner."

Sometimes I involuntarily smile when I hear bad news.

Bad news makes me feel closer to people.

Good news is bad news—sadly bad news is also bad news.

I don't trust the news unless I can't understand it.

News serves a social function more than anything else. Monks don't read the news.

I read in the news that alcohol stimulates the immune system; ants are a liquid.

I read that frogs don't actually just sit in a pot of boiling water until they die. (What kind of sicko would make that up?)

I actually like talking about the weather.

I actually like crying, it makes me feel better.

If all possible worlds don't exist, we might actually live in a very unlikely world. It might not get more unlikely than this.

Supposedly Joe Brainard said on his death bed: "One good thing about dying. You don't have to go to any more poetry readings."

Bad news: You can't actually save time. You'll just use it to do something else.

You pretty much have to do one thing at a time, and in order.

You could just change your life.

I wasted some time and it made me so happy.

I like to feel wistful before sleep, and sometimes I get in bed early just to lie there awake, feeling wistful.

I procrastinate more than I used to, and worry less. Turns out, important stuff just gets done.

I know it will get done. So it seems strange that I actually have to do it.

Why do I have to make this future that already exists?

I'm Not Mourning (There Is Voids)

I had it again, the dream that I lose my bags in the airport and miss my flight to Paris.

Every time, it's devastating.

I've never been to Paris, in real life or in a dream.

Awake, I sometimes feel that it's too late (in history) to go to Paris.

Paris Syndrome is a state of "extreme shock" experienced by travelers forced to reconcile Paris-in-reality with their expectations—it can cause acute anxiety, despair, hallucinations, delusions, and "depersonalization," the impression of observing yourself from the outside.

The sense that your self has left your body—you have *depersoned*.

Unlike Stendhal Syndrome, a condition that occurs when one is overcome by the beauty and profundity of great art, Paris Syndrome is the result of "immense disappointment" in the face of the banality of Paris.

Even in Kyoto, I long for Kyoto.

In the mourning journal he wrote in the months following his mother's death in 1977, Roland Barthes quotes Donald Winnicott: "The catastrophe you *fear* will happen has *already* happened."

Less than three years after his mother, Barthes died from injuries sustained when he was hit by a laundry van while walking through the streets of Paris.

Pierre Curie was also killed in the streets of Paris, in 1906. He fell in the rain, and a horse-drawn cart wheeled over his head.

He was already weakened by massive exposure to radiation.

From Marie Curie's mourning journal: "My Pierre, the life is atrocious without you, it is an anguish without name."

There is almost something romantic about dying from "complications."

Romanticism makes of all death a romance.

According to legend, in 1794, grave robbers stole Shakespeare's skull.

In 2016, an archaeologist used radar to confirm that his skull is not in his tomb: "What we found is that half of his grave is undisturbed. And then the head end, so where his skull would have been, there is voids."

Georges Perec's novel *A Void* (the English title of *La Disparition*—the disappearance) does not contain the letter *e*.

To adhere to the constraint, it might also have been translated *A Vanishing*.

Perec, born Peretz, an orphan, died outside Paris, from lung cancer, in 1982.

Every death is a fact.

Barthes writes: "Don't say *Mourning*. I'm not *mourning*. I'm suffering."

Elisa Gabbert is the author of four collections of poetry, essays, and criticism: The Word Pretty *(Black Ocean, 2018),* L'Heure Bleue, or the Judy Poems *(Black Ocean, 2016),* The Self Unstable *(Black Ocean, 2013), and* The French Exit *(Birds LLC, 2010).*

THREE POEMS

RACHEL ABRAMOWITZ

Vantablack

All the animals you know
will die. You set food
out for them anyway,
let the oily seeds fall
among the fiddleheads
to be ground down
permanent as bone.
The forest fills and unfills,
drops itself down root
tubes and turns to dark lace.
One undoing: leaf
to sparrow, ghostly star.
Or there is no death.
Or the face death sets sucks
light like that special paint, the one
that plunges and harms.
They painted a barn that special
paint, and the barn disappeared.

Chat-Renard

It is the halfness that confounds.
What hunts livestock into legend,
slips around doors into shadow,
feline soundlessness. Vulpine appetite,
gutting kitchens of their offal, ripe
and bursting fruit, even breads heaped
on warm stone. Amalgam of hot
and heather, slinking through
the landscape like a demon,
soft, with provocative teeth. What
stories they have for you: babies
snatched in the candled night, returned
and shifted behind the eyes, mewling new
at darkness and asleep forever in the day.
A pet for a wealthy widow, half dead,
running her white hands over your spine,
that coiled bridge between worlds.
What enters their dreams: hind legs quick
and keen, balancing in a shaft of light, one eye
illuminated, one hushed in the gloaming.

Severed Head of a Giant 40,000-Year-Old Wolf Found in Russia

I will it into my dreams, but it will not come.
I don't speak its language, but I see its tongue,
pink-tipped and red underneath, a muscle just this side
of the underworld. I will it into my house, but it paces
outside the door and makes a sound like fire in its throat.
I have only so much meat. I have only so many days
to its cold eternity. It has been waiting like a shade,
though its coat is thick enough for this new earth.
I watch from my window steam rise from soft tissue
and have no spells for such a skull, such promising teeth.
I can only transform numbers into things.
This many hairs make a braid you can hold,
this many years and you will never see yourself again.
There are depths some can sound, but what reaches
for you there will be made of flesh so terrible
you would cut off your own to be free of it.

Rachel Abramowitz's poems and reviews have appeared or are forthcoming in Tin House Online, The Threepenny Review, Seneca Review, The Kenyon Review Online, Crazyhorse, Tupelo Quarterly, Oxonian Review, POOL, jubilat, Sprung Formal, Transom, Interrupture, Colorado Review, *and others. She is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and the University of Oxford, and has taught English Literature at Barnard College in New York.*

ERRATICA

BRIAN LAIDLAW

I remembered the sedimentologist Karen Kleinspehn saying to me in these same mountains, "You can't cope with this in an organized way, because the rocks aren't organized."

—John McPhee, *Assembling California*

1.

There's a term that's been circulating in the spheres of poetry I like: *geopoetics*. I've heard it for several years, and have always loved it, despite never fully grasping its meaning. I figure it has to mean something beyond simply "poems about rocks," but if that's all it means, well, then I like it even more.

Right now I won't attempt to track down a geopoetic manifesto to clarify the matter, because I'm at a cabin pleasantly removed from the grid, and I don't have an internet connection, and anyway it seems like geopoetics and the internet shouldn't have anything to say about each other. But I do know that a book associated with geopoetics is one called *Cascadia*, by a poet I deeply admire named Brenda Hillman. I had been keeping an eye out for a copy of this book for a while, and during a West Coast tour in the fall I found one sitting on the shelf in Point Reyes Books.

This copy of *Cascadia* happened to be used. I don't mind some wear and tear, and it never hurts my skinny dirtbag-poet wallet to save a few bucks, but I have a hardline rule never to buy books that have writing in the margins; it's too distracting, and it makes it impossible for me to have my own experience with the work. At first glance I could see that there were ballpoint scribbles in abundance, marginalia popping at random like wildflowers out of the gridded fields of pages. Per my policy I was about to set it back on the shelf, assuming I'd have to continue my search for an unblemished copy of *Cascadia* elsewhere, but then I happened to read Hillman's poem "Sad Cookies." The poem contains the exquisite deadpan line "there is no president of cookies," next to which the book's previous owner had drawn an arrow and written, in tall blue lovely cursive,

But there should be!

(Exclamation point included.)

It was like two poems for the price of one. Five dollars later, this copy of *Cascadia* had found a new home.

2.

Of course I connected quite deeply with the book. Over the intervening winter, I reached out to Brenda Hillman to ask where a few of the poems from *Cascadia* were written. Each one seemed beholden to a specific geography, a specific geology, and I explained in my breathless fan-boy email to her that I hoped to travel through her Cascadian landscapes, and to scale a few of the rocks I found there, using her poetry as a kind of gestural guidebook. It was a weird request, but she's a weird poet (that's a compliment), and I felt optimistic she'd understand.

Reader, she did! In her generous reply, she mentioned among other locales that the boulders near Lake Tahoe were a touchstone (now *there's* a geopoetic term) for parts of *Cascadia*, including one of my favorite poems from the collection, "Glacial Erratics." So as soon as my teaching duties wrapped up for the semester, and the Sierra Nevada began at last to shed its snowy mantle after the gigantic winter season, I made my way toward the Tahoe Basin.

The area just south of Tahoe contains all the most important touchstones in my own life, too. My grandfather worked for the Sierra Club, as its accountant, for much of his career; he had always spent a great deal of time in the Range of Light, and after returning from World War II, he purchased a cabin on Forest Service land in the Mokelumne Wilderness. The Finch Cabin, on whose porch I now sit, was built in 1939; a bronze plaque by the door, affirming that the structure is on the National Register of Historic Places, tells us so. My mom grew up coming here each summer, and so did I. All the formative events in my life as a writer, not to mention the formative events in my life as a climber, took place on the granite outcrops and juniper-strewn benches within a few-mile radius of this deck. For several seasons during and after college I lived here alone, without heat or electricity, without neighbors or visitors; I played my guitar, I labored in my notebook. Looked out at these trees, looked down at this water. I sat on this porch and wrote terrible, terrible poems and songs that gradually—glacially—got better.

A chipmunk stands up on its hindlegs and makes a sound far too ugly for so cute a creature. An ant wrestles another ant's head into the grip of its mandibles. At a certain angle, and for a certain brief interlude, morning sun illuminates a billion gnats in the notches between the pines. The granite is pale here, soft gray, and glows equally whatever time of day or night.

I would have said I know this area like the back of my hand, and yet, when I started looking for the best glacial erratics beside which to consider *Cascadia*'s poems, I was amazed to learn there was an up-and-coming bouldering area just minutes from my beloved cabin. It sat immediately beyond the terminus of a ridge I'd walked a thousand times. The description in Dave Hatchett's *Bouldering Lake Tahoe: Outlying Areas* made it perfectly clear that this was where I needed to go:

> *Erratica has one of the coolest names of any spot in Tahoe. The area features a great mix of freestanding erratics and greenish-black mini cliff walls . . . Erratica feels remote and there are some spectacular views to be had on the open benches . . . The terrain consists of flat forest, meadows, benches, mini domes, and everything else in between. The boulders are stashed everywhere and are often hidden by trees and thick brush.*

It was to be a treasure hunt. When I drove up into the Sierras, I could hardly wait to throw *Cascadia* in a daypack alongside my climbing shoes and my chalk, a pen and a notebook, some water and some trail mix, and explore the boulderfield.

But. There's a knot in my shoulder, kind of between my neck and my shoulder blade, that seems to have arisen from some combination of a week of hard climbing back in Colorado, plus the eighteen hours of continuous driving it took to get here, plus a couple nights in a row of sleeping on friends' floors. The result is that I'm in my favorite place in the world, surrounded by protruding slabs and erratics both climbed and unclimbed, creek valleys both beloved and unknown, and I can't get out there and get involved. Instead I remain on the porch and attend to the wildlife more closely than usual: a beetle whose back is matte black, but turns platinum green when the sun hits it just right. A *chick-a-dee-dee-dee-dee-DEE*. The creator of a pile of guano under the window, a hint that the bats who lived behind the shutter last summer have renewed their lease.

And I read. In one frenzied sitting, I blaze through John McPhee's *Assembling California*. It's a local classic of course, and I think a half-dozen distinct copies have passed through the one-shelf-wide "library" at our cabin over the decades, but each time, another borrower has picked it up and carried it into the field before I got my hands on it. Now a copy has resurfaced, and today's the day. My wrists get sunburned holding the paperback up on the porch, baking in the unfiltered sunlight at eight thousand feet.

To move so swiftly through a book so beautiful feels exactly like admiring the Sierras from the highway. It is suboptimal, and also better than nothing, but also only *maybe* better than nothing. Yet the speed is appropriately inappropriate. No amount of leisurely, measured reading could entice the book to unfold in geologic time, and there's a breakneck pace to the narrative anyway, with transitional sentences often including time markers like "a thousand million years earlier." Everything about geology, as conducted by humans, is necessarily cursory. And McPhee's prose is so lovely that I don't mind careening through it, even if I only understand it in part; after all I've just done the same, in the Beige Bullet, traveling here through much of the High Sierran terrain he's described, and I was able to enjoy its vistas in the swift and sublime near-purity of my ignorance.

3.

ITEM: My grandfather's ancient climbing rope, the first generation of nylon ones to be manufactured, colored like a copperhead snake and coiled like one in the closet.

ITEM: A cow skull we found in the forest, the provenance of which becomes stranger the more I reflect on it, and which as kids we left displayed on a flat rock hidden elsewhere in the forest at a site we called "The Museum."

ITEM: A small fossilized imprint of a leaf pressed into hardened mud, which sat at "The Museum" beside the cow skull, a snake shedding, and a hawk's feather.

4.

If you spent your whole life writing one poem it still wouldn't be slow enough to be geopoetic.

If you spent your whole life writing the downstroke of a capital I, the size it appears in twelve-point font, that's closer, that's borderline geopoetic.

(Salt Lake City and San Francisco get three millimeters farther apart each year, thanks to the tectonic stretching of Nevada's basin-and-range region; that's the tempo I'm imagining writing at.)

I'm thinking these kinds of thoughts as I've taken a tennis ball and propped it against the exterior cabin wall, and now I'm leaning onto the ball with all my energy, digging it into the part of my neck that's a hot mess. It's right next to my ear, so I can actually hear the nerves and fibers popping and twinging, kind of a wet-noodle sound, as I rock back and forth across the ball. It is painful enough to seem likely to be helpful, but I'm no more a doctor than I am a geologist.

Before long I'm seeing spots, gold against the blue sky, from the strike-slip motion of my tendons. I retreat indoors, fall asleep on the couch for a spell, and then wake with the following sentence, kind of a mantra, on my tongue:

> *Of course you can act like an idiot, as long as you're smart about it.*

—

My takeaway from today's glancing blow with *Assembling California* is that geologists study long-long-long-term chaos. They're attempting to fit orderly narratives to some of the most disorderly occurrences on the face of the globe. McPhee, in my favorite passage, describes a portion of the Sierras' western slope—a region not more than a half-hour glide downhill from where I've been digging the ball into my shoulder—where, as one plate subducted under another, it scraped everything on the top plate into a giant rock-salad. Instead of tidy layers, stacked in chronological fashion from oldest on the bottom to youngest on the top, the stone-scene in this region contains a gravelly, shattered mishmash of specimens from mind-bendingly disparate moments in time.

To give a sense of the depth, the madness, of the disarray, McPhee likens it to a room bedecked with artifacts from throughout Western history:

> *Suppose you were to find in a spacious loft a whale-oil lamp of pressed lead glass. What would you think, know, guess, and wonder about the origin and the travels of that lamp? And suppose you were to find near it a Joseph Meeks laminated-rosewood chair, and an English silver porringer and stand, and an eight-lobed dish with birds in a flowering thicket. It is possible that you would not immediately think 1850, 1833, 1662, and 1620. It is possible that you would not envision the place in which each object was made or the milieu in which it was first used, and even more possible that you would not discern how or when any of these pieces moved through the world and came to be in this loft. You also see, lined up in close ranks, a Queen Anne maple side chair, a Federal mahogany shield-back side chair, a Chippendale shell-carved walnut side chair, and a William and Mary carved and caned American armchair. Stratigraphically, they are out of order. How did that happen? Why are they here?*

McPhee explains that the Sierras offer a similarly chaotic puzzle:

> *One thing follows another in a manner that seems random—a collection of relics from varied ages and many ancestral landscapes, transported from far or near, set beside or upon one another, lifted en masse in fresh young mountains and exposed in roadcuts by the state . . . You cannot be expected, just by looking at it, to fit it all together in mobile space and sequential time, to see in the congestion within this lithic barn—this Sierra Nevada, this atticful of objects from around the Pacific world—the events and vistas that each item represents.*

These spaces—this barn, this loft, this attic, this roadcut, this range—all sound suspiciously poem-like to me: the assemblage we see at each site seems random, but we readers and treaders must trust that each item, no matter its inscrutability or origin, has ended up there for a reason.

5.

Brenda Hillman writes, in *Cascadia*'s opening sequence, *we wanted the extraordinary stranger in our veins.*

In recent months I have read and loved this book several times through, and in those traversings I had managed to self-impose blinders over my eyes, so as to be able to ignore the previous reader's commentary. When I re-opened the book just now, in fact, I was surprised to see the blue writing there; I'd excised it from my reading experience and my memory altogether. But somehow now, revisiting it, the other reader's observations take center stage. (The extraordinary stranger had, among other intrigues, underlined *we wanted the extraordinary stranger in our veins.*)

As a reader, this unknown Other was quite astute. They highlighted new and subtle points for my consideration, underlined phrases that might not otherwise have drawn my focus, pointed out references I certainly would have missed. For example, the stranger writes next to the first word in the poem-title "Dioxin Promenade":

> *environmental pollutant / accumulates in food chain / highly toxic / Agent Orange*

and next to the place-name in the title "Past Guinda":

> *Small Town / Northern California / Name Spanish for Cherry*

Without an internet up here, I couldn't have done this research myself. I wouldn't have known dioxin was related to Agent Orange. Thank you, stranger.

—

Crucially, they've also marked with a blue arc Hillman's lines

> *—we develop new methods of*
>
> *searching in the West*

which were my favorite declaration in the book. They were, in fact, the starting point for this essay. It's been on my mind recently: California's role, in modern history, as a site of all kinds of strange new methods of "searching": the subterranean search for ore in the Gold Rush days, the psychedelic search for alternative consciousnesses in my parents' Summer-of-Love era, and the internet search for a commons and marketplace outside space itself. I've been thinking, too, of the free-climbing revolution whose birthplace, as far as many climbers are concerned, was Yosemite Valley. What a spectacular method of searching: with California-based climbers' techniques and technologies, countless square miles of unexplored terrain emerged on the Z-axis of the range. A world between the layers of lines on the topo maps.

We follow guidebooks that direct us to special stones.

We attend to the rocks more granularly; we scale them up and down.

McPhee explains: in granites, the crystals are visible to the naked eye.

—

Elsewhere the extraordinary stranger and I diverge; our readings, tectonically speaking, grind against one another, causing dire rifts to form. My heartrate spikes when I see Hillman's couplet

> *Infinity lifted:*
> *A gasp of emeralds*

annotated with

> *(hate lines like this).*

What the *hell*, stranger? And later, in the margin beside Hillman's poem "Pre-Uplift of the Sierra," which contains this brisk, vast geologic gloss:

> *I was half-listening to infinity*
> *when we spoke*
>
> *Every sentence was the skin of heaven*

the extraordinary stranger has wondered almost-aloud, in her own parenthetical addendum,

> *(can she pull this off?)*

I want to shout to the stranger, *Goddamn right, she can!* And to explain that these glimpses into, and beyond, "infinity" evoke for me the chaotic attic from McPhee's passage. All the bigness of Deep Time. The landscapes on which our lives unfold appear static; indeed these rocks and mountains are, in most contexts, the very emblems of duration and eternity. And our homes, too, with their wooden scaffoldings and concrete foundations and metal pipes, might seem like fixed points to which we can always return.

And yet this cabin's walls are slumping downhill, year by year, to the east and south. And each of its wooden crossbeams used to be a tree, from a forest that seemed eternal until it was clear-cut, and each of the concrete bases upon which the cabin's foundations rest used to be embedded someplace in a mountain, until that mountain was scraped out for a gravel pit, and each of its pipes used to be diffusely threaded through the underworld, until an enterprising corporation made that part of the underworld into a copper mine.

I know these materials for only the briefest slice of their lives. Each has its own infinity, up against which we walkers, users, residents are only briefly grazing. In order to believe that I'm the protagonist in the scene, I have to treat this all as a backdrop, in order that *my* growth and change may take center stage. But by peering into these infinities, by pulling off and looking past the skin of heaven as *Cascadia* has done, I see my story must include the cabin slowly falling underfoot and, more slowly and farther below, the mountains' uplift, too. Yes, stranger: she pulls it all off.

6.

ITEM: A shipping box for a Remington typewriter, with a label indicating it was sent to an address in Guthrie, Oklahoma, a place where nobody from my family has ever lived or been, which has rested underneath the cabin for a hundred years and which sits full of an assortment of replacement plumbing parts, nearly all of which have rusted so profoundly they've fused into clumps of brittle fuzz.

ITEM: The bed I built with borrowed tools in a friend's garage in a desperate attempt to prove to a girlfriend that I wasn't useless, even though she and I both knew I was.

ITEM: The canister that held my grandmother's ashes, now empty under that same bed.

7.

I follow the hand-drawn map in *Bouldering Lake Tahoe*, find the pullout off Highway 88, and park the car. My improvised tennis-ball-deep-

tissue-work has done its job; the knot in my neck is present but not throbbing. I locate my first landmark, the Father's Day Boulder. It's just beyond a grove of aspens and across a mossy rivulet. It's a striking piece of stone, fifteen feet high or more, with a serrated arête up one side, lightly chalked up from prior hands passing there, but not showing anywhere near as much wear as I've seen on other high-traffic boulder areas. (Eventually, from the oils on climbers' hands, the repeated brushing of holds and—one might dream—the sheer grip-strength climbers apply to the material, it's shocking how smooth of a human-made polish, a glistening patina, can be worn into rocks like this. These edges, however, were still grippy and rough.)

Tracking faint deerlike trails through the gullies, I find a few more identifiable blocks, the Black Boulder most impressive among them. On the way, though, I've become a bit confused as to where the trail intended for me to go; the guidebook, honestly but unhelpfully, had a big NOT TO SCALE disclaimer in the corner of the map. The trail of cairns I was following would appear and disappear; I'd walk up a slab looking for my next marker and instead find short, rounded cliffs, or little copses of pine, lizards and scrub-jays, bumblebees in the lupined lowlands. Nothing to complain about, to be sure, all magic—but not what I'd been looking for.

Then on the sloping granite I saw, faint and ghostly, what looked like letters etched into the surface of a low-angle slab; it was a place a seasonal river would run, the stone polished and even, almost glossy, streaked blonde and strawberry. The letters were upside down from my vantage, and when I saw them I was, at first, appalled to think that they might be written directions to one of the boulders. Such an obvious, destructive manner of wayfinding would be a glaring breach of climbers' low-impact ethic.

Instead, though, when I came around to face the letters right-side up, and, one at a time, deciphered the sequence of elegant block-capitals, each nearly a foot tall, I read:

ROSEMARIE
-O-
LOST FOREVER
JAN 1[XXX?]
BELOVEd

The lowercase *d* in *beloved*, as it had been written there, was somehow shatteringly sad to me, a kind of diminishment of the world right before our very eyes, at the loss of this person. I wasn't exactly deep into the backcountry, but this was quite a remote spot for a memorial; I wondered what the story could possibly be.

At the foot of that stone wall was a particularly large cairn, and for a strange and fleeting moment a string of neurons fired that told me that this was a funeral marker, a gravesite for Rosemarie's resting place. But no, I realized, I was just back on track—the cairn-trail had resumed.

Cairn-trails are the evidence of extraordinary strangers: *alone though you may well seem*, they say, *other readers have passed here, too.* Sometimes we want this, or need it.

There had been, on Father's Day Boulder, a line called "Father's Day Direct" that was a little too tall and wild for me to feel comfortable working on my own. I had taken a few stabs at the problem, but I could soon tell that it would require a big throw for a hold up high, with the potential for an ugly uncontrolled fall if things went awry. I sensibly backed away and continued my wanderings for another couple of hours elsewhere in the boulder zone. On my way back to the car, though, I was surprised to see another climber there at the base of Father's Day. We introduced ourselves and remarked that we both found it unlikely to encounter another boulderer at such a remote area, and on a weekday evening no less.

My new compatriot—Jeremy, I learned—lived in the Central Valley, a little over an hour away, and often came to Erratica in the evenings. He hadn't been able to "send" (climber shorthand for "ascend") "Father's Day Direct" during his previous session on it, and I confessed to the same. We talked about the movements and our progress, discovering ourselves to be stymied at the same spot—a sideways semi-dyno from a bad sloping left hand up to the arête, far and high out right.

Climbers will know this term well: *beta*. It refers to the body of knowledge that accumulates about a particular climb, what sequence of moves to use, whether to grip that crimp with your right hand or cross to it with your left, whether to bump straight through from the sloper to the better incut, or to get a high foot first. In many cases, different climbers will use different beta for the same problem, depending on their body size, their strengths and weaknesses. In other cases, there might really only be one "correct" sequence that makes a move possible. But either way, it's always helpful to see how someone else reads and interprets a line; it provides a new perspective, unlocks new connections and linkages you hadn't seen before.

You're not allowed to lie in nonfiction essays, but this is exactly the perfect outcome, and I swear it really happened: after talking about our respective readings of this boulder problem, I stepped up to the boulder and sent the route. A session-flash. On the very next attempt, Jeremy stepped up and sent it too. All we needed was an extraordinary stranger to guide the way.

8.

In my notebook, when I first read *Cascadia*, I had transcribed this passage:

> *. . . A california*
>
> *is composed of moving forward, away, or past; a skin is not separate; a poem is*
>
> *composed of all readings of it.*

I notice now, returning to the book, that my previous reader had underlined this passage, too.

And I think: a climb is also composed of all readings of it. That's what *beta* is. Jeremy and I had added two new interpretations to the Father's Day boulder, two new versions of its story. This gets literalized, in a way, by the layering of chalk and residue onto each hold of the climb; a forensic scientist could, hypothetically, uncover the stratigraphic layers of all the climbers who'd scraped skin cells from their palms and fingertips onto a given hold. Even a studied glance at a climb might give a sense of how many ascents it's had, based on the thickness of the chalk deposits on the holds, added to successively by suitors chalking up, and then applying their mark to the rock. This is geopoetry to me, legible, collaborative, embodied.

Among the oldest known artworks by humans are their handprints on the walls of caves, sometimes applied and overlaid thousands of years apart.

9.

ITEM: A perfectly intact dead butterfly like a miniature monarch whose migration, for causes unknown, ended last autumn on our windowsill.

ITEM: A propane oven from the 1930s in seafoam green which was in the cabin when my grandparents took ownership of the place, and which we only recently noticed has swastikas printed on the metalwork beside each of its four enamel valves.

ITEM: The table in the kitchen, painted seafoam green over a layer, visible through chips and cracks, of crimson, made of the same wood-stock as the ceilings and floorboards, suggesting it was built at the same time as the cabin, and on which my, and the stranger's, copy of *Cascadia* now sits.

10.

If you ask kids, or non-poets, or casual enjoyers of the occasional poem, what they think defines poetry, one of the commonest answers is that "it's deep." Another variation on the same theme is that "it has many layers." Geopoetics deepens this

depth, adds layers to these layers. As the stranger has added a layer to Hillman's text, and I to both of theirs.

I've returned to the cabin now, and the sun has set; I've gone indoors for what may be the first time all day, and by the glow of a lantern I survey the objects around me in the room: a typewriter from 1939, the same year this cabin was built. A kerosene lamp from a Pullman railcar, which was already mounted on the wall when my grandparents bought this place in the 50s. Snowshoes made of animal gut, which used to be inside a living animal, perhaps stalking through these very valleys; chairs tacked together from hand-formed willow, perhaps grown in these very draws. A Burton snowboard that I got at a garage sale as a teenager, and a 1981 version of Trivial Pursuit, and a banjolele from the 1920s and a guitar from the 2000s and a MacBook from last year in a color called space gray.

On the ceiling you can see ghostly handprints, wrapped around each slat of wood as it was hammered down, marks from the oil on the hands of a carpenter now long dead, who built the most important place in my world.

It recalls McPhee's attic: an assemblage of artifacts from far-flung places and eras. In *Assembling California*, after he describes the chaos of the Sierras, he explains the challenge its oddity poses to the geologist:

> *Sort that out. Complete a title search for each piece. Tell each story backward through shifting space to differing points in time. Imagine the palace, the pavilion, the house, the hall for which each piece was fashioned, the climate and location of the country outside.*

This comes to the heart of the geopoet's task, I think: to tell stories backward, to trace objects and phenomena—impossibly, paradoxically—to times prior to their very origins. One of the basic premises of environmental thinking is that, in ecosystems, it's untenable to tease out any species' existence from that of its neighbors; rather than thinking of these creatures as being bounded and separate, we are invited to see them in interlocking webs of influence, everything contingent, everything co-constitutive of everything else. Contemporary eco-poetry attempts, in one way or another, to coax readers into a greater perception of this boundlessness.

I wonder if geopoetics may be doing something analogous to this, but in terms of *time*. Rather than treating each moment as a bounded, fixed phenomenon, we begin to feel the vastness of the past, the contributions of its perpetual welter of chaos, brought to bear in every observable instant of the present. We see ourselves measured not by the tempo of a heartbeat, one every second, but by the tempo of a glacial period, one every hundred thousand years. From this vantage, when we look to the steadfast mountains, the hillsides, the lakes and rivers, we begin to recognize that everything's on its way elsewhere. We just observe it so briefly, in a human lifetime, that it appears rooted firmly where it is.

With this in mind, I turn once more to my copy of *Cascadia*. I allow its life to extend beyond the sliver I've seen firsthand. I see the extraordinary stranger flipping through the pages, a blue pen in their hand, their mouth. I see their eyes gallop across the words, a nodding, a furrowing of brows. I see the present, as the stranger's notes become a part of this essay, and then I cast my gaze to the future, where in some dreamland perhaps the stranger will see this piece, and will be shocked to learn that I'm about to send a draft of my essay to Brenda, too, so the stranger's notes—both the compliments and the skepticisms—will, by way of an improbable conflagration of circumstances, a bookshelf in Marin County, a bouldering guide, a Forest Service cabin, a knotted shoulder, a trail of cairns, have threaded upriver through time and space to reach the author herself.

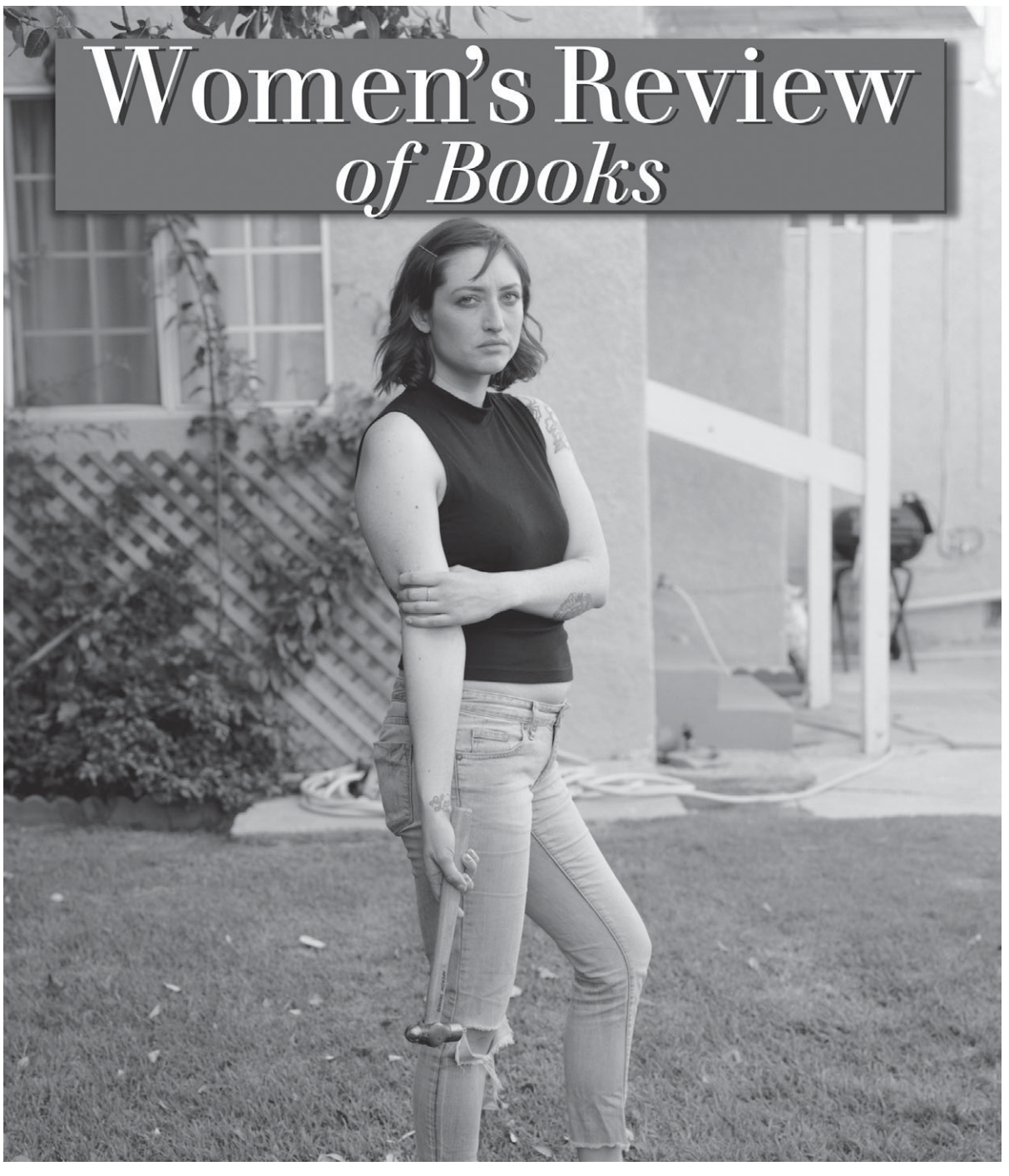
These erratics have traveled to their current locations from far, far afield; embedded inside glaciers, borne aloft for thousand-year journeys on the backs of ice-rafts the size of entire cities, entire states, these rocks have come a long way to arrive here.

Not to arrive. To pass by. And I think: to climb them is to climb a horse that gallops slowly. And I think: under the moonlight beyond these windows they're running down hillsides, turning into sand. And I think: who and where is Rosemarie lost, and how long is forever?

When the glaciers melted, they gently, gradually laid these boulders into their positions on the meadows and benches of this terrain. I noticed it all day today: the character of the stones was often different from the character of the slabs on which they sat; the textures and colors, the sizes of the crystals and grains were a patchwork, not a uniform style. They're from everywhere, from every time.

The strangers meet a moment in the valley, then go their separate ways.

Brian Laidlaw is a poet-songwriter whose books include The Stuntman *and* The Mirrormaker *from Milkweed Editions, as well as the forthcoming* Summer Err: A John Muir Erasure *from Mount Vision Press. Now a PhD candidate in English and Literary Arts at the University of Denver, Brian continues to tour nationally as a folksinger, and moonlights—often literally—as a rock climber.*



TWO POEMS

ARIEL FRANCISCO

Eating a Dollar Slice in the Rain

for Carlie

All the money I've spent
on cheap umbrellas,
I could have bought the greatest
umbrella in the world
or an umbrella made of gold,
something that doesn't cower
in even the slightest wind.
But poverty forces shortsightedness,
short breaths to keep moving,
small portions. The sign says
Pizza Slice $1, Pizza Slice With Any Toppings $2.
Toppings are a luxury. If I had
three dollars for another shit umbrella
I'd still choose the pizza. If I had
two dollars I'd get two slices.

For My Uncle Lulu, Who Was Deported for Jumping a Subway Turnstile in 2003

Two dollars he didn't have
or didn't want to spend.
That's all it took. No pass
for a misdemeanor. Maybe
he wanted to save that money
for beer, always drinking.
The bright side: the two dollars
saved will go a lot farther
in Santo Domingo than
they ever would in America.

Ariel Francisco is the author of A Sinking Ship is Still a Ship *(Burrow Press, 2020) and* All My Heroes Are Broke *(C&R Press, 2017). A poet and translator born in the Bronx to Dominican and Guatemalan parents and raised in Miami, his work has appeared or is forthcoming in* The New Yorker, The Academy of American Poets, The American Poetry Review, *and elsewhere.*

INVISIBLE SCRIPT

ALAN GILBERT

Whole worlds on fire.

A black ship in a red sky.

I'd rather walk, but I don't know the way.

The hungrier we get, the longer the line.

No page is ever empty.

We sign it—Forgotten.

One note at a time, throwing out the bugle.

The crush of it all beneath the sound stage.

Pop is an advance on the computers.

Parasites line our intestines.

The things we do for love.

The rest of the time we're alone.

Alan Gilbert is the author of two books of poetry, The Treatment of Monuments *and* Late in the Antenna Fields*, as well as a collection of essays, articles, and reviews entitled* Another Future: Poetry and Art in a Postmodern Twilight.

LETTERS FOR THE BROTHER

JAMES HOCH

[WAR PAINT]

They used to grind flower and seed,
charcoal, ochre, gypsum, clay, creeper,

dry buffalo lard and gut, chokeberry,
pestle shell and lapis, hibiscus, excrement,

then bind pigment with spit or piss,
yolk or blood— You got yours at Walmart,

America's like that, and paint your son
standing at ease, sort of, backpack,

superhero lunch box. One white thumb
at a time, sand you can't get out of

your head, as if donning for combat, not
a second grade play cobbled from the state-

mandated curriculum. You do not say
you are thinking of brothers who follow

each other, paroled, pill after pill,
like kids filing onto a bus soon gone into

the leaded hills and rivers of Idaho.
You kiss him square on his forehead

and turn back, no trace, no ounce,
to ward off rage, a boredom more hell

than war, the waking dreams light brings.

[BOOT CEREMONY]

If you die, they set your boots down
as if you still stand inside them,

fix a bayonet and sink it into dirt,
then set the skull of the helmet,

on the rifle butt,
the tags hanging.

If you enter ether, there are words
they say and don't say, all scripted,

US Army Field Manual.

But if you live, there's no ceremony
for waking and feeding the wood stove

for pouring coffee,
bagging the kid's lunch.

No one is saluting you for not losing your shit
on some guy at a gas station,

or not eating a round
while you soak in a lithium bath,
trembling with ghosts—

Some squat like fists in your chest.
Some burn like barrel fires beneath skin.

If you sleep, *you never sleep*,
there are words you say and don't say,

and the woman lying next to you knows
you are holding your breath,

the sky around you soot dark.

James Hoch is the author of two poetry collections: Miscreants *(W. W. Norton, 2008) and* A Parade of Hands *(Silverfish Review Press, 2003). He is a professor of creative writing at Ramapo College of New Jersey.*

SANTA SANGRE

J.J. HERNANDEZ

After Alejandro Jodorowsky

I watch blood leave my body & travel into a machine
that separates the plasma from the red cells by spinning

at high speeds. The plasma is yellow and fatty. They
tell me that I am doing good & that I am a good person.

My red cells are mixed with a saline solution & pumped
back into my other arm. I taste it on my tongue. The

nurse asks if I am okay, & I tell her that I am in another reality.
My vision blurs into a box. I see the dying elephant, its trunk

bleeding into the cobbled street. She is there watching. She knows
what blood means, she has bathed in its thickness, tasted its metal.

I come to on the floor, bathroom lights buzzing. I'm cold & my
pants are undone. I stagger back into the blood center & tell

them that I passed out in the bathroom. They are afraid, they put
ice packs on my neck, empty boxed juices down my throat. They say

*We don't want to lose you, you are the perfect candidate, you haven't
had sex with a man, not even once.* Salt leaks from my eyes.

If I were Jesus, I would have cried metal, black, not redblue like he did
and my younger brother is denied entrance to see me—

another space he has been banned from. I am in the 80's
& Reagan is still calling AIDS a *gay disease* on the analog

TV. On the inside I am upset, because I am my father, but I don't say
anything. I remember my pastor telling my brother his jeans

were too skinny, that his hairstyle was too "gay," & he left the church
that day. Or was it that his wife called him a homosexual; or was

it that he was living a lie? All true, all something that I, as my father,
want to say is okay, say that I love you, that you mean

the world to me, that the Proverb: *a brother is born for adversity*,
is bullshit, that I want you to be happy, but he knew he wasn't

welcome. Dad, if he gets married to a man, I will take communion with his new
husband & him, a glass of pinot or merlot, like our grandfather

& I used to make in the basement. I will tell them that I love them.
I worry about my brother, worry about him dying at the hands of bigots.

I am a naked man painted red. I have a penis. In the womb I have no genitals.
You cannot get over the fact that your little brother is gay. My brother,

is a child with wispy hair, who runs to grandma's for sodas & candy. He was
born with a desire for men's bodies. I've seen him kissing a man on the mouth

& it was beautiful. As a child, I see his blood drip into the snow after a sledding
injury, & the snow succumbs to red, melts into a river that starts to pool.

J.J. Hernandez is a poet in Fresno, California. He holds an MFA in poetry and served as the inaugural fellow in the Laureate Lab: Visual Words Studio under Juan Felipe Herrera.

SUBJECT MATTER

A review of Obit *by Victoria Chang*

APR Books

PIOTR FLORCZYK

Obit: Poems
by Victoria Chang
Copper Canyon Press, 2020
$17.00 (paper)

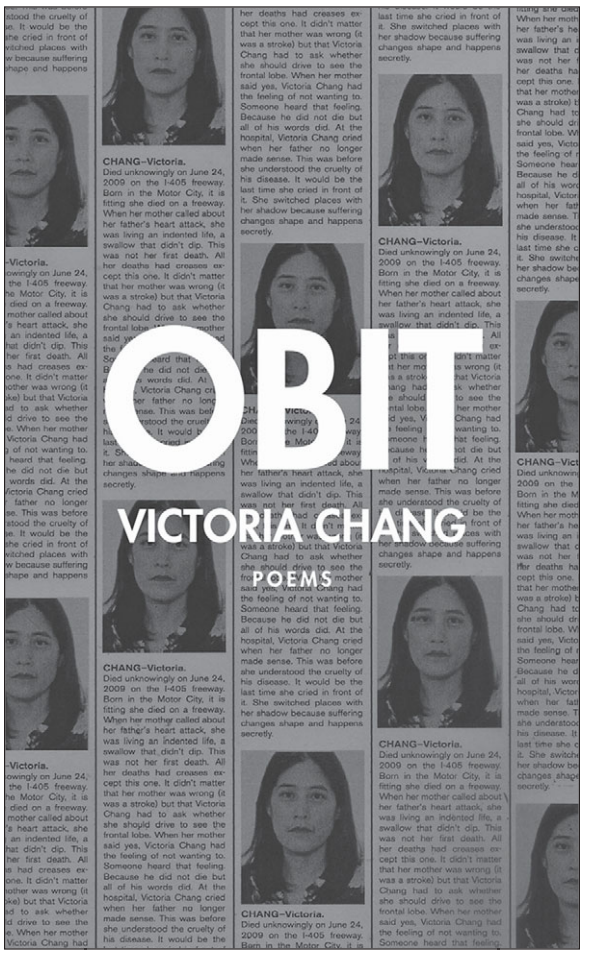
I've never asked myself what I would say about either of my parents—who, for the record, are still alive—if given the task of composing his or her obituary. Would I mention their professional accomplishments? Or the dreams they had, including the ones that never came true? How about something about the vacations we took to the lake south of Krakow when I was growing up? Looking back on someone's life, one inevitably reexamines his own, both as the person who had shared their life with the deceased and as the person who's suddenly been barred from enjoying that experience ever again. Grief can be so overpowering precisely because it swallows up everything in its path.

Obit is Chang's fifth collection. She started out, as many poets do, by writing quiet lyrics. In deftly composed couplets, she examined the life in American suburbia, mainly California's Orange County, as well as the trials and tribulations of Asian Americans. What's striking about her debut collection, entitled *Circle* and published in 2005, is how the poems embody a perfect mix of the poet's sweeping gaze, which is necessary to tackle broad themes, and her attention to detail. Here's an example of Chang's technique, from the poem "At Lake Michigan":

> *The snow rattles with each step,*
> *the sound of chestnuts cracking,*
>
> *my breath glacial, growing into webbed*
> *chalk. Occasionally snow bundles land*
>
> *with a dampened crunch and crimp.*
> *Houses plume smoke from chimneys*
>
> *like tied kites, not allowed to scythe*
> *the wind and rise through the pewter*
>
> *sheath, beyond snow-globe harbors.*
> *The mailbox handle molts its hold.*

The extended exposition isn't devoid of wonderful elements—the use of "plume" and "scythe" as verbs, for instance, or the sharp notes concluding the lines—but one might find it a bit too languid, though it certainly befits the setting. What's more important here is how the poet allows herself the time to linger; her choices of what to include and what to leave out are not accidental.

Chang's poems, then as now, are built around a desire to leave no stone unturned, as it were, and the surface-deep quietude of her debut belies intellectual discipline and compositional rigor, both of which bestow upon the early poems an aura of piercing meditations. Something similar can be seen in her second volume, the ominously titled *Salvinia Molesta* from 2008, but there is also a marked tonal shift. For one, a sense of urgency is beginning to supersede the meditative stance. "I am gardening," the poet writes, "but my mind is tilling." While the desire to explore the unsaid



and unseen, be it historically painful narratives or domestic strife, has always been there, there is more built-up fury now and less concern for tidiness. The speaker, having freed herself formally, becomes more expansive in her tackling of subjects and forms, although Chang is too technically accomplished a poet to let herself go completely.

Hence, in order to remain grounded and not risk being overpowered by a new-found unreservedness, she has embraced in the last three volumes the project-book, i.e., a volume of poems focused on an overarching theme. Whereas in her debut she circled a subject in order to both develop upon it and use it as a springboard toward another subject, a type of accretion that gave her debut book a powerful cumulative effect, in the last three volumes she pounces and dwells on a theme until it begins to satisfy her wish to understand it. Which isn't to say that she fails to follow the various offshoots that emerge in the process; in fact, the speaker of these latest poems, including those found in *Obit*, understands that the first crack in the edifice is just the opening.

The majority of *Obit*'s poems are untitled and resemble actual obituaries: they are as skinny as a newspaper column, with margins flush on both sides, and printed in the middle of the page. Where they differ, however, is in their rapid-fire delivery. Each poem's words cascade and bounce around the pre-set form; if a narrative emerges, it's through confusion and contradiction. That's when the body itself becomes the vocalizer of what we're feeling and thinking. Here's an extended quote from an obituary to "Civility":

> *After my father's stroke, my mother no longer spoke in full sentences. Fragments of codfish, the language of savages, each syllable a mechanical dart from her mouth to my father's holes. Maybe this is what happens when language fails, a last breath inward but no breath outward. A state of holding one's breath forever but not dying. When her lungs began their failing, she could still say* you *but not* thank. You don't know what it's like*, she said when I told her to stop yelling at my father. She was right. When language leaves, all you have left is tone, all you have left are smoke signals. I didn't know she was using her own body as wood.*

What compounds the feeling of helplessness is not just that we fail to articulate what we would like to say or that our bodies behave in unrecognizable ways, but the realization that mourning is a deeply individualistic experience. "When someone / dies," the poet writes, "there is a constant feeling of / wanting to speak to someone, but the / plane with all the words is crossing / the sky." The poems embody, and reflect, the speaker's aloneness.

Chang's father passed away in 2009 and her mother in 2015—we are told these and many other facts. Effectively, these poems stem from both experiences, but they are also about the many small deaths we suffer and endure surrounding the passing of our loved ones, including months or years later. There are obituaries here to, among others, "Privacy," "The Future," "Empathy," "Affection," "Friendships," "Secrets," "Caretakers," and "Victoria Chang." These obituaries commemorate ideals and human personality traits, even objects, like a chair, and do so in ways that both highlight and strip them of their innate characteristics. Here is a poem from the book's third of four sections:

> *Subject Matter—always dies, what we are left with is architecture, form, sound, all in a room, darkened, a few chairs unarranged. The door is locked from the inside. But still, subject matter breaks in and all the others rise. My mother's death is not her story. My father's stroke is not his story. I am not my mother's story, not my father's story. But there is a meeting place that is hidden, one that holds all the maps toward indifference. Can pain be separated from subject matter? Can subject matter take flight and lose its way, peck on another tree? How do you walk heavily with subject matter on your back, without trampling all the meadows?*

This is a key poem in this riveting collection, for it hints at the guilt one feels for wallowing in grief. The speaker may formally manipulate the subject, even try to lose it, as it were, by employing a form that's typically more numbing than upsetting, but it remains—it stares back at her looking in the mirror.

These column-poems look like coffins on the page, yes, but also remind me of pinball machines. The velocity of language rises when the words encounter obstacles that prevent the speaker from making sense of the death of her two parents. This leads to the speaker mentioning times and days from before and after her parents' deaths, like her

mother's leaving Taiwan for America in 1960—it's a way for the speaker to escape the suffocating confines of bereavement. And blame, which, as Chang writes, never dies.

In addition to the obituaries, and "I am a Minor. The Light Turns Blue," a fragmented poem built around caesuras that makes up the entirety of the book's third section, the collection also includes a number of tankas dedicated to Chang's children. The decision to employ this classical Japanese form isn't as surprising as it may seem—it's another received form in which to box-in her grief. Yet in these two-stanza poems, the proverbial tables turn: the speaker, grieving for her deceased parents, is still a parent to her own children, who watch her in pain, perhaps a little absent, unaware of what's at stake:

I can't say with faith
that I would run toward a bus
to save you from death.
If a girl is only as
good as her mother, then what?

*

To love anyone
means to admit extinction.
I tell myself this
so I never fall in love,
so that the fire lights just me.

Before the fire is lit, before that moment comes, there is hope, and plenty of it, including for those of us who are yet to write their parents' obituaries. This wonderful collection is its living proof.

Piotr Florczyk is a doctoral candidate in the PhD in Literature and Creative Writing Program at the University of Southern California. His new volume of poems, From the Annals of Krakow*, which is based on the testimonies of Holocaust survivors, will be published later this year. His work can be found at www.piotrflorczyk.com.*

ODE TO BUTTER

BETH ANN FENNELLY

Like everything delicious, I was warned against it.
Those mornings, I'd slowly descend the stairs
in my plaid Catholic school uniform skirt, find my parents
eating behind newspapers, coned in separate silences.
The only music was the throat-clearing rasp of toast
being scraped with too-little butter, three passes
of the blade, *kkrrrrr, kkrrrr, kkrrr,* battle hymn of the eighties.
When I pulled the butter close, my mother's eyes
would twitch to my knife, measuring my measuring—
the goal, she'd shared from Weight Watchers,
a pat so thin the light shines through. If I disobeyed,
indulged, slathered my toast to glistening lace,
I'd earn her favorite admonition, predictable as Sunday's
dry communion wafer: "A moment on the lips . . ."
I couldn't stop my head from chiming, *forever on the hips.*

Hips? They were my other dangerous excess.
I was growing them in secret beneath my skirt,
and when I walked the dog after breakfast
and a truck whooshed past from behind, the trucker's eyes
sizzling mine in his rear view, I knew my secret
wouldn't stay a secret long. They were paired, up top,
by a swelling, flesh rising like cream to fill, then overfill
the frothy training bra. Everything softening on the shelf,
milk-made. Meanwhile, at breakfast, sitting on my secret,
I'd concede, scrape *kkrrrrr, kkrrrr, kkrrr,* lay down
my weapon, dry toast sticking in my craw. I'd think
of the girl from school, seventeen to my fourteen,
who crawled out the window of first-period bio
to meet her boyfriend from the Navy base. She'd collar
his peacoat, draw his mouth to her white neck,
or so I kept imagining. *Slut*, the girls whispered, watching
her struggling back through the window, throat
pinked from cold and his jaw's dark stubble,
kkrrrrr, kkrrrr, kkrrr. Only fourth period,
and already I was hungry for lunch, or something.

Thank you, Republican parents, thank you,
Catholic education, thank you, Reaganomics—
words I never knew I'd write. But I hereby acknowledge
repression's inadvertent gifts. Folks who came of age
in liberal families, permissive cities, the free-love sixties,
how far they must go to transgress—
Vegas, latex, sex tapes, a sugaring of the nostrils?
Yet how close at hand rebellion is for me.
Merely making married love with my married husband,
I'm a filthy whore. Merely sitting down to breakfast
and raising the butter knife, I'm living on the edge.

Beth Ann Fennelly, Poet Laureate of Mississippi, teaches in the MFA Program at the University of Mississippi, where she was named Outstanding Teacher of the Year. Her collections of poetry include: Open House*,* Tender Hooks*, and* Unmentionables*, all with W. W. Norton.*