

# The AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW

"I understand that Whitman didn't actually dress many wounds, a task probably best left to those trained for it. But in the continuing dream of his poem he does. And he is there in the national psyche as well, going on from one injured person to the next with his calm gaze, and his impassive hand, and his fearless commitment to look at the naked, desiring, damaged human body. Out of that gaze comes his faith in what a democracy might yet become."

— DOTY, p. 8

JULY/AUGUST 2020 VOL. 49/NO. 4

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## JENNY BROWNE

UNTIL THE SEA CLOSED  
OVER US AND THE  
LIGHT WAS GONE

MARK DOTY  
NOT ENOUGH BEDS

FAYLITA HICKS  
FOREIGN BODIES  
& AFTER THE WAKE

ALSO  
KAYLEB RAE CANDRILLI  
MATTHEW OTREMBA  
HADARA BAR-NADAV  
VIJAY SESHADRI



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# The AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW

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# UNTIL THE SEA CLOSED OVER US AND THE LIGHT WAS GONE

—*Dante, Canto XXVI*

JENNY BROWNE

---

*But if the truth is dreamed of toward the morning*  
—El Paso

Although it was really last summer's song,  
all this summer *Despacito* played on

as slower than I turned myself to gaze  
upon Juarez. The summer everything

hurts my eyes, a dozen Thai boys tweezed from  
beneath the surface, the picnic table shirts

of those bold Croats, even words sprayed below  
the bridge I walked back across: Sabes el

camino? Do I know the way? Donde?  
Wolves change rivers. A swallowtail lingers.

It was summer all morning & all night  
& soon it would always be summer so

I point us toward the far sea & mean  
we approach the ocean like returning.

*And going our lonely way through that dead land*  
—Salt Flat

We approach the ocean like returning  
soldiers, arms open wide, or we approach  
the ocean like border patrol pickups  
speeding six hundred fifty-something miles  
of exposed skin. We approach the ocean like  
poachers, galloping at the speed of blood.

We approach the ocean ripping open  
our shirts to roar. We approach not to be *of*  
God, but *in* God. Or we ghost approach with  
no preposition at all, mirroring  
the fat frack trucks speeding past, loaded down with  
even wider temporary housing  
as if the sea too was made quick & cheap,  
thin walls already bubbling in the heat.

*Till my prayer becomes a thousand*  
—Van Horn

Thin walls already bubbling in the heat,  
I consider the blanketed woman

feeding a host of sparrows before church.  
(If by layers we mean how little we  
can see inside another animal.)

You will be kind. You will try. You still  
like the fortunes about basic human  
decency best, even as the seams of  
your map turn soft as tissue. (& if by  
layers we mean dressed to walk  
all night long?)

& like every seed you will start confused,  
searching long in the dark & like every  
seed you will crown out *holy holy holy is the Lord*  
*of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory.*

*When memory returns to what I say*  
—Balmorhea

*Of hosts! The whole earth! Full of his glory!*  
would be Isaiah 6:3, more or less,  
verses it took me until now to learn  
I once buried, a church child, only  
to dig up today for our birds, our dirt,  
cobblestones, & that bell that keeps ringing  
without needing reason. I don't want to  
make kindness heroic, although I do.  
Once upon a horse I got turned around.  
Once too by a god, then sent off to find  
the donkey its tail. Also by the hands  
of a man, first gently, then not so much.  
Though he was no machete, nor was sex  
two trucks stuck between Pecos & death.

*But if near dawn the dreams we have are true*  
—Pecos

Two trucks stuck between Pecos & death  
makes for an uphill line to begin again.

By side, by side, they grind their teeth  
& we shall not be moved. If then I felt

we were all just waves, that vague & that  
abstract. Or there ought to be a law against

motion sickness, but we're born with it:  
landscape as a list of future targets.

The Golden Cheeked Warbler didn't have time  
to pack & if—as Dogen writes—we should

not view ash as *after*, and firewood  
as *before*, what time is being told & told

but not listening? What would it be  
to die, or stay alive, albeit fearlessly?

*If it already happened it should not be too soon*  
—Ozona

To die, or stay alive, albeit fearlessly,  
my mind must stop revising that great hawk  
into a killing machine. I don't mean  
to sound so apocalyptic, but I  
remind my students they can't put a drone  
in their poem without some blood on their hands  
or leave out the man scanning his screen for  
heat. It's cold in Ozona, but I meet  
the happiest men in the world also  
heading east. *Nothing to do there but fish.*

Birds of a feather, gods of wind, I am  
supposed to warm to your slow turning  
blades of war. Mine, not oars. Arms grow sore  
wishing our species better metaphors.

*We made wings of our oars for our fool's flight*  
—Seminole Canyon

Wishing our species better metaphors,  
I consider the author of borders  
& fear standing up the slumped horizon.

*The anthropocene's silent auction now*  
*closing.* Author of brushing peach pie from  
the geologist's beard. From here, we can  
see smog hiding one of her children  
behind her back. The other approaches  
the canvas: our land turns blue, our eyes black.

The refugee takes her sky's temperature.

Author of those two white horses feeding  
at the Val Verde County Line, reminding us  
of nothing. It was still summer & it was  
never their job to humanize the land.

*Just like a little cloud sailing skyward*  
—Del Rio

Never their job to humanize the land,  
a hotwired breeze doubles the feeling.  
*Do I have a choice?* jokes the man who owns  
the only pho shop downtown when I ask  
how he likes living here? On the border?

On earth? I thought this was a slow dance,  
but we laugh until we cry, like people do:  
*jinx on me, jinx on you.* Rain never did  
follow the plow, but the soybean expert  
now wants his overtime beer. Each of us

is to ourselves permanent. I remain  
petty & confused by joy, a seed  
in the hot blind earth. I must remember  
what I cannot believe. I must remember.

*It grieved me then and now again it grieves me*  
—Rock Springs

What can I not believe? I must remember  
that day outside Rock Springs when the green  
needles on the cypress made it look so  
easy to survive us. Outside my room  
two boys built a fort of mud & sticks so  
that a third might come stomp on it. Which one  
will grow into the kind of man who climbs  
a mountain to pick up ash another  
left behind? Which will leave his tongues untied,  
the dogstar blinking from his eyes: *Tonight!*  
*Buckets of iced Corona on special!*

Even this thirsty one might begin to  
feel oceanic out there. What between  
the ocotillo & the tequila.

*Only those flames, forever passing by*  
—Sonora

The ocotillo & the tequila  
& the way it becomes even harder to  
breathe as ozone repeats *Do your job! Do*  
*your job?* In a different land a man needed  
only a goat to cross the century.

Nothing sadder than a train in the rain?  
The methane flares do their job, burning all  
the night. As does the eyelid, the moth &  
even the mouth, testing out echoes in  
this unfinished house. How is it the girls  
in Juarez turned to dust? How is it I'm  
still holding this stone? Nothing sadder than  
sagging, frostbit cactus? It's a breeze to  
be lost & not seem. Ask the lonely bees.

*Beyond the world, the light beneath the moon*  
—San Antonio

Be lost & not seem? Ask the lonely bees,  
those tricked into believing more painted blue  
ceiling meant more blue sky. *Sana sana*  
echoes the mockingbird, our little grey songster.

She's heard the mothers try to make it better.  
She's heard the father on the border howl  
in his holding cage. We never learned to  
love the way blossoms & almonds do.

In the history book of the newly born,  
every room is a room of water. That  
is where the dreamers land. In late July,  
the river tried to love her own thinning

face like sleep. Si no sanas hoy, sanarás mañana.  
I would have liked to have known you before.

*I stood on the bridge and leaned out from the edge*  
—Laredo

I would have liked to have known you before,  
your stars jewelizing like migratory desire  
in song above the old town. Someone leaves  
the trains on all night. Until the river  
again unlocks the grey bird's light, she sings.

On the promise of an empire of  
monarchs protecting our only sky, she sings.

Thawed back into recognition, she sings  
while on the muted television one

of those shows where a hidden camera films  
a roofer using his nail gun to pin  
a sleeping old woman's wig to her head.

People look horrified, but do nothing.  
People look horrified, but do nothing.

*May I not find the gift cause for remorse*  
—Alice

People look horrified, but do nothing  
to imagine the distance before steam,  
before turbine? We could have made so much  
better time. But why? On toward the shore with  
exactly four grackles & the hard wind  
some still call a *Norther*. Sort that makes  
it rain sideways. Then comes the Horse Crippler  
& the Greater Roadrunner repeating  
the question. Comes caliche, cochineal  
I-35 & missing our exit.  
Did you forget where we live? *The work*  
*for which all other work is preparation?*  
Wake early & watch a girl leaning from land  
to thank the water with both of her hands.

*And turning our stern toward morning*  
—Brownsville

To thank the water with both of her hands.

Do you know what is the way? Return us  
to the body's surface without violence,  
as we were & as we never were, still  
approaching the ocean like we own it.  
*Despacito*. Memorize the tune we  
call air for the next time you need to breathe.

You said it was summer all night, all day,  
& no one knows what to wear anymore.

Not skin, the citrus trees, nor the future.  
*O one, o none, o no one, o you. Where*  
*Let the way when no where it led?*

Without the last of what summer's song?

*Broke hard upon our bow from the new land*  
—Corpus Christi

Although it was really last summer's song,  
we approached the ocean like returning,  
thin walls already bubbling in the heat  
of hosts, the whole earth full of his glory.

Two trucks stuck between Pecos & death?  
To die, or stay alive, albeit fearlessly?  
Wished our species better metaphors.  
Never their job. To humanize the land

what could I not believe? I must  
remember the ocotillo & the tequila!

To be lost & not seem, ask the lonely bees.  
I would have liked to have known you before people

look horrified but do nothing  
to thank the water with both of her hands.

---

*Jenny Browne is the author of three collections of poems, At Once, The Second Reason and Dear Stranger, and two chapbooks, Welcome to Freetown and Texas, Being. She was the 2018 Poet Laureate of the State of Texas and Distinguished Fulbright Scholar in Creative Writing at Queens University, Belfast, Northern Ireland, in Spring 2020.*

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past and women of mythology,  
with language and fellow poets,  
with the signs of the stars, with  
oxygen and alchemy, with  
many inspired voices, and the  
wounded among us.”*

—Robert Morgan



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# THREE POEMS

## JOHN GALLAHER

---

### Coded Messages (*Architecture 2*)

The purpose of being alive is to carry a sequence of code.  
And so, being adopted, I'm part of a plot, a sleeper cell  
in enemy territory, quietly working against the system  
from within. It's fall, I'm on an ancestry website signing up for a DNA kit,  
because this is what adoptees are supposed to do at some point.  
There are several to choose from, flow chart questions  
leading toward cousins, health risks. Two versions of the story,  
because versions of stories are how we get to tomorrow, and everywhere  
around  
is a pretend grave you inhabit bit by bit. I've chosen "cousin," then,  
as we have to choose something, and cousins are decorative,  
and I want to know, more so than heart disease and northern Europe.  
I'm in my 50s. None of these stories will matter all that much longer,  
unless one of us tells them in especially memorable ways, but even that  
only extends another generation or so, like saying we drove through Grant  
City once,  
and that's what becomes of Grant City. You get to this point of every life is  
a life,  
every job is a job. (Like hunting the snark, when there is no snark,  
as all snarks are boojums.). There's a long list of John Gallahers out there.  
I'm friends with several on social media, and I get updates;  
they're out doing things: John Gallaher flying, John Gallaher at the pyramids,  
et cetera. And there are several Eric Enquists as well, my birth name.  
I didn't friend any of them on social media, though, as that didn't seem funny,  
in the way that sending a friend request to John Gallaher felt funny: "Hey John,  
it's John! What are we up to?" Whatever you call yourself, though,  
it's the same sequence of code. Dear rose, dear octopus, it's a dramatization:  
you belong where you are and you belong to something else. Fire.  
Element. It's like how it turns out humans might be  
the most remarkable thing in the universe,  
and the price for that would be that we're the only ones who would know.

### All the Young Mothers of 1911 Agree (*Architecture 9*)

Is it time to say "quit" or time to say "just getting started,"  
when you're making your family tree and end up at 1564, and Wolff  
Mornhinweg  
and Ursula, as a team, saw through a log, the Baumstamm Sagen,  
after the marriage ceremony. Test results in, they're the furthest back I can  
trace  
on any genetic family line, the first scrap of DNA. Ursula, meaning  
"little bear,"  
was a popular name in the middle ages throughout Europe. The wedding,  
I'll say,  
was fabulous, as first recorded events should be, a Garden of Eden theme,  
standing on the X, the starting line, like looking at the earth from space,  
or like putting sheets on the bed, fresh from the dryer, still warm,  
whispering "zero,"  
whispering "eternity." Further back, across the continent, there's a  
competition held  
each year for over 300 years, a minimum of three plays per playwright  
per year.  
Fragments of the list remain, a few plays. After the show,  
you'd sit in the field with your sandwich, dance trophies, soccer trophies,

like a breeze gently blowing over the sea. What remains is mostly war,  
royalty and generals: dates, scorched earth policies. The fields are a dream.  
As we go out into it, it's the atmosphere we love, what happens  
is mere plot, a cheap device. It sells tickets, but it's atmosphere that wins  
awards.  
Here it is then: the cabinet opens and they spill forth. Praise for the process,  
for the sticky goo that marks us, that ties us together in this picture  
Gary Ferrington sends of his mother at four and my grandfather at a few  
months,  
with their parents, Erick and Annie Enquist, standing in front  
of one of their fishwheels, 1911, where Bonneville Dam is now. Meanwhile,  
the Maryville girls' high school soccer team played Chillicothe last night.  
3–0. Good win in a difficult season. They had to really fight for it,  
until the clock made it inevitable, allowing them to rotate most of the squad.  
Just before the half, Natalie took a hard hit on her weak ankle, and during  
the break,  
the coach taped it, stirrup and anchor, just like in the videos,  
and she went back in. There's an empty box somewhere in which we don't  
put these things.  
In it, they're dreaming of us and our afternoon walk around Bonneville Dam,  
as no language or impossibility lifts them from this photograph they also held,  
located now at the Troutdale historical society. So we sit awhile longer in  
the grass,  
play 250. Good play, we say, maybe, or, the school lunch account  
is getting low. I'll send you with some money tomorrow. OK.

### Mouse Trap (*Architecture 13*)

There's no courage in saying things are a mess. Even now, as we make a table  
to eat at. Remember the idea? Our sketching dolls voted yes.  
The maps we made to move across voted yes, the way we wanted out of  
ourselves  
and to be left alone, the way we wanted someone to belong to.  
Family's the family you make votes yes. "Birth, school, work, death,"  
as the Godfathers said, voting yes. I thought it was a great idea,  
writing a book of poetry as if I were talking to you, asking us if we were  
happy,  
and then never getting to an answer. It's because everyone agrees things  
are a mess. Step two is the problem. Like how we have a problem with field  
mice,  
so my winter job is mouse trapper. Find where they've been,  
set the live trap, a translucent green box that looks like a little Monopoly  
house,  
then take them to the dumpster at the industrial park, our frail small-town  
version  
of an industrial park. Always the same dumpster.  
That's an important step: keeping the family together.  
This morning, mouse number two of the fall got out of the trap house  
and was standing on the roof reaching up toward the covering of the trash can  
I'd placed it in. The mouse looked like a child there,  
wanting a parent to pick it up, and I had to maneuver it around a bit at the  
dumpster  
so as not to lose the trap. "Is this great literature yet?"  
I asked the mouse, "The rising action, the conflict, resolution?"  
Things are a mess, and sometimes, reading the great literature, I begin to feel  
a kind of hope rising. I thought I was writing great literature once.  
I was prepared for it. "That's not the great literature," Literature replied.  
"In the great literature, we're at once the mouse and the idea of the mouse,


a hundred mice across the field voting yes.” I’m thinking of myself when I say things like “I was a different person then,” how my greatest fear was that I wouldn’t be honest enough, or not making it true to living enough, and then my greatest fear was that it would become tedious and self-indulgent, voting yesyesyes, the relativity of all perspectives and the transformation of all living things, from cell to creature to carcass. I can feel myself growing tired of ideas. We start our lives as mailboxes. The next thing we know, we’re the house. We’re in the house and of the house. And then we crawl to the roof.

John Gallaher’s newest collection is *Brand New Spacesuit (BOA, 2020)*. He lives in rural Missouri and co-edits the *Laurel Review*.

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# NOT ENOUGH BEDS

MARK DOTY

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Not enough beds, enough sponges and clean rags, enough pillowcases. Not enough hospitals. Fifty thousand patients, in a city with a population only half again larger than that. Not enough shovels, neither time nor room to bury the dead. Not enough chaplains, orderlies, nurses, surgeons. No autoclave to sterilize the surgeons' instruments until 1876, no proven germ theory of disease until 1881, no rubber gloves till 1889. This is 1863, the dome of the Capitol still incomplete. It's strange how a city under construction can look very much like a city in ruins. In the commandeered larger spaces of new buildings, rows of cots occupied by young men who wore either color of uniform. Bandage and wound, scar and stub are their uniform now. A few will occupy these beds or others like them for months or years, and others for not long at all.

157 years later, in this moment's medical emergency, it's impossible to miss the echoes of those years when damaged soldiers arrived in the capital by the tens of thousands. How pushed to the very edge of their capacities those caregivers must have felt, their stamina and spirits exhausted by the vast rows of beds, the bodies stacked in hallways awaiting temporary burial until someone could figure out what to do with them. The awful sense of helplessness, of being ill-equipped, in the face of suffering so grave one could not bear to look at it or to look away.

Walt Whitman hadn't expected to spend his days in these makeshift wards, but for a time his life came to revolve around them. At home in Brooklyn, he'd watch freshly uniformed young men parade boldly off to war, and in poems that now seem alarmingly naïve, work he'd later regret, he urged others to join the fray. For him the Union was more than a political entity, and he passionately wanted it to remain intact. It was the archetype of a democratic compact, 34 states both distinct and merged, a national version of what he sought at the local level, an egalitarian culture founded on our affections for each other, and on what we hold in common, each of us a spark "struck from the float forever held in suspension." We were of a common substance. "Men and women crowding the streets," he wrote, "what are they if not flashes and specks?"

When a variant of Whitman's brother's name appeared on a list of the wounded, the poet travelled south to try to find him. His pocket was picked on a Philadelphia train platform, and he arrived in D.C. penniless, but forged on toward the Union encampments on the edge of the battlefields. There he found his brother George with only minor wounds, and began his extended encounter with the human body's terrible vulnerability. In "Song of Myself" he famously celebrated the body's beauty and ardor, its fragrances, its openness to sensory delight. What then to make of the nearly incomprehensible sight that he described in his notebook: a heap of amputated human limbs discarded there, outside a hospital tent, arms and feet, legs, all in an intimate tangle. It must have seemed like what Emily Dickinson called "a pile of moan," though of course it was utterly silent.

After his time in the fields of Virginia watching, offering here and there assistance, it was just a few steps to the two years he would spend volunteering in the capital's wards. He kept men company, brought candies and slices of fruit, brought paper and stamps, read letters to men who could not read them themselves, took dictation, cooled foreheads, listened to their confidences, and held their hands.

He documented his work in notebooks, in news articles, and in a troubling poem, "The Wound Dresser," first published in 1865. He opens the poem with a weirdly decorous, sentimental scene, picturing himself as a beloved old man telling young people about the war, and ends it with an uncomfortable passage proclaiming how much the wounded soldiers loved him. I think he made this fusty, Victorian frame to try to protect himself, and his readers, from the brutal modernity of the poem's center, an unstinting catalogue of the soldiers' wounds, offered without figurative speech, distancing devices, or hope. He warns us to "follow without noise and be of strong heart."

*Bearing the bandages, water and sponge,  
Straight and swift to my wounded I go . . .  
To each and all one after another I draw near, not one do I miss,*

*An attendant follows holding a tray, he carries a refuse pail,  
Soon to be fill'd with clotted rags and blood, emptied, and fill'd again.*

The speaker has to force himself to remember what comes next:

*. . . (open doors of time! open hospital doors!)*  
*The crush'd head I dress, (poor crazed hand tear not the bandage away,)*  
*The neck of the cavalry-man with the bullet through and through I examine,*

*From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand,  
I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the matter and blood,  
Back on his pillow the soldier bends with curv'd neck and side falling head,  
His eyes are closed, his face is pale, he dares not look on the bloody stump,  
And has not yet look'd on it.*

*I dress a wound in the side, deep, deep,  
But a day or two more, for see the frame all wasted and sinking,  
And the yellow-blue countenance see.*

*I dress the perforated shoulder, the foot with the bullet-wound.*

There are moments of suffering in Whitman's previous poems, but his habit has been to move briskly from such scenes to some other instance of the variety of human experience. Nowhere else is his gaze so dire and sustained. But "I am faithful," he writes,

*I am faithful, I do not give out,  
The fractur'd thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen,  
These and more I dress with impassive hand, (yet deep in my breast  
a fire, a burning flame.)*

These passages fix on damage; they refuse to veil horror with abstraction. No nobility or sacrifice here, nor even courage, unless it's that of the faithful wound dresser. It's a little unsettling, knowing that the poet who wrote these lines was sending press releases to the *Boston Globe*, noting that "the poet Walt Whitman" was visiting the nation's wounded boys. It helps to remember that his era invented marketing. He was perfectly happy, a few years later, posing for a photo with a cardboard butterfly he claimed was real perched on one finger. He was branding Walt Whitman.

But there's nothing of that in these lines stripped of sonic or rhetorical flourishes. In them, Whitman comes face to face with the unredeemable. Wounds in the bodies of men and in the body of the nation, they represent the darkest and most difficult of challenges to Whitman's vision. He longed for and prophesied union, a social compact founded upon our mutual affections. He got instead the brutal actuality of those bodies tearing one another apart.

Here, without explicitly saying so, he is making an argument for a difficult sort of poetry. His era was rife with art that seemed to rush toward consolation, finding meaning in moralizing interpretations of suffering, emphasizing sacrifice and the idea of experience as spiritual education. Misery might have value, and pain might elevate or refine the soul. Whitman's poem suggests that such a reading of the suffering of these soldiers isn't finally possible. To ennoble their suffering would be a lie; the pain is undeniable fact, and exists in a dimension in which conventional consolation is irrelevant. Whitman wants us to come face to face with the abject, simply because it is real, to look directly at what is human and broken since we are also of that substance. It is awful to look, awful to turn away.

The secret of consolation is that you don't have to say things will be all right. In the Civil War hospitals, as in the nursing homes and wards of New York City now, everything will not turn out all right. The horror of what he has known plays on inside the speaker, who returns to this scene, "in dreams and silent projections." He goes back—"(open hospital doors)"—and he ministers, with "deep in my breast a fire, a burning flame." That seemingly inexhaustible compassion kept an exhausted man going on his rounds. Later it allowed him, perhaps night after night, to revisit those wards. I understand that Whitman didn't actually dress many wounds, a task probably best left to those trained for it. But in the continuing dream of his poem he does. And he is there in the national psyche as well, going on from one injured person to the next with his calm gaze, and his impassive hand, and his fearless commitment to look at the naked, desiring, damaged human body. Out of that gaze comes his faith in what a democracy might yet become.

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*Mark Doty is the author of nine books of poetry, including Deep Lane (2015) and Fire to Fire: New and Selected Poems, which won the 2008 National Book Award. His most recent book is What Is the Grass: Walt Whitman in My Life (W.W. Norton & Co, 2020).*

# THREE POEMS

## CASSIE DONISH

---

### Survival Gown

Beneath your skin, a flood  
of glass is surfacing. It means I stay  
alone for years

during your week  
in the hospital. You breathe like rose  
hips crushed, mouth too muddy

to believe. I'm one to talk.  
The stylist asks if I want my lies  
to show through. I wade into  
a flooded pass. No doctors  
attend to me. I dream your departure,  
parting my hair

into a disguise.  
The angles here are husks of sun  
that melt and run off the roof edge.

My secret: I'm afraid  
of being left  
when this is over. When nothing is left.

In my next life, I live with a dog  
in a valley painted blue. She sits  
on my lap while I eat salmon,

peach, artichoke. She licks  
the plate clean. For years I wore  
any dress thrown my way,

loved anyone I saw crying, lived  
in valved rooms. Erect  
in my harness, I touch what touches

the point where my nerve comes  
to an end. What's the point? Pleasure  
and pain are only a few

degrees removed. Lately, even upright,  
I'm a sound-swollen horizon  
lined with dead ends and cement.

### Reservation at Cold Resort

It is time for the day's report. The last peach tree  
has died and along with it every natural  
summer past this June. I try to save  
you and fail. I walk to the corner in the heat  
to undress. Instead I buy a mountain  
of shiny limes,  
they mold immediately.  
I steal a carton of grass, unripe bananas,  
swollen mangoes, verdigris  
from an alley. Love, it's about  
to rain again. You should believe me.  
After all, you're the one  
on fire. From between two glass panes  
I slide out an overgrown live oak  
whose lungs could suck up a galaxy.  
Your hair fills with ash, but you don't  
seem to mind. I look at dozens of images  
of Jupiter's moons. I rename all of them  
Johanna. Sometimes I still think of your back  
cool beneath the circles of my palms.

### The End of Fair Weather

I place a bundle of white feathers in a drawer.  
I gather cloud slips to give to a lover.  
This is among the last blue-sky days.  
The continent will soon go full centigrade.  
Each day in winter will be a mirror  
through which one may step, overdressed,  
into record-breaking summer.  
It's not useless to call out  
the name of a moth just gone  
extinct, just as it's not useless to sing  
in a dead language  
while frying eggs to start the day.  
As in, either it is or isn't useless.  
Who here is qualified to decide?  
I see the larkspur vanishing.  
I see my jeans threading to skin.  
In a dream, a lover tells me to start  
a panic journal. I say, *I don't want these things  
written down*. She sends me the ocean  
in a black envelope.  
I see myself opening it  
on a pixelated screen. I see my name  
beside the word *executor*.



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*Cassie Donish is a queer, nonbinary, Jewish poet, author of the full-length poetry collections The Year of the Femme (University of Iowa Press, 2019), chosen by Brenda Shaughnessy as winner of the Iowa Poetry Prize, and Beautyberry (Slope Editions, 2018). Her nonfiction chapbook, On the Mezzanine (2019), was selected by Maggie Nelson as winner of the Gold Line Press Chapbook Competition.*

# I WOULD PREFER TO DIE AHEAD OF YOU

DILRUBA AHMED

---

Three hearts beat  
in the octopus  
but I have none  
to spare. I won't  
let this one wither  
without you. I'm far  
too selfish  
to grant you  
your wish. No,  
let me  
disappear, first,  
after years  
waking each morning  
with a chest open  
the way a trench  
might open  
after a quake.  
It's taken  
this long to see  
the fault lines  
between us  
are nothing  
from an aerial view:  
mere folds  
in a topography  
so huge  
we're rendered  
invisible,  
Each footbridge  
or trestle  
we construct  
along the impassable  
will simply become  
the soon-to-be  
forgotten remains  
of fabled civilizations.

*Note: "I Would Prefer to Die Ahead of You" takes its title from "Something Like That" by Nicanor Parra.*

---

*Dilruba Ahmed is the author of Bring Now the Angels (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020). Her debut book of poetry, Dhaka Dust (Graywolf Press), won the Bakeless Prize. Her poems have appeared in The American Poetry Review, Blackbird, Kenyon Review, New England Review, Ploughshares and Poetry. Ahmed is the recipient of The Florida Review's Editors' Award, a Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Memorial Prize, and the Katharine Bakeless Nason Fellowship in Poetry awarded by the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. She holds degrees from the University of Pittsburgh and Warren Wilson College's MFA Program for Writers.*

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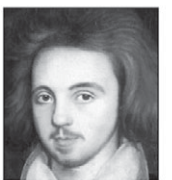
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# THE TROUBLE GENE

## MARIANNE BORUCH

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One clear thing about trouble—it can set you back to zero, a personal cone of silence. And reading, writing, listening allow entry into that troubled solitude; you disappear *into it* regardless of the time or place you really are in, be it bed, kitchen, airport, elevated train, last week, two months ago. We thin out and make room for what we read or write. That trouble orbits the oldest stone in us, back where quietude hides. And poetry is in there with it, our own trouble gene working overtime to pick up its sound and shape.

Which is to say not too long ago at a gathering of 30 or so who loudly laughed and talked, a guy I hadn’t met seated next to me—mid-50s I guessed—seemed to cherish such a stone, even *be* one, eyes down, eating supper, no attempt at the usual chit-chat over the bedlam in that bad-acoustics room. I tried to talk to him. No luck. I tried again. Finally he looked my way, waved his hand—“too much ambient noise”—pointing to a device matchbox-small between his knife and spoon and my fork. I followed its wire to the small silver disc fixed to the side of his head. “My cochlear implant,” he said.

A secret weapon for sanity then: he had tuned right out, this artist/graphic novelist from Detroit, Carl Wilson, brilliant self-taught printmaker, his work documenting many violent troubles from his own experience, but endearing ones too. Shortly I would learn of the most unimaginable mic in the world, that cochlear implant as ear trumpet gone hip-digital and 21st century talking straight to his brain via a magnet, how it had been slipped under his skin to link up that little gadget on the table to funnel in sound. That magnet business, as if words were steel shards, syllables as tiny lightning bolts pelting him. He realigned his wires, clipping that gizmo on the table to my shirt pocket. “I’m not being fresh,” he said, “or maybe I am.”

Thus began the et al. and et cetera of stranger to stranger, the well-meaning semi-awkward who-what-when-where of most conversation, right through dessert. Did that make our chat earthshaking? No. Just balance, pattern, the long-standing negotiation with the distance of another. It’s that trouble gene I imagine sending out its auto-enzyme to figure and settle things amiss just as the other 23,000 genes do whatever they do in every cell, making patterns we humans inherit. All the while, dinner!—as he and I resolved or unresolved more surface complications of the world in the sudden semi-quietude we briefly shared.

Sudden semi-quietude. Which is to say: on the brink of poetry. I’m counting on analogy here.

It starts simple. Trouble and its noise, the great *out-there* again—vs. poetry. My *here* at a window, trying to think how this works. So many people live that wish to know hard through extraordinary methods, down to a skull drilled to lay down a tiny metal plate inviting everything in. Poetry too registers inside and outside. Which may be why it’s primal, endlessly valuable, repeatable, practically illegal, sleuthy. Poetry: our need to hollow out a channel between self and world, self and self. Either way, you eavesdrop on who or what you don’t quite know. A poem starts from scratch. Things weird-out from there thanks to the trouble gene, its range from one-bird/one-stone (or one-bird, one decent pair of binoculars) to a mess of kaleidoscopic outback scrub, termite mounds, lonely unsealed roads.

A stab at standard categories then: If the lyric is whisper, the *unlyric* (story or argument) is stage whisper, not secret at all but caught by readers and listeners who bend low to absorb what poets live, sometimes die quite literally to say. The more classic lyric takes the drug straight to address a single individual, a beloved or the self, an I-thou or simply I-I. But there’s a larger sense of audience, a communal responsibility in poems less lyric, an expansion. But it all means trouble.

It can go epic, that trouble gene working the ancient Sumerians into *Gilgamesh*, its authorship pinned to a someone or many someones as “He Who Sees the Deep,” the story itself about a Trump-like ruler though this one turns good. More instances: *Beowulf*, the *Icelandic Sagas*, the intricate weighty visions of Homer or Dante, or consider the Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime stories of the oldest (70,000 years!) continuing culture on Earth. It’s often a matter of desire and empathy turned mission, beyond the

personal angst involved, more a matter of prophecy and history and moral weight spoken in the name of a collective intelligence, its rage or remorse or jubilation. A shared backstory and hope for the future at stake and, if there at all, specific lives become singular examples, a line of breadcrumbs back into the primordial cave of being.

All because the trouble gene keeps bearing witness, riding tension, presenting the reigning horror show or whatever break in clouds lets in light. *I sing the body electric*, Whitman still shouts to high heaven, his me me me as *you*—no—it’s *us*, underscoring poetry’s look-at-me as *believe me, for god’s sake!* An assumed citizenship out there, intent listeners. As with all art, trouble gets bigger before it resolves, if it does resolve. A journalist before he discovered poetry, Whitman goes for curiosity and what’s nonstop “breaking news.” Think zoom lens and juxtaposition. And he won’t shut up. But any poet must silence and trouble us enough to make us listen. Note this characteristic blurt from *Leaves of Grass*, 1855:

*The opium-eater reclines with rigid head and just-open’d lips,  
The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her  
tipsy and pimpled neck,  
The crowd laugh at her blackguard oaths, the men jeer  
and wink to each other,  
(Miserable! I do not laugh at your oaths nor jeer you);  
The President holding a cabinet council is surrounded by the  
great Secretaries. . . .*

Similarly compelled, Langston Hughes in 1938 punched into his “Let America Be America Again” a parenthetical “(America was never America to me)” that stings like acid and sorrow gone flammable. A large poem, it’s unnervingly relevant these 80-plus years later, its fury and reach and inclusion regardless of phrasing at times as dated as Whitman’s. Hughes’ trouble gene is down every wretched road and passage.

*Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?  
And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?*

*I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,  
I am the Negro bearing slavery’s scars.  
I am the red man driven from the land,  
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—  
And finding only the same old stupid plan  
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak. . . .*

Of course, sweep and heft aren’t always required. Dickinson, so often compact and abstract as she works the interior, can throw her lot toward a chilling social critique too, one with a surprisingly worldly edge. Reconsider her #389, its rhetorical and narrative drive and invention.

*There’s been a Death, in the Opposite House,  
As lately as Today—  
I know it, by the numb look  
Such Houses have—always—*

*The Neighbors rush in and out—  
The Doctor—drives away,  
A Window opens like a Pod—  
Abruptly—mechanically—*

*Somebody flings a Mattress out—  
The Children hurry by—  
They wonder if it died—on that—. . . .*

Dickinson keeps taking on the town’s heavyweights in this poem, ticking off the Minister who “owned all the Mourners” and the mortician—“the Man / Of the Appalling Trade”—who takes “the Measure of the House—” And “There’ll be a Dark Parade—” she wryly, chillingly writes, “Of Tassels—and of Coaches—soon. . . .”

The epic mode at whatever level is often launched by the agony of others. And the passion to *do something*. There’s the legendary real story of Anna Akhmatova taking to heart the quiet plea outside Stalin’s grim lock-up: *can you describe this?* And she, urgently back—*I can*. And did, on tiny slips of paper memorized by friends before her words—destroy the evidence!—got thrown to fire, the poems to be pieced together by what others recalled, for the future’s unborn, i.e.: you and me.

The poems of Robert Frost’s second book, *North of Boston*, came during an early self-exile in Britain though clearly he dragged New England with him for a short-lived but triumphant visit over the pond. “The Hill Wife,” made of linked pieces, carries an epic impulse as in *beware, this could be your story too*. Here the trouble gene’s at work and so to the point it can freeze a reader straight through.

### The Oft-Repeated Dream

*She had no saying dark enough  
For the dark pine that kept*

*Forever trying the window-latch  
Of the room where they slept.*

*The tireless but ineffectual hands  
That with every futile pass  
Made the great tree seem as a little bird  
Before the mystery of glass!*

*It never had been inside the room,  
And only one of the two  
Was afraid in an off-repeated dream  
Of what the tree might do.*

The poem's final section, its faint then fainter figure in the woods, must trouble anyone who lets this piece lodge in the brain more than five minutes. Its plainest of styles and the startling power of empathy play out in a way you'd never imagine empathetic: as reserve, as distance. A Frost feat and trademark, this habit of holding back appears simple but it's hard to pull off. His camera work is an opening pan, then a close-up before a more general sweep.

## The Impulse

*It was too lonely for her there,  
And too wild,  
And since there were but two of them,  
And no child,*

*And work was little in the house,  
She was free,  
And followed where he furrowed field,  
Or felled tree.*

*She rested on a log and tossed  
The fresh chips,  
With a song only to herself  
On her lips.*

*And once she went to break a bough  
Of black alder.  
She strayed so far she scarcely heard  
When he called her—*

*And didn't answer—didn't speak—  
Or return.  
She stood, and then she ran and hid  
In the fern.*

*He never found her, though he looked  
Everywhere,  
And he asked at her mother's house  
Was she there.*

*Sudden and swift and light as that  
The ties gave  
And he learned of finalities  
Besides the grave.*

Also from *North of Boston*, in Frost's most dream-soaked "After Apple Picking," these off-hand penultimate lines, loaded and so often quoted and loved—

*One can see what will trouble  
This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is. . . .*

But “The Hill Wife” is an honest-to-god narrative that drifts toward epic proportions not only of loss but of the unshakable never-to-be-understood. He had that trouble gene down cold, by heart. It would not let go and I imagine this poem first came to Frost’s begging bowl bravely solo as he remembered a secret left in those woods, a *should I*, a *could I*, a rare trepidation—blessed uncertain on-the-verge-of, and . . .

Stop. Isn't that what poetry is? What it feels like as we enter its searing, mysterious company, either as readers or writers?

How to put this— Every beginning is lyric.

Unlike Frost's "The Hill Wife" where in a gradual layering we learn how damage hits specifically then more generally, trouble can come as *jolt* or a series of jolts, the silence huge before and after each hit. I recall but have lost track where (and can't find, either in a long-ago talk he gave or an essay he wrote that has haunted me ever since), the rather panoramic way William Gass thought this might play out in fiction. You could be trudging across a snowy field, hear a stupendous crash only to jerk around and see the long path you took—gone as a glacier calving abruptly into a slow blinding let-go. The route you'd been trusting; now only pure cold air behind you, down a mile straight. Nothing to do but stand there, dumbfounded.

I admire poems that work like that. A dramatic recalculation to question what I am sure of, or take no notice of, then. . . . One's dream life is at stake, one's fears, how brave one's been or hopes to be. Poem as *shape toward*—

Best is when you don't know toward *what*. Consider the sonnet, a poetic form we'll never get rid of because it really is the old *show your work* in math class, how the mind works through its most natural state: *worried*. The initial back and forth, to and fro—some call it *argument*—bears down to trigger a turn and change (Volta, do your stuff!), and in that startle and pause you invert, recon-

sider, and *because of what went before*, it's yikes or OMG, a revelation large or small. Something happens but *how* it happens to resolve or give up *is* the poem. The trouble gene insists on that. And most every other kind of poem is a ghost sonnet, following that drill however gone rogue, seemingly on its own steam—or in a sudden give-way, à la that William Gass analogy, every bit behind redreamt by a troubled descent down the page.

Here's one of the first poems I loved, a stand-out in an outdated anthology, a beautiful eerie piece written in 1930 at the height of the Depression by *who-reads-him-now?* Archibald MacLeish, once a very big deal, the Library of Congress Poetry Consultant during World War II (the post renamed "Poet Laureate" for those coming after), a three-time Pulitzer winner—two for verse, one in drama—founder of UNESCO, on and on. (*Note to every self out there*: how truly unlasting the fairy dust of fame and fortune, if any comes at all. A few decent poems, if luck holds . . .) Just reading the spooky title back in my 20s, I was smitten straightaway and could not *not* read on.

## Epistle To Be Left in the Earth

*. . . It is colder now*

*there are many stars*

*we are drifting*

*North by the Great Bear*

*the leaves are falling*

*The water is stone in the scooped rocks*

*to southward*

*Red sun grey air*

*the crows are*

*Slow on their crooked wings*

*The jays have left us*

*Long since we passed the flares of Orion  
Each man believes in his heart he will die  
Many have written last thoughts and last letters  
None know if our deaths are now or forever  
None know if this wandering earth will be found*

*We lie down and snow covers our garments*  
*I pray you*

*You (if any open this writing)*  
*Make in your mouths the words that were our names*  
*I will tell you all we have learned*  
*I will tell you everything*

*The earth is round*  
*there are springs under the orchards*  
*The loam cuts with a blunt knife*  
*beware of*  
*Elms in thunder*  
*the lights in the sky are stars*  
*We think they do not see*  
*we think also*  
*The trees do not know nor the leaves of the grasses*  
*hear us*

*The birds too are ignorant  
Do not listen  
Do not stand at dark in the open windows  
We before you have heard this  
they are voices  
They are not words at all but the wind rising  
Also none among us has seen God*

( . . . We have thought often  
The flaws of sun in the last and driving weather

Consider the sonnet, a poetic form we'll never get rid of because it really is the old *show your work* in math class . . .

*Pointed to one tree but it was not so.)  
As for the nights I warn you the nights are dangerous  
The wind changes at night and the dreams come*

*It is very cold  
there are strange stars near Arcturus*

*Voices are crying an unknown name in the sky*

MacLeish's sobering jolts of trouble and silence get strange indeed and resist the culture-bound feel of much of his other work. Sentences here work as fragments do, suspended, the odd-ball white space shifting (silence/trouble/silence/trouble) to suggest retrospect, a deep unknowing but a final piecemeal translation of ordinary days and years. The future looks back, the tone hypnotic, urgent then hopeless, the claims and imagery painfully contemporary. My guess is MacLeish himself was roundly taken aback by this piece that seems not so much a vision as a visitation. *Who wrote that?* he must have asked himself, coming out of trance. How the world might remember it looked, the trouble gene into deep trouble, the poem's white space scattering logbook entries, simple advice, weather notes, astronomical readings.

Once more it's William Gass' deafening collapse behind us just when the world seemed stable, nondescript, an A to Z ho-hum. . . . The trouble gene's roving enzyme keeps after serious trouble, looking for damage, change, discovery, reason through the white space of past and present and now this *think again*. MacLeish's future tense warns us.

“Stanza,” of course, is the Italian word for “room.” And poems made of such rooms can be as

haunted as our *living rooms*, the very name replacing *front parlor* when undertakers took over what Dickinson called this “Appalling Trade” from households, out of the DIY mode to be fulltime modern Charons poling the dead over Lethe, River of Forgetfulness, setting up their funeral *parlors* as retail establishments on Main Street. Thus banished from the family home forever was any Great Aunt Bertha’s “wake” or “viewing,” complete with funeral biscuits forgotten too, those dark homemade party favors, each topped with a tiny sugar-iced hand rising out of a cloud. That room only for the *living* now. And most *stanzas* too remain ghosted by whatever trouble and silence hang there still.

For a number of weeks, I’ve been rewriting a poem based on *a thing that really happened*, hoping its parts add up. But that poem refuses to be. And still hammers at me like tinnitus.

Its details float about, trying to be some larger creature. A late-night darkness figures in, also my badly parked car when I discovered myself hemmed in. This, during a party, of sorts, and me early to leave, my car pinned in by other cars and my own damn fault.

Next to anything truly important—social justice, climate change, a sudden pandemic—my dilemma was not even a flyspeck, barely registering in the *trouble* zone. Still, there is a thing called “wiggle-room” in life and perhaps in art. It got literal, my *unjam*, *unjam thyself*—a mantra as I twisted and turned the wheel to reverse and drive out of there. Dark. Dark. Dark. I couldn’t see much. Did I mention the fog?

Certain quiets get loud, however buried in the body next to weightier matters; those quiets keep welling up to bigger than they should be. One’s called *panic*, the word cobbled off the mythic Pan whose pipes, in spite of their rep for velvety seduction, were reportedly downright terrifying at times. So poet Eva Heisler informed me. Which seems right since on the edge of that panic is where I was in my small dismal first-world-problem way, trying to unpark and extract myself.

A young artist I hardly knew, Alexis Mitchell, had left the gathering shortly after I did and was soon in that parking area, her *watchful*, her *wary* arriving just in time. Who knew she’d turn spirit guide, rising up from the bleak nowhere next to my car to direct with her *keep going, veer right, now a little that way, okay, okay, now ease to the left*—practicing kindness on me as meticulously as a good musician does scales.

Gradually, somehow. . . . It just might work. I began thinking through that old film footage *slowly I turn, step by step, inch by inch, Niagara Falls!*, the Three Stooges shouting right out of their 40s movie, the whole business rerun on TV in the late 50s and early 60s when I saw it. As kids, we repeatedly acted that out, screaming the phrase, dissolving in choked laughter. One loves things. For some reason or no reason. Now on a loop on a loop on a loop in my head for a lifetime.

And my poor poem? Sentences don’t necessarily complete what they start. They begin as glimpse, a bouquet’s inch of bottom water right out of the tap, clear as a lens, seemingly down there to juice up whatever cut roses. But there are other things quite beyond the power of our favorite never-to-be.

Hold up the vase. Idiot! Why did I drive into that parking place in the first place? Even Venus might lower her head, mumble into her clamshell embarrassed, then mildly desperate: *where are my clothes?*

Helping me inch out of the fix I was in—surely the young artist had her own reasons for generosity: that each day should end okay for all, that she wasn’t the only human in the world. Meanwhile, she was strong and smart. I was, well, pathetic, going this way and that, just trying to make it out of there.

It got darker. To say *no moon* isn’t to put the moon up there. But she had that trouble gene, an inkling.

Marianne Boruch’s 10th poetry collection, *The Anti-Grief (Copper Canyon, 2019)*, came out last fall. She’s written three books of essays including the recent *The Little Death of Self (Michigan, 2017)*, and a memoir, *The Glimpse Traveler (Indiana, 2011)*. On a 2019 Fulbright in Australia, she observed that country’s astonishing wildlife to write a neo-ancient/medieval bestiary of poems. Gone rogue and emeritus from Purdue University, Boruch continues to teach in the Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College.



# Jacob Saenz

## Throwing the Crown



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

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

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# COLLINS FERRY LANDING

VIJAY SESHADRI

---

*for my father*

Only rivers bottom out like this.  
Only rivers bottom out with this kind of conviction.  
Not humans, or, at least, not humans as  
indisputably human as you were,  
trapped in consciousness's surplus, exilic,  
animalized absurdity, writhing in its contradictions—  
you, the shyest person we hardly ever knew,  
the solitary we hardly ever knew.  
You the fatalist. Your favorite sentence  
“It is what it is.” (Yes, it is, it really is.)  
Only the negative constructions pertain with you.  
Nothing to allegorize or ring changes on  
with you. Nothing occluded. Nothing with which  
to make analogies or metaphors.  
Never not meaning what you said, never not transparent.  
Never could you have been like this river,  
acquiescent to, and companionable with, Earth,  
supple, reconciled, patient  
while trapped between the high banks,  
narrowing itself, widening itself,  
sinuous through the industrial places—  
slag heaps on either side, coal barges booming down its waters—  
and placid and fructifying among the farms.  
Never you with dynamics like this,  
rushing limpid from the foothills;  
soft-singing in the valleys;  
oozing, opaque, mercuric through the marshland,  
silvery, satiny, emollient, satisfied;  
the rippling and dissimulating liquid medium—  
not apparent to the flesh like you but the illusory  
reflective surface into which we fall and drown.  
Don't even imagine the flexibilities,  
the insinuations, the dragon and the serpent  
and the river beside which  
you nursed that despair the three of us who loved you best  
could never coax you away from.  
The cold but intact rainbow trout under the ripples  
are doing what? Feeding? Dreaming? No.  
They are concentrating. They don't need ears  
to hear your ghost, thrashing and muttering in the brush  
between the river and the road—  
your ghost coming back to the place you might have  
thought you should have died  
(all alone were you with your disappointments)  
but didn't, your ghost afraid to go back to where you  
shouldn't have died but did. I met him up there.  
We were shivering up there together. He asked me,  
“How did I get here?”  
“How do I get back?”  
“Where do I go now?”

★ ★ ★

I have a friend. (You'll be glad to know.) She and I work together. (You'll be glad to know I still have a job.) She's an ally. She's sympathetic. She's warmhearted. She's socially conscious, gentle, a decent type, and from what I've observed an excellent mother, too. Not very smart, though. A little while after your soundless departure, I was telling her about you. I was describing what I saw as your place (yes, yes, your highly functional place) on the spectrum of . . . what are the right words, neuro-cognitive homelessness? I was describing cultures of shame evolving across millennia; economies of scarcity versus economies of surplus; civilizations teetering on the edge of time, about to take the plunge into oblivion. Deep India, I said to her. Wonders and terrors, I said to her. Deep India, strewn with elephants and cobras. Scorched by temples, mosques, stupas, churches, synagogues. Cratered with poverty, hunger and thirst, storms of affliction. Shot through with sacred rivers. They flood. They shrivel out. The sun's furious particle stream immerses the pencil-thin scavengers picking sustenance from the dry riverbeds. The infant god opens his mouth to display the entire, appalling universe. I told her that long ago, when the Earth was still flat, you made your pinched, solitary, tramp-freighter journey from there to here—Colombo, Suez, across the Middle Sea, then over the far edge. I was talking privation. I was talking history and injustice. I was getting wound up and indignant. That was what must have triggered her inimitable gift for the sentimental non sequitur. She put her right hand on my left arm and said, “He'll always be with you. In your heart.” See what I mean? See what I mean? Not if she had said one bright morning we'd meet up again in Heaven (and I wouldn't put it past her to say something like that, too) would she have made me angrier. I could have kicked her shin. But (wait, don't interrupt—and, no, of course I didn't kick her shin) I'd like to explain why I kept talking to her in the aftermath of her idiotic outburst, why I didn't shake the dust of my feet off at her and cut her off then and there forever. Though the time in which I'm writing this overlaps yours, you'd be amazed and embarrassed if you understood the extent to which we're allowed these days, encouraged even, to indulge feelings and succumb to motives and express resentments and make demands offensive to reason that a mind with an experience like yours, a burden of discipline, a resignation, and a silence like yours, a mind like yours cowed by melancholy, would consider disreputable, even shocking. I'm sad to say you won't be surprised that I've taken advantage of this license. I've indulged, openly and shamelessly—and, also, secretly—more times than I'm willing to remember. But I want you to understand that at this moment my talking was anything but self-indulgent. I was confused in the weeks after you died, and my confusion didn't derive from the universal fact that a parent's death is too strangely shaped for a child of theirs to grasp with any confidence but from the fact that I myself was becoming strangely shaped. I was crying (bawling at times) and grieving in the way I imagine I was expected to, in conformity with generally accepted principles of grief; but, also—don't get judgmental; I'm pretty sure I'm not alone in this—I wasn't just feeling grief but congratulating myself for it. I was seeing myself as the star of my loss, its protagonist, treading the boards, pacing under the proscenium arch of bereavement. Some part of me was saying, “Finally, reality. I've heard so much about it.” That wasn't the real strangeness, though. It was this: this sin of self-awareness, this dramatization of the self, this consequentiality of consciousness, this aestheticization, this the most pathetic of all the assertions of the self as it stumbles across its blasted heath of existence was leading to a separation of self from self that was making

apparent another person underneath. Another person suddenly arrived inside me. Another person, as real as the person typing this, but detached, outside the world itself and growing huge in relation to it. Another person was standing at the crossroads of time and space, shirtless, shoeless, but dressed in a nice suit, on the outside looking in, curious but indifferent to being and not being, both of which he understood as accidental and impossible. The free person, the truly free, free from time, space, the world. Don't roll your eyes, this was actually happening. Cool and supercilious before a million universes, Whitman says, or something like that. In the years when you were angry with me, and frightened for me, the search for this person haunted my mind. But now that I was he, he was the last person I wanted to be. The distance I suddenly had achieved wasn't joyous. It was unendurable. This is why I kept talking and talking, whenever I could, climbing hand over hand up the rope of words to get back to my ordinary, unenlightened life. I was clinging to other people with words. I was gripping them by their lapels. I couldn't let them go. The knowledge I had I didn't want. I knew, though, probably for the first time in my life, what I did want. I wanted the details. I wanted to be sitting on the living-room couch, watching *Jeopardy* with you.

★ ★ ★

I get up in the middle of the night.  
I go to the bathroom and micturate.  
I come back and lie in bed wide awake.  
I can't forget, I can't forget.

In the dark room, the severed wire  
sparks and sparks uselessly  
that once was that living wire  
we shared alone,

across which, at those few piercing moments  
in all our interactions,  
what we call our selves  
traded places. You saw yourself

through my eyes and I saw myself  
through yours. These moments ping  
my optic nerves alive.  
Your looking at you through me

the last time you waved goodbye,  
your walker holding the storm door open,  
your t-shirt loose around  
your shrunken chest.

My looking at me through you  
the first time you waved goodbye—  
sixteen months old, my hair not cut yet,  
sitting in the sunlight

on the red masonry floor,  
the sun entering through the open door,  
the two of us on both its sides.  
And then, the two of us

looking down at our four feet  
on the frozen Middle American street—  
on our way  
to the Saturday premiere matinee

of *How the West Was Won*.

I'm matching you stride for stride.  
Our four feet are moving like two feet,  
and we are alive.

---

*Vijay Seshadri's newest book, That Was Now, This Is Then, is forthcoming in October. He teaches at Sarah Lawrence College.*

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# ARTAUD

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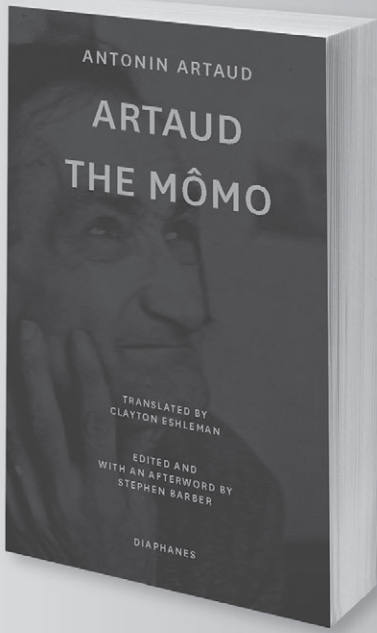
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# COLD WATER AND CUT DOUGH

DANELLE LEJEUNE

Peaches pulled off the trees, tender and warm.  
Lemon juice and ice water in a bowl,  
boil the skins off, drop in the cold water.

I am here. Flour dusting the table, fills in the knife scars,  
deep into the grain of the cypress.  
The table is one leg lower, from when the house leaned in.

Peaches macerating in sugar on the counter.  
I roll out the pie crust: flour, lard and salt.  
My hand is cut, stinging from the flour and lemon zest.

Roll, turn, roll, turn, fold over, roll, turn, roll turn.  
Fold over and over. Not too much or the dough toughens.  
Roll, push down, roll, roll, roll, and then cut carefully and lift.

Pies are easy, Jeanie told me. Easy as pie.  
I touched her purpled hand and she winced.  
Wrists are fragile, love, at this age, she said.

I know that shame, that glance at the door.  
Caged birds are all alike and sing pretty.  
This needs more salt. More time. More heat.

Peaches boiled down in sugar and lemon.  
Add a pinch of salt, careful with my palm.  
The skin split back open and is weeping.

Steam rises up, sugar forms on my eyelashes.  
I stir. I stir. 1st prize for peach jam, held in my mouth  
like a wish on my tongue, fills in the bite marks.

What's the secret Jeanie, I asked her.  
Salt, love. Salt from the mountains,  
and the too sweet peaches, bruised from falling.

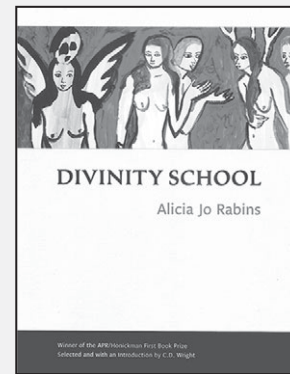
We are both clock and door watchers. Listen for the pop  
of jars cooling on the counter, the dogs barking at the road.

---

*Danelle Lejeune's writing is about motherhood, farming, feminism, and finding the beauty in a post-glacial landscape. Her first book, Landlocked, Etymology of Whale Fish and Grace, was released by Finishing Line Press in 2017.*



## Alicia Jo Rabins DIVINITY SCHOOL

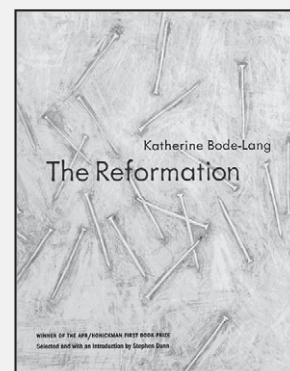


*“‘We dreamed of immortality / We flexed  
our young flanks,’ writes Alicia Jo Rabins. . . .  
This is a gorgeous book—roiling with desire  
and awe, it stretches toward the divine,  
while offering a resonant meditation on the  
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—Matthew Olzmann

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## Katherine Bode-Lang THE REFORMATION



*“. . . the speaker in these poems achieves  
her own form of grace, writing directly  
of the female body and learning to trust  
her own instincts. She wrestles with self-  
definition . . . revealing, for readers, one  
woman's path through contradiction and  
tradition.”*

—Robin Becker

*Available from APR's online store*

**PAUL,**  
**MATTHEW OTREMBA**

## i. AFTER READING A POEM BY GEORGE SEFERIS, I MADE DINNER

*Houston, April 2019*

The coarse and leafy stalks, like memory,  
Began to soften in my hands. The kale  
Massaged with olive oil and salt. Silently,

You sat on the couch as if in grisaille,  
Scrolling through *the twitter of the state*.  
A fragile, bluesy cover song was scaled

To minor on the stereo; the last late  
Light of afternoon cast behind closed blinds.  
Earlier, we walked in truncated

Circles through the park up to an inclined  
Vantage point. Falling water pooled endlessly  
Below a blinding, glassy skyline.

If we squinted, we could almost see  
*That vague dizzying sway of a tall palm tree.*

## ii. BIOPHILIC DESIGN: A HOSPITAL WALK

*M.D. Anderson, Houston, April 2018*

The vague dizzying sway of a tall palm tree  
And the clear bitter current of a mountain stream.  
Each picture was a variation on a theme,  
Reminders of places we will never be  
While wildflowers opened to nature's middle C.  
We lapped the floor, your smile not what it seemed  
As we passed the nurses treating their teeming  
Machines. "Sunset on the Beaufort Sea,"

One caption said, and I was reminded  
Of the song our father used to sing,  
The lyrics returning, *leaving weathered, broken bones*  
*And a long-forgotten lonely cairn of stones.*  
There was some Northwest Passage we were hoping  
To find, so we walked on—together but alone.

### iii. CROSSING THE WASHINGTON AVENUE BRIDGE

*Minneapolis, December, early 2000's*

So we walked on, together but alone  
With our thoughts.  
                        Christmas break, snow falling.  
We came looking for the spot—  
  there was no headstone—  
Where the broken poet suddenly broke his fall.

*Poor Henry.* We held the riveted railing  
In our gloved hands                               above the marooned beams  
Stretched out over half-frozen eddies swirling  
Below us. The landing                               they call Bohemian

Flats, a place immigrants settled, downstream  
From the falls  
that built the city we called home.

(Where is home now?) You recalled  
a Dream Song,  
Lines weighed down by heavy boredom,

And we watched our spit fall through the gloaming  
Light, like floating prayers hitting home.

iv. OUTSIDE THE BARN, WE LISTENED TO  
*THE DARK SIDE OF THE MOON*

*Inver Grove Heights, Minnesota, 1994*

Light, like a floating prayer hitting home,  
 Flared and faded, the bonfire slowly  
 Turning to ash as we passed the joint  
 Between us like fragments of poems  
 Just starting to form on our tongues. Holy  
 Or unholy, it wasn't a point

We wanted to make. *All things counter . . .*  
 And strange, for sure, we laughed—what glory—  
 The stars and the moon in some pointillist  
 Glow—how high we must have been—and our laughter  
 Was the story.

## v. AT THE MEMORIAL

*Rice Chapel, Houston, July 5, 2019*

You were the story behind the stories,  
The presence we found lost in the details.  
Blue eyes appearing in the smoky corner  
Of a café—scanning the board—rook to e4.  
Discerning mouth during one of the many meals  
You shared, tasting conspicuous pork shoulder  
Braised with juniper berries and coriander,  
Chased with the high note of your laugh over cocktails

With friends. All those (dis)comforting words  
You left, like the letter you sent to our brother  
That kept him from war, and the poems like birds,  
Wounded and woke, we heard circling toward  
The chapel door, like those we captured the summer  
When I was nine, so you must have been four.

## vi. CHUTE AND HOWL

*Big Sky, Montana, December 1992*

I must have been eighteen and you four years  
Younger when you followed me up the ridge  
Just off the lift they called *The Challenger*.  
Both of us out of breath at the chute's ledge,

Watching, from the cornice's lip, the snow fall  
 As we stepped into our skis. What came next  
 Was elation, something in the gut called  
 An almost falling feeling. Soon I checked

To make sure you were following my tracks  
And not veering toward the rock face  
We knew was certain death. The parallax  
Of memory, let's call it, your voice displaced,

Suddenly appearing now—where are you?  
That rapt howl I can still hear behind me.

## vii. AUDIBLE WITH HAIL MARY

*Savage, Minnesota, December 25, 2012*

I could hear your rapt howl behind me.  
A family tradition, all of us gathered  
In the neighborhood park, wrapped in layers  
Of fleece and down—thick wool socks buried

Under heavy boots. With every shallow cross  
And deep post, our footsteps flattened the snow-  
Covered field. With every half-back toss  
And quick pitch, we chased the shadows

Our bodies made running away. Daylight  
Fading, you drew up the final play  
In the palm of your hand. What did you see  
That caused you to look down the line at me?

And with a simple nod, I somehow knew—  
As brothers do—the play you switched to.

**viii. IN THE WAITING ROOM  
(WITH IPAD AND CARCASSONNE)**

*M.D. Anderson, Houston, April 2019*

As brothers do, we played. You switched to  
Blue as your color, hoping it would bring you luck.  
We *sat and waited*, passing the game between us.  
*The yellow margins* of the tablet glowed  
In our hands. Between the *lamps and magazines*,  
Others waited too. *Jeopardy* played on the TV  
And filled the room. Each of us felt *the round*,  
*Turning world* in our seats. Feeling *the round*  
*Turning world* in our seats, *Jeopardy* on the TV  
And filling the space between *lamps and magazines*.  
*The yellow margins* of our tablet still glowing  
As we waited and waited, passing the game between us.  
Blue was the color you hoped would bring you luck.

**ix. AT THE MENIL**

*The Menil Collection, Houston, 1998–2019*

Blue was the color that brought the artist luck,  
A monochrome fusion of water and sky.  
The point we found in that pointless instruction.

And another time, we stood waving goodbye  
To those blooms of mustard and peach, clouds  
Covered in ash, as the guard stood close by.

That afternoon when a boy drummed aloud  
On the rooftop, we passed a broom sculpting  
A canvas and all that marble lying like shrouds.

During our last visit, we stood watching  
Sand interminably raked and then erased  
Beside the barbed wired future we were facing.

Coda: When your friends filled that place  
With your words, I sat silently. Each visit retraced.

**x. GHOST MEMORY/MEMORY GHOST**

*St. Paul, late 1970's; Houston, June 23, 2019*

With and without words, I sat silently tracing  
Those figures that had powers I could only  
Imagine for myself, each impression erasing  
The purity of the page, like this memory

Of a memory I can't recall but summon  
Just the same, the way our mother held you  
In one arm and opened the oven  
With the other. I sat there and watched you

Hold your hand out to a kettle on an open flame,  
And I didn't say a thing. Your screams  
Soon filled the room, and there was no taming  
You in that moment. Years later, in a dream

That wasn't a dream—those final hours—I saw you,  
Without a sound, but with your eyes, screaming up at me.

**xi. AFTER SEEING PARLIAMENT FUNKADELIC  
AT FIRST AVENUE, I CALL YOU**

*Minneapolis, September 1996*

With the sound that his eyes made, he sang to me,  
At least it felt that way, feet from the stage,  
Almost three hours into their set. The smoky  
Room was filled with an embracing film of rage  
Called love while those vessels for an embodied  
Force united us all, one nation, under  
The groove and sway of our sweaty bodies  
Caught up in the funky and “awesome power  
Of a fully operational mothership,”  
His words. You should have been there.  
Earlier in the show, the guitarist, stripped  
Of pretense, played, as if in some hazy prayer,  
Our song. That electric dirge—a subliminal sublime—  
Like maggots in the brain—taking us out of time.

**xii. MIXTAPE FOR A ROAD TRIP**

*South Dakota, Summer of 1993*

Because *mother earth is pregnant for the third time*,  
We climbed, headlong, those graveled deposits of time.

We wanted *to spit in the face of these badlands*  
While the fossils appeared like contraband, out of time.

Yes, *we sit here stranded . . . doin' our best to deny it*.  
All those foolish signs, mile markers advertising a good time.

Windows rolled down, because *we are creatures of the wind*,  
Each granite spire was sculpted, giving the finger to time.

Still so young, we were *oppressed by the figures of beauty*,  
Our hands wedged into rocky holds, losing our grip on time.

As the song goes, *upon us all a little rain must fall*.  
The windshield wipers, like our thoughts, moved in time.

You turned up the stereo dial—a *denial, a denial*—  
As you fell off your horse and I gathered that heavy tax on time.

**xiii. SUNDAY SCHOOL WITH MATH PROBLEM**

*St. Paul, mid-1980's*

One saint fell off his horse, another gathered taxes.  
Of course, the lesson was we all must pay.  
The story started with God arising out of blackness,

While every picture book was white. We played  
Along but knew that something wasn't right.  
Upstairs, the floor would shake as our parents prayed,

The sound their tongues made was a weight  
We couldn't carry. And yet, we danced—  
What choice did we have?—as the tightly

Packed congregation swayed. The distance  
That time makes lengthens and contracts,  
In waves just like a *confession's reticence*

And its release. We were just learning the fact—  
It didn't add up—all the simple subtraction.

**xiv. CHANNEL SURFING, AFTER CHEMO**

*Houston, October 2017*

It adds up quickly, all that subtraction  
Multiplied in a news story. The flood receded

But not abated, miles of soggy tract homes  
Surfacing with their belongings stranded  
On washed-out lawns. The shot from a drone  
Showed the speedway stalled, lane after lane  
Of cars left to dry out in the rain.

Soon it was a late night rerun. We knew  
The band. The melancholic frontman telling us  
*It's the side effects that save us.*  
Yet, the long division of every cell  
In your raveled body was telling you

Otherwise, and when you turned the channel,  
It was a rigged bus with a bomb to dismantle.

**xv. LANDSCAPE WITH PINE TREES, GRANDFATHER,  
AND HAND GRENADE**

*Circle Pines, Minnesota, early 1980's*

Like a rigged bus with a bomb to dismantle,  
Each plot line in our minds played out  
In melodramatic fashion: Superheroes channeled

As we ran across the lawn, and the pirate hideout  
We built in the row of pine trees lining  
Their backyard. That day, you were on the lookout

As I steered our grandfather's wooden, sky-  
Blue trailer to a beachhead we commandeered  
Behind the garden shed, and you watched while I

Let fly the hand grenade—a disarmed souvenir  
Brought back from the war. We stole it  
Off the living room mantel, but we couldn't hear

His footsteps approaching. There was no punishment  
Other than his silence and what we had to forfeit.

**xvi. VISITATION AS A DREAM SONG**

*St. Paul, November 3, 2019*

It was the sound of your voice that I had to forfeit  
This morning as I was summoned out of a dream  
In which we all were gathered in what seemed  
Like a church connected to a bereft  
Shopping mall. The back rows extending out  
Into an otherwise empty food court.  
I saw you and our siblings crammed  
Into a middle pew. I held a program

In my hand, but it was a blank page.  
When I walked over to you, you made room  
For me to sit beside you while offstage  
A speaker blaring muzak stopped and then resumed  
With your voice singing some operatic note  
That faded—to my alarm—as I woke.

**xvii. YOU AND THE TULIPS (AFTER PLATH)**

*M.D. Anderson, Houston, April 2018*

Fading in and out, the alarm woke you.  
The night nurse came quickly to check on  
The machines they had hooked up to you.  
This was after you gave your *body to surgeons*,  
But before they gave your body back to you.  
When the nurse moved you, pain surged in  
Your face, her hands doing things to you.

Your doctors ordered nothing by mouth  
Until that hole would heal inside you.  
After seven days, it was enough

To see things, like the bowl of berries you  
Pictured in your empty hands. Under your breath,  
Staring up at tulips—*too red*—I heard you  
Say, “from a country far away as health.”

**xviii. POEM WITH MY KNEES IN YOUR CHEST**

*Cottage Grove, Minnesota, Summer of 1988*

As if from some faraway country, the healthy  
Or unhealthy distance that guilty memory

Travels, the image returns like a tennis ball  
Tossed against a garage door, a kind of call

And response echoing over the trim lawns  
Of suburban houses on the edge of town.

Out of that cul-de-sac of forgetting,  
Some junior varsity version of longing

Reappears, which had me climbing any number  
Of fences to meet a girl whose name I can't remember.

Inside the room that we shared, you caught me  
Sneaking in through the window. Instinctively,

I sat on top of you, covering your scared  
Face with a pillow, daring you to say a word.

**xix. THE ATTIC, CASEY KASEM, AND A POCKET RADIO**

*St. Paul, 1983 or 1984*

With your head on a pillow, you didn't say a word  
As you watched me scan for any signal  
We could find to break through the dull static, a sign  
Of the “devil's music” as the preacher called it  
In church, those heavenly, hip-shaking chords  
That would soon get us dancing. If we were fallen,  
We liked how it felt to fall.

And when we heard  
His shaggy voice, we knew we were saved as he  
Counted down, *from coast to coast*, those hit songs  
That we didn't recognize, but we still could sing  
Along with as we soon memorized the simple choruses  
And hooks that seemed somehow dedicated to us.  
Looking right at me,  
you crooned, “Because I'm bad,  
I'm bad come on.” And I to you, “Who's bad?”

**xx. STANDING IN YOUR KITCHEN, I FILL THE SILENCE  
WITH MORE SILENCE**

*Houston, April 2019*

I didn't need you to say it. I knew it was bad.  
I didn't need to see the scans and the reports,  
The constellation of tumors like unwanted ads  
Appearing for a future you couldn't compart,

So you sat there staring at a bowl of yogurt  
While I stood slicing radishes for a salad  
I wouldn't eat. The cat walked closer  
To you, so you touched her bowed head

With your hand. In that moment, I wanted  
To put my hands on your shoulders  
While wrapping my arms around you, wanted  
To wrestle the circling grief growing wider

And wider, to pull at that *tacky substance*  
Between us—an uncrossable distance.

xxi. A TOURIST'S VIEW

*Grand Canyon, Summer of 1990*

Before us that uncrossable distance,  
But we crossed it anyway on the high wires  
Of our minds, or rather, we hovered there,  
Imagining the awful view of that expanse  
Narrowing as the daredevil drove off and then glanced,  
For a moment, at all those vertiginous layers  
Of rust and rose, of buff and a dusty madder,  
His parachute opening, leaving nothing to chance.

I say we, but it was me who pictured it then  
As I picture it now, staring at old photos  
Of you up to my chest—a family pose—  
At the edge of the southern rim, looking  
Down, as if into that gorge, at you looking  
Up at me—I can see it—once again.

xxii. BOOKBUYING IN DINKYTOWN

*Minneapolis, July 2000*

Once again, I can see them, all those packed  
Rows of books, thick and thin copies stacked  
  
To the ceiling. You lived around the corner,  
And I was back home for the summer.

The shop owner's yellow lab greeted us  
At the front door, and every muscle

In her released at your outstretched hand.  
Discarded, recycled, and used, each secondhand

Volume we passed sat on those shelves—castaways—  
With names like *Comte*, *Considerant*, *Fourier*.

When we got to the back of the store, we found  
What we came there for: *Shadowing the Ground*,

*A Part of Speech*, *Delusions*, *Etc.*, and a *Descending*  
*Figure* holding *Lunch Poems*, *Against Forgetting*.

xxiii. POEM WITH WORDS WRITTEN IN AND ON  
THE MARGINS OF A MANUSCRIPT

*Houston, March 2019*

Over lunch, I read your poems against forgetting,  
Poems of witness—poems that stand—restless lines  
You worried over while sitting on the balcony.  
Angled toward your adopted city—the city  
That adopted you—you looked at the skyline,

All that *concrete*, *rebar*, *asphalt*, *glass* rising  
Out of the bayou. Somewhere close a siren,  
And closer still an urgent call. *The shapes*  
*Across the floor* were the cats chasing scraps  
Of paper packaging that you left out for them.

Then, *the hour of the eye with edges going*  
*Jaundice* appeared. Then, *Forty Million Daggers*,  
A page you handed me, marked by *a ghostly finger*  
*Spelling WORLD*—that *walled-in state* bordering.

xxiv. LOST AND FOUND IN THE COSMOS

*The Cosmos Mystery Area, Black Hills,*  
*South Dakota, mid-1980's*

It was a world like a spell or a charmed state  
Bordering on the dark arts, which we were warned  
Against, and yet, our parents took the bait  
And bought us those temporary tickets that earned

Us admission into a place defying the most  
Elementary of physics, but somehow proving  
The law of attraction to every kid it hosted  
In that “topsy-turvy world” going

“Completely berserk,” as the brochure put it.  
Those words a kind of gravity for us  
While every corner of the house defied it.  
We took turns standing on walls like circus

Performers suspended at right angles to the ground,  
Where balls rolled uphill and logic was unbound.

xxv. STRETCHED SONNET ON A PICTURE  
YOU SENT ME VIA TEXT WHERE YOU STAND  
ON THE FRONT PORCH MAKING FACES  
WITH JEN AND PATRICK

*Houston, May 19, 2018; St. Paul, November 11, 2019*

By some downhill logic—rolled up, balled, bound—  
Like thread waiting for a needle's purpose  
To give it whatever meaning there is to find,  
I called up that image this morning, and the wordless

Message that came with it. But Patrick writes,  
“Even the silence, if you listened, meant something.”  
And, as if in chorus, Jen prays to the hindsight  
Of memory, how it “stitches the unraveling

World.” With every cell I want to believe them,  
To believe there is a message after all  
Written on your faces. In Patrick's eyes, some  
Mix of playfulness and defiance, a faux pall

With his hands on his hips, staring at the camera.  
In Jen's sly smile coupled with a look of genuine wonder,  
One arm on your back, staring at a panorama  
In the sky we are left to imagine. And, my brother,

In you, a month after the surgery that took  
Your appetite but not your hunger, your face  
Slightly ashen but still mischievous, with a look  
At once ironic, dumbfound, and unbraced

As you stared up too, in either awe or in alarm,  
Beside your *apostles of the now*, standing in arms.

xxvi. SONNET DISGUISED AS A HAIKU  
SUMMING UP OUR CHILDHOOD

*Various locations, 1980–1990*

Standing at/in arms  
Apostles to the questions  
That silence answered

xxvii. THE ONE WHERE MEMORY AND SILENCE  
GO OUT FOR A WALK

*Houston, May 2018*

Memory called, and silence answered.  
Through the neighborhood, they walked

Past the bric-a-brac of post-war bungalows  
And a tear down's vacant lot. The backhoe

In the driveway spun, digging in its heels.  
Memory said, “Look, an albino squirrel!”

Silence was left speechless. Soon a boxy row  
Of townhomes appeared while a plastic gnome

Reclined on a manicured lawn under a canopy  
Of deciduous trees. One of them had bad knees,

And the other carried a burden on his back.  
As they stepped over the twisted roots breaking

Through the sidewalk in this story, I started to see—  
I was afraid—which one was you and which one me.

xxviii. **FAKE ID (OR THE GIFT I GAVE YOU  
SOMETIME AFTER MY 21ST BIRTHDAY)**

*St. Paul, 1996 or 1997*

The cashier couldn't tell that you were me  
Behind those cases of Grain Belt stacked  
On the liquor store counter. He just couldn't see  
That my blue eyes were a little more compact  
And yours a little bolder. He couldn't make out  
The way my nose was bent, almost Roman,  
While yours was sturdier, more Eastern European.  
He must have been blinded by the whiteout  
Of our foreheads sloping down to the shared  
Shape our jaw lines made back then, almond-like,  
And the symmetry in our mouths when pursed,  
Our lower lips slightly larger. Outside, the night  
Waited for you like your friends did in your car—  
The retelling goes—some house party not far.

xxix. **YOUR 40TH**

*Houston, November, 5, 2018*

In my retelling, you looked happy at the party.  
Gathered around you were a friend and family  
Seated at a long table set with what we  
Couldn't say, or wouldn't, so we filled it loudly  
With praise for the birthday meal you made  
For all of us. Marbled sirloin that was seared  
And basted in butter with sprigs of thyme  
Paired with an earthy bottle of Italian wine  
That reminded you of a bicycle ride  
On the back roads of a hilly countryside,  
Which left you breathless, alive, and hungry.  
Someone passed the Brussels sprouts, crispy  
And roasted with balsamic. Someone took  
A picture with their phone. We smiled—that look.

xxx. **POEM PLANTED IN A PUBLIC GARDEN**

*McGovern Centennial Gardens, Houston, early June 2019*

I don't have a picture of how you looked  
That day, but I know by then just walking

Was difficult. Each step holding the potential  
Of a dropped call, a lost or broken signal

Along the way from foot to brain—to mind.  
Still, we walked with the sun warm on our skin,

But yours a shade darker. A deeper note  
Of silence was quickly rising in your throat.

You stopped to smell the rosemary, the lavender  
And the bright nasturtiums, those edible flowers.

“You must remember this,” I remember saying  
To myself, as I turned to look at what was growing

Out of the wooden beds in front of me.  
Those coarse and leafy stalks, like memory.

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Notes

On June 24, 2019, my brother, Paul Otremba, passed away from gastric cancer. Paul was initially diagnosed with cancer toward the end of August in 2017, had surgery to remove his stomach in March of 2018, experienced complications from that surgery, which hospitalized him through the early part of April, and then was notified that his cancer had returned in September of 2018. All of the poems in this “double crown” of sonnets are addressed to him. Additional notes for individual poems are as follows:

- “After Reading a Poem by George Seferis, I Made Dinner”: The italicized portions in this poem come from the following poems: “Constellation,” by Paul Otremba, and “An Old Man on the River Bank,” by George Seferis.
- “Biophilic Design: A Hospital Walk”: The song referenced in the poem is “Northwest Passage” by Stan Rogers.
- “Crossing the Washington Avenue Bridge”: On the morning of January 7, 1972, the poet John Berryman committed suicide by jumping off the Washington Avenue Bridge on the campus of the University of Minnesota. “Henry” is a character who appears in many of Berryman’s poems, including a number from *Dream Songs* (1964).
- “Outside the Barn, We Listened to *The Dark Side of the Moon*”: The poem’s form and some of the language are indebted to Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem “Pied Beauty.” The poem uses a form that Hopkins called “a curtal sonnet” (or “curtailed sonnet”).
- “In the Waiting Room (with iPad and *Carcassonne*)”: All of the italicized passages come from Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “In the Waiting Room.”
- “At The Menil”: The following artists and artworks are referenced in this poem. Yves Klein: *Requiem (RE 20)*, 1960. Cy Twombly: *Untitled (Say Good-bye Catullus, to the shores of Asia Minor)*, 1994. Maurizio Cattelan: *Untitled (Drummer Boy)*, 2003; *Untitled*, 2009; and *All*, 2017. Mona Hatoum: + and –, 1994–2004; *Impenetrable*, 2009. On Thursday, October 10, 2019, a memorial reading for Paul and a launch for his third book, *Levee*, was held at The Menil Collection in Houston.
- “After Seeing Parliament Funkadelic at First Avenue, I Call You”: In 1996, George Clinton and Parliament Funkadelic toured in support of their album titled *T.A.P.O.A.F.O.M.* (“The Awesome Power of a Fully Operational Mothership”).
- “Mixtape for a Road Trip”: The italicized passages (in order of appearance) come from the following songs: “Maggot Brain,” Funkadelic; “Badlands,” Bruce Springsteen; “Visions of Johanna,” Bob Dylan; “Wild Is the Wind,” Nina Simone; “Chelsea Hotel No. 2,” Leonard Cohen; “The Rain Song,” Led Zeppelin; and “Smells like Teen Spirit,” Nirvana.
- “Sunday School with Math Problem”: The phrase “confession’s reticence” comes from Paul’s poem “Ecology.”
- “Channel Surfing, After Chemo”: In the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, local speedways in the Houston area were used to store cars destroyed in the flood. The band referenced in this poem is The National singing “Graceless” on SNL. The movie is *Speed*, starring Keanu Reeves and Sandra Bullock.
- “You and the Tulips (After Plath)”: The italicized words and the passage in quotation marks come from Sylvia Plath’s poem “Tulips.”
- “The Attic, Casey Kasem, and a Pocket Radio”: The italicized words in this poem were part of a signature tagline that the DJ Casey Kasem used during his radio show *American Top 40*. Kasem was also the voice of Shaggy for the cartoon *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!* The song quoted at the end of the poem is Michael Jackson’s “Bad.”
- “Standing in Your Kitchen, I Fill the Silence with More Silence”: The words in italics come from a notebook entry Paul made on 6.7.2018, in which he stated, “Cancer is a tacky substance, growing as I grow.”
- “A Tourist’s View”: The title for this poem comes from a description of Thomas Moran’s painting *Chasm of the Colorado* (1873–1874), by the art critic Joni Kinsey. The daredevil is Dar Robinson, who drove a car off the edge of the Grand Canyon (in September of 1980) and then jumped from his vehicle to parachute to safety.
- “Bookbuying in Dinkytown”: Dinkytown is the name of an area just off the University of Minnesota campus, where Paul studied as an undergraduate. The poem is an homage to Robert Hass’s “Bookbuying in the Tenderloin,” and the first passage in italics comes directly from that poem. The phrases in italics at the end of the poem are titles for collections of poetry: *Shadowing the Ground* (1991), David Ignatow; *A Part of Speech* (1980), Joseph Brodsky; *Delusions, Etc.* (1972), John Berryman; *Descending Figure* (1980), Louise Glück; *Lunch Poems* (1964), Frank O’Hara; and *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness* (1993), edited by Carolyn Forché.
- “Poem with Words Written in and on the Margins of a Manuscript”: In March of 2019, I was with Paul as he was making final edits to the manuscript for *Levee*, right before sending the book to his publisher for printing. All of the passages in italics come from poems found in the manuscript copy that Paul gave me to edit or in the notes he wrote in the margins of some of the poems. Those poems include: “Doctrine of That Bird Once Worshipped on the Shore,” “The Abridged Politics of Starlings,” and “Forty Million Daggers.”
- “Stretched Sonnet on a Picture You Sent Me via Text Where You Stand on the Front Porch Making Faces with Jen and Patrick”: The passages in this poem that are in quotation marks and italics come from the following poems: “Elegy for a Broken Machine,” by Patrick Phillips; and “The Needle” and “The Ascension,” by Jennifer Grotz.

# TWO POEMS

HADARA BAR-NADAV

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## I Took the Drugs

marked sleep for sleep and the drugs marked joy to trudge through grief and the yellow drugs to crack my Vaseline smile, ooze trickling the length of my spine, the hair on my arms electrically charged. The stop-my-legs-from-fidgeting drugs for blood-dipped dreams, the stop-crying drugs that left me hazed in a hangover for empty weeks, the taste of copper licking my lips. The drugs for side effects, the drugs for drugs, bottle-shape they shoved me in, body of sludge. Call me the corpse of corpses, the undead with a pharmaceutical edge and a head full of mud. But I believe, if I believe hard enough, if I am a believer on my knees, the pink circle by day, blue ovoid by night, white pearl for when my chest ruptures into flame—my bruises gathered neatly inside my skin.

## Harvest

Silence didn't exist until the 14th century.  
Until the 14th century there was only noise,  
or silence itself was silenced, unmapped  
in language—a hollow where silence would be.

When my mother tells me to break  
her jaw after she dies—the titanium plate  
inside *worth a mint*—I have only silence.  
Why let the crematorium keep the precious  
metal after turning her into rubble and ash?

Does she really envision me with a hacksaw  
and power drill in hand, suddenly dentist  
and demented, harvesting her for parts?  
How horrible a daughter I am. How loving.  
How in Judaism it is a sin to mark or mar  
the body, or to be cremated, though mother  
longs to be God of her own death.

Is she thinking of the Nazis and their vats  
of Jewish gold, value chiseled from the teeth of  
no longer valued souls? What is “disturbing  
a corpse” when the corpse is your mother  
telling you to break her apart?

Her mouth hanging open.  
My mouth hanging open.  
My mouth is her mouth.

Silence rises like a mushroom cloud,  
blistering the air between us. The sound  
of a mouth that can no longer speak.

---

*Hadara Bar-Nadav is the author of The New Nudity (Saturnalia Books, 2017); Lullaby (with Exit Sign), awarded the Saturnalia Books Poetry Prize (Saturnalia Books, 2013); The Frame Called Ruin (New Issues, 2012); and A Glass of Milk to Kiss Goodnight, awarded the Margie Book Prize (Margie/Intuit House, 2007).*

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**First Book Prize**



## 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*.

# THREE POEMS

## ANNELYSE GELMAN

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### Museum

She was a security guard and even though her uniform was black I could see  
It was covered in blood, the marble floor was covered in blood, it was  
Slowly pooling out from the space where HER HAND used to be  
*Oh my god*, I said, then I started to say, YOUR HAND, but it felt wrong  
To call it HER HAND, now that it was gone, now that there was not A HAND at all  
And that HAND was like THE MOUSE I killed, once, by sealing it in a Ziploc bag  
And its mouse trap, too, and its smear of glue, hardened around its legs  
*I can't kill* THE MOUSE, I thought, but I thought, *I have already killed* THE MOUSE  
I squeezed out all the air I could, after a few minutes it lost its predicates  
And that was what death was, something to which nothing could happen  
I once photographed a cat and the owner came out and screamed at me  
*How dare you*, she said, *It's* MY CAT, as if the cat were a part of her body  
And that was what life was something that could possess something  
*I don't know*, said the guard, she was crying, and she raised her arm so that  
She could have, with THE HAND, had it been there, wiped her tears

### Search

The music was lying to her so she turned it off.  
Snow settled like a mood.  
Eating eggs of fishes, she typed, in quotation marks.  
On result (a shot of pleasure thrummed through her).  
A forum of questions and answers.  
Fishes, she typed into the find function.  
She enjoyed the find function.  
It made her feel efficient.  
Like the clerks at her mother's office.  
Only admired in secret.  
(Invisible BECAUSE drawing predicates together.)  
Her mother expected more.  
*My extraordinary daughter.*  
Wasn't that from a movie?  
*My extraordinary, loathsome life.*  
She could imagine someone saying it.  
A man.  
Maybe Philip Seymour Hoffman.  
She typed it into the search bar.  
Nothing.  
The fishes came up below a picture of a wilderness adventurer.  
Which is the most disgusting thing to do in this world, read the caption.  
Because you have done all the things that are yuck.  
Like eating eggs of fishes, spiders, livers of animals and also your urine.  
After each question mark there was a question mark.  
And before each question mark there was a single space.  
As if to leave room for the question.  
The spaces angered her.  
Anger angered her.  
It was inefficient.  
And could not be punctuated.

The silence was lying to her so she turned it off.  
Soft sculpture rides hard on the air, went the song.  
It was sweet and made her want to dance, but she did not want  
to dance.  
Anyway the wanting was inefficient.  
Was *wanting to survive* an emotion.  
Like angry or happy or sad.  
If so when would she feel it.  
And when she did what would happen to this question inside her.  
(BECAUSE.)  
Her hands felt rough and sharp like crab claws.  
And all the things that are yuck.  
Not like the clerks with their smooth tapered fingers.  
They must be meticulous with their feelings.  
They must have a place for everything.  
They must be immaculate inside.

### Everything

You must understand even to walk down  
the street felt like a demonstration  
of power. It made me sick I felt  
contagious with it.  
  
I could not share myself any more than  
a weapon can be shared by being  
deployed. Therefore I  
stopped leaving the house.  
  
All this participating it made me sick.  
Outside the window grew a fern.  
It was so alive it hurt.  
It extended toward me tunneling a smooth  
  
geometry, it issued a clear directive, it demanded  
regarding, it was beautiful and I knew beauty  
was expensive. Therefore I  
knew I was dying. I did not dare to intervene  
  
in beauty. A sickness progresses. A person,  
little by little, becomes an ideology.  
Outside the window grew a sound.  
Laughter? You must understand  
  
it used to be you regarded (for example) a fern and  
owned the fern.  
It belonged to you, it was somehow your  
property, was somehow a property  
  
of you, you  
somehow "possessed" each  
other, were "possessed" by each other, the fern  
entered you, changed you, became entangled  
  
with you, indistinguishable from you, you could take it  
for granted, the way it belonged to  
you, like a preposition belonged to an object, like an economy that  
was a way  
of participating in life, simply by answering its imperative  
  
to be regarded, so that you could be  
regarded by what? Everything?

---

*Annelyse Gelman's work has appeared in* The New Yorker, BOMB Magazine, the PEN Poetry Series, *and elsewhere. She is the author of* Everyone I Love Is a Stranger to Someone. *Find her at* [www.annelysegelman.com](http://www.annelysegelman.com).

# FOUR POEMS

SEAN SINGER

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## Form Is the Shape of Content

Today in the taxi I picked up a guy on Madison Avenue near 45th Street around noon. He was going to JFK. He was on the phone talking about his safari to Kenya, his deals selling a gold and silver mine, etc. The Pope was visiting during the UN General Assembly, so the traffic was unusual.

Along the route he hollered: “Fuck!” then “This is fuckin’ unbelievable!” and finally “My flight is at 1:30! I’m fucked! This city! Fuckin’ unreal!” When we got there, around 1:00, he thanked me for keeping cool while he was screaming.

I thought of the fishermen on the boat Daigo Fukuryū Maru that moved under the mushroom cloud 80 miles from Bikini Atoll. They heard the explosion seven minutes later and were coated with the white ash of radioactive coral. The radio operator, Aikichi Kuboyama, died of atomic burn.

I wondered about the Lord’s illusion, a superimposition of waves separated by octaves. She keeps going up on a loop. The brain, tiny in the dark liquid, doesn’t see Her dust when it comes down.

## Invisible Screen

Today in the taxi I picked up a Wall Street type on Madison Avenue going to JFK. He proceeded to change out of his suit into different clothes in the car. “I have a long flight ahead of me,” he said.

The inside of the cab, neither public nor private, is so transparent that you can look through it and see the world. I thought of Adorno, talking about Beethoven’s long waves of bass notes, *not of tension but of lingering*.

People in their own contours treat the line between the front and back like a blanket through which the waves continue. Sometimes nothing emerges, and I can ignore it. Adorno commented: *The music wants to ‘stay here.’*

## Dirt

Tonight in the taxi I got a call from one of the passengers. A man said “Who is this?” I said “You called me . . . you have a wrong number.” He said, angrily, “Your number was in my wife’s phone and it said ‘I’m on the way.’” I said “I’m a taxi driver . . . maybe that’s what it is.” He hung up.

When Jeremiah asked for a solution to stopping the Golem who was destroying Prague, he was told: “Write the alphabets backward with intense concentration on the earth. Do not meditate in the sense of building up, but the other way around.”

I thought of a night at an East Village hotel when I didn’t—but almost did—have an affair with the visiting poet. She was a pair of scissors cutting a silent letter out of a word. Though the Golem has a human shape, you could say external beauty has been denied him. Hillel commented: *Where there is no one, try to be a human being.*

## City

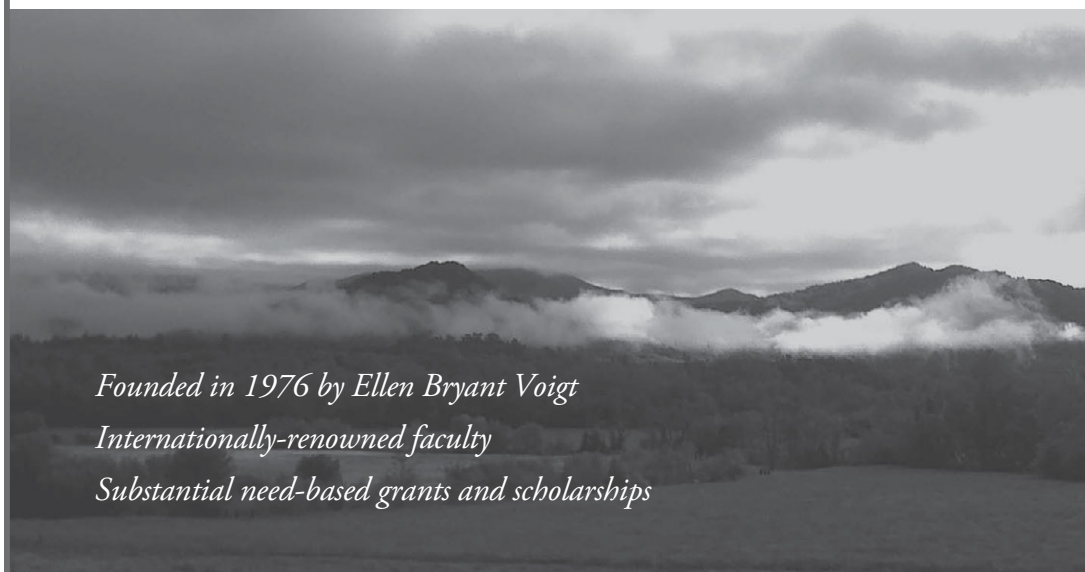
Tonight in the taxi I checked the console. I made sure I had plenty of hand sanitizer, tissues, some candy. The traffic invades like a black swarm of spiders’ turnings.

Everything witnesses everything else. There’s a hundredfold harvest of faces, each in a window, and each window in a death machine.

---

*Sean Singer is the author of Discography (Yale University Press, 2002), winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize and the Norma Farber First Book Award from the Poetry Society of America, and Honey & Smoke (Eyewear Publishing, 2015).*

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# THE POETRY OF EARTH IS A NINETY-YEAR- OLD WOMAN

*An Appreciation of The Galleons by Rick Barot*

*Apz Books* **SPENCER REECE**

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*The Galleons*  
by Rick Barot  
Milkweed Editions, 2020  
Paperback, 71 pages, \$16.00

*Whatever the truth is, to speak it is a great adventure.*  
—Louise Gluck

Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein famously proposed: “What can be shown, cannot be said.” He seemed to be saying that the visual *differs* from the verbal, and that so much exists *beyond* and *above* mere articulation. Naming and labeling all day long can’t fully capture the amplitude and complexity of the world. Thus what I *tell* cannot ever *show* you everything. I was reminded of this finishing Rick Barot’s *The Galleons* in the time of the 21st century’s worst pandemic, with over 100,000 dead in the U.S. alone, and in a time of the death of George Floyd. In this time of broader protests against racism of which George Floyd’s death is the latest spark, I turned to *The Galleons*.

Rick Barot has seen things beyond words. As a ten-year-old he left the Philippines for the United States. In his first book, *The Darker Fall*, there is a telling poem sequence called “Wittgenstein,” comprising centos, made of lines from the philosopher’s notebooks, which includes the lines: “We must always / be prepared to learn something totally new.” In a second poem, titled “On Certainty,” he asks: “Does it make it / true? Is it right to rely on our senses / as we do?” Thus, rising up through Barot’s books, *showing* always overmasters *telling*. Enter his latest book, *The Galleons*, where this philosophical conundrum reaches its fullest fruition. In one poem he offers a list of a ship’s manifest: “cloves, pepper, / nutmeg, tamarind, ginger, martaban jars from Burma, / dragon jars from China, Vietnamese jars, / Siamese jars, Spanish jars.” Then later, in “The Galleons 6,” we have this:

*Santiago, 1654*  
*San Juan, 1564*

*Sa Lucas, 1564*  
*San Pablo, 1564*

*San Pedro, 1564*  
*San Geronimo, 1566*

*Sam Juan o San Juanillo, 1570*  
*Espiritu Santo, 1570*

The poem goes on for nine pages with nearly two hundred names with dates. Barot informed me the list is the ships that took part in the Spanish galleon trade in the Pacific. The year refers to the launch date. Barot said: “I got this information at the Naval Museum in Madrid, whose historians created the list.” This is showing us what? Telling us the difficulties in Barot’s poetry are hidden underneath. They are lists like Whitman made, but without the camaraderie.

When I asked him to describe his own aesthetic, Barot said: “I don’t know that I can describe my own aesthetic, any more than I could describe my own face or my own voice. If I could illustrate my aesthetic as a kind of Venn diagram, it would be that sliver on the page where lyric intensity, clarity, and story overlap.” On the adventure of Barot’s quest for truth through lyric, story overlaps with image. In his poem called “Tarp” from

*Chord*: “what I have in my mind isn’t the thing / itself, but the category of belief that seeing the thing / as a shelter for what is beneath it.” Notice how “thing” and “itself” are cut by a line break as if with a scalpel from Wittgenstein’s philosophical toolbox.

In his third collection of poems, *Chord*, Barot wrote in a poem, “On Gardens,”: “if you look / at the word *colony* far enough, you see it / travelling back to the Latin / of *inhabit*, *till*, and *cultivate*.” Barot describes the famous garden at Sissinghurst that bloomed only white flowers, designed by Vita Sackville-West, which clashes with his own family memory: “I think about the Spanish friar who saw one / of my grandmothers, two hundred years / removed and fucked her.” Much silence surrounds that rape.

Craig Morgan Teicher, in his recent book *We Begin in Gladness*, writes: “Though their art is a refined form of speech, poets know more about silence than they do about sound. They are people who, for any number of reasons, cannot, or at one point could not, speak.” Barot’s immigrant beginnings could account for a certain silencing. Growing up gay in America at the end of the last century would have compounded it. Teicher, again: “The hidden subject of all poems is the silence that surrounds them, the things that can’t be, that will never be said: a real poem points to everything beyond it.” *The Galleons* sits on a sea of silence. Each “Galleon” poem is numbered 1 through 10. Are they poetic ships, coming at us with their cargo? One for each decade of his grandmother’s life? “The Galleons 9” begins:

*in Madrid I orient myself I walk on the wide boulevards*  
*and I know an empire is its boulevards I stand below the angel*

*skeptical of the beauty of angels at the royal gardens I count*  
*the 138 kinds of dahlias at the crystal palace I imagine*

*the exhibition of plants indigenous to my islands I walk*  
*up the street of the poets*

It’s poignant to see our author walking the ground of the country that pilaged his. We know from earlier work the potent symbolism of that garden with the rape of his grandmother by a Jesuit. I note the word “skeptical” taking in all that is religious, how ineffectual that is rendered. And I note with particular poignance the signifier “my” islands. The close of the poem lifts into a particular kind of radiant melancholy I know, having lived amongst the Spaniards in Madrid a decade:

*and Chueca maybe only in Madrid is the light a gold*  
*weight always at the supermarket I overhear two Filipinos*

*speaking and I turn away and break I find myself in*  
*the cathedral in the movie theater where I watch a movie*

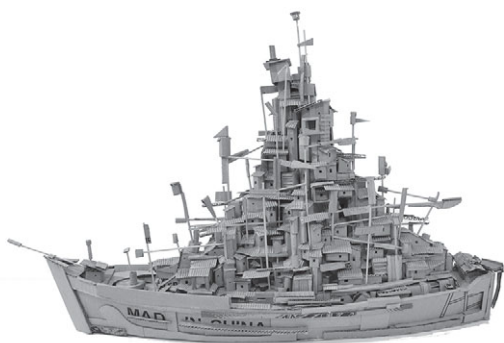
*without understanding the words spoken around the corner*  
*I stop because a kind of meadow has been grown on the side*

*of a building like a tallness of heart a dream carried*  
*into waking my life breathing before it incredible and true*

Note “Chueca,” which is the famous gay district. Knowing Barot is gay permeates this poem with a silence: silence is the gasoline on which many a gay life has run. The poem closes with a famous garden that Madrid has grown onto the side of a building, you see as you walk to and from Atocha, the train station. There’s a joy in the brushstrokes at the end of this poem, our poet noticing “a tallness of heart” and “my life breathing.” The last two adjectives, “incredible” and “true,” could refer to the garden on the side of the wall or to the speaker of the poem. Incredible and true. Such joy here. Perhaps he discovered the garden after going to the Naval Museum, for one follows the other on the same grand boulevard in Madrid. Our maker is after a world turned, if not upside down, then sideways.

The Philippines, “my islands,” as stated above, that archipelago twice colonized by Spain and then America, a place, Jessica Hagedorn author of *The Dogeaters*, archly said to me was famous solely for inventing the yo-yo, a collection of islands that became infamous through Imelda Marcos’ shoe collection, rises up in Barot’s masterpiece. Masterful for the words he’s placed on the seventy pages, but also for the silence, a silence I feel is informed by logic, a logic akin to Wittgenstein. The book itself *is a galleon*, a galleon cutting through centuries of silence made of words.

The construction of *The Galleons* is distinct. Every single poem is in couplets. Couplets. Couplets as a stylistic choice signals a coupling, an intimacy. When I asked Barot about this choice he wrote: “Before I started writing the poems for the book, I had a silence that lasted almost two years. Writing the poems in prose was a way of tricking myself into writing poems again, without the high-stakes anxiety of writing ‘real’ poems—poems that were lineated, chiseled, crafted. When I started to lineate the prose drafts, I kept gravitating to the couplet, its airy quality, its sparseness. After a while, I just decided that all the poems should be in couplets. Also, during this time, I was deeply enamored with Agnes Martin’s vocabulary of vertical and horizontal lines, her strict and beautiful plainness.” The effects and influences



# The Galleons

poems RICK BAROT

of the painterly world are never far from Barot's desk. He paints with words ever mindful of penitence. Note the two years of silence. Note how the poems came out of prose. Prose and poetry are always at odds. Prose we associate with newsprint, novels, tracts, the facts. Poetry with fancy, all that is ethereal. Barot, more than ever, is after a poetry of facts, a Venn diagram where poetry and prose overlap, that subset.

Mark Doty in his recent non-fiction book about Walt Whitman, *What Is The Grass?*, writes: "Poetry exists to find words for what resists easy naming; we are most often driven to write it or read it when any other sort of language seems incapable of the work required." *The Galleons* is driven to understand the history of colonialism, and with Barot choosing couplets, he's showing, not telling, how grandmothers couple with friars, how Spanish couples with English, how this author couples with America. Barot writes: "A guiding theme for me from start to finish was thinking about my grandmother, whose death at 92 years old made me think of different spans of time. Certainly the span of her life, its intimate scale. And also the spans of time that contextualized her life—the history of the 20th century, and the larger histories involving colonialism and capitalism." At every turn of every couplet, large themes are matched with the intimate, such as: "No, her story is an illumination / of history, a matchstick lit in the black seam of time." Amidst the large forces at work in the world, the individual matters most, Barot seems to suggest. Each one of us is illuminated by history. Equally, to flip this, which adds the "post" to colonial, Barot writes: "the individual life can illuminate history. The smaller thing can irradiate the larger thing."

In the joints and bolts of the poems, I startled at Barot's metaphors. Rather than "like" or "as," throughout these poems Barot claims something "is" something. The effect provokes. Especially after reading through Barot's previous books where naming things was questioned. Note the opening poem of *The Galleons*. Note the first two lines: "The poetry of earth is a ninety-year-old woman / in front of a slot machine in a casino in California." Is it? The tone I'd call whimsical and authoritative. The line is echoing Keats'

poem, "On The Grasshopper and the Cricket": "The poetry of earth is never dead." The choice of changing "never dead" to a "grandmother" is a shift to something more specific and concrete.

Am I going to submit to this assertion that poetry is a grandmother? Or what? I am reminded of the Roman Catholic church as opposed to the Episcopal church. The Romans are all transubstantiation and infallibility, the bread *is* the body of Christ, whereas the Anglicans say, "maybe." Let poetry be an old lady playing the slots. This insistence on making things concrete is in line with the factual tone created by parsing couplets from prose. Barot taught himself in this book to come at the poetry backwards. Let *The Galleons* sail.

Further down in the same poem, Barot writes: "And because waiting is thinking." These bold original assertions! I paused. Was waiting thinking? I guessed it was, but I'd never thought of it that way before. It relabels what I am being shown. This is a poet waiting which means this is a poet thinking. A reader of poetry like me lives for these moments, where my thinking is rearranged. These assertions proliferate this book: "History is the galleon," "Research is mourning," "the blooms that are a genius / on the kitchen table." These statements electrify this manuscript with a certain confidence I'd not seen in Barot's previous poems. They sound to me like Christ's "I am" statements: "I am the gate," "I am the shepherd." Wittgenstein also proposed: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." No doubt Filipino culture has known limitations under the subjugations of various empires and dictatorships. Barot's elegiac book with the ghost of his grandmother looming over it, including a poem with spliced poignant excerpts of a recording of her own voice ("I always liked to read. I wanted to go to college.") creates possibilities through his poetic language that were not there before: an unimportant woman in the eyes of the world becomes important. He's rearranging worlds.

Barot said: "Heritage and religion are deep in the fabric of my identity. I spent my childhood in the Philippines, which meant a profoundly Catholic upbringing, full of ritual and ceremony and story. But I stopped being a believer in my early teens. Still, that early wiring informs much of who I am, even if it's not easy to parse out exactly how, in the same way that it's not easy to parse out the Filipino-ness in my poems. It's probably best to say that all the elements of my identity—including my American self, my brown self, my queer self, my middle-aged self, my male self, and so on—converge in my poems in an intricate set of tensions and harmonies. In some poems, a few elements of my identity might be more distinct than others, but they're all present somehow." Wittgenstein, a Viennese Jew, an agnostic, wrote: "I have had a letter from an old friend in Austria, a priest. In it he says that he hopes my work will go well, if it should be God's will. Now that is all I want: if it should be God's will." Both men throw belief in the trash but, from time to time, dig through the food scraps and unfold the crumpled balls of it to their work.

Strange how a religious framework can survive and even comfort, even after a belief in all it embodied has largely disappeared. Barot has a poem in the book entitled "Marimar," which begins with a detailed adoration of a Catholic church: "One of the things I know / is that the most beautiful church in the world / is in the Philippines." Midway through couplets comes this volta: "And, later, the crooked desires / that would smash the devout in me / to filth." The poem closes with Barot's concentration on a drag queen in a "tourist-trap zoo." The poem ends with the

story of the drag queen eating a dead python and then "flicking open her black lace fan." I'm not sure I'd fully be able to appreciate this poem if not for the fact I lived in Spain for the last ten years where fans are used by men and women with dramatic effect. It feels to me a nod to faded Empire, a left-over gesture from the Spaniards in the hand of an older overly made-up sweating snake-eating drag queen. It's a relief to see the wild fun theatricality of the drag queen and the beautiful jewel-box of a Jesuit church merging in Barot's psyche the way, say, they were unable to do in the life of Little Richard, who was either becoming a Baptist pastor and throwing away his make-up, or taking to the rock-and-roll stage. Little Richard's gay self and his religious self could never merge. That's sad to me. Here I see something else: a hope, if not with feathers, then a hope with make-up. Perhaps Barot's early study of Wittgenstein aided him as he moved to this poem? In this collection there is an emphasis on clearly presenting what is in front of us, giving the reader the choice to make what connections they may. Barot strenuously resists epiphanies.

Barot closes the collection, writing: "I used to think that to write poems, to make art, / meant trying to transcend the prosaic elements / of the self, to arrive at some essential plane, where / poems were supposed to succeed. I was wrong." I paused. I went back through what I had just read, the attempt, poem by poem, to recover the truth of the past and the present, the adventure every poet embarks on. Succeed these poems do. Every poet is maybe always instructing us, subtly, on how to read him or her. Barot invites me to be skeptical and scrupulous, with lines like, "grudging faith / in the particular" followed by "I have prayed to the patron saint / of eyesight for a new way, a new accuracy." There's a nod perhaps to Elizabeth Bishop's famous eye, a reliance on what one sees, but added to that, runs that Wittgenstein idea that what you see is not what you get. Barot's accuracy seeks out the fire and glass that make up the smoke and mirrors of colonialism.

Kay Ryan, in an essay on Marianne Moore, writes: "There has got to be a fanaticism—it doesn't matter, it can be the fanaticism of fastidiousness—but there has to be some private path the reader just can't follow all the way. There must be a crack in the poet of some sort. It has to be deep, privately potent, and unmendable—and the poet must forever try to mend it." Barot tells. Barot shows. The crack mends some with these couplets. If the poet's grandmother's life was stifled, the grandson's poems release her, flesh her out, fix her in art the way capitalism and colonialism and many other "isms" rolled right over her. I was grateful in the time of the pandemic, when a startling stasis struck the world, when the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis ignited the national consciousness, to move some of the way down this path of *The Galleons*. *The Galleons* is a garden on a city wall. *The Galleons* expands our world. Barot is a great discoverer. What else is beautiful poetry but making and unmaking the world before us with accuracy? What else is beautiful poetry but limber language's potential to undo a wrong? What else is beautiful poetry but its ability to track the echo of a Jesuit fuck? We must always be prepared to learn something totally new. Especially now.

Spencer Reece is the author of *The Clerk's Tale* and *The Road to Emmaus*. 2021 will see the publication of *The Secret Gospel of Mark: A Poet's Memoir* (Seven Stories Press) and *Think of All the Beauty Still Left: A Watercolor Diary* (Turtle Point Press).

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# NOVEL

## NOAH WARREN

The first time he stared down a barrel it was his fingers cradling that clot of steel, and I do mean stare *down*, because he was sitting cross legged, the pistol was in his lap, he watched both his thumbs flutter around the stiff trigger. It was very awkward. Through thin shorts, he could feel the pebbled grip press heavily against his dick. He was very awkward. He remembers the long whitish stalks of summer grass, swaying around him, broken under him, itching his shins and thick thighs. He remembers an overwhelming sense of boredom, and intuits now a lack of imagination that makes him pity that boy even more.

Water is colorless when seen from the air. Odd. The patches the eye sees grow baroque as they pass upside-down through experiential knowledge, where they're woven into gowns for the heart. Reflecting, he decides he would steal again. Reflecting, he sees he mistook the play he was in for seduction. Normal touch, it is said, reminds the body where it ends.

A limp quip begetting polite laughter begetting chimp laughter begetting a long howl of pain. Who will come and find him when he builds his cabin? Buds burst like bustiers on the twigs of May. Gravid elk strip the sapling apples. A clod of blue sky rinses his eyes. He *will* figure out how to make that borscht.

Or a line of plane trees mills the air into bronze. Of the accordions along the dusty boulevard, too few wheeze the boredom of summer light. The difficulty of comparing a strong, noble horse, with a jade, has wilted his courage. In a late twist, too late in fact, he will discover the troubadours were cruelly deceived about love.

A dark blue Jetta stares down the coast road, where rugged islets unzip the rolling waves. Above, light melts through woolen clouds. How could he be homesick? He has his habits. He lives inside them.

*Noah Warren is the author of The Destroyer in the Glass (2016), winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets. His work has appeared in The Paris Review, Poetry, poets.org, ZYZZYVA, and elsewhere.*

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# TWO POEMS

FAYLITA HICKS

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## After the Wake

I look to the tree line & already the leaves  
are ripping themselves away from their mothers.

It is only August but I am already rising early  
for a crisp moon, smoking in the rare chill

of a shaded patio. My breasts have begun pickling,  
the fat rounds provoked by the idea of cold exposure;

syncopated assertions that the season upon us is ours.  
Soon I will have a glass of whiskey & suspend myself

over the streets, throw my laughter into the woolen night  
& undo the ties holding me together. A ghost of a woman,

I will be allowed to fall apart. Finally.

## Foreign Bodies

You cannot tell me  
there is nothing wrong

with the weather.  
Scientists discovered

a new species of blind  
flesh-toned fish

flushed out from a hole  
in the earth of Kurdistan

almost an exact year after  
a photographer discovered

the pronate body of Alan Kurdi  
flushed out from a hole

in the earth of Turkey  
almost four years before

a journalist discovered  
the pronate bodies of Óscar Ramirez

& Angie Valeria  
flushed out from a hole

in the earth of Texas  
this past Sunday.

The origins of this  
new species of fish

are: widely speculated,  
*essentially unknown*

but it is clear—they are  
proliferating underground.

You cannot tell me there is nothing  
wrong with the weather.

I digested this data & disintegrated  
on a molecular level—

am now an ironic history of black heat  
coaxing out your air & tearing through

your defined shape. I have become  
the hidden hyphen

strangling the ice of your waist  
& shredding. There is something wrong

with the weather—with my mouth—  
a silhouette of mud.

I've swallowed men for many millennia—am now  
a register of cyclical genders, flushing out sex

from a queer hole in my body. To say I am unknown  
is to say I am in flux—sucking on all the names

& waterlogged roots dissoluble  
in the hinge of my *blackblue* skin;

both vessel & vision—I have become  
a fish

& a womxn & ready to die—  
a hurricane in the heart. My species survives,

our wilted crowns bent at the center  
as green wave after green wave

swaddles itself around our necks  
to bruise deep & distinctive. Listen to us

bubble up & scratch our heads  
against the open air. Whistle & arc.

Awash along the thinning coast are our bodies,  
once lost in the sway of the ocean,

are ribbon along the white shore of this man's land.  
A flush of color—we have always been

going *or coming* with the tide.  
You cannot tell me—there is nothing wrong

with the weather. I can feel it in my jaw—  
the thirst for copper-tinged sediment & meat

fresh from the dying fields. Can't you feel it?  
California can't stop shaking. What it knows

runs back & forth beneath the surface:  
a beast of ruin gnawing on our dead;

the fires of Paradise chew  
through the face of the state,

smokes out the menagerie of darkened bodies  
that clog its anxious streets with gangs of *amen*

to camp on the floor of this wild. Can't you feel it?  
Greenland is melting. The yellow milk

swished from its mouth—out into the ocean—  
is enough to feed the world's hungry

with salt & suspended silt. When you turn  
from yourselves to see your cities burning—

do you not melt? Am I the only one on fire?  
Texas is drowning. The flooded borders

overcome with waves of *helpushelpushelpus*  
congeal into cement puddles large enough to float  
  
& swallow our country of survivors. Are we not  
now—all wet? Is my body the only one still gasping for air?  
  
You cannot tell me—there is nothing wrong  
with the weather.

---

*Faylita Hicks (pronouns: she/her/they) is a queer writer and the Editor-in-Chief of Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review. She received her MFA in Creative Writing from Sierra Nevada University, and has received fellowships and residencies from Jack Jones Literary Arts, Lambda Literary, Right of Return, Tin House, and the Vermont Studio Center. Hicks's debut poetry collection, HoodWitch (Acre Books, 2019), is a finalist for the 2020 Lambda Literary Award for Bisexual Poetry and the Julie Suk Award.*

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# ROSEHILL

## GRADY CHAMBERS

In the bedroom where they slept,  
there was a window  
  
that wouldn't wholly close,  
so when he would wake  
  
in the middle of the night  
and could not return to sleep,  
  
he would listen  
until he could hear  
  
the sound of time  
inching forward,  
  
which he'd come to know  
as the sound  
  
on the street below  
that each car made  
  
as it approached, from a distance,  
and the sound it made as it grew distant, like a pencil  
  
trailing off  
across a page,  
  
though in the moment the car passed  
directly beneath the open window,  
  
what was strange to him  
was how it always seemed  
  
to increase its speed  
and hurry past,  
  
the way as children  
he and his sister  
  
would hold their breath  
and quicken their pace  
  
where the path  
they took to school  
  
turned and took them  
past the cemetery gates.

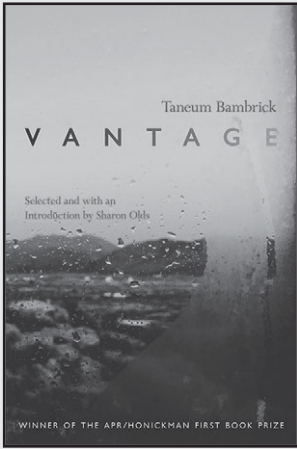
Grady Chambers is the author of *North American Stadiums* (Milkweed, 2018), selected by Henri Cole as the winner of the inaugural Max Ritvo Poetry Prize. His poems have appeared in or are forthcoming from The Paris Review, Ploughshares, The Sun, Kenyon Review Online, Prairie Schooner, Boulevard, Image, and elsewhere.



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# Taneum Bambrick

## Vantage



*Vantage* by Taneum Bambrick, winner of the 2019 APR/Honickman First Book Prize, is available at APR's website, [www.aprweb.org](http://www.aprweb.org), and at other outlets. *Vantage* was chosen by guest judge Sharon Olds.

TANEUM BAMBRICK is a 2018–2020 Stegner Fellow at Stanford University. She is a winner of the Academy of American Poets University Prize, a Susanna Colloredo Environmental Writing Fellowship from the Vermont Studio Arts Center, and the 2018 BOOTH Nonfiction Contest.

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# TWO POEMS

## MATT DONOVAN

---

### Portrait of America as a Friday the 13th Flashlight Tour of the Winchester Mystery House

And it's down another corridor—*Keep moving, keep up,*  
  
the guide telling us again. *It's easy to get lost in here.*  
  
*Folks go missing all the time.*—weaving our way  
  
to the ballroom that inspired Disney's Haunted Mansion  
  
with its parquet floor & ivy-laced words scrolling  
  
custom stained glass: *Wide unclasp the tables of their thoughts.*  
  
Some believe, we learn, she used this space to mourn  
  
& atone for her family's guns while others think  
  
at each full moon she'd strike a chime & summon spirits  
  
for a midnight feast. *This organ was donated to the house,*  
  
*& it's hard to find a good organ donator.* To complete the gag,  
  
all we needed was a cued rimshot—*badum-ching*—piped in  
  
above the sounds of rain & thunder playing throughout  
  
the house on refrain. Then it's once again *watch-your-step-*  
  
*watch-your-head-here-we-go* & we're off to the next room.  
  
*Who knows what lurks around each corner?* the brochure asked,  
  
although a safe bet would be more bad puns, horror tropes,  
  
history that doesn't add up. We've already wandered  
  
the gift shop waiting for our tour to begin, posed  
  
with rifles for a keepsake photo in front of a green screen  
  
that allowed us to appear in any room we chose.  
  
We've strolled the Hall of Fires, seen a staircase disappear  
  
into the ceiling, seen the inch-deep cupboards made because  
  
the grief-stricken heiress was instructed by a psychic to move  
  
West, the guide told us, & build a house that needed to be  
  
kept under constant construction or else anyone killed

by guns would seek revenge. Or something like that. Out of  
  
remorse, fear, sidestepping blame, or some mishmash  
  
of it all, the hammers could never stop. *Ask me anything folks.*  
  
*If I don't know the answer, don't worry. I went to M.S.U.—*  
  
*Make Stuff Up.* We watch the beams of our souvenir flashlights  
  
glide across ramshackle splendor & Tiffany windows  
  
streaked by the real storm outside, too embarrassed to admit  
  
we all expected more for our \$49. *The House That Fear Built*  
  
is dimly lit but not quite dark & bewildering enough to make  
  
our hearts pound. *Keep up. This is where we always lose people.*  
  
In the séance room—*the labyrinth's heart*, with its false exits,  
  
barred windows, blue trim—we're told Winchester would  
  
enter this space, lock the doors, & reach out to the dead,  
  
sometimes seeking forgiveness, sometimes asking  
  
what to build next. A dramatic pause, & then at last  
  
the ghost stories we've wanted to hear. One about a man  
  
roaming the hallways. A doorknob rattling. The sound  
  
of hammers, inexplicable bursts of light. *These things*  
  
*happen all the time.* And if in that moment none of us heard  
  
how those tales of the dead echoed not the dead  
  
but stories of shootings & those who survived—  
  
*A nearby bang. Someone gripping a shoulder. The sound*  
  
*of boots & breathing. Someone else in the room.*—would you  
  
blame us? That would entail stepping through aftermath  
  
of a different kind, one a far cry from what we paid for.  
  
On this unlucky night, our own muddled penance—as if  
  
we'd ever use that word—is to keep moving. Up ahead,  
  
the Door to Nowhere, which all of us needed to see.

# The Dug Up Gun Museum

Unearthed from homesteads or Deadwood dirt,  
                    shoveled up in Tombstone, Nebraska, Vermont, from the muck  
                    of the Missouri's banks or burned-out cabins,  
from a goat barn, ghost towns, gold country, battlefields,  
                    this one discovered by a worker in the crotch of an oak,  
                    this one pulled fully loaded from a riverbed

with mother-of-pearl handle still attached: case after case  
                    of rifles & pistols, all battered, mottled,  
                    rippling with rust & now nestled in vitrines  
on piles of carted-in dirt, rocks, & tufts of grass  
                    in order, I imagine, to help us imagine  
                    the places from which they came. Or *to keep us from thinking*

*about guns as things*  
                    *no one ever touched*, the owner told me, which meant noticing,  
                    for instance, one had backfired  
before someone hammered the cylinder back into place,  
                    or the shotgun's stock pierced with a bullet hole,  
                    or how most pistol grips had rotted away, leaving behind

steel frames, each one curved like a letter from an alphabet  
                    we almost recognize or, given the earth's slow erasure,  
                    perhaps from a word being taken back. *It's all about history*  
*coming alive*, he said, although wasn't history already  
                    alive, on the move, everywhere  
                    around us? Just up the road, at the Cody Firearms Experience,

you can pull the trigger  
                    on every American gun, pour powder down the barrel  
                    of a pioneer musket, or batter your shoulder  
with a full auto M-16. Their slogan: *From Flintlock*  
                    *to Full Auto*, an alliterative phrase that glides through  
                    three centuries of weapons that shaped our country—

Winchester, Gatling, Tommy gun, trapdoor. Even if there's more  
                    to say about euphemism lathing  
                    the edges of the verb *shape*,  
here instead is a woman wearing a plastic sheriff's badge,  
                    showing me a cardboard target  
                    with a black & white photo of a man. On one side,

he glowered & pointed a pistol. On the other, his hands were raised  
                    with the gun tucked into his jeans. *This is a typical good-guy-*  
                    *bad-guy course*, she told me, a bit bored  
as she clamped the target into place  
                    & entered a code that made the man jerk back  
                    then turn to one side so that we could only see the target's edge

soaring down the lane until  
                    it paused for a moment, then flipped to reveal  
                    the man pointing the gun. On it went, the man spinning & flung  
back & forth, ready to shoot  
                    then raising his hands or—sometimes with a full-turn flick—ready  
                    to shoot again. Then the lights shut off

& there was the sound of the man sliding down the lane  
                    just before a double burst of light broke the darkness above  
                    the good guy, who rotated to become the guy  
holding the gun & everything  
                    went dark again. You get the idea. The plan was to prepare  
                    teachers to carry guns in schools, although of course

there would be much more. Picture a classroom  
                    staged with toppled desks  
                    & students pretending to be wounded or dead  
as the math teacher bursts through the door  
                    with his prop gun, in an instant needing to assess, choose, aim,  
                    his finger on the trigger just like the life-size John Wayne

out in the lobby, at ease yet ready  
     for whatever might come. This was the same *Rio Bravo*  
     cardboard figure, I learned, used by the high school  
 during active shooter drills, when the two principals would carry  
     the Duke along with Clint Eastwood  
     from *The Good, the Bad, & the Ugly* through the school  
 in order to represent two gunmen on the loose, prowling  
     the classrooms, offices, the gym,  
     seeking out stragglers, floating down the hallways  
 the way the real John Wayne, in town to promote *The Shootist*,  
     once glided down main street beside a thirty-foot Winchester  
     in a Fourth of July parade. You can still see the prop mounted  
 on a gun shop's roof, although if locals describe actor & rifle cruising  
     the road side by side, the gun's barrel  
     offering the legend a place to lean  
 as the procession crept forward, in every photograph I've seen  
     of that day, Wayne grins from the back of a Cadillac  
     & there's no oversized gun in sight, meaning  
 even the basic facts are wrong  
     & the Duke either trailed the Winchester, following it slowly  
     through the heat as the crowd hooted above the drums  
 or the dark two-foot O  
     of its barrel tracked him from behind  
     as he drifted up the street. For some reason  
 this seems to matter. For some reason  
     I keep thinking of workers later unbolting the gun  
     from the parade float, then hiring a crane to lift it  
 to the rooftop, guiding it into place, aiming it to the south of town,  
     tending to it whenever the sky broke  
     through the barrel, making sure the gun would hover above  
 forevermore. Patched, reinforced, secured,  
     it's not going anywhere now & now  
     will always cast its long, illegible shadow  
 down on the street where they stage a shoot-out  
     in the summer six nights a week when it's all about the standoff  
     & showdown, the quick draw & sudden bang  
 followed by cheers. Does the storyline matter? Not long  
     after Cody Custer praises the killer Crab Rangoon  
     at a restaurant a few blocks away, Wyatt Earp & Doc Holliday  
 pinch-hit for an AWOL sheriff, shooting down the bad guys  
     outside of a wheeled-in Buckshot Saloon. The point is  
     nothing stays holstered & no one imagines  
 bullets entering flesh. We want to see  
     the bodies fall & hands fluttering at the hammer  
     like they're supposed to do. And we want it all  
 to end with applause rather than what happened a few summers back,  
     when one of the guys loaded his gun  
     with live rounds by mistake & shot a few tourists  
 & some kayaks for rent across the street. Now, of course,  
     everyone checks their weapons  
     more than once & the group, for insurance purposes,  
 changed their name from the Gunfighters to the Wild Bunch,  
     even if it's the same show with the same  
     Butch Cassidy in borrowed chaps making jokes  
 about *biting the bullet*, a metaphor we use for any hardship,  
     meaning it drifted free  
     from meaning long ago & refuses  
 to claim anything about actual bullets slipped into  
     the mouth as a source of meager reprieve, unlike  
     the chewed up, pockmarked metal nubs, now barely bullets at all,  
 lined up along a shelf at the Dug Up Gun Museum, dug up  
     from who knows where. There must be something more to say

about bullets as a source of pain  
 as well as pain's insufficient cure,  
     but instead I'm already turning to the five-year-old in Pittsburgh  
     who found a pistol on his playground at school,  
 not buried at all but just tossed there in the grass  
     where the little O of its barrel glinted & summoned him  
     from the swings. He picked it up & fired a bullet  
 & yet for what it's worth no one was shot that day. Isn't that the best  
     we can hope for, given that  
     no one's asking *if* anymore & the guns are in our grass,  
 our schools, our dirt & we know  
     there's still more to find, or given no one's thinking about how  
     Chekov wrote *One must never place a loaded rifle on stage*  
*if it doesn't ever go off. It's wrong to make promises*  
     *you don't keep.* Even if America buried  
     many of its promises long ago, when it comes to the gun  
 & bullets being fired we rarely fail. *O say*  
     *can you see*, we sing all the time, as if this were a question  
     we wanted to ask although of course no one's asking  
 what you might have seen  
     since the words that follow never change: another dawn,  
     another bomb-burst, all the stuff about the flag. The word for that O,  
 if it matters, is apostrophe, which means literally  
     *to turn away* in the sense of leaning in & calling out & from there  
     following whatever words unbidden come, which is all  
 I might have hoped for when I crouched down for a last look  
     & the owner of the museum paused too & together we peered into  
     a space we'd both already seen  
 filled with nothing but rocks & scribbles of grass & guns  
     & we looked once more at the rusted, lopsided O  
     of one barrel's dark tip that signified nothing in itself but we tried  
 to imagine for a moment whatever else  
     we could beyond the gun & then what next O

---

*Matt Donovan is the author of two collections of poetry—Vellum (Mariner, 2007) and the chapbook Rapture & the Big Bam (Tupelo Press, 2017)—as well as the collection of lyric essays, A Cloud of Unusual Size and Shape: Meditations on Ruin and Redemption (Trinity University Press, 2016).*

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ON THE TOPIC  
OF UNLOVING

MATTHEW DRAUGHTER

\*featuring Minnie Riperton\*

today i kissed a stranger  
because the vibe was right

i felt his heart pulse  
through eye contact  
and lawd i got stuck starin like

lalalalala lalalalala lalalalala la la la la

minnie keep singing to me  
because your notes are almost as high as mi—

stop reading  
stop  
looking—stop

pressed between a rock and masculinity  
is the hard place  
you keep reading me

this boy feels like unpacking  
a new durag and finding a new way to lay my edges down.

make me play lovin' you  
when it's not spring time  
because your kiss

sits in my stomach like a seed  
waiting to stick  
its roots into the ground. springtime.

grow within  
me like all of the seasons  
transcreating a universe just for two

because lovin you feels  
like when moses parted the red sea

and the israelites never knew god  
was planning to have goddesses pick out their afros  
and create rocket ships

to pierce stratospheres  
break down blackholes  
and fall in love with nameless stars

just because the vibe is right

Matthew Draughter is a poet and producer, born and raised in New Orleans, currently residing in Portland, OR. His work spans the topics of race, sexuality, and masculinity through a queer, afro-centric lens.

# A MARBLE RUN FOR THE LIGHTS & A MARBLE RUN FOR THIS FINITE EARTH

KAYLEB RAE CANDRILLI

---

## A Marble Run for the Lights

*for Steph*

I.

Such a cliché to write a poem for a dead friend. I don't know much about stage lights or undiagnosed heart problems besides how they burn, too bright. I don't know much, but I know I wish I could have shined a light into your chest and seen it coming. What we don't know can't hurt us, until we are hurting. I know that in a world where you are not dead, we can take Yesterday to the forest and hold her hostage for just one more summer. In a world where you are not dead, we can head to the woods and skin the wildflowers of their thin and delicate fur. I wish human skin was thicker, and less delicate. Sometimes, I leave the faucet running and everything is figurative until the ceiling is caving. Everything is figurative until you are falling through the waterlogged floor and your friends are gone. I know as much about hurt as anyone, but no more. I drink hurt like the ground takes in its rain. We all do. I once watched you rebuild your 67 Dodge Dart on a South Philly side street. I watched you hold the engine in your hands like a heart, as the Philly litter swirled around us—confetti or piñata or small cyclone. The wind in this city grows a garden of tiny trash twisters, up like tulips every May. It really is beautiful. None of us are getting any younger.

II.

I'm not getting any younger and it is probably time to get my alcoholism in check. I can always taste champagne and my partner's worries. My partner worries about my body and each unpredictable tide inside it. I can't blame them. I drink through the blush-warm sea water and I drink too much warm beer. I don't blame anyone for their drinking. It's easy to guess where it comes from. Familiar nectar, familiar fruit. Familial neglect. Familial fruits. I once took a broken lightbulb from its socket with a kiwi and replaced a bulb that had burnt out years ago. I replace each burnt bulb in our home and when my partner's heart murmurs, I feed them a plate of kiwi fruit, some sliced, tender potassium. Tender and simple, my grandfather loved Jujubes and vodka cranberries. When he died, he first died surrounded by Merpeople in his pool. When he died second, he died surrounded by his children. Though time isn't linear, we hope it will be. Every ocean love story is essential to our survival—and though time isn't linear, I hope the Merpeople are braiding my grandfather's hair, and I hope the starfish is set to marry the sand dollar. I want my hair braided again. I want to marry my partner. I want all of my dead to come to the wedding and throw milkweed.

III.

My friend, I wish you could see the wedding, toss milkweed into the air for the monarchs and just party. You told me first that happiness was a worthwhile endeavor. You were the first to point to my partner and say, *why not just be happy?* You once hit a speed bump at 70 mph and that's when I knew I wanted to live. You once poured a beer over the balcony for my first friend gone. When you died, we searched for the photos. When you died, we dug through the years and only found you behind the shutter. The moon is always recalling the friends I dream of. The moon chants your name and tries to teach me about lights and electricity and faulty engines because you're not here to do it. Because you're not here to do it, we have to learn to be good people all by ourselves. We have to stare into the lights and hit our marks. When I stare into the sun, I can feel the wildflowers growing taller. The monarchs are struggling to get to Mexico, but they still manage. We are struggling to get where we are going but we will try to manage, if only for you. I will collect all the grasses' dew in jam jars and pour it out. If only for you, I will pour a beer off my balcony. It's such a cliché to write a poem at all, but, my friend, I do hope you can hear it.

# A Marble Run for This Finite Earth

## I.

It is unbelievable to think my body could make another body under the right circumstances.

And under the right circumstances my body could build a skyscraper, but, really, who has the time.

Who has the time to skyscape, nowadays, when even our bodies are too heavy for the earth. We all

know our flesh is far too much weight for this world. Close your eyes and you'll feel each coast sinking, and if

you shut your eyes, you'll know not much matters anymore, only the way you kiss your partner's head. Who am I kidding,

so much still matters. You kiss your partner, you understand global warming, and you've moved a bird with a broken wing

from the road. And when you moved that broken bird from the pavement, I bet you thought about your family and all

you are willing to do for them. I think about my family and still see the needle in my father's arm. Love is limitless.

Somewhere, still, there is a needle hanging from at least one of my father's veins. Please know, I would save him if could.

## II.

I would save every man from himself if I could. And please know, that when I was young, I did terrible things on the internet.

The internet was young then, and terrible as it's ever been. Nobody is without reproach, or their own flavor of villainy.

Animals and children are beyond reproach, I suppose, but only barely, and only until we teach them how to kill one another.

I once taught the neighbor boy how to kill a snake with the sharpened head of a shovel. If he remembers me at all,

he will remember me, only for that one, cutting, moment. I regularly dream I am killed by the sting of a black widow.

It is the dream I've dreamt since I was a child, almost weekly. It doesn't mean anything. But I am always afraid—

afraid always of spiders, and of dying, any time before I am ready. Because of my father, I know more about pressure

points than one should. Because of my father, I know how to send a threat to sleep. I am not a violent person, so much as

I am a violent person when absolutely necessary. I am not above anything, other than the ground, for a little while longer.

## III.

For a little while longer, I'll be here in a city, just above sea level. There is a trash bag stuck in the tree outside my window and

I'm irritated. But even the trash bag can be beautiful if I work hard enough. What is love besides letting me do some labor for you?

Let me do this labor for you, Love. I'll take out the trash. I'll make the bed. I'll build a model airplane and suspend it from the ceiling.

I'll string a plastic seagull from the banister and take you to the beach, at least twice each summer. I don't so much mind getting older

as I mind feeling older. At least once each summer, I dance in a field with my shirt off. I let the whole world stare at my scars. Why not?

Why not let the whole world stare at my body until it is unremarkable. Nearly all things smell the same when they rot: tulips, tongues.

I often bury tulip bulbs in the garden. Nearly everyone has spoken in tongues over a fresh grave. I wish my friends were still alive.

I really wish my friends were still alive. Every sunrise without them is a color I've never seen before. Not everyone is who they used to be.

Each sunrise I am thankful to see a day I've never seen before. Not everyone understands my body, but still, it's here, and believable.



A NOTE ABOUT THE MARBLE RUN

The Marble Run is a form I’ve designed that takes its shape from the antique toy by the same name. With long and sprawling lines, the second half of the first line becomes the first half of the second line, and so on. For three Spenserian stanzas this pattern is sustained, until the 27th and final line, in which the first half of the poem’s first line becomes the second half of the poem’s final line. Conversational, reflexive, and reflective in nature, The Marble Run is a poem of undoing, but still of progression.

For years, I used a Jacob’s Ladder to conceptualize the movement of a crown of sonnets. I wanted to apply the same logic to a new form.

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Kayleb Rae Candrilli is a 2019 Whiting Award Winner in Poetry and the author of *Water I Won’t Touch* (Copper Canyon Press, 2021), *All the Gay Saints* (Saturnalia, 2020), and *What Runs Over* (YesYes Books, 2017). Their work is published or forthcoming in Poetry, Boston Review, and many others. They live in Philadelphia with their partner.

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# TWO POEMS

## JOAN LARKIN

### Old Stranger

When my lost carbon steel  
knife turned up as if  
it had never left the drawer—  
dark haft, trio of nickel silver  
rivets like moons of Pluto,  
thin blade stained as before—  
I breathed, spoke to the empty room,  
reached for the old stranger. Touched  
its whetted edge. Alive, it could  
change tomatoes to glistening  
discs, basil to little hills, draw  
blood from meat. It raked  
joy onto my plate while the gauze  
that wrapped my cut, reddened.

### Whisper Not

*for jazz pianist Fred Hersch*

I’m straining to see, desert sky dark,  
left hand on the wheel, right hand  
turning a knob & suddenly I’m inside a  
piano, inside your contrapuntal mind  
where glass shakes on a high shelf as the  
subway comes. Spider swings her spinnerets  
into the wind, crisscrossing tungsten silk.  
The future is unforeseen. Nerves stutter,  
stepwalk down to the guttural cellar, left hand  
argues with right, and just as I think you’ll leave  
me in split spacetime the tempo lifts,  
delivers the key to your house. Still curled  
in your mind inside the car inside the dark I  
see your hands, your eyes, almost—skyglow escaping.

Joan Larkin is the author of six books of poems, most recently *Blue Hanuman and Naked Hand*. Her honors include the Shelley Memorial Award, NEA and Academy of American Poets fellowships, and the Lambda Literary Award. She has taught writing at Brooklyn College, Sarah Lawrence, and Smith, among other colleges, and lives in Tucson, Arizona.

### 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

# THREE POEMS

## PHUONG T. VUONG

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### The Beginning of the Beginning

Who decides where a river starts? When are there enough sources, strong currents and water wide enough for its name?

In Colorado, the Chama begins in smaller creeks and streams, flows into New Mexico to form the Rio Grande, splitting Texas

and Mexico (who decided?) and moves deeper south. I think a few of these thoughts by a creek on a beaming hot day,

as water rips by in rapids propelled, formed in mountains far above. The water icy even in this summer heat. People grin

some false bravery. They sit in tubes and dip into the tide and are carried away. I think of drowning. Of who sees water

as fun. Who gets to play in a heatwave. Who trusts the flow. Migrants floating in the Rio Grande haunt me, so

I think of families tired of waiting, of mercy that never comes, of taking back Destiny. The rivers must have claimed more

this year. Know no metering but the rush of their mountain source's melt. A toddling child follows her father into water's

pull. Think of gang's demands, of where those come from. Trickles of needs meeting form a flow of migrants. Think of where

it begins. Think of the current of history—long, windy, but traceable and forceful in its early shapes.

### Traversence

What is the speed of light.

At my desk I count to five slowly after a flash of lightning.

A mosquito dies in my notebook. I do not remember or notice when.

There is a light between the pages. There.

All a sudden, sky the brightest blue behind the catalpa tree.

The brightest green lit up. Heavenly dark stalk and sun-glow leaves.

Rain becomes hail becomes soft rain then—

silence.

A child hops across a puddle.

The speed of a Google algorithm: 2 seconds.

The brain makes electrical connections at the speed of 156 miles per hour.

A smell of some old thing in the street transports me at such a speed.

My hand is always reaching out for this tug. In my mind, the hand remains extended.

I time travel too easy.

Think of mom. Think of dad. Aunts. Grandparents.

Their beings to the ratio of names I do not know.

My grandmother dies and I can never remember her age.

Other times the electrical connections are a stutter. Obstruction of a weak spark plug.

Instead, remember palm leaf's drag on dusty ground.

Remember adolescent re-meeting her.

A cement well in the afternoon countryside. Sweetness of ripe jackfruit.

Heavy water evaporates quick in the tropical heat.

My grandmother dies and she is always dying. On loop.

I arm myself in the shadows of dislocation.

Remember hard. Remember.

Remember as revisiting.

Remember haunting.

as adding member.

as knowing something severed.

someone severed.

What is the speed of memory?

The speed at which ancestors travel: \_\_\_\_\_.

### Trịnh Công Sơn's Children

Trịnh Công Sơn's children sing into the navy sky—each note a bright spot in a dark basin overturned; each song a new full moon, a spotlight or river,

some reflective thing. Trịnh Công Sơn's children know the end of the world will split into a poem to be sung. Know to call a war a silly war if it kills us—

our loves—any of us at all. His children walk on land so far from him they don't always sing his words back. But they always sing them still

in the hum of their breath, a motor bike's purr, the tilt of black-rimmed glasses, long cigarette exhales stinging; say

tôi sẽ đi thăm—a promise—come and visit them, child of Viet Nam of yellow skin, who loves her people

như đã yêu mình. Come with everything now changed, see your people touched by sun and paddies, market and grief. Their faces

tan with the salt of their heavy. Trịnh Công Sơn's children walk through overgrown graves, grassy cemetery of those gutted on hillsides

and left there. His children know the thing about flesh, its easy deflation. Trịnh Công Sơn's children wave flags with fading shapes and color, they

will croon you with a bia or as a lover, to the cool by the river, will slip a song into your hand.

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*Phuong T. Vuong's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Black Warrior Review, Kenyon Review Online, Cosmonauts Avenue, The Asian American Writers' Workshop: The Margins, and elsewhere. Vuong's debut collection, The House I Inherit, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2019.*

# A CANDLE IN THE NIGHT

NATHAN SPOON

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Stone is tender  
to lichen.  
Lichen is tender  
to the earth and its other  
inhabitants. What are  
you and I tender to?

When a black hole  
swallows a star,  
it must do so  
tenderly, since  
a universe hinges  
on tenderness.

At midnight  
your candle burns  
with tenderness,  
dream-like in an amber  
votive, its flame  
flickering tenderly.

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*Nathan Spoon is an autistic poet whose poems have appeared in Poetry, Mantis, Harvard Divinity Bulletin, Oxford Poetry, The South Carolina Review and elsewhere. He is the author of the debut collection Doomsday Bunker, and co-editor of Queerly.*