

The AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW

“A labyrinth has only one path; a maze has many. / To call it also a home lessens the fact that it is really a cage. / You cannot lose yourself in a cage. / As Socrates points out, describing a line of argument, a labyrinth will take you back to the beginning—the source—if you are not consumed by the monster along the way. / The source? / I have my mother’s eyes.”

— BACHMANN, p. 23

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2021 VOL. 50/NO. 1

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RITA DOVE

DECLARATION OF INTERDEPENDENCE & OTHER POEMS

KAZIM ALI

MOUNTAIN TIME

LYNN MELNICK

REFUSENIK

JOHN MORRISON

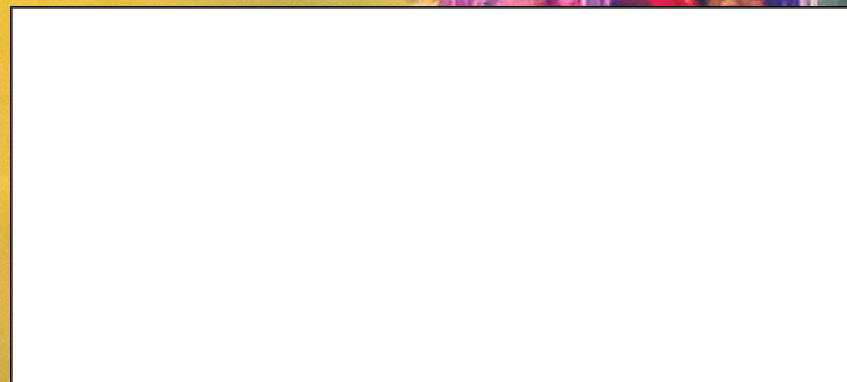
HEADPHONE MASTERPIECES

ALSO

DANUSHA LAMÉRIS

CAMPBELL McGRATH

PAISLEY REKDAL



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Subscription blank: p. 36

Index of Advertisers: p. 36



The AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2021

VOL. 50/NO. 1

IN THIS ISSUE

RITA DOVE	3	Declaration of Interdependence & Other Poems
KAZIM ALI	4	Mountain Time
SANDRA SIMONDS	7	I Gave Birth in Another Era & Other Poems
MATTHEW MINICUCCI	10	A Primer on Listening for Bird Species in Lady Bird Johnson Grove, CA
JOHN MORRISON	11	Headphone Masterpieces: On Gil Scott-Heron's <i>Winter in America</i>
AMY BEEDER	13	Eating Wasps & Figure of a Comet in the Bayeux Tapestry
CAMPBELL McGRATH	14	The Moon & The Caves
LYNN MELNICK	16	Refusenik
DIANE SEUSS	20	[My earliest memory is telling myself stories without] & Other Sonnets
SPENCER REECE	21	How Simultaneous We Are: An Appreciation of Kimberly Grey <i>APR Books</i>
BETH BACHMANN	23	Ouroboros Essay
DANUSHA LAMÉRIS	26	Barefoot & Other Poems
LOURDES HEUER	28	In the Beginning
PAISLEY REKDAL	29	Appropriation as Racial Hoax
MARILYN HACKER	34	Pantoum with Trombone Player & Elegy
FRITZ WARD	36	from <i>Born</i> [My oars fail me.] & from <i>Born</i> [Welcome:]
KARTHIK PURUSHOTHAMAN	37	Notes from the Wilderness: An Interview with Philip Metres
GERALD STERN	40	Lest I Forget Thee

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FOUR POEMS

RITA DOVE

Declaration of Interdependence

Hooknose, Canada Goose, slit-eyed Toucan.

Porch monkey, baboon, trash-talking magpie.

I cover my head in adoration, just as you doff your hat.

Do not rub my head. Don't even think about it.

I bob as I chant, I pray as I breathe. Does that disgust you?

I shout to the Lord, dance out my joy. Does that amuse you?

To my knowledge I have never terminated a deity.

Last time I looked, I did not have a tail.

Business is not "in" my blood. I attended university. I studied.

I am a trained athlete. Nothing I do on the court is natural.

Matzo is not a culinary delicacy: There wasn't a menu.

Fried chicken will kill you just as easy as the Colonel.

You buy tickets to hear me crack jokes about my tribe. Are you uncomfortable yet?

Suddenly you're walking up the same street I'm walking down.

Are you frightened yet?

You laugh, and forget. I laugh, and remember.

I laugh to forget, and the thorn deepens.

Excuse me, but what do vermin actually look like?

Raccoons are intelligent, curious, and highly industrious.

I am not the problem or even a problem. Problems have provenance; someone created them.

I'm neither exotic nor particularly earthy. I was a child once; I belonged to someone.

No, I do not know how to play the violin.

Sorry, I'm tone-deaf. No rhythm here.

Bagel-dog, Bronx Indian, Beastie Boy.

Buckwheat, Burr Head, banjo lips.

I have never even seen a well.

So is that a poplar?

Do not talk about my mother.

Do not talk about my mother.

The Terror and the Pity

as in: cold pain, shitty pain,
a shock, a shirring, a ripple.

sharp, of course. more variously:
crisp or piercing, clean or fuzzy.

a whisper. a tickle cresting, then
settling down. (good.) the reliable dull roar.

sheered through. a cold punch followed
by radiating calm . . .

can it be sour? yes. salty?
perhaps; bitter, definitely;

and sweet, sweet is the worst,
a deep pure blue of an ache,

a throb caught in its own throat
trying to explain—

as in: numbing, searing, penetrating, sudden.
as in blotto. lord-have-mercy. why. please.

Ode on a Shopping List Found in Last Season's Shorts

Wedged into a pocket, this folded paper scrap
has been flattened to a pink-tinged patch—
faint echo to the orange plaid cotton shorts
that even back then barely cupped my butt.

Milk tops the chart. Then bottled water,
crackers, paper towels: staples bought in bulk,
my husband's jurisdiction—meaning
we must have made several stops, together.

Then why is "Home Depot" scratched out but
not the light bulb we would have found there?
Batteries for him, styling gel for me,
emery boards, wasp spray, glycerin for shine:

What contingencies were we equipping for,
why were we running everywhere at once?
And now I see it: Ritter Sport, Almond Joy,
Mars Bars and Neccos for the father

whose ravenous sweet tooth was not what
killed him. In the summer of that last birthday,
who could have known there would be
no more road trips to buy for, no place to go but
home? I'll never wear these shorts again.

This Is the Poem I Did Not Write

while sorting mail, responding to posts.

Chasing a dream I can't quite remember,

remembering things I never dreamed

could happen. Putting on rice, the laundry,

all the times it was time for pills or injections,

mounting the elliptical: stairs up, stairs down.

One martini late in the day. Writing others—

less impatient ones, better behaved.

Rita Dove won the Pulitzer Prize for her third book of poetry, Thomas and Beulah, in 1987 and was U.S. Poet Laureate 1993–95. She received the National Humanities Medal from President Clinton and the National Medal of Arts from President Obama—the only poet ever to receive both. Her many honors include a 2017 NAACP Image Award (for Collected Poems 1974–2004), the Heinz Award in the Arts and Humanities, and the Academy of American Poets' Wallace Stevens Award. She is the Henry Hoyns Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Virginia. Her eleventh collection of poetry, Playlist for the Apocalypse, is forthcoming next summer from W.W. Norton.



MOUNTAIN TIME

KAZIM ALI

In the air you don't know who you are or where
My own self feels it is in wind being born
These are currents a man made one eighth of smokeless fire fears but
chooses
A path south from Anchorage to a Mountain House
Ungovern the northern land to pass from people to people not to own
I came to learn something, that's always what I say
What pilgrims follow on trails are bodies that went before them
Paths neither consecrated by use nor blood or days
Or is the body of a pilgrim climbing a mountain like that of an
athlete
Whose path to Victory is just a metaphorical expression of sexual or
political or military conquest

★

In Homer now at the end of a long promontory continually shored
up against ever encroaching tides and water level
The birds caw in the night, a night not so dark as it is bright
The mountains mean business
Moon content not to glower but gleam in a sharp point, surrender
its more interesting role as portender of tender doom and instead rise as a
lesser sun
It is a pink and blue night, a shining one
There is the constant sound of the bay a loud whisper a lapping
Cold June, nearly midnight according to a clock devised epochs to
south of where my body is now
What is shame a species of, one asks in the light night, guilt or
innocence
Nothing is really real, is it
The birds caw—they don't give a shit either way

★

Not far down the Spit like in every old seaside town there is a lonely
memorial to those lost at sea
Why always come sit first with the dead
Not the dead but the way we mark them
To locate them in a rock, to gather what has unraveled itself from
form and traveled like sea
Deaths at sea moreso death because the body is buried in what is
beyond shape
Dispersal in sound like the clapperless bell affixed to the memorial
A wooden crate of rocks beneath
I take one and strike and the sound does linger long
What happens to sound is it like matter or energy neither created nor
destroyed but becomes one another

★

The memorial is open to all directions, a temple to the sea, four
pillars and a roof, a place filled with wind and the smell of fish
The base of the statue is covered with offerings

A photograph of a young man has been screen-capped from a social
media post, at the cropped bottom you still see the outline of a thumbs up
and the number of "likes"

This unending vow, the view across the water

No witness but sound, the gulls crying, a songbird or two closer,
cars coming along the spit, wind, waves, a boat out on the water, a cough,
someone shifts, a truck being unloaded, road shifts on the land, and yes, an
undertow unheard, that bell I rang

★

Evening ages long silver tarnished in lines of water the stone in waves
Elements become air as a body disappears from the world, soap
bubbles in the garden float

Across the water sharply skyward tsunami beacons beckon

Though there is nothing to do in such a case not even run

Would it be good to know you are leaving the world

What soundtrack in your head would you play

Sing Blue Silver

★

You cannot sleep in Alaska in June because the day does not end
Maybe the world does not end maybe the body does not
We will see the senate of bald eagles launch from rocky promontory
and alight on the hotel balcony
Mythic birds in feather and flesh
Bigger than imagined and calmer
Do you think there's a ghost of a chance
Do you think we will live through
In the mornings there is no sunrise
No break of day or end of night, no opening to begin again, no
morning anew, no grand luminous gesture, no turning of a page
This is what it means to live through

★

Blue and white the mountains and the gulls scroll

In white letters across the screen of dove grey watery fog

News from the far south of the death of Kevin Killian

Is there science to read in the rainy patterns

I've lost that old quality of joy

It's not the same as bliss

I cannot sleep

Water ruffles under passage

Sage watery words brush the shore

Kevin's echoes still resounding even here among these stones

The night is cold and bright

Soon the lines of light lace tight

★

Unmoored I am, living in a dozen places at once, never wanting to
record or explain

This is the month there is no end to the world

To meet god on the water at the place the glacier spills its soft charm
The water becomes glassy as we traverse into that wake
I could not remember that in every country and every tradition to
look at god directly means annihilation or conflagration
Keep me here on this tenuous strand of ground at the end of the
earth where people crossed over
The dark haired fisherman paces the boards on his phone while his
coffee is prepared
The light is somehow softer in the day than that steel slice of silvery
sharp flick of stiletto that slides deep in
Each shop owner opens their shack with crafts, clothes, coffee,
promises to see bear, otter, halibut or puffins
The sign outside High Tide Arts says “Gifts—Knives”
The knife of night lies cool and flat against me so no much brush as
rush but as the tide comes in then a rash a hush
Ash in the air, fire that transforms
Across the bay birds speak in Tlingit, having flown a great distance
The sound of the language and time against soft texture of water in
the air
Past not prologue at all, nothing but this could have happened
Gifts
Knives

★

Across the bay the peaks and just behind that stone ridge a frozen river
Each tongue has its own name as if all water was not the same water
Just all in some form of process from ground to sea to air to ice
and again
What if bodies are also like this
To know a mountain in the presence of god
The glaciers flow—water tectonics—and made this ridge, this spit
Should this land have since returned to the water
Or is the spit now a collaboration between human and glacier
Is the mountain water
Does the surface change, what happens beneath even the crust
that floats
Are we as bodies the topography of god

★

At Mako’s Water Taxi people come to gather their gear, life jackets,
oars, maps for the trails
Soon we will be borne across the bay into the park
To climb for the glacial tongue and hear the slow syllable of
ancient water
Are we in the first breath, first light, first sound
A tree lies on its side in the riprap beach
Its bleached trunk round and incandescent in the summer light, one
end the roots and the other the branches
One looks down from the plane coming in to see tidal streams
cutting the silt banks like capillaries or veins
Rivers through the green, shapes that reflect each other in interstellar
space and interstitial tissue
Hard to say which end reached once for earth and which for sky

★

It’s raining in that way it always seems to be raining even when there
is no rain on account of much water there is everywhere
Constant state of transferring its form, never truly settling in one
form or the other
The glacial river emptying out, the day and the night, the tight circle
of the world in the far north
The day that lengthens into day
You almost cannot notice anything ever changing

★

Road hemmed by lupins, shadow of a southern flower I couldn’t name
In this rush a human is hiding
His god is sound but only because music drowns out—what?
Ordinariness?
Emptiness?
Expectation?
He dreams that his best friends were all at a party and then bicycled
away before he got there
People he loved left him
So he comes into this life feeling that only by loving can he soothe
his own earliest vulnerability
That night in the hospital he was left to fear and sadness
Why maybe he has found pleasure in being alone
His mother left him with toys and games in the crib—he remembers
a slate of dark wax with a grey plastic sheet over it that you drew on with
a red stylus—and told him if he got scared in the night he could press the
button and the nurse would come
And he did get scared and press the button but no one came or no
one came for a long while and why did no one come or if someone came
how could he explain the experience of time that may have stretched a
minute into an epoch
And so I had only writing to comfort
But it never soothed, it only marked the wound

★

Walking back down the hill toward town on my walk to really
nowhere I passed the Salvation Army Meeting House, the Kingdom Hall
of the Jehovah’s Witnesses and another church, a third, a fourth, another,
another
It is maybe no wonder that people want to talk to god in a place of
pure elemental rock and water and sky or rather I cannot believe you have
to go back to some thousands-of-years-ago place’s way of describing god on
the opposite side of the planet and yet this rock this water this sky
The lupins, this sun, this cold June, the mountains’ western azurity
As I walk back those peaks sculpt the sky, a stone scripture
Not backdrop but the town and these buildings are frontdrop
To what kings and kills, out of time the glaciers negotiate this stark
gap between statue and plinth, in the universe of humans unimaginable
to cross
That we fill the void, feel the void, fool the void
Jesus Christ what are you going on about

★

Still, the days can be ordinary, land with unmuffled engines,
occupied with humble chores
I’m far from home and still not quite a stranger
The town grows together with the patterns of any life—the bearded
bouncer does not proof me on the second night, the crimson-silked hostess
leads me to my regular seat, the tattooed barista with the pierced tongue
wants to flirt just a little bit longer today
My field guide is useless and I didn’t buy bear spray like I was told to
Marco is worried I’ll get lost or eaten by a bear but I’ve been lost my
whole life
In Homer I feel not lost not found but at least a little bit known

★

It’s early as the boat accelerates through the water once it drifts from
the harbor’s stone arms
The mountains reach from margin to margin, a stone envelope in
which I am sending myself
Yes I could annihilate myself in stone, in the crotch of a tree or in
the deep blue chasm of the glacier

One knows somehow that to go into this wild space one is going to disappear and the body that returns—if it does return which is by no means certain—is not the same body, it is a different body, less human in some unexplainable way

We wandered the beach looking for the trail, entered our names in the book so the rangers would know to look for us if we didn't come back out and then we climbed, we didn't know where and we didn't know for what

★

There were a group of boys, twelve or more of them, with some adults accompanying them, a church group or a school group I couldn't say, I kept passing them or they kept passing me

Only one of them would address me, greeting me, asking me how the trail was ahead, the pretty one, wan but with wide shoulders and pants a little too short for him, showing ankle not because of fashion but because no clothing company planned for someone to be so slim and so tall

He asked where I was from and after I told him he kept calling me "San Diego" whenever we encountered each other again

They'd pass me and then a little while I'd catch up to them, all standing in a circle, silent, unsure if they were praying or resting

Communion of some kind, sure, but with what—stone, sky, eagle, glacier somewhere nearby creeping down, melting away

How to write the specific name of god with whispers into the map of nothingland

What traces exist as the milky river of glacial water streams out, carrying with it the minerals that were locked inside for ten thousand years

Then you are alone in the wilderness of Alaska among the trees you don't know the names of with only your own breath and then someone coming up behind you calls out, "Hey, San Diego"

★

Though I cannot linger, the last boat leaves at 4pm and I am still hours up the mountain and there will be no stars to guide me back

At the peak my phone starts blinking with a day's worth of messages, including one from my sister saying my mother has gone to the hospital

This has happened before—a trip and a call from someone at home: someone is in the hospital, someone has had a heart attack, a stroke, has cancer, someone is dead

When I cast myself adrift, the line quivers to pull me back to shore

Either I'm the farthest wandered or death, disease and debility are the only reasons to summon me

Under a bright silver sky I lie down on the beach, sore from the descent, and dream the water rising higher and higher on the beach

We are what claims us

★

To leave a place—now to leave a place—how to leave a place—where one has been, has lived, has known or tried to know, where one has been known

This afternoon light, gold, thick, soft, warm, the barest breeze through the nettles and shapes of memory

The long glacial line of the spit, the steep harsh climb into white rain

Today instead I climbed down from the mountain between rocks to miles and miles of beach, half rubble and rock and half sand, deep and soaked, the broad tidal zone

The night before at the Down East Saloon Katie checked her tide app to tell me when the ebb was fullest so I would be able to walk the beach and not hug the rocky cliffs

The mountains in slate pieces, slate blue, bright with light

Each direction had mountains, fading, an ancient script still present in the daily

But north only one single peak, Redoubt, active and dangerous, if not as the cab driver bemoaned we would all be rich from the diamonds

There's a rub: we're not on the fringe of the world here, it's only "frontier" for the moment—our presence is a stopgap measure, a holding pattern, until the oil, diamonds, gas, space, stone, air, ground, water become necessary

I walked into the sun, away from the wind, stone before and behind

Important to jazz is the concept of the solo wherein out of the ensemble each instrument emerges for a little while

And so it all separates into rock and liquid and air, waves and particles—of light and sound—its reflection on the water, echo of god

And all the muscles of my legs sore from walking on shifting pebbles and even the sands

And always those mountains about to evaporate into clouds, rock into water, that in fact metaphor for eternity becoming porous then vapor

That space, that instant between light and the reflection of light

Everything seen in that place

Between the sound and its echo—that moment the wave strikes

The long walk back with nothing before or behind

The cliff on my left gulls and eagles and crows flying above

On the strand walking on what the sea had for this moment

withdrawn from

The sea forest exposed, the barnacles, silver threads of fish here and there, an otter carcass blooming with black flies

Onward not my body but my breath was failing

Wanting to know at the end what it is like, a day continuing on without cease or does it dip into night, does the sun truly set

The eagle allows me to approach, the mountains shimmer, neither appearing nor disappearing

And when I can't imagine continuing any more I pray for reception so I can call someone, talk to them, not be alone any more

But we are far out, there are no bars

Here on the edge that is not, on land that is part of the sea, I seek any comfort, any friend

The sun climbs higher in the sky, it is not yet midday

Homer, Alaska, June 13–24, 2019

Kazun Ali's books encompass multiple genres, including the volumes of poetry Inquisition, Sky Ward, The Far Mosque, The Fortieth Day, All One's Blue; and the cross-genre texts Bright Felon and Wind Instrument. He is currently a Professor of Literature at the University of California, San Diego. His newest books are a volume of three long poems entitled The Voice of Sheila Chandra and a memoir of his Canadian childhood, Northern Light.



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THREE TRIPTYCHS

SANDRA SIMONDS

I Gave Birth

Woke to the “mean
error,” of birds squawking
inside the blue-grey-
black polyphonies of what
happens when we lose
the terminology
to determine how bad
things really are. Was
there no way to puncture
the agonizing film
that kept us all corralled
here? I looked through
the window—be-
wildering axiom, condition,
assumption—I looked
at the dwarf orange
tree, fruiting
sour fruit incessantly.

In Another

Suppose it is possible
to be in three states
of error
at once and in each place
to think three things
and in each
thing to feel
a different version of
the salted wind as you
are walking
along the high sea cliff.

Take, for example, apricots
which have been gen-
etically bred
to amplify the length of
time their fragrance stays
in the crisp air
of the cadaverous super-
market, just long enough to
place them
in your cart and think
to yourself *the world
is good.*

You may be very lonely
at this point. The grocery
clerk scans
the apricots and asks
you a few questions
to which the answer
is always “no.”

Era

“When will
the coronavirus
be over?” asks
the griever who’s
a very small child
in the room
we have painted
Amalfi blue
but have not
yet filled with
sea-themed
decor. How much
of a garden’s
design is made
more beautiful
through negative
space? Across
from the entry
for “grief”
is “grenade,”
which derives
from the Old
French word
for pomegranate.
Why do I
write poetry?
Because I don’t
know what it
means to live
anymore other
than scan the left
behind
shapes. Why
do I write
poetry? Be-
cause I want
to drown.

I.

Had sex in the national park, looking up through the lattice work of leaves, touched earth's watery flesh, the skin of last year, impenetrable ghost, time scale shift like finishing the Norton Anthology of Literature Volume II. Which way do I go now? Marginalia? Do you think it's criminal to try to squeeze some pleasure out of this embalmed wasteland? Then walked to the middle of the river, some men hovering around the birth-place of toxic masculinity like wasps but really they seemed more like graves, ridiculous, knowing no one would care about their musculature in 50 years.

It rained on and off all night, the tent warm and clean, my green tennis shoes soaked through (rookie error). What if someone caught us or the park set up hidden cameras? Would we become registered sex offenders, fined for public indecency? Maybe it would be best to arrest the chipmunks, the chunks of quartz at the bottom of the mossy pool!

In the morning, drove through the upside down White House (Las Vegas of Tennessee), a place to rent a machine gun, a shack selling moonshine of all kinds—cherry, piña colada, one as blue as a beach towel, and I pressed my hand through some tiny fissure right into a past life, from which only the most persistent spirits escape.

II.

History's great tides. The artist rises in a blue room. Something immaterial—fluvial, eked out of the shift between rain, between rain. My voice stems from a certain amount of intellectual experience punctuated by, "See, it's Mr. Rabbit," my daughter says and sure enough the creature is hiding under a bush I've been trying to kill. Note to self: write two hours a day, only 15 minutes of social media, 1 hour reading, check air quality: *unhealthy* but I will still go running until my little lungs get all sooty and wet, laden with virus and calamity, until they wheeze vowels and cramp up—pushed to extinction. Saharan dust cloud making its way across the Atlantic Ocean and I'd like to prove to you that I still have feelings, that I could write long, jangling essays about them, that my body still wants other bodies, that I still want life despite my numerous addictions and abject failures! Notebook: what I liked about the disgraced poet is that she did not apologize. Shame: to discover oneself. Disgrace: to deprive of fortune. Fortune: a goddess personifying luck. Luck: perhaps related to lock which means a hole. I am digging a hole in the garden with my bare hands. I went to the shopping mall to get my phone unlocked. But now I am planting bulbs. I have unlocked the garden. Just my luck, my shame, my disgrace, my cover. There's nothing more I can give to the polis.

III.

My phone is idiotic. It tells me that my car is parked at my house 15 feet away from where I am now making my morning coffee and looking at my car. There is something very sad about that 15 feet because I don't want to be made aware of this yet I know it and I will never stop knowing it. If I decide to bake bread, I will know it is still 15 feet away. Inanimate piece of blue metal, you've ruined my life by never being the getaway car you promised you would be! I have wasted years on these sorts of equations and noting the absurdity doesn't do much to decrease the sadness of pouring oatmilk but I am determined to write an aria today, demystify the polluted air with homeless notes, the pitches of which are strung together like the way I used to gather rent money, always finding a few bucks under the sofa cushions, or maybe selling a poem or losing the check that I got for the poem I sold about trying to pay rent while dreaming of a little gathering of poets exchanging work for free and now it is mid-morning and the light has changed, and the rabbit has darted across the front lawn and I am picking up the newspaper where I have written a few things about a poet I admire. Here I am. I have not moved more than 15 feet.

On the Way to the Shore

I love and care
for people, even if

the social matrix
does everything in its crude

power to collapse
intense feeling, even

if every poem is subject
to gross humiliations.

★

Verging on the end,
my mouth is full of antonyms

so I place a robust
pot of blue tulips

on the outdoor table
as the sea collects

its causalities, read
more frivolous news:

Much of the artwork
comes from people who are

remodeling their beach cabins.
And from my husband: "I must

head off to a professional
development workshop."

These are the things
we said as the disaster took hold.

I Bought You a Bonsai

Containment zones
widen into spring

where bulbs are flourishing
from the devastating waters.

Remember

your origin, says
the sea, ratcheting up
its chaotic philosophy.

I will hold you forever
since you are dearer

to me than a metaphor
dissolving its own letters.

Cypress Tree

Dawn begins in Florida's
opulent greenhouse.

This is nothing like
memory. It is the sound
of dripping, a Persephone
of vocative formulations.

This is no screen; it is
wood slowly rotting
on the forest floor

and the SIM-card full
sea calling out to be seen.

Sandra Simonds is an award-winning author of seven books of poetry: Atopia (Wesleyan University Press, 2019), Orlando (Wave Books, 2018), Further Problems with Pleasure, winner of the 2015 Akron Poetry Prize from the University of Akron Press, Steal It Back (Saturnalia Books, 2015), The Sonnets (Bloof Books, 2014), Mother Was a Tragic Girl (Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 2012), and Warsaw Bikini (Bloof Books, 2009).

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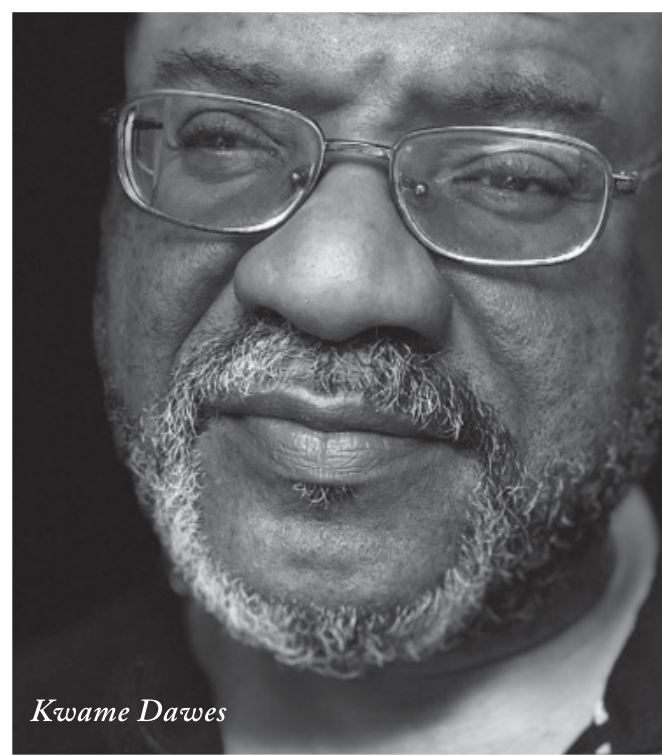
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A PRIMER ON LISTENING FOR BIRD SPECIES IN LADY BIRD JOHNSON GROVE, CA

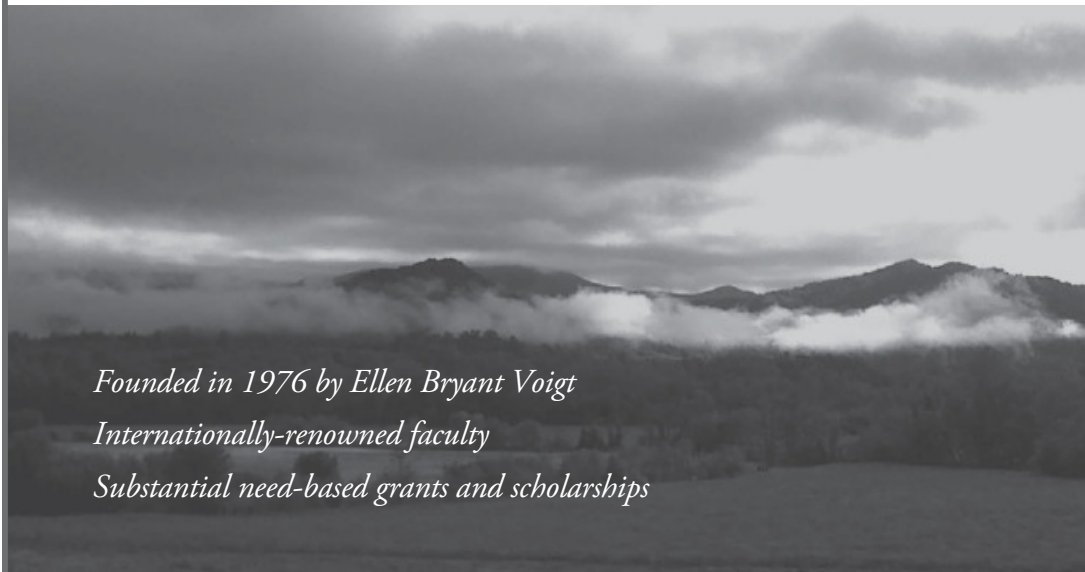
MATTHEW MINICUCCI

It's a brass class of penny-whistles
on branches, the black oystercatcher
picked bark; hole struck in a plastic lid
burnt by butane. Melted, stinging
missiles marking territory, terror's
a truck right through the base of
trees. Turn down the sound. Talk stars
along the sidewalk that hangs in the fog;

I guess what I'm trying to say is: today
sounds the same as every other
tinnitus day: tincture of fear, a tin
prick flap that can't be uncoiled from the
flag mast. Sometimes, at night, I can hear
the clear-sound snap of stern
and I begin to cry. There you are:
there you are again.

Matthew Minicucci's most recent collection, Small Gods (New Issues), won the 2019 Stafford/Hall Oregon Book Award in Poetry. His poetry and essays have appeared in or are forthcoming from numerous journals including The Believer, Ploughshares, POETRY, The Southern Review, and the Virginia Quarterly Review. He currently teaches at the University of Alabama.

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HEADPHONE MASTERPIECES

On Gil Scott-Heron's *Winter in America*

JOHN MORRISON

When poet/singer Gil Scott-Heron and pianist/arranger Brian Jackson entered DB Sound in Silver Spring, Maryland to record *Winter in America* in October of 1973, the world outside the studio doors was in turmoil. Despite the fact that the U.S. had signed the Paris Peace Accords, declaring a ceasefire and signaling that the Vietnam war was nearing its eventual end, bombings and military aggression would continue, putting a bloody period on the horrific conflict. State-side, the war had taken a particularly devastating toll on the Black community. Black soldiers made up 23% of Vietnam combat troops, despite African Americans as a whole only accounting for 11% of the total U.S. population. A violent and brutal war whose aims were in direct opposition to the interests of Black folks and oppressed people everywhere, Vietnam left a bleeding wound in a community that was already struggling to get free.

By 1973, Martin Luther King had been dead for 5 years, shot dead on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel while he was in Memphis in support of the city's striking sanitation workers. Malcolm X had been dead since '65, shot dead in front of his wife, children and community in the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem. Medgar Evers, Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, Bobby Hutton, Bunchy Carter and John Huggins. By 1973, there was already a long and terrifying list of activists that had been assassinated. It seemed as though the extension of true equal rights, and a relief of the daily indignities that Black folks suffered, was a promise that America never intended to keep. The hope and optimism of the Civil Rights era had transformed into the fiery, revolutionary spirit of the Black Power movement, a fierce climax of a nearly 400-year struggle for freedom.

In many ways, *Winter in America* is a detailed and panoramic look at the state of Black America at the time. A gifted poet and singer, by the time the album was being recorded, Scott-Heron had already established himself as an important young voice capable of pinpointing the political and cultural nuances of Black life through song. Scott-Heron's previous albums, *Small Talk at 125th & Lenox*, *Pieces of a Man* and *Free Will*, were popular, with each release showcasing the growing complexity of Scott-Heron's musical aesthetic. A key component of Scott-Heron's artistic development would be his relationship with pianist/composer Brian Jackson. This musical partnership would blossom beautifully on *Winter in America*.

The album opens in a somber and reflective mood with "Peace Go With You, Brother (As-Salaam-Alaikum)." A near-universal greeting in the hood in 1974, here, the salutation feels heavy, and weary, delivered under the weight of centuries of pain and dreams deferred. Scott-Heron wails as Jackson plays alternately bitter and sweet electric piano motifs all around him. More than anything "Peace Go With You . . ." hints at the tenuous nature of Black Male fraternity in Amer-



ica. Scott-Heron, like many Black Men in America, struggles to hold space for himself and the people around him. Scott-Heron sees us as we are, trapped behind literal and figurative walls that keep us from loving each other fully and freely. Scott-Heron addresses his brothers in the struggle specifically:

*Peace go with you, brother
Though I ain't so proud anymore
Peace go with you brother
Recognition don't come cheap anymore
You're my lawyer, you're my doctor
Yea, but somehow you've forgot about me
And now, now when I see you
All I can say is: Peace go with you brother
Peace to you, brother*

Scott-Heron goes on to say:

*"You're my father, you're my uncle and my cousin and my son
But sometimes, sometimes I wish you were not
But I manage to smile and I say: Peace go with you brother
Peace go with you brother. . . . All of your children and all of my children are gonna have to pay for our mistakes someday*

A world-weary, but revenant opener, the song presents a unique aesthetic space where the blues and jazz exist interdependently in the context of contemporary soul music. It's an ambitious first shot that sets the thematic and sonic tone for the rest of the album. "Rivers of My Fathers" opens with Jackson soloing beautifully over a minimal rhythmic bed. Relaxed and slightly behind the beat, Jackson's dense piano chords jut in and out between rich, lyrical motifs. When Scott-Heron enters his voice is strained and his lyrics are abstract and stunted. Lost and longing for home, Scott-Heron's words could speak to the despondency and alienation that Black folks found in the city in the wake of the great migration, or they

could be hinting at some deeper, lost ancestral connection.

*Looking for a way
Out of this confusion
I'm looking for a sign
Carry me home
Let me lay down by a stream
And let me be miles from everything
Rivers of my Fathers
Can you carry me home
Carry me home
Rub your soul against the concrete
And the concrete is my smile
Got to change my way of living
Got to change my style
Let me lay down by a stream
Miles from everything
Rivers of my fathers
Could you carry me home
Carry me home*

Scott-Heron and Jackson round out the first side of the record with the whimsical love song "A Very Precious Time" and "Back Home," a breezy, nostalgic tune that expands on the themes of home and city life Scott-Heron explored in "Rivers of My Fathers." "Back Home" finds Scott-Heron lamenting, "I never thought I'd be lost and searching for one warm, friendly smile. I never thought I'd be running through them city streets like a newborn child," and reminiscing on eating cornbread and collard greens.

The warmth and melancholy of "Back Home" closes out Side A on a soft, reflective note before "The Bottle" kicks off Side B with a renewed sense of purpose and intensity. A bouncy, jazz-funk burner that's still lighting up dancefloors four and a half decades later, "The Bottle" is by far *Winter in America's* most accessible composition. With its driving 4/4 beat and spirited flute solo from Jackson, "The Bottle" lays down a groove that is perfect for Scott-Heron's reflections on the impact that alcoholism had on the Black community at the time.

*See that Black boy over there, runnin' scared
His old man's in a bottle
He done quit his 9 to 5 to drink full time
So now he's livin' in the bottle*

*See that Black boy over there, runnin' scared
His ol' man got a problem
Pawned off damn near everything, his ol'
Woman's weddin' ring for a bottle*

As the rhythm section of drummer Bob Adams and bassist Danny Bowens heats up, Scott-Heron sets his sights on the various figures in the neighborhood, running down a listing of preachers, doctors, everyday working folks, and the ways in which their lives have been hindered by addiction. The album's intensity relents for a moment in the form of a two-song suite that serves as a loving tribute to childhood. "A Song for Bobby Smith" is a delicate ballad written for a young boy that Scott-Heron and Jackson had befriended, and "Your Daddy Loves You" was written for Scott-Heron's daughter Gia. Beautifully written and performed, both compositions are imbued with the profound sense of hope and optimism that elders place in children. "Your Daddy Loves You" and "A Song for Bobby Smith" are two of the most emotionally rich and deeply human pieces in the Scott-Heron and Jackson catalog, and their placement back to back on the album is a stroke of genius.

On the morning of June 17, 1972, over one year prior to the start of the *Winter in America* sessions, several burglars were arrested while breaking into

the offices of the Democratic National Committee, which were located in the Watergate building in Washington, D.C. The suspects were connected to Richard Nixon's reelection campaign and had stolen documents and wire-tapped phones in the offices. Eventually, the incident would build into a huge political controversy. In the wake of the scandal Nixon would resign from office on August 8, 1974.

Scott-Heron would target this subject with snide humor in the poem "H₂Ogate Blues." After a brief explanation of the nature of the Blues, the band launches into jaunty, juke-joint groove. Delivered at a rapid clip, the precision of Scott-Heron's critiques is only matched by the scope of his vision and encompassing disgust for American society. Scott-Heron touches on revolution, the war in Vietnam, economics, ecology and more, his words and the images they conjure spinning together into a firestorm of righteous anger. Scott-Heron's words here are shockingly prophetic as he identifies American racism, capitalism and attacks on the press as forces signaling the looming spectre of fascism.

*How long will the citizens sit and wait?
It's looking like Europe in '38
Did they move to stop Hitler before it was too late?*

(No)

*How long, America, before the consequences of
Keeping the school systems segregated
Allowing the press to be intimidated
Watching the price of everything soar
And hearing complaints 'cause the rich want more?*

Winter in America ends as it began, with a version of "Peace Go with You, Brother (As-Salaam-Alaikum)." Delivered at a more urgent pace than before, the song closes the album on a tense and remorseful note. With all its violence, hatred, vice, oppression and hypocrisy, America is a hellscape of our own making. A prison that we've all had some hand in building and maintaining. Knowing this, Scott-Heron sends us back out into the night with a salutation of "peace" but can only offer one assurance: that reckoning will come, and the time for that reckoning is near.

*Time is right up on us now, brother
Don't make no sense for us to be arguing now
All of your children and all of my children are gonna
have to
Pay for our, pay for our mistakes someday
Yes, and until then, may peace guide your way
Yeah, peace go with you, brother*

Wherever you go, peace go with you, brother

John Morrison is a writer, DJ, and sample-flipper from Philadelphia. A regular contributor to *The Wire* and NPR's *All Songs Considered*, his latest deep-dive essay on *The Roots' Do You Want More!!!!!!* is out now on *Halfway Books*.



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

TWO POEMS

AMY BEEDER

Eating Wasps

Pre-apocalypse, things take on a certain radiance

our eye the dystopian lens

lingering on death: a field of corpses, say—

then resting on an amber ditch

where the assassin's flicked cigar flares red.

And now I'm eating wasps.

Did you know that figs are full of dead ones?

Not really. In any given fruit there's one at most

who, pollinating, died within. If there at all

they're reabsorbed, digested by the enzyme,

replaced with pulp or a hundred glinting pips.

Think of that next time you wake at three to the abyss.

★

It's not the worst thing. You knew (right?) about the aphids

in cabbage, thrips in the corn, all the mites

that grace gray sage, eagwig bits in our coffee,

one hundred & some parts allowed per pound—

Oh well.

There's something to be said for acquiescence:

the calm before you shed your wings & crawl

down the ostiole—stripped of your feelers, too;

the day you Graubelle-it, resined. *Not the worst thing:*

someday we'll all be eating bugs & not by accident.

And why not? Oh well, why not, I say, since by *we*

I mean *you*, in a future where I'm dead.

★

Here's the plan: you'll all learn to live like seraphim

on cakes of seed, on rind & grubs

& pigeon eggs; you'll redeem us with your husbandry,

your thrift & clarity of speech.

I'll leave a cache of pollen & a map to where

there might be some berries: check that book

(you know the one) where I always leave some cash.

Don't mention it. It's just not in us

to refuse the sweetness, any sweetness,

lips parting at the sound, the taste: *the heavy hives adrip—*

Figure of a Comet in the Bayeux Tapestry

A needle's path can never fashion deity. Alas. In best light

it's Cyclops or a windmill, a bell tent wind-beset; still,

enthralled, the thread men gape: *Isti mirant stella*

while beneath them ghost ships of the Norman fleet

set off to conquer Harold. In the borders, guileless crow

keeps losing her cheese to the devious fox

while in the Beachhead Panel soldiers burn a dwelling

of crewel so carefully dyed in the mucus of whelks

or vats of woad & madder rose, set with oaken gall

& piss: purple, terracotta, sage-green, gold

& crimson for the flames which of course are also thread.

O star, our tailed ray of hope. Omen,

Amen, or the devil's pheasant come to peck our eye—

A star, we thought you. Starriest!

Pliny named those *Acontia* that vibrate like a dart;

Lapadieas were burning torches; others deemed

mane or spear or fleece, the soul of murdered Caesar,

the disheveled hair of Lamashtu hurled from heaven,

her icy nucleus ten miles or so across. The tapestry

finishes mid-frayed skein, the final panels stolen,

gnawed by mice or moths, succumbed to oscillations

in the field. To dissolution. Tribute for the one

whose crown is filament. Whose name means *broken thread*

or *radiance*, who trades in tainted harvests.

Meanwhile a woman pleads with Normans while they torch

her linsey-woolsey roof. Meanwhile *King 'Arold*

with his eye full of arrow

& the belch of methane, light beyond the reach of time:

the rudest song, I thought, of matter—

Amy Beeder is the author of the poetry collections Burn the Field (2006), Now Make an Altar (2012), and the forthcoming And So Wax Was Made & Also Honey.



TWO POEMS

CAMPBELL McGRATH

The Moon

Light delimits the darkness as snow
gives shape to the silence of winter trees.
Above a rooftop, the shadow of illness hovers
indistinguishable from the wraiths
of common chimney smoke.
Strip skin from flesh, flesh from bone
to behold the comical, adumbrative skeleton,
rickety ladder to the ore-cask of the skull,
crude keys to forgotten locks.
Surely, this cannot be the answer,
this calcified puzzle-works,
this unmarked instant ticking to dust
even as I seek its delay, letting it crawl
up a finger to my wrist, like an ant.
How luxurious the world's materials,
and such illumination—moonlight
revealing every inch of a table so familiar
it could only be your mother's kitchen.
And the ant, laboring to cross that plateau,
what part of you desires to crush it?
Not the hapless thumb,
not the bicep, which lacks agency,
not even the mind, which admires industry,
and understands harmlessness, and professes
fellowship with insignificant creatures.
Only the heart could be so miserly,
begrudging the ant its morsel of sugar,
pure and selfish as the moon.

The Caves

1.

Talking with Jerry Stern about the Angel of Death
and the Delaware River, he's remembering in lyrical detail
a house he bought for \$3000 in nineteen sixty-something,
old colonial built from stones the size of suitcases
on an acre of land for his tomato plants and zinnias,
squash vines running right to the water's edge.
For a decade we've been lunching together
during Jerry's winter pilgrimage to Miami Beach,
though it's easier now to bring the corned beef sandwiches in,
the deli is hard to navigate and Jerry can't hear a thing,
so we're eating in Jerry and Anne Marie's apartment
overlooking the moored sailboats on Biscayne Bay.
Six weeks after he sold that house, Jerry says,
the guy who bought it dropped dead
from a heart attack or what have you—six weeks!
Now, the Angel of Death is a shrewd customer,
famous in the tradition—it's Malach ha-Mawet
according to rabbinical literature—
but could it be he made a mistake in this instance?
Was he looking for me, Jerry asks, gesturing impishly
with a gherkin, but got that poor schmuck
out harvesting the last of my beefsteak tomatoes?
Jerry's mind is a boarding house full of ghosts,

a polyglot Pittsburgh of the come and gone,
from Andy Warhola to his own immigrant father dancing
the kazatzka in the kitchen. Victories and defeats
don't mean much to him anymore, but I'm pretty sure
it would satisfy all of Jerry's worldly desires
to pull a fast one on Malach and sidestep his fate
by means of a serendipitous real estate transaction.

2.

After lunch I cross the bay to Tom's workshop in Little Haiti,
driving along blocks of painted storefronts depicting
risen spirits and heroic saints and cemetery angels.
More and more of the people I find myself thinking about
turn out to be dead. Old friends, legendary musicians,
writers I had always wanted to meet and never will.
Jerry is ninety-four, I'm fifty-seven, Tom's grand-daughter
is only two months old—last week her mother
skipped out of rehab and took her away to parts unknown.
So, one reason Tom and I work all afternoon
stamping ink onto paper with his hand-set letterpress
is to distract ourselves from looming shadows.
Art makes a shape in the void. I don't know how
else to say it. Everything around us is vanishing
but when Tom feeds fresh paper beneath a roller
bathed in ink spun lustrous as syrup
something new comes into being, something never before
seen or whispered about or cherished or disdained,
a figure, a gesture, a glyph, a totem, a shape
that is always the same, no matter how it changes.
In the caves you recognize it immediately: the purple horse,
black handprints palmed across water-sculpted walls,
herds of elk and bison daubed on undulant stone.
The red deer at Covalanas are 24,000 years old.
In the dark they surround you and are surrounded
by suggestive absences, a world of *luz, oscuridad y sonor*,
the guide says, whispering us forward through time.
Their delicacy is such that to touch even an inch
of the cave-wall would be an act of criminal vanity,
but if you could graze the flank of a single animal,
place a thumb upon one of their calcified thumb prints,
you would connect with the unfathomable
hunger of the Ice Age. Our erudite guide, Joaquín,
turns out to be a distinguished archeologist,
understanding this cave has been his life's work,
he wrote, quite literally, the book on it.
Six weeks later it arrives in the mail, and I send him,
in return, Anne Marie's book of poems, *Red Deer*.

3.

Coming home from Tom's today I watched a young man
perform an unusually passionate dance routine
across from the Chevron station on NW 2nd Avenue.
He did not appear crazy or lost or abandoned,
just ready to get dancing to some Kendrick Lamar.
At twilight, from my window, the blossoming porter weed
burns like a purple fire down the elongated fuse of its stem,
entwined with the rapturous, violet-flowered pea vine

and the burgundy leaves of a gangly croton,
 and it comes to me that this is among my handful of triumphs,
 this glorious, bee-haunted, over-spilling bouquet,
 a gorgeous mess tumbling from the bamboo trellis
 I have inadequately wired to the fence posts.
 Emerging on the cliff-face from the cave at Covalanas
 there is a long moment when you hang suspended
 between the memory of its mineralized, cinematic darkness
 and the dream-like intensity of sky, sun, wind,
 the intoxicating Braille-work of the senses.
 The view is a fairy tale of Cantabrian peaks and valleys,
 meadows dewed with freshly-crushed diamonds,
 stone-walled pastures from one of which rises
 a xylophone of tin bells as a flock of tiny sheep
 scurry into line at the command of a white dog barking
 its idea of order. What sent them to the caves
 is what keeps Jerry writing—he's publishing two books
 in this, his ninety-fifth year on the planet—what drives me
 back to crank the Vandercook #4 at Tom's print shop,
 with its odor of mineral spirits and warm machine oil,
 its endless drawers of fonts and jigs and spacers
 for setting blocks of type, binding every letter just right.
 We are alive. That's all. Our hearts, however briefly,
 join their tattoo to the din, and one response
 is to honor that mystery in pirouettes, in bells,
 in scrawls of manganese and iron oxide.
 Truth be told, my talent as a graphic artist
 is marginal at best, even Tom only trusts me
 to slide the freshly-run prints into the drying rack.
 Red fear, green desire, purple awe—I can name
 the colors but I can't bend them to my will
 or match their pigments to my handprints on the wall.
 Words are my horses, my aurochs, my antelope,
 crude characters inked on paper, primitive tools
 for the glorification of such creatures.

Campbell McGrath is the author of eleven books of poetry, most recently Nouns & Verbs: New and Selected Poems, and XX: Poems for the Twentieth Century, a finalist for the 2017 Pulitzer Prize.



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LYNN MELNICK

I was promised a girl
held her glossy image, shatterable,
ice skating on a Soviet pond.
I'd never seen snow
but for the cut out paper flakes
hung in school hallways.
I only knew rain
as intermittent confusion.
Los Angeles in the '80s.
We set fire to hairspray
for fun we wrote half-truths
in our padlocked journals,
we collected the phone numbers
of grown men we collected
the gratification of grown men
to trade for money,
we were adolescent!
There was never enough
money and there were never
any quiet moments on a pond
there was never any pond only
swimming pools into whose
water I was not invited.
I couldn't withstand the excess,
spent any money on bus fare
and lipstick and then,
then V showed up
on a plane from the Soviet Union
and was a boy, they told me
there was a mistake,
this beautiful 15 year old boy
with his family
all arranged to stay with us.

+

When I was 10
there was a presidential primary
and I ate lunch at a table
by the stacks

and told the librarian
I would vote for Alan Cranston
mostly because he reminded me
of a doctor I saw
before we came to California,
an old white man,
gentle, gentele. My childhood
was littered
with white men, mostly Jewish,
the way the state park
was littered with chaparral
and cigarette butts,
so my childhood
was not spent wondering
if Jews are white,
there are white people
and there are Jews
but white Jews are white,
I would have said
if anyone had asked me
and anyway
my Jewish men
were rarely gentle.
His whole career,
Alan Cranston
advocated for the abolition
of nuclear weapons. The next year
Sting wrote a song
about mutual assured destruction
and so we all wondered
if Russians loved their children
too but at that point
I'd begun to wonder
about Americans
and gentleness
and who loved me
and I stopped
going to the library
and by the time I watched Sting

perform his song
on our black-and-white television
I'd started trading
tit feels for vodka
and stopped worrying
about Russians for a bit
and I don't think I thought
about Alan Cranston
again
until he died.
I wanted it all
to just stop but instead
I got tipsy
and learned capitalism,
learned
what a white female body
is worth
in liquid ounces.
+

When V and his family
found their own apartment
his mother didn't
want to unpack
the Judaica so we stuck it
under her bed.
We found some
of his mother's turquoise jewelry
and V wore it
at school, luminous
in the hair band '80s when
men could wear jewelry
and be pretty
but let's remind ourselves
that these pretty men
found my friends and me
up and down
Sunset and statutory
raped us in ways we felt

so good about until we didn't.
I skipped school
and V fingered me
on his mom's bed
like he wanted to comprehend
every part
and I was
not expecting to get off
anyway and later
we hid in the closet
when his mom came home
after looking for work
and we watched her
through the crack
of the door change
into something fancier,
watched her heft
her breasts
into her bra,
place her shoulder pads
in her blouse,
fix her makeup.
Awkward
and something
more than horny,
we watched
for womanhood.
+
In breaking news,
a Jewish candidate
is almost preferred to a shiksa
but the other white man
wins anyway
and of course.
In broken news, Jewish men
keep lecturing me about it
but give me points for sitting here.
If you were me
would you dramatically cover your ears?
I should be noticed
for some reason.
I listen to the table talk Russia,
talk white men, talk Jews
of history destroyed by blood

libel laws wherein it's said
we drink Christian blood.
I mean, I do that,
if you get what I'm saying.
Still,
I haven't turned a trick
for years. Let me be
clear, let me be more clear
than I was the last time
I wrote about this:
my Mexican friend K
was busted for walking
a street corner
she and I walked together
but only she
was flung in a jail cell
with less care than how
earlier we'd flung cans
over a fence to kill time
and then I was gently instructed
by a white officer to fly out
the side of the station
before being charged
with anything.
What was handed to me
but my whiteness
and my mouth, but that is why
I'm here, that is why
you see me at all, I seem
to need to remind everyone.
A man around this round table
in this library
sits wide-legged in his chair
and talks at me for 30 minutes
about Nazis
and oh wow, really?
Nazis, you say?
Never heard of it.
Never not until you told me.
+
"We Are the World"
won the Grammy for everything
in 1986 as we all knew it would
and it did

and Sting won nothing but did
perform "Russians" both patriotic
and subversive, which was a thing
in the '80s and anyway
almost all the nominees
in the top categories
were white men
and I didn't question it but
I'm sure
somebody somewhere did
in some archived page
in the coldest room
in the library written well
before I showed up.
My mistake has always been
in thinking I'm the center.
I thought I was pregnant,
which happened
about once a month
but this time
I really wondered
and I stood outside Thrifty's
while V bought me a pregnancy test
and I was 12
and not pregnant
and the woman at Thrifty's
thought V was a girl
and he was happy
but when I asked him
if he wanted me
to think he was a girl
he said *shut up*
and when I told him no
one wants to be treated like a girl
he said *screw you*
as if he'd been waiting months
to say that. I let him
fondle my breasts
in an empty stairwell
after I'd peed on the plastic test stick
and we watched the spill
of yellow downwards.
I'm not kidding when I tell you
"We Are the World" blasted

from at least two cars
circling the levels.

+

Blue eye shadow was big mid-decade
with me and also V's mom.

Time was,
you could put a dollar price tag
on a six dollar cosmetic
and the cashier wouldn't notice.

I tried all the colors.

Everything was an option.

Oh how I wanted things in the '80s!
Beaten down denim.
Sleeves of rubber bracelets.
The used blue eye shadow
slipped into my pocket
while V's mom looked
through the paper for work.

I believed capitalism
could save my life. My peacock eyes
I thought could deliver assimilation.

+

In 1939, Hitler's publisher sued
Alan Cranston for publishing
an English translation
of *Mein Kampf* without erasing
the antisemitism.

You should know.

I grew up being told everyone hated us
but I saw no evidence of that
in Los Angeles,
only us hating ourselves.

We all believed the stereotypes.

V and I sat
outside a Purim carnival
smoking thin cigarettes
riffing on the danger
we'd put ourselves in.

I wanted everyone to stop
howling about how
much I'd survived
and I still want this.

I let V start to stub out
the dig-end on my forearm.

I don't know who I am,
he said.

V threw a bean bag at a target
and accepted a goldfish.

I'm telling you this
because V named the fish Hitler,
though he told his mother
he'd named it Spot.

Even he'd become that comfortable.

+

In daily news,
I am full of vengeance
because I was born
with the Old Testament
in my veins. The curator
for Jewish texts couldn't look me
dead on because maybe
I talked about my pussy
too many times
in my presentation
at the flagship library
where I am being paid
to write about Jews.

I said why don't we stop
pretending modern Judaism
gives a nod to women
when on the wall of the last shul
I stepped into
that called itself feminist
a sign carved into the stone read
"Have We Not All One Father?"
and unless you take a chisel to it
I am done.

In 1988, I told V I was nothing
if not Jewish
and I knew I meant it
and I know I mean it now.

+

V began to scorn me,
my form, my city. A wall
came down
and Americans felt so superior,
dangerous. Caustic
rays shone and shone

onto Fairfax Avenue
where I stood in my dayglo
bikini top
asking for money.

I was happy in my old life, V said.

We sat outside
CBS studios and smoked a joint
I'd seduced a stranger
into handing over
and V and I walked
to the shul
on Olympic for a basement
reception for Soviet Jews
where the women wore boots
studded in rhinestones
that outshone what had once
been fancy place settings
and everyone
was really very proud
of themselves
and Jews and America
and I felt stoned
and cocky and breathlessly
I marveled,
We are living through history!
and V said,
I never want to see you again.

+

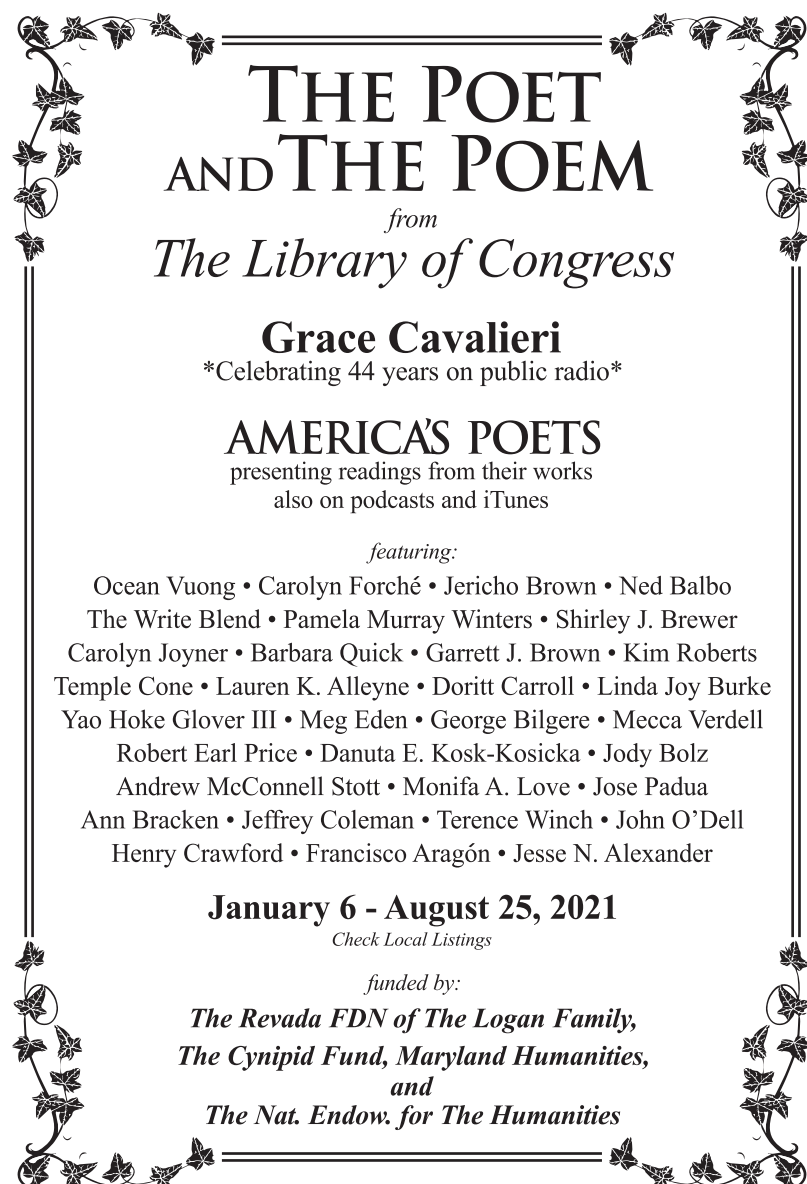
Because,
in the end,
the flora of Los Angeles
will make you gasp
every few steps
because it's outlandish
and sharp
and you always forget
how beautiful
the way you forget
the intensity of pain
because it's all unbearable,
like the sun
of Southern California
which burned and still burns
our white skin quick

as white Jews are white
 but with an asterisk because Nazis
 march against us
 and Russians plot a takeover
 while politicians look away.
 Alan Cranston was publicly
 reprimanded
 in 1991 for something
 to do with money.
 Have I touched enough
 on money here?
 It's all that any of this was ever about,
 though
 it's always about power
 my colleagues will correct me,
 as ever,
 to sum up.

+
 When I ran into V
 the last time on a street corner
 in 1990, surrounded
 by the glorious excess
 we scarred ourselves
 trying to burn down
 we kind of laughed
 about all of it and he said
just two ladies of the night!
 because V was always proud
 to use an idiom.
 The air smelled of eucalyptus
 and spice
 from a Mexican market
 with its doors thrown open
 into the pleasure of the plashing air

in whatever season that was
 and V touched my arm gently
 and told me about how at night
 back home in winter
 it was so gravely hushed
 that your every
 insufficient exhalation
 could actually matter
 the world around you.

Lynn Melnick is the author of the poetry collections Refuse-nik (forthcoming in 2022), Landscape with Sex and Violence (2017), and If I Should Say I Have Hope (2012), all with YesYes Books, and the co-editor of Please Excuse This Poem: 100 Poets for the Next Generation (Viking, 2015). I've Had to Think Up a Way to Survive, a book about Dolly Parton that is also a bit of a memoir, is forthcoming from University of Texas Press in 2022.



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The Robinson Jeffers Tor House 2021 Prize for Poetry

*The annual Tor House Prize for Poetry is a living memorial
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**\$1,000 for an original, unpublished poem not to exceed
 three pages in length. \$200 for Honorable Mention.**

Final Judge: Kim Stafford

Open to well-crafted poetry in all styles, ranging from experimental work to traditional forms, including short narrative poems. Each poem should be typed on 8 1/2" by 11" paper, and no longer than three pages. On a cover sheet only, include: name, mailing address, telephone number and email; titles of poems; bio optional. Multiple and simultaneous submissions welcome. There is a reading fee of \$10 for the first three poems; \$15 for up to six poems; and \$2.50 for each additional poem. Checks and money orders should be made out to Tor House Foundation.

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The Prize winner will be announced by May 15. Include an SASE for announcement of the Prize winner. Poems will not be returned. For more information, visit our web site or contact us by email.

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SIX SONNETS

DIANE SEUSS

[Goldenrod, I could say, you know, everybody wants something]

Goldenrod, I could say, you know, everybody wants something from me, but, well, everybody wants something and nobody wants nothing from me, goldenrod, towhead, beast. Goldenrod, you pack the meadows like gold-plated sardines. I have heart palpitations but all forms of relief end with a kickback, like my aunt with the black eye who lied she was kicked by a horse. Free goldfinch comes to feast on thistles in May and perches and weaves and sings of its political exhaustion. Pisses me off, bird, to find out the devil from Sunday school is real. I didn't even have my own Sunday school. Trespassed and thieved art supplies and gibberish. Had I only tied the play apron around my waist and faced the windy sun and watched your gold hermaphroditic wands sway. Dumbbell that I was I sought a product called God though the whole village was opulent with gilded heathens. Goldenrod, is your dying hard? I know, I know dying's hard. Are you reaching toward, you know, or just reaching?

[I hope when it happens I have time to say oh so this is how it is happening]

I hope when it happens I have time to say oh so this is how it is happening unlike Frank hit by a jeep on Fire Island but not like dad who knew too long six goddamn years in a young man's life so long it made a sweet guy sarcastic I want enough time to say oh so this is how I'll go and smirk at that last rhyme I rhymed at times because I wanted to make something pretty especially for Mikel who liked pretty things soft and small things who cried into a white towel when I hurt myself when it happens I don't want to be afraid I want to be curious was Mikel curious I'm afraid by then he was only sad he had no money left was living on green oranges had kissed all his friends goodbye I kissed lips that kissed Frank's lips though not for me a willing kiss I willingly kissed lips that kissed Howard's deathbed lips I happily kissed lips that kissed lips that kissed Basquiat's lips I know a man who said he kissed lips that kissed lips that kissed lips that kissed lips that kissed Whitman's lips who will say of me I kissed her who will say of me I kissed someone who kissed her or I kissed someone who kissed someone who kissed someone who kissed her.

[Labels now slip off me like clothes when I was in the dark]

Labels now slip off me like clothes when I was in the dark with some daddy-man and I could turn anyone into a daddy-man with my stupendous mind which is how I thought about things when I was fourteen and some half-a-rapist was scraping the tears off my cheeks with a milkweed pod in his two-room house on the riverbank so many boys back home lived without parents in Fuckerson Park where some of us teetered ready to tip onto dirt roads where shacks were painted Kool-Aid colors and nameless pathways led to Bob's Country Club and all the dogs were named Pee Hole and one big colonial prefab from when the Lord led Rose to the right lottery ticket which wasn't worth the resentment heaped on her by the rest of us even Jesus she said resented her and smote her that way he does with a thousand paper cuts which made the rest of us feel better and that is the job of Jesus the most daddyish daddy-man of all.

[My earliest memory is telling myself stories without]

My earliest memory is telling myself stories without words, starring the decal dog, cat, and butterfly on my crib headboard, I couldn't talk yet, then my mother coming in the room to pick me up, I lifted my arms, it must have been my mother though I've never called her mother in my life, I call her by her name, Norma, and always have, another early memory is getting lost in a toy store, finding my mother and encircling her legs with my arms, but it was not my mother, it was another lady, a stranger, and from then on toys too were strange, the small oven that baked cakes with a light bulb, playing under a mock orange tree and in the abandoned chicken coop, finding out what I called violets was really petrified chicken shit.

[Abrupt lines on the nature of beauty: I've examined death]

Abrupt lines on the nature of beauty: I've examined death masks, most but Tesla's look the same, oh poor Lincoln is Lincolnish, Franklin, doughy, Keats, who'd wake up sobbing that he was still alive to agonize, beautiful, meaning what, tender planes of his face, eyelashes, the narrative of his suffering up against the imperturbability of the plaster as if napping under a willow and a temperate breeze, Fanny Brawne on his mind, of whom he wrote: "—her Arms are good, her hands bad-ish," or is he beautiful because his poems are beautiful and what is a beautiful poem, or his face is serene unlike the old man whose mask captures the vile contortions of the last gasp, I'd like to educate myself about the beauty of *that*, Keats writes "Beauty is truth," so in what dark closet hides Fanny's last face?

[We all have our trauma nadir, the umbilicus from which]

We all have our trauma nadir, the umbilicus from which everything originates and is tied off and turns black and the cord eventually falls away, to speak of it in mixed company, well, it's just not done, to think of it alone, in a one-room house with three of the four walls composed of windows looking out onto bears, prehistory, don't think of it alone, there is really no place for it, where do you find an urn large enough to hold the ashes of a pod of problematic blue whales, and even if you find that urn, where is the mantel strong enough to display it, I do not recommend home cremation, even of something as small as a songbird, well, he burst into my bedroom, I was finally asleep, I tried to kill myself, he said, and as I called for an ambulance, he hacked away at his wrists with a pair of scissors.

Diane Seuss is the author of four books of poetry, including Still Life with Two Dead Peacocks and a Girl (Graywolf Press, 2018). She is writer-in-residence at Kalamazoo College, where she has been on the faculty since 1988.

HOW SIMULTANEOUS WE ARE

An appreciation of Kimberly Grey

AP² Books

SPENCER REECE

Systems for the Future of Feeling
by Kimberly Grey
Persea Books, Fall 2020
79 pages, \$15.95

Nu sculon herigean. —Caedmon

When Kimberly Grey stepped onto the stage of poetry, she didn't sound like anybody else. When I mentioned this to her, she said: "I just want to write good work that is compelling and different. I don't want to write like anybody else. I always said to myself, it isn't worth writing something if someone else has already written it." When I mentioned this to Gabriel Fried, her editor at Persea, he said: "Form and subject matter in Grey's poems are melded. Nothing is ornamental or incidental in her work, no small part, which you can make do without, is left over at the end. Her books form a gorgeous apparatus: you can see how the poem-parts operate on their own but also how they depend on each other—how they reflect and refract, how they make their distressing music. I can think of few contemporary poets (Tyehimba Jess and Karen Solie come to mind) whose collections feel like inventions the way that Grey's do." A gorgeous apparatus. A twenty-first-century poetic concertina the likes of which audiences haven't heard. A new sound. Here, here.

The Opposite of Light won the Lexi Rudnitsky First Book Prize in 2015. Grey had just completed her Stegner Fellowship at Stanford University in 2014. That book! Kaboom. It wasn't like anything else. The book begins with a poem called "Invention." Portentous. The poem starts: "Built your truss, built your small back, / all I could muster, all cheek and luck." Take that in. Maybe I thought of Sylvia Plath's "Colossus," where she resurrects her father figure. Then I thought of Plath's playful poem "You're," anticipating the birth of her child, Frieda: "O high-riser, my little loaf!" But only for a minute. Mark the attention to Grey's language, the sound building. Mark starting sentences on the verb and cutting off the subject, the way Annie Proulx did in *The Shipping News*. Our poet is there and not there. Even in Plath's poem to her unborn child we sense she's *in* that poem. Mark the echo of "truss" coming up in "muster" and "luck." And further "back" and "cheek" and "luck." And when was the last time a poet used "truss" in the first line? Her attention to detail never feels purple or drawing attention to itself for no reason. And yet there's beauty in this language as the poem tumbles out: "Built your hum to crescendo and bucked / it suddenly. You are not usual. Built / your not usual, your poor blue, your quiet / monkish heart." The alliteration: bucked, built and blue. The "b" sound one of the first utterances of a newborn. Is this a placenta? A poem? Or both? The word *poetry* has its root in the Greek verb *poiain*, "to make." What a maker Grey is.

Linger longer on this opening sound of Grey. Halfway down, find: "If I am building you, I have / forgiven you." Unusual. Radical. If you

build something that means you've forgiven it? This perception demonstrates this original mind at work. When I think of "building" a poem, say, I don't think immediately of forgiveness, but as I've aged forgiveness and compassion have been major stars by which I navigate writing a poem. Or if our maker does not mean making a poem but making a placenta, this perception is equally riveting: if you are going to make a child, start with forgiveness. Not sure most people think that way. When a poem makes you do that much investigation after you read nine words, well, that's a poet to go back to.

She proposes thoughts. She uses "if" and "because" to great effect. The subjunctive works over her poems: the concrete grows malleable. She sets up original logic all over the place. Imagine her narrating SAT multiple choice questions. Her manner is sometimes scientific: if this author is discussing sex she'll do it in a lab coat, thank you very much. She's not a prude. She's an experimenter with goggles on. Language and love go into test tubes and spin around in the centrifuge of her poetry. Her tone sometimes sounds like an instructional manual for the soul. Unusual words are deployed: "herry" and "behovely."

Plath in her last BBC interview gushed when comparing poetry to prose, saying with poetry you had to go "so far, so fast." Mark Wunderlich, once, in conversation with me, said, like it or not, there was no way getting around Plath, every modern poet had to confront her or address her. Plath merged the personal with the mythological, inventing her own sleek forms to attend to her concerns: years of work pouring over her thesaurus, she broke into her own and those poems flumed down on us. Grey goes far and fast in another way, a way I'd not seen. Jarred, orbiting in a peculiar philosophical galaxy I'd not been in before, when I laid down the first book I wondered what could she do next. Would the work be more personal? Would the work leap? How far and fast would she go?

In 2014, in *The Kenyon Review*, when interviewed, Grey spoke of her next book:

I'm writing a book that explores the failure of language as both a private and public phenomenon. I call these poems "systems" and they formally focus on repetition and patterning. I see a poem as a systemization of language, sound, and thinking . . . I want to understand how language and narrative can coexist in a poem. For me, there has always been a great tension between the two. I struggle writing narrative, often turning to anaphora, refrain, and other modes of repetition to move the poem forward. I used to think something was wrong with me. I'd think why can't I write a story? It's simply a beginning, middle, and end? I always return to what Carolyn Forché said, that "The history of our time does not allow for any of the bro-mides of progress, nor the promise of successful closure." We are writing in a post 9/11 world and I don't think we've fully discovered the impacts that terror and time and technology have had on our attempts toward an ade-

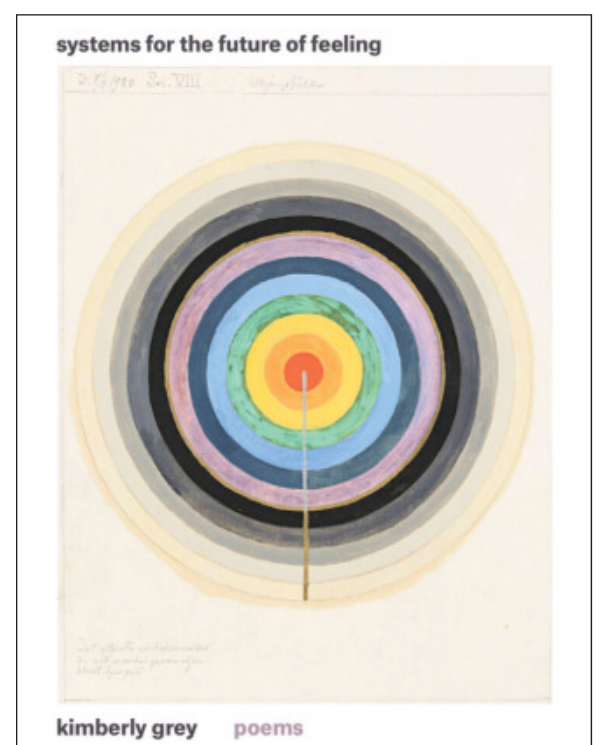
quate language for our postmodern experience. It's startling how much information there is. How simultaneous we are. Existing everywhere and at the same time. And fastly! Maybe I repeat to slow it all down. Maybe I'm trying to hold everything still for a little while.

When her second book arrived, the cover art of a painting by Hilma af Klint got my attention. Brightly colored, austere, the concentric circles of color make up a kind of labyrinth. Paintings, unlike poems, immediately telegraph a feeling. You say, "Oh I like that!" You don't have to think about it. A poem you need to process before you say you like it. The image on Grey's book telegraphs to me something of what is inside. The painting selected is impersonal yet warm, inventive yet mathematical, spiritual without a category. All that is the color of Grey. I asked Grey about the cover:

Her paintings are very abstract, often contain elements of diagrams and or notes on them. She believed them to be visual representations of complex spiritual ideas. She was involved in the spiritism movement of the late 19th century. Spiritism is the belief that relations can be established with the spirits, almost in a scientific manner and entails the moral and philosophical result of those communications/connections. I liked this art for the book because I think it's relational to the idea of systems, of sequence, of dimension, and the future. It looks like both a bullseye and a chart, something scientific and aesthetic, something systematic and also, perhaps, natural. Like if you cut inside a geode or the sun.

Open this book and enter poems that work like bullseyes. Note the book is wider than normal, because the poems are wide. Just like this painting, Grey manages poems that are systematic and natural. Makes sense Grey sought such an image to hug her poems.

Antonella Anedda, a modern Italian poet, recently interviewed in *The Paris Review*, said, "Words give me a sort of authentication of what I live, of my experience." Grey authenticates experience, but where she starts not to sound like so many poets is with that modifier "my." When have I read poetry that feels so urgent and personal and in the same breath *isn't personal*? Grey said: "I am not anywhere near as comfortable with the personal as the confessional poets were, but I think the desire to share, the interest in psychoanalytic theory and trauma is where we collide. I guess my work is what happens when you feel you don't feel you can be confessional." In her poem, "System with Some Truth," she writes:



Once a person
asked if we are valuable to each other, I said that's personal.
It's truly
smart to answer personal questions in a hurried manner.

Or it is personal, but I don't need to know much about Grey's biography to enter these poems. You would think that would be a recipe for chilliness, but these poems are human and fleshy and warm and not obtuse or obfuscating in the least. Or when I hear "language poetry" I think Dadaism and joyful nonsense. But that's not this. Her anaphora might signal to something like Gertrude Stein, but it's not off-putting the way Stein might get. How does she do this? Her biography is on display, if and when it does occur, only to support her poetic adventure of creating language systems. Curious this work of hers arrives fully formed, stacked along with many books of late driven by identity. This book says, "It doesn't matter who I am." Subversive. Humble. Bold. To read Grey is to watch narrative like a little toy choo-choo train go right off its tracks. You sense the maker watches the train go off with a little wink and giggle. I thought of David Trinidad's masterful *Plasticville*, where pop culture is celebrated and subverts the personal. I thought of Louise Glück's masterpiece, *The Village Life*, where an entire village trumps autobiography. The voice of Grey offers an intriguing counterpoint just now. The work is sedulous, sassy and sound.

Looking at the poems, it's fairly unclear what Grey's identity is. Some of the concerns you might call "female," surely, there's poems in the voice of a woman musing on lovers, but it's a minor chord to her major thought experiments in the collection. Like this:

I love a man who is difficult to love, the way a horse is difficult to ride
when the horse is a man. Or when you don't stroke him enough, or you
do, you stroke him wrongly and you don't love him completely.

This "I" feels detached, part of a thought experiment, more than catapulting out of an autobiographical trampoline. The man isn't named. The image of a woman and her horse is familiar enough, but what about "you stroke him wrongly" or "you don't love him completely"? And in three short lines the "I" has disappeared and the poem turns back on us. The reader could be the person who loves a man who is difficult. Pronouns swivel around in these poems, "I" becomes "you" fast as a teenager texting. In another poem, "The Mercy of Pronouns," she writes: "Sometimes a *you* is a lover, but he is not my lover." There's generosity. Who else can you think of that says these things?

No surprise Ludwig Wittgenstein is a spiritual ally here. Yet I've never felt him more *humanely* than in this book of poems. Grey achieves this in a series of "interviews" of her intellectual companions: Gertrude Stein, Anne Carson and more. These sui generis poems are half séance, half cento. I'd never seen anything like that before. Have you? Here she is interrogating Wittgenstein:

So there is a system for meaning?
LW: "In this case one might say: 'Only in the system has the sign any life'." (26e)

When Grey steps forward, she wears a clear plastic mask. The poet is wholly herself using a rare heightened philosophical language that is not difficult to understand. Grey is a vast reader and the reading shows in her poems in a dazzling way that invites you. The poems hold her reader's attention. Who is this poet? Or, more importantly, how is she making these poems?

Christian Wiman wrote a recent book called *He Held Radical Light* concerned with "the art of faith, the faith of art." Grey's work concerns the latter. In that book, just as Wiman learns of his diagnosis of a rare and fatal blood cancer, one that has caused him great suffering through multiple bone marrow transplants, he takes issue with C.K. Williams, who wrote of Philip Larkin. Wiman wrote: "I objected to his characterization of Larkin as a braver and more stringent writer than George Herbert because Larkin had *no overarching metaphysical system* with which to bolster his despair and he refused to fabricate one" (emphasis mine). Wiman believes, as do I, that Larkin's "faith" in poetry makes for lasting poems that are religious without being religious. Plath too. For me. We live in a secular time. Secular times perhaps push poetry-making closer to mystery. Ironically. George Herbert is there in the constellation of poets, but to the modern reader, who probably doesn't go to church, he's distant as Pluto. For me, all poets, believers or not believers, make icons through which I see the divine, containers containing the uncontainable.

Grey creates her systems with philosophy and language to make sense of her world. I asked her about her relationship to God. She said: "I guess my relationship to God is epistemological. What I can't know, what I can't understand, is mysterious, which provokes me creatively." Her art comforts me, a *rara avis*, a poet and a believer. Nowhere did that comfort come stronger to me than when I read her address to September 11.

I write this appreciation of Grey exactly on the 19th anniversary of that event. Wisława Szymborska wrote a startling poem, "Photograph from September 11th":

They jumped from the burning floors—
one, two, a few more,
higher, lower.

Closing the poem, she wrote:

I can do only two things for them:
Describe this flight
and not add a last line.

If that's not sacred poetry, what is? Grey gives equal capaciousness and dignity to this subject. My college classmate worked for Cantor Fitzgerald and died that day. My brain refuses to ponder the particulars of how he died. Just refuses. So I am grateful, if that is the right word here, that Grey, a new generation of American poet, has taken up this subject and given words to it with all her intelligence and craft and thoughtfulness. Grey wrote to me about this subject: "I had my first creative writing class on September 12, 2001. I remember walking into the room and the teacher telling us to sit down and write. No further instructions." She found herself writing what she heard around her and said, "I knew I had original thoughts, but I did not know how to express them in language. This was the beginning of my life as a poet and my desire to write interestingly about the world I lived in." Her poem is called "Postmodern Dirge." This is how it closes:

Because it is still so
unimaginable—the act of jumping,
the fact of buildings and people
high in them and no sea. And men
who loved women and men who loved
men and children
who loved their fathers and
mothers who jumped too.
What we need now is a bed
smoothed into the side of a mountain
where we could sleep. How beautiful
the nerve of us to think
We have plenty of time and breathing.

I drove into New York City on September 11, 2020, to begin my new job as a priest in Jackson Heights, after seven months in quarantine and a return to America after ten years. Foolishly I'd thought I'd be more detached from my country, but your country is your country. I looked to where the buildings were where my friend died. Just nineteen years ago. "How fastly" to quote Grey. What prayer could I summon as I drove over the Robert Kennedy Bridge? Grey's poem came to me *in place* of a prayer. She did not write a political poem. She wrote of the poem: "I think all these years later, I'm still trying to process the trauma of watching people jump to their deaths. The choice-lessness in that choice. What it means to witness that as a young person."

Between 658 and 680, Caedmon, a shepherd in England, made one of our first poems. His "hymn" is his sole surviving composition. The poem was sung by people until one day it was written down. History would repeat itself with Anna Akhmatova during the Stalin years when her poems would be passed on by memory. Her house was bugged. Her work banned. A friend would stop by the house and she would hand him a few lines while talking about the weather. When he had them memorized he would nod and they would burn the poem in the ashtray. Is there anything more indestructible than a poem?

The poem by Caedmon was passed down until the Venerable Bede recorded it on paper. The poem contains this line: "the eternal Lord established the beginning of wonder." His poem was about God being a maker. Grey wrote to me about her work: "It is interested in language, what it does, how it fails, what it accomplishes, and how difficult it can be, and also, how full of wonder." Driving, thinking of my classmate who died that day, on my way to a job in a church where the priest had died from the pandemic, I felt mute. Her poem stood in place of absence as I was about to stand in place of an absent priest. Religion lodges in that place. As does poetry. Poetry and religion, whether yoked or separate, both track the unsayable. Grey, poet of the "monkish heart," establishes wonder in the face of 9/11. Her poem came to me in the car on the bridge. I looked at the space where the two towers once were. I breathed. The sun rubbed its muzzle against the new Freedom Tower. Some might call the church and our life there a gorgeous apparatus, but I say poetry is the same.

That's it. Grey reminded me of Caedmon. Singing over the Manhattan cityscape. Her work brings me back to wonder. Mystery ignites her song. Old English made new. What joy. What solace.

Spencer Reece is the author of *The Clerk's Tale* (2004) and *The Road to Emmaus* (2014). 2021 will see the publication of *The Secret Gospel of Mark: A Poet's Memoir* (Seven Stories Press) and *All The Beauty Still Left: A Poet's Painted Book of Hours* (Turtle Point Press). He is the priest-in-charge at St. Mark's/San Marcos, an Episcopal bilingual parish in Jackson Heights, Queens, New York City.

OUROBOROS ESSAY

BETH BACHMANN

fleece

One person who cannot see you is you.

We can get an idea from water or gold, depending on the light.

So I know myself by approximation.

There is a likeness between the curve of the paradisiacal snake and the parabolic arch of the bridge, but placed one on top of the other, it's unlikely they'll line up.

Poseidon, God of the sea, earthquakes, storms, and horses, is silent on the subject of bridges and love songs.

Poseidon got his gold the old-fashioned way: he fathered it.

He turned the granddaughter of the sun god Helios into a sheep and himself into a ram and fucked her in a field of wolves.

Thus was born the Ram with the Golden Fleece.

Some say the fleece represents a method of washing gold—stretching and submerging animal fleece in a stream, then combing out what rises.

Some say the fleece was made of sea silk made by shells—a gold made of water so fine you could weave it into gloves.

When you look at your face in gold, do you see water or animal or father?

Some say it represents allegations of Utopia, which means no-place because, by definition, it does not exist.

monster

A one-way mirror is also called a two-way mirror.

One side is lit and the other is dark.

On one side you can see yourself.

On the other side, someone can see you.

To be or not to be depends on who's listening.

1) Hamlet is mad.

2) Hamlet knows someone is listening from the other side of the tapestry and wants to appear mad.

A soliloquy, anyway, implies an audience.

To balance a composition is to distribute its parts in such a way that the viewer is satisfied that the piece is not about to pull itself over.

Sometimes you can see a small reflection of yourself in your eye, like a little Minotaur in a labyrinth.

To call the home of the Minotaur a labyrinth is a mistranslation.

A labyrinth has only one path; a maze has many.

To call it also a home lessens the fact that it is really a cage.

You cannot lose yourself in a cage.

As Socrates points out, describing a line of argument, a labyrinth will take you back to the beginning—the source—if you are not consumed by the monster along the way.

The source?

I have my mother's eyes.

The seventh circle is the circle Dante places around the violent.

The Minotaur guards it.

In most imaginings, the Minotaur has the head of the bull and the body of the man, but in the *Inferno*, Dante, in some translations, places the head of the man on the body of the beast.

Labyrinths, like mandalas, can be used for inducing a trance state.

Jung believed the alchemist's *prima materia* stemmed from man's unconscious.

The secret code, then, is man himself—his shadow—his unconscious—the shadow he must assimilate into the self in order to become whole.

Jung saw the ouroboros as the symbol for the integration of the shadow self—devouring the self in order to give birth to the self.

The monster's mother nursed him but he grew and grew until everyone feared he would eat his own mother.

How do you integrate the monster without becoming your mother?

Yantras are a type of mandala.

Many contain a radial symmetry based on a circle with its design extending from the center, e.g. the iris around each pupil of your eyes.

A yantra represents the abode of the deity.

Home of the god: home of the monster: home.

greed

If I have no gold, I want gold.

If I have gold, I want more gold.

I shake my hips to signal I envenomate.

In reality, the rattlesnake is happy to resemble dirt even while it basks in the sun and envelops a volume larger than its throat.

No sound can be made by the rattle until its skin is shed twice.

The rattle is a threat made of filament.

When as a child, an adult shouted, *time! time!*, it meant, simply, *stop*.

caesura

In *Difference & Repetition*, Deleuze writes, “The caesura, along with the before and after which it ordains once and for all, constitutes the fracture in the I (the caesura is exactly the point at which the fracture appears).”

Is < the tail of the ouroboros or the open mouth?

The split tongue is the I, the caesura where the fracture appears.

Caesura, they say from the way Julius Caesar was born, cut from his mother's side.

Of course, this couldn't be true.

Caesar's mother lived and no woman could survive that, then.

Either way, in the line, the I is bisected, cut by its own breath.

The ouroboros dates back at least as far as the ancient Egyptian *Enigmatic Book of the Netherworld*.

Its first appearance in an alchemical text is found in *The Chrysopoeia of Cleopatra* dating to 3rd century Alexandria, alongside the words *hen to pan*, "one is the all."

From there, it is adopted as the symbol of alchemists, as a symbol of the cycle of birth and death that the alchemists wish to break.

A caesura is not a line break; it is a pause within the line.

The ouroboros is also used as a symbol of the cycle of *samsara*, a word that means wandering or world.

Labyrinths are used in meditation as a visualization of the path.

In a labyrinth, you'd need no thread.

There is only one way out.

Still, we feel there is a thread between us.

Sometimes, you are the door and I am the tooth.

Sometimes, the mouth needs to be pulled open to speak.

The first word is never *I*.

The first word is always *you* and *you* and *you*.

You mother.

You feed me.

You come when I call.

But the ouroboros is motherless; like chaos, it gives birth to itself through its own dark mouth.

butter lamp

Like the mosquito, God wants blood.

He'll also take your children.

In *The Cantos*, Pound writes, "Gold is inedible," but I read it as "God is indelible."

Dante says, "each one wraps himself in what burns him."

If I were Beatrice, I'd say, "it's called *skin*."

Fleece is not skin: it's hair.

Wool can absorb one third of its weight in water.

The skin of an animal, though, you can pound into paper.

Skin is made mostly of water.

Some mandalas are made of sand.

Here lies one whose name was writ in water, says the sea to the shore.

Dante asks, "What does gold taste like?"

Next to skin, gold has no smell so you cannot use it to mummify.

Instead, use the resins, frankincense and myrrh.

The butter lamps have real flames.

Alchemy is transforming something of the everyday into something illuminated.

In the temple, the butter lamps are set between seven bowls of water each representing a different kind of water: one for washing, one for drinking, one for flowers, one for scent, one for perfume, one for food, one for sound.

What does a bowl of sound taste like?

Love, Dante writes, is often converted into chaos.

Dante says desire is primal, as in bees, there is the urge to honey-make.

"One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light," Jung writes, "but by making the darkness conscious."

Why do the leaves change color?

Sugar.

We've all got to eat.

The gold is always there in the leaf.

It just needs less light so we can see it.

Less light, less chlorophyll.

More dark, more gold.

Gold is the absence of light.

The leaves do not fall in any order.

Medusa

In one story of Medusa, it's not snakes that grow from her head; it's golden wings.

This is the origin story of Pegasus: the winged-horse and a boy with a gold sword spring from Medusa's neck when her head is finally cut from her body.

Géricault's painting *The Raft of the Medusa* centers on a hole.

You could call Medusa and Poseidon on the floor of the temple of Athena a kind of shipwreck.

Athena turns Medusa's hair into snakes so no man can look at her and live.

Trouble is some men take snakes and see rays.

In Raymond Queneau's *Chêne et Chien*, he gives the reader a list of things of which he has nothing to say; of the grass, wind, oak, rat, sand, rock, star, moon, dog, town and heart, he has nothing to say.

But of the sun, he writes: "sun: oh Gorgon, oh monster, oh Medusa/ oh sun."

God of the Sea, God of the Horse.

Even winged things come from water.

The most plentiful source of gold on Earth is the sea—20 million tons.

However, it's extremely dilute.

Cup your hands and a mouthful would contain barely a sparkle.

Spinoza argued the mind and body are one, but that the mind doesn't always know its own body.

Of poetry, Duncan writes, "each line is a proposition of the total structure."

If you looked at the head of snakes, you would turn to stone.

Snakes love to live inside a cold stone wall or a cold stone well.

The human brain is folded so the connections are closer together.

In Burne-Jones's painting *The Baleful Head*, Perseus holds the head of Medusa above a well so her reflection can be seen by his lover without turning her to stone.

All three heads are reflected in the water, but Perseus seems to be looking at his lover and his lover appears to be looking at Perseus's reflection.

Medusa's eyes are closed.

Barthes writes, "You are the only one who can never see yourself except as an image; you never see your eyes unless they are dulled by the gaze they rest upon the mirror or the lens (I am interested in seeing my eyes only when they look at you): even and especially for your own body, you are condemned to the repertoire of its images."

Everywhere the winged-horse struck its hoof to dirt, they say, a spring burst open.

A spring is a well unbounded by stone.

Some of the gold in the ocean is so deep you'd have to mine it.

And there's no easy way to do that.

Beth Bachmann is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and the author of three books from the Pitt Poetry Series: Temper, Do Not Rise and CEASE. She lives in Nashville and New York City.

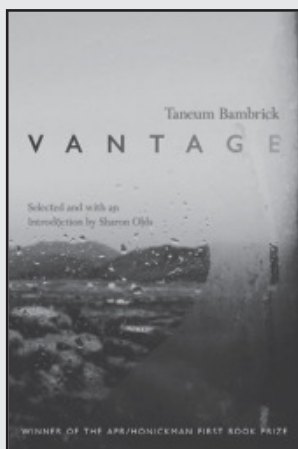
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Letters should be sent to:

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

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, 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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FOUR POEMS

DANUSHA LAMÉRIS

Barefoot

I learned the world through the bottoms of my feet, bare in the creeks of summer, stepping on pebbles, the squidge of moss between my toes. On hot asphalt, the hop and skip over cracks, feet already toughened by bramble, dirt, the prickly ground of pine needles. Callused and ready to roam the rough halls of July, of August, of early September, through acres of blackberry and bristled fountain grass, the spiny clumps of cocklebur, and foxtail. Through clusters of quartz, agate, feldspar. Small, black ants crawled over my toes. Fish nibbled at them in the skinny creek. It wasn't summer until I'd been bitten, ankles pocked with the raised bumps left by mosquitoes, flea bites from Toof Toof the cat, who liked to roam the field then settle back on the shag rug where I'd sink my toes into the plush pile before rambling down to the beach, the fine-ground sand, cutting myself on loose shards of glass left by broken beer bottles, sharp-edged shells that dug into the fatted flesh above my instep as I skimmed for washed-up bits of abalone, oyster, clam, side-stepping the glutinous bodies of jellyfish, past crusted bulbs of kelp, their long, tubed stems buzzing with flies. Sometimes, the body of a dead seal, the peppered fin curling into itself in the heat. Back on the grassy slope, I'd marvel at how I could feel a gopher stir underground from yards away, that slight rumble in the earth. This was foot-knowledge, heel knowledge, knowledge of sole and arch, that domed curve, vaulted nave, everything that entered there, sanctified, holy.

Break

You know. You were there. It was dark and quiet. Only the coyotes up the hill howling to their gods. What did you have to lose? You took my face in your hands, held it like a cup, a chalice, something from which you could drink. I've wanted that. To be a well one might drink from, a font to quench the thirst. And while the deer crept into the front garden, buried their faces in November's last blossoms, a light rain began to fall upon the field. And because it was dark, and because no one will speak of it—what passed between us—I will press it here to the page, a dried flower, a wild bloom, where it will remain, caught, still fragrant. How there was something your body said to mine in its halting speech of torso and bicep, its vocabulary of fire. And mine tried to answer in its own fumbling dialect—fingertip, collarbone, rib. I wanted to break something inside you. Enter some fissure in your soul, that dark room with its dirt floors and melancholic choirs. To fall into the underground cavern of you, forget, awhile, the burnt taste of my own grief, the cracked vessel of my heart. Free whatever animal lurks there, paces in the cave of your chest, tearing up the loose dirt. And you were

descending the ladder of my body, and the coyotes were getting louder, and I could feel us moving close to that abyss. But it was late, and getting later and we didn't need to peel off another layer of old wants, to wake up penitent, reeling. And so we let it go, rose from our make-shift bed, blew out the flame. And I know I should forget what happened, but let me tell you, friend, though years have passed, there are nights, like this one, when I hear the deer's mouths closing on the flowers, and I see you bending over me, again, and it's winter, the candle lit, the rain just starting to fall.

Hair of the Dead

The Victorians were known to wear it on brooches, pinned to the lapels of their dark wool coats. Or in gold lockets, dangling between their breasts.

I keep it in boxes, in plastic bags, in white envelopes. My brother's perfect coil. My son's black strands, silky as when they first came in, that full head of hair, a surprise

on a baby. How common, once, the early death, a backyard cemetery lined with ornate stones. A child, gone to scarlet fever, a wife to childbirth, Spanish flu.

Longfellow's wife caught fire, it's said, sealing her children's hair in envelopes, the match she used to melt the wax, fallen in the folds of her dress.

When I was a girl I rode horses without saddles through the dry hills, clutched them by their manes—those fine tethers—to hold on.

Alphabet of the Apocalypse

Where does an end begin? Why not with *A*—Atlantis sinking back into the sea with its aquatic spires and crystal architecture.

B for herds of bison whittled down to almost nothing, drinking from the drying lake.

I don't know when the body's cells decide to give up the ghost. How they start to catapult toward decay.

Death-knell of the form, its sweet and terrible diminishment. First, decrease, then end.

Snowy white egrets, standing in a glade. Eagles, elephants, elk. The late, pink light through groves of eucalyptus.

Great green planet, formerly known as Earth. Will you end in fire? What will they call you when we're gone?

Who will be left to sit beneath
the moon's nightly glow? Who will
recall the glaciers' tall, blue countenance?

Here on Earth as it is in Heaven. But
isn't heaven a white expanse of
nothing capped with nothing?

So much for the ibex, its long, pronged horns.
So much for Italy, iguanas, the iris, the color
indigo, steeped in vats in rural India.

So much for June, month of brides
clasping cut flowers—orange blossoms, jasmine,
coral-colored roses—in their careful hands.

I've never been to Kansas or seen a kangaroo,
though once a katydid hid in my curtain,
and sang, all night, its little, virgin song.

O Lamb, O Lion, it matters little now
whether you lie together,
on the bare and ruined soil.

Mother, mountain, mammary.
No more, these founts
for mammals and mystics.

It was never enough: nectar from the orchard,
nightingales singing from the highest boughs.
Narwhals decorating the Northern seas.

Once I took a child to the ocean
for the first time. I can't forget the sound
she made, that gasp—her mouth an O.

Wouldn't it be better if we'd all stayed
pagan? Aghast, each night, at the moon,
the trembling stars?

If we quivered, still, at the unlikely
grass, the song in the river, the shimmer
on the face of cut stone.

What if we remembered the shy soul
in everything—the world shot-through
with whistle and hum.

If we sought, above all, the silence
between blades of green, the pause
inside the cricket's choir.

To touch the tender core of Things,
and tell of it. Pure pleasure.
What more could we want?

To undress the world, get close
to its shiver, rock and spore, river
and bark, the dandelion's naked stem.

Our vagabond planet, traveling
the galaxy's milky arm,
pulled by forces we can't see—

with *us*: wanderers, wanters,
those who crave. Always restless
for the next and next.

Following the x-axis
of some trajectory we can't know.
To be or not?

Which brings me here, to the window,
looking out at the acacia, blooming yellow
in the field beside my house.

This moment, the zillionth, in a long parade.
A something arising from nothing.
Existing. And sinking back, again.

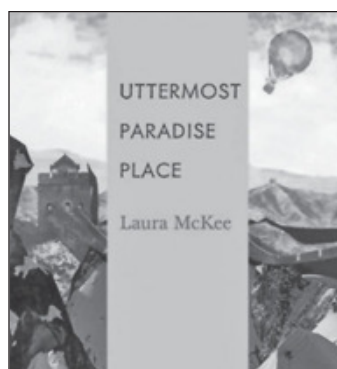
Danusha Laméris is the author of The Moons of August (Autumn House, 2014), which was chosen by Naomi Shihab Nye as the winner of the Autumn House Press poetry prize and was a finalist for the Milt Kessler Book Award. Her second book is Bonfire Opera (University of Pittsburgh Press), and she was the 2020 recipient of the Lucille Clifton Legacy Award. She teaches poetry independently, and is a Poet Laureate emeritus of Santa Cruz County, California.

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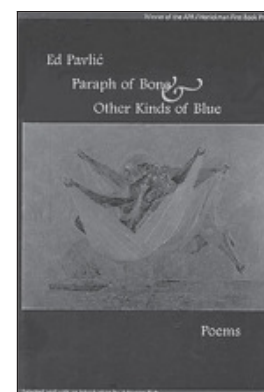
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IN THE BEGINNING

LOURDES HEUER

so little rest.

All living things must breathe.
Oocyte. Ootid. Ovum.
Heifer. Cow. The old milk snake
still shedding her skin to nest
through cloudy brille in the leaf
litter of the melaleuca.

The bony oarfish, the shiny
sea monster washed ashore,
her thousand eggs swarming
out of six-foot ovaries. They flood
the waters of the sea. Spoonbill
and loon feed on the belly full

of krill, the severed tail
and multiply on Earth.
From August to May the feral
Muscovies breed on our driveway.
They incubate their clutches
for a month, twenty minutes

a day for each hen to drink, eat,
and shit alone under the sun.
Duck was your first word.
They were everywhere.
Even when the dog flushed them
past our seawall, they returned.

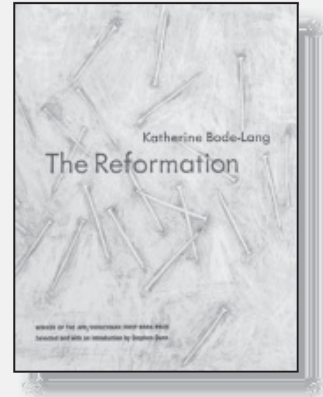
Of course, I understand
the pushback. The bedtime stories.
The midnight snacks.
Thirst and pee.
Water and water. Always
the reaving of day by night

by day. When I find you
in my bed at 2 am, I take
my pillow back, yes,
then push my nose under your nose
to breathe in what you breathe out
it is good.

Lourdes Heuer is the author of two books for children, forthcoming in 2022 from Tundra Books/Penguin Random House Canada. She teaches writing at Broward College and lives in South Florida.



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.”

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APPROPRIATION AS RACIAL HOAX

PAISLEY REKDAL

Dear X:

In 2015, *The Best American Poetry* series anthology included a poem titled “The Bees, The Flowers, Jesus, Ancient Tigers, Poseidon, Adam and Eve.” Perhaps you remember this poem, in particular the fact that it was authored by a White, male poet named Michael Derrick Hudson who published it under the name Yi-Fen Chou, the pseudonym Hudson used to get the poem taken by the literary magazine *Prairie Schooner*, which *The Best American Poetry* guest editor at the time, Sherman Alexie, then happened upon. Hudson confessed his true identity to Alexie after he learned of his poem’s anthology selection; he also confessed his use of the female Chinese pseudonym in the final published anthology’s biographical notes. Hudson wrote that he’d chosen the name only after the poem had been rejected forty times by different journals. The female Chinese name, Hudson’s note implied, made a previously unpublishable poem suddenly attractive.

You can imagine how Hudson’s appropriation of this name—one, it was later uncovered, that belonged to an actual former female high-school classmate of Hudson’s—caused outrage among Asian American writers, many who’ve seen themselves passed over by such prestigious publications as *Best American Poetry*. Their anger only increased when readers and critics argued in defense of Hudson that, as race itself was merely a social construct, it might be effectively explored through false personas, an argument that I think is a pretty obtuse diminishment of both Asian American writers and our lived experiences in the world.

I began these letters to you, X, with the working assumption that you, like most writers, are concerned about how and if to write about the lives of others through their fictionalized voices. I believe you’re concerned about the ethical risk in appropriative works the reader understands to be imaginative. I assume you are not planning the far more radical proposition of pretending to be another person through your work, even though literary history is filled with people who’ve created raced or minoritized personas for themselves, or who’ve passed their work off as genuine expressions of events and lives. Such hoaxes and fakes pop up with surprising regularity. There are fake slave narratives and bogus indigenous oral histories, there is Nasdijj and Grey Owl and *The Education of Little Tree*, there is James Frey’s fictitious imprisonment in *A Million Little Pieces*, there is the debunked *Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years*, and, most recently, there is the Canadian writer Joseph Boyden, who falsely claimed to be Métis.

But though you may not be planning to take on such a false identity, X, I want to explain to you just why such racial fakes are painful. I came across my own first hoax in an Asian American Poetry class I taught fifteen years ago at my university. The fake was named Charles Yu, and his poems were included in our class-assigned anthology of Asian American poetry from the late nineteenth century up to the 1970s entitled *Quiet Fire*. According to the anthology’s biography, Charles Yu was a Chinese student living in Chicago in the late 1930s; after a random Internet search, however, I discovered through a rare bookseller’s site that Yu was actually the pseudonym for a Jewish American editor for G. P. Putnam’s Sons named William Targ: interestingly, the same editor who rose to national prominence for buying and editing the Godfather novels. In 1941, Black Archer Press brought out Targ’s *Poems of a Chinese Student* under Yu’s name after several poems were published in the *Chicago Tribune*.

The students in my class, to my chagrin, were ecstatic. All semester long I’d fielded questions from a small but vocal minority of students resistant to taking my class in order to fulfill the university’s diversity requirement. Over several weeks these students questioned my course’s relevance to English literature, increasing my own concerns about this subject which meant, personally, so much to me but which seemed to have so few dedicated Asian American poetry anthologies for the field. *Quiet Fire* was the only historical overview of its kind I could find; frankly, I hated it. So many of the poems insulted my intelligence about racial politics in America, and they offered little opportunity for in-depth analysis for the students. I had chosen the anthology the way some of my students had chosen my course—based on market constraints and artificial requirements—and so each night before class, I’d sit at my desk, groaning as I tried to imagine how I would fake

fresh enthusiasm for my detractors who sat at the back of class, glaring into their dog-eared books. For a while, I even toyed with the idea of pretending to be White for the semester in the vague, self-hating hopes that my presumed Whiteness might validate the subject where my Asianness would only further undercut it.

“What’s the point of segregating literature unless the poems can’t hold up?” one student argued the day before midterms, holding up *Quiet Fire* with the tips of his fingers. “If it’s good literature, then we should just read it all together.”

“An excellent suggestion,” I replied. “One I’m sure our university has already taken. So how many great poems that happen to have been written by Asian Americans have you read in your literature courses?” The students looked baffled. “African Americans?” A few shrugged. “Latinos?” They glanced at each other.

“Well,” one student finally said. “None, of course.”

It was that “of course” that came ringing back to my ears upon the discovery of Charles Yu. Here it was at last, X, proof for my students that race was little more than a formulaic narrative anyone could forge. The fact that an Asian American professor had fallen for the hoax itself proved I had never been interested in literature but representation. Who knew how many other writers weren’t actually Asian American or African American or Latinx in these anthologies they were now being forced to purchase; who knew how many other, better, White writers were being ignored at the expense of politics?

Rightly or wrongly, X, their resentment throughout that semester stung. It made me feel responsible both for Yu and for the university’s diversity requirement. Targ’s fake meant I had a literature now as well as an identity to defend.

Of course, if you read the poems of “Charles Yu” closely today, you’ll see how little Targ did to hide his identity. Targ used the Yu poems to satirize and celebrate the idea of America as a racial melting pot, not really to imagine being Chinese. In his poem “In America,” for example, Yu and his friend (a mysterious Miss Jones) enter a nightclub to find “a beautiful Negress” standing onstage, singing a Yiddish lament. The poem swiftly descends into an Orientalist fantasia of racial mixing in which the “exotic” sexuality of the Black singer is exaggerated. Her skin, Yu notes, is “brown as fresh iodine, / her lips [like] coral lacquer”; she fills the entire club with “the quickening scent of [her] musk” while singing to “the beat of a tomtom.” It’s a poem that lampoons race, a fact Targ also seems aware of, as he outs himself as its author in the final stanza:

*Only in America could it occur:
This Negress passionately singing
Eli Eli Lomo Asovtoni,
The Yiddish lament
Written by a New Yorker
For a drama dealing
With Chinese Jews.*

Chinese Jews? Clearly, Targ was trying to let his audience in on the joke. I understand the likely reason Targ’s work had been included in *Quiet Fire* was that there’s a dearth of Asian American poetry written in English in the early part of the twentieth century. But the existence of such a fake in this anthology—one edited by an Asian American editor, no less—spurred me to seek out other such hoaxes. I wanted to find in these fakes a key to their mistaken racial logic, a flaw I might pinpoint to determine that there was in fact something authentic about being Chinese, or Asian, or Asian American, something that could not be faked, whose absence would be glaring to the Asian reader. But what if I found a fake that, aesthetically, I liked or that convinced me of its authenticity? What would that mean about me as a reader, and as an Asian American? What if my students, even if they expressed ideas about literature that I recognized were racist, were also somehow right? And that’s how I discovered Araki Yasusada.

ARAKI YASUSADA AND THE POLITICS OF RACIAL FAKES

Around the mid-1980s, a number of poems began appearing in American literary journals under the name Araki Yasusada. According to his biography, Araki Yasusada was a relatively unknown and deceased Japanese poet who’d survived the bombing of Hiroshima but who lost almost his entire family in the blast. An avid reader of Jack Spicer and Roland Barthes, Yasusada had sporadically published his poems in Japanese avant-garde literary magazines, becoming famous to American readers only after English translations of his work surfaced in the pages of journals like *The American Poetry Review*, *Grand Street*, and *Conjunctions*. Readers and critics, entranced by the poems, clamored for more except, oddly, no one seemed able to reach Yasusada’s estate. Kent Johnson, a poet, community college teacher, and translator of Spanish poetry, was Yasusada’s purported contact, and it was he who sent Yasusada’s poems off for publication. Rumors that Yasusada had

never existed soon began to surface, and Wesleyan University Press, which had first offered to publish a volume of Yasusada's work, quietly withdrew its contract.

All this, however, didn't stop American interest in Araki Yasusada. If anything, it made his work an underground sensation, and *Doubled Flowering: From the Notebooks of Araki Yasusada*, the only available book of his poetry to date, was later published by Roof Books in 1997. So far, no one has come forward to claim responsibility for the hoax, though its author is almost certainly Kent Johnson, the poet who sent Yasusada's work to magazines on behalf of Yasusada's "translators," and who edited *Doubled Flowering*. Johnson, at least, is the one to whom all the literary journals' fee checks were written.

The Yi-Fen Chou and Charles Yu scandals are strange, X, but you can see that there's a whole new level of insanity to Araki Yasusada, in part because of the different levels of seriousness to the poets' biographies, in part because of the authors' differing commitments to their frauds. It's one thing to pretend to be a Chinese student living in Chicago in the 1930s or to occasionally publish a poem under another person's name. It's another thing entirely to pretend having survived the bombing of Hiroshima, to claim you've lost your wife and youngest daughter in the blast, and to describe watching your eldest daughter perish of radiation sickness four years later.

For Targ and Hudson, their authors' racial identities are almost beside the point. The Chou and Yu poems aren't interested in discovering what it means to be Chinese or Chinese American, because they are personas or pseudonyms through which their authors can either get published or, in Targ's case, parody multiculturalism. If you read Hudson's "The Bees, The Flowers, Jesus, Ancient Tigers, Poseidon, Adam and Eve" (a title that accurately sums up everything that appears in the poem), you'll discover there's no reason for Hudson to have chosen a Chinese name at all, since the poem makes no reference to any specific information about race or culture, though certain readers might make much of lines like the following:

*Am I supposed to say something, add
a soundtrack and voiceover? My life's spent
running an inept tour for my own sad swindle of a vacation
until every goddamned thing's reduced to botched captions
and dabs of misinformation in fractured,
not-quite-right English . . .*

Much, that is, if you want to find Hudson's admission to being "the voiceover" buried within these lines or see the phrase "fractured, // not-quite-right English" as a racist nod to the identity he's appropriated. But if Hudson just wanted to plump his CV, Targ's point was to play a joke on his audience, a theory proven by the fact he once appeared at a Chicago book club that invited "Charles Yu" to read his poems, and he also outs himself as Yu in his memoir, *Indecent Pleasures*.

In this, Hudson and Targ are fundamentally different from Yasusada, who never reveals his true identity. Indeed, Yasusada is in fact a persona within a persona, since Johnson now insists it's another Japanese poet, Tosa Motakiyu, who was the one to invent him and who has now, rather conveniently, died.

But the fact Johnson insists upon the existence of Motakiyu at all is telling; at first, I read the Yasusada project as one of imaginative empathy, something Lionel Shriver herself might approve of, and it's become one of the longest-running attempts to fake a persona that American readers might treat as authentic. Thus the letters, the fragments, the rough drafts and translator's notes, even the shopping lists scattered throughout *Doubled Flowering*: I can see that Johnson has assembled a world from these quotidian scraps he's imagined to prove a life is at stake, a life based upon experience, violence, art, and history. Implicitly, Johnson is arguing that a specific cultural identity can imaginatively be created, and that autobiographical experience, or authentic national citizenship, aren't prerequisites for the making of transcultural art.

With the Yasusada poems, the question of race and ethnicity are profoundly important to consider, because while I might focus on Yasusada's nationality as the appropriated identity, here national boundaries also represent racial ones. Japanese racial difference is certainly one of the factors that influenced how the United States treated its Japanese American residents and citizens during the war, and how it also decided in favor of dropping nuclear bombs on Japan. Perhaps, however, you think the worst thing Johnson appropriated was Yasusada's personal experience: Yasusada offends because his identity as a war victim is fake. Still, I would argue that we must take race into consideration, as at times the poems in *Doubled Flowering* demand that I equate Yasusada's experience as a war victim with his also being racially Japanese. I can see this in his poem "Walkers with Ladle," in which a mysterious group of people Yasusada simply refers to as "they" command the poet, in English, "Don't you dare fucking walk you fucking Jap

fucker." For me, these interconnected national, racial, and traumatized identities contained within Yasusada are what make the hoax so fascinating, and a more complex form of appropriation than either Targ's or Hudson's poems.

Finally, the Yasusada poems are different from Targ's and Hudson's by the simple fact that they are, aesthetically, more sophisticated. Frankly, X, I liked Yasusada's poems. And considering what I wrote you before about there being no unbreakable link between race and the cultural products artists can produce, I have to take my aesthetic pleasure in Yasusada with unnerving seriousness; that is, I have to ask myself whether there's some larger value to these poems, regardless of Yasusada's actual identity. When I presented Yasusada's work to my class, my gut desire was to reject the poems outright, but the commitment to the fake, the sheer amount of writing "Yasusada" produced, suggests that there's more psychologically at stake for Johnson. If I'm supposed to read these poems as an American elegy for the bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or for the racist acts America committed against the Japanese on its own soil, then perhaps the fact that Johnson refuses to identify himself as the author implies that, to him, Yasusada does exist, if not in a Japanese poetic imagination, then in an American one. Johnson's silence might, then, suggest that Americans are the ones who need Yasusada to be real, to explain and perhaps be forgiven (by ourselves, ironically) for the bombings in the war.

But before I consider whether or not the poems are an apology, I want to spend time thinking about why I found the poems so appealing to begin with, especially those whose subject matter was most closely, if elliptically, tied to the poet's biography. Poems like "Telescope with Urn," "Trolley Fare and Blossom," and "Mad Daughter and Big-Bang" I found surprisingly moving, considering how they evoked personal pain without giving in to autobiographical detail or actual sentiment. For me, they suggested rather than declaimed the horrors of Hiroshima, placing me on the margins of the poem while focusing my attention instead on the poem's surreal style. "Mad Daughter and Big-Bang" might be the most successful example of this suppression of the autobiographical in service to the surreal, and it's the one I found most haunting. Here is the poem in its entirety:

*Walking in the vegetable patch
late at night, I was startled to find
the severed head of my
mad daughter lying on the ground.
Her eyes were upturned, gazing at me, ecstatic-like . . .*

*(from a distance it had appeared to be a stone, haloed with light,
as if cast there by the Big-Bang.)*

*What on earth are you doing, I said,
you look ridiculous.*

*Some boys buried me here,
she said sullenly.*

Her dark hair, comet-like, trailed behind . . .

*Squatting, I pulled the
turnip by the root.*

From its start, the poem relies upon the distressing "facts" of Yasusada's biography, beginning with the disturbing image of the narrator, a father, finding the decapitated head of his daughter in a vegetable patch, "[h]er eyes . . . upturned, gazing at [him] ecstatic-like." It then jumps to a parenthetical description of the atomic bomb detonating over the city, the head like "a stone, haloed with light, / as if cast there by the Big-Bang." When the poet asks his daughter's head what it's doing on the ground, the head replies "sullenly" that some boys buried it there, and the poet, squatting, pulls up a "turnip by the root."

These disjunctive images may feel arbitrary, but the poem soon unfolds into a coherent biography of the bomb's impact on Yasusada's family. Images of the universe's origin repeat in the poem, appearing in reference to the bomb that leveled Hiroshima, but also in the narrator's description of his daughter's hair, which trails "comet-like" behind her head. The image of the turnip at the poem's end resonates with the image of the mad daughter's head, implying the daughter has been killed by the bomb, and by those "boys" who initiated the war. Indeed, the war's effects continue to haunt her: the daughter seems to gaze ecstatically at both the narrator and the bomb, awed by its half-divine, half-natural force.

What strikes me about the poem, X, is how naturally the sublime moves into the absurd, the grotesque, the cruel. After the description of the bombing, for example, Yasusada tells his daughter that she looks "ridiculous" with her head in the ground, as if attempting to dismiss the shock of her death. And while the daughter's face and hair are described with great tenderness, the poet's reaction to them is one of indifference; seeing her "comet-like" hair, he squats and yanks the turnip/head up by the root. The

poem combines its many tones to reveal a sadness and repressed anger at his daughter's death that is, in its overall effects, astonishing.

The same surreal style is employed in "Telescope with Urn," a poem that addresses the death of another daughter, this one the infant who died in the atomic blast. The first line of the poem refers to the image of galaxies "spread[ing] out like a cloud of sperm": an image that is itself commented upon by an unnamed "observatory guide" who notes its rapid velocity. The image of the galaxies' expansion evokes the expansion of the bomb after impact, all of which contain a strange beauty for the narrator, as the third line suggests: "It is like the idea of the flowers, opening within the idea of the flowers." From here, the poem takes a more personal turn, as Yasusada recalls his young daughter "squat[ting] over a sky-colored bowl to make water." The poem finishes with this following reference to her death:

What a big girl!, cried we, tossing you in the general direction of the stars.

Intently, then, in the dream, I folded up the great telescope on Mount Horai.

In the form of this crane, it is small enough for the urn.

Like "Mad Daughter," "Telescope with Urn" uses visual repetition to link its narratives. Galaxies, observatories, sky-colored bowls, and telescopes remind me of the poet's terrified awareness of space. The galaxies are "like a cloud of sperm," which sets me up for the final appearance of the poet's infant daughter who herself gets "tossed up" like ashes or stars. The galaxies open like flowers, which reminds the poet of a monk in the act of flower arranging. Images build one on top of the other, so that the poem begins to "bloom" outward from its initial galactic image. This formal enactment of "flowering" in the poem turns sinister as I realize the final direction the poem takes: the urn containing his daughter's ashes. For me, it's impossible not to see this "flowering" of stars and child as also referencing the physical expansion of the atomic bomb after impact, its eerie and instantaneous explosion, followed by the clouds of ash it leaves. The first image of sperm becomes inextricably linked to the image of nuclear destruction. It's as if Yasusada created a child solely for the purpose of her being destroyed.

I wrote before that my gut desire was to reject these poems once I knew about the hoax. But that's not entirely true, X. My gut desire was to rescue them. And in class, it was easy to rescue these poems, because the students enjoyed discussing them. The poems gave my students difficult topics to consider, and because we could have more engaging conversations about them, I began to see these poems not just as hoaxes but as literature. I even began to wonder in what ways I should consider the hoax itself as part of the work's formal device, a fictional frame that could not be separated from the poems themselves. And in fact, it can't be. Because the reality is that, with racial hoaxes like Yasusada, the context in which the work was produced determines how it must be viewed. Unlike other creative work, the context *is* the work.

When it comes to appropriation, X, most writers, in attempting to represent an identity that is not their own, work to maintain a separation between the author's self and the subject's. In that case, the purpose of the author's imaginative work is to create a representation of an identity that signals her respect, also, for its differences. This kind of writing usually contains within it some sense of the characters being different from their author: they possess their own intentions, experiences, and private knowledge. When creating a fraudulent identity based on trauma or on a specific racial or ethnic experience, however, no such separation exists. It not only claims the representation of a subject's experience, it claims the subject's very self, suggesting there is something performative about that identity overall. But while identities are shaped through shared cultural performance, X, they are—of course—more than performance. To lose a child to the atomic bomb is not something that is performed, it is an experience that's inflicted.

PSEUDONYMS, CULTURAL FRAUDS, AND TIME BOMBS

Maybe you're wondering what constitutes writing that claims another's identity, versus writing that hides behind a name. How do you parse the sometimes fine-grained differences between hoaxes? Why are certain fakes culturally appropriative while others aren't? Plenty of writers—myself included—have taken on pseudonymous identities at times, and these identities allow us the freedom either to try out different literary forms and genres, to write in public opposition to popularly held opinions, to publish at times when our true identities would have prevented the work's publication, to sell more books to different audiences, or to keep from offending our families when we write about subjects they don't want associated with themselves. Elena Ferrante, Robert Galbraith, Richard Bachman, Agatha Christie, George Sand, George Eliot, Saki, and O. Henry are a handful of such names. But even as these authors hoodwink readers, they do not attempt to perform any specific or different identity off or on the page. Masking one's name is a form of deception, but it's a socially accepted one

that doesn't require that you or I invest the work with biographical authenticity, or a belief in journalistic truth.

There are also writers who create elaborate literary hoaxes, not just to safeguard their careers, but to challenge the publication cultures that would exclude or condescend to them. These include Ossian, purportedly the third-century author of an epic cycle of poems about a Gaelic warrior named Fingal, but who in reality was the eighteenth-century University of Edinburgh professor James Macpherson, who wanted a literary tradition for Scotland that could rival ancient Greece's. Not all long-lived literary hoaxes exploit identity stereotypes, though with Ossian I might argue that ethnic identity is at play, since Macpherson clearly saw his fake as a way to bolster Scottish nationalism. But Macpherson was not trying to write outside the boundaries of his own ethnic identity; rather, he created an idealized version of it for outsiders, one that might carry with it the same weight as more traditionally "important" cultures in the West. Macpherson, in that sense, was not stereotyping another culture, he was trying to write against English and Continental stereotypes of Scotland.

The important thing, however, is that—had he not been unmasked—Macpherson would likely have continued. In that, I think the Ossian hoax is different from frauds who want to be discovered, frauds like Hudson or Targ, who see their imposture as a joke played on naïve readers. The critic Christopher L. Miller in his book *Imposters: Literary Hoaxes and Cultural Authenticity* calls these fakes "time bombs," as they're meant to go off in readers' faces and unmask the poor judgment of editors. One such bomb was Ern Malley, a poet created in the 1940s by the Australian writers James McAuley and Harold Stewart, who collaged together quotes from Shakespeare, random phrases from books of quotations, and lines of their own poetry, all to prove how vacuous modern poetry—and modern poetry critics—had become.

Finally, there are racial and cultural hoaxes. One of the most famous ones is JT LeRoy, author of *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things*, who turned out not to be a West Virginian, sexually abused male teen and former prostitute with AIDS, but Brooklyn-born Laura Albert, a middle-aged, White female writer for the HBO show *Deadwood*. Albert was uncovered as the hoax's author in the *New York Times* when a reporter received a phone call from her boyfriend revealing Albert's "all-consuming web of deceit." Before that, however, the LeRoy hoax lasted ten years, during which time Albert wrote two novels, a novella, and a film script as LeRoy, and even got her sister-in-law to appear at literary events as LeRoy, costumed in dark sunglasses and a blond wig.

Albert may not conventionally be seen as a transcultural fake because both she and LeRoy are White, but clearly Albert trafficked in communal identities to which she did not belong. An educated, straight, and successful writer living in Brooklyn and San Francisco, Albert pretended to be from rural West Virginia, indigent, the child of a prostitute, and someone whose identity flirted with transgenderism. Worse, Albert tried to pass her persona off as someone dying of AIDS. In court, being sued by the film company that planned to produce her "autobiographical" book, *Sarah*, Albert argued that she'd been sexually abused as a child, and that the trauma from this abuse necessitated her use of a pseudonym and an identity like LeRoy's to write accurately about her experience. Whether or not Albert had actually been abused is up for speculation, but in 2000 when *Sarah* was published, not much was popularly known about transgender people, male prostitutes, or (it seems) West Virginia; it's clear that Albert relied upon these unique elements of LeRoy's identity to be unfamiliar enough that her hoax would be believed.

In that, Albert joins the ranks of a number of writers who've assumed ethnic or racial identities that are not their own. There's *The Education of Little Tree*, by Asa Earl Carter, writing as Forrest Carter, or *Famous All Over Town* by Danny Santiago, who is actually Daniel James. Likely you've never heard of this novel, but *Famous All Over Town* was, in 1983, a very critically acclaimed novel of a young Chicano man growing up poor in East Los Angeles. The author, Daniel James, however, is a White man educated at Andover and Yale who'd struggled to place his stories. With his mentors Gregory Dunne's and Joan Didion's encouragement, James, purportedly out of frustration, changed his last name to Santiago and his debut novel was snapped up. The public reception (and perception) of both Santiago and *Famous All Over Town* was, I think, pretty telling of why the hoax occurred in the first place. When Santiago's editor admitted he'd never met or talked with the author in person, he said, "We figured he was probably in prison and didn't want anyone to know." In the *New York Times*, one reviewer gushed of the novel, "I am totally ignorant of the Chicano urban experience but I have to believe this book is, on that subject, a minor classic."

Cultural hoaxes and frauds are a category of appropriation that lies well outside the norm, and for good reason: they are not meant to be read as imaginative acts of "representative thinking" but taken as real evidence of lived experience. No one questions whether *Light in August* is a novel, thus its portrayals of African Americans are fictional. Faulkner can depict Afri-

can American culture incorrectly, but the transparency of his project allows and even invites me to make that critique on the basis of his characterization, diction, plot, and style. The transcultural fraud, in comparison, tries to subvert my critique from the artistic representation to the identity itself. It suggests something similar to what my Asian American Poetry students believed: that my aesthetic values are secondary to my notions of cultural authenticity, and that my belief in the fraud signals my own lowering of aesthetic standards in favor of “identity politics.”

In that, cultural and racial hoaxes are always built on an idea of inequality, either on the unequal position the appropriated identity holds, or on the self-perception of the writer who has appropriated it. They’re also built on the idea that the racialized body is fundamentally unknown or unknowable, a common racist perception of non-White, or non-European, bodies. The poet Kevin Young, in his book *Bunk*, even argues that some of these hoaxes are successful because they tap into racist paradigms and metaphors, as he proves with his exploration of the 1835 Moon Hoax, in which the New York paper *The Sun* claimed men had walked on the moon and seen darkly menacing “bat men” on its surface, men with dark and “closely curled hair,” their faces like those “of the large orang outing”: depictions of otherness that recall the way African Americans, too, were described at the time. If the hoax depends explicitly or implicitly on racial meaning, Young notes, it’s because race and hoaxes share something in common. “Race,” Young reminds me, “is a fake thing pretending to be real.”

I think all of these reasons are why Yasusada is a Japanese victim of Hiroshima, and not a Japanese American formerly interned in an American concentration camp. To evoke an identity that appeals to our national history, Johnson relies upon American historical fascination with U.S. actions in Asia, along with the general American ignorance of Japan. Johnson imagines for the general reader an author who can act as an Orientalist cipher while also gesturing to a familiar critique of our military. At the same time, while his poems may not tap into overt or conventionally racist paradigms you or I might hold about Asians, their exposure as fakes allows a particular kind of reader to indulge the suspicion she might have of the cultural prestige Asians, or other non-White people, possess in the literary marketplace. In that way, Johnson’s poems are like Targ’s and Hudson’s: they don’t stereotype Asians so much as needle the audience that fetishizes Asian identity.

But with the Yasusada poems, I keep returning to one question: why did I like them? More to the point, if my enjoyment was in any way tied to my belief in the identity of the author, would definitively proving the poems’ details are inauthentic cure me of my pleasure? That, X, is the sad genius of these hoaxes. As with our debate around accuracy in *American Dirt*, transcultural hoaxes encourage critics to engage in unwinnable debates that only reveal the paucity of their own racial imaginations. I doubt any American can answer what it means to be “authentically” Japanese without resorting to yet more American stereotypes about Japan. And really, which should carry more weight for me, the poem and its aesthetic attractions, or the knowledge that the poem is a fake? The real issue that troubles me about Yasusada, X, is that, if I was moved by his poems, does that mean I, too, am racist?

If I were looking for ways to discredit Yasusada solely based on Orientalist inaccuracy, there’s a lot for me to find. *Doubled Flowering* contains a plethora of conventional symbols for Japan that feel catalogued from a country frozen in the late nineteenth century. Here are geishas and chrysanthemums, sumo wrestlers, references to kabuki, peonies, shakuhachis, the art of calligraphy, yukatas, daikon, temples, and monks—all references that begin to feel increasingly like touchstones for an American audience seeking emblems of an exotic and pre-modern Japan. In one unnamed, undated fragment, for instance, the poet lists:

*Two daikons
three rice cakes
one (blotted by crease, eds.) seaweed packet
4 crane eggs
empress oil chrysanthemum root best rice
Beat yourself with a serious air through the labyrinth of the market. Feign to
ignore the (blotted by crease, eds.) spirit medium of plum-colored lips
American cologne.*

The editors note that “despite the curious interjection, this appears to be a shopping list” that was “found in one of the notebooks, folded into an origami bird.” Little about this fragment, shopping list or no, feels believable. Who eats crane eggs? And who buys them based on a shopping list folded into an origami bird? The exotic cooking items placed against the reference to some anonymous “American cologne” feels forced to me, as does the hyperbolic language. In a few instances in *Doubled Flowering*, Johnson makes references to American products or perspectives of the Japanese that reveal Yasusada is aware of anti-Asian racism. In these fragments, the Japanese are suggestively subhuman to Americans, as occurs in this untitled haiku: “American circus / The Japanese midget wears the body / of a horse.” This

awareness for me troubles the Japanese symbols he then uses in the shopping-list fragment, because they pander to the Western trend of exoticizing the Asian while asserting Occidental dominance. In Yasusada’s “shopping list,” the list of Japanese goods is meant to signal their cultural difference from the American cologne, the goods themselves—both Japanese and American—a metonym for culture.

But the most damning piece of evidence occurs late in *Doubled Flowering*, in one of its appendices. Apparently in an effort to address the hoax, Kent Johnson and Javier Alvarez wrote an essay that explicitly addressed Johnson’s relationship to Yasusada and his own ideas about “the poetry world” as it relates to the avant-garde:

Indeed, it has been the common assumption for some time in the poetry world that Johnson is the “culprit” of the Yasusada imbroglio, though it is still inadequately explained how a community college Spanish teacher with little poetic talent could have produced work that caused fairly unbridled admiration amongst such a range of well-placed arbiters in the world of poetry.

The barely concealed triumph, anger, and disdain that characterize this statement unnerve me: am I to understand this project as an attempt by Johnson and Alvarez to frustrate the snobbish world of poetry publishing?

The literary critic Marjorie Perloff has noted that Yasusada’s biography and work are riddled with obvious and easily researchable mistakes, including the fact that he claims to have attended a university that had not been founded by the date of his enrollment, that his poetic influences—Spicer and Barthes—either weren’t published in Japanese or French at the time of his reading them or weren’t known outside their native countries, and that Yasusada’s and his wife’s very names are used incorrectly by his translators. If I take Perloff’s suggestion that these numerous small “mistakes” the authors make regarding the creation of Yasusada’s biography are “surely not unintentional,” that they are, in fact, clues meant to signal that the poems are not legitimate, then can I still see the work as an act of apology?

If Johnson wants to make his poems both an imaginative apology and a subtle attack on the American poetry scene—an arena from which Johnson imagines himself ejected—then race, culture, and the experience of Hiroshima are being used, and the entire project of empathy is a blind behind which the poet can hide. Yasusada is not just a transcultural hoax but a time bomb, meant to explode in the face of readers who would privilege identity over talent.

THE FANTASY OF FREE IMAGINATIONS

Yasusada was clearly meant to disrupt a publication system that Johnson believed was skewed to favor the writer of color. And sadly, *Doubled Flowering*—if only briefly—succeeded in doing so. Yasusada’s work even received a strangely ecstatic reception in the early 2000s after it was determined to be fake: critics rushed to praise what they saw as an exercise of the writer’s “free imagination.”

But if the argument that experience can be transcended is one that gets subsumed into racist ideology, X, it is also, I think, an argument that cannot always be believed, even by those who support it. When I shared *Doubled Flowering* with my Asian American Poetry class, one student asked if her classmates would equally applaud a Saudi Arabian writing as an American banker who escaped the Twin Towers on 9/11. Much of the class grew visibly upset. My point is that while many of us like the idea of being able to “freely overcome” culture and race and identity, our personal histories and experience of the world make it difficult to accept this. I can tell you until I’m blue in the face that culture or race or memory doesn’t matter, X, and that still never stops people from being wounded, even mortally so, by the ways these “constructs” divide us.

But why, again, did I like the poems? Re-reading *Doubled Flowering* now, thirty years after its publication date, I’m reminded of a summer I spent in Japan during my early twenties, in particular the afternoon in which my Japanese host family took me to visit the Hiroshima Peace Memorial. I remember creeping down the hallway of the white stone building, afraid to meet the gaze of the other visitors within. The museum looked both elegant and grotesque: large glass cases displayed artifacts culled from the bombing, along with photographs of victims, remnants of clothing, and copies of official documents. One giant diorama housed an artist’s rendering of the bombing’s effects upon life-size statues of people. I remember in particular a young girl with her clothes looking seared into her flesh, her limbs bloody and shredded.

At the end of the exhibit was a long, carpeted hall with a few televisions, each programmed to play video recordings of survivors’ testaments. The survivors spoke in Japanese, and their statements were translated below in English and French. I sat and watched the videos. Person after person spoke, some with horrible disfigurements, some with a legacy of cancer, some looking physically untouched but anguished. Here were horror and fear, grief, resignation, forgiveness, rage. *I will never forgive America, one*

older gentleman said, practically spitting into the camera. *I will never forgive a country that could commit such evil.* The glass windows behind me filled with sun, making it difficult to read the translation. I flinched and squinted. The video had captured a variety of responses to preserve some idea of what Hiroshima meant to those who had experienced it. There was no one reaction, and though I knew each person speaking was a singular identity, I also understood that the collection of responses was meant to suggest that all of them together did compose a single identity, the identity of the Hiroshima survivor, a concept that could and could not exist. *I forgive them. I despise them. I am suffering. I have made peace with it. They are evil.* There was nothing coy or elliptical in the phrases the speakers used. One after the other spoke: man, woman, man. They blended together, enraged and pained and haunted, a voice full of ruin. The effect of listening, even for an hour, was agonizing.

Agonizing in a way that the rest of the Peace Memorial could not be. The museum, to be a space anyone can enter, is toned down from rage and despair to detached elegy. Sadness—not even grief, which implies a more excruciating loss—is the emotion fostered by the museum, because sadness can be imaginatively shared. Sadness does not demand. Sadness does not, unlike fury or vengeance, blame. This is what Johnson’s poems achieve for me: his poetry is a museum of Hiroshima in which the same images recur, posed here and there like statues in a hallway. Images of space and flowers and bowls, images of courtship and longing and a distant, occasionally eerie, sense of absence. Rage doesn’t enter Johnson’s poems. Nor does an excess of sorrow. His best poems in fact subvert my feelings of grief by making them surreal and oddly comical, a subversion I liked because it didn’t implicate me. What could be confrontational was elided or kept on the margins. Johnson’s poetry is not an apology to the Japanese. It is an American museum of loss.

EMPATHY AS CULTURAL FANTASY

When a writer pretends to be from a minoritized identity, she engages in a high-wire act that knowingly plays on contemporary notions of race and power. By picking and choosing elements of her biography and subject matter, she constructs an identity to appeal to cultural fantasies, part of what formulates Loffreda and Rankine’s “racial imaginary.” In essence, X, she does something similar to what Katy Perry did in her performance of “Unconditionally”: she collapses the person of color with a particular set of values.

Applying Loffreda and Rankine’s question about what desire is on display in Yasusada’s poems, I can see that Yasusada expresses a particularly American urge to empathize with and to be forgiven by our wartime victims. I can see how much I, too, suffer with this desire. I can see that *Doubled Flowering* purports to overlook race while still depicting certain groups and bodies as traumatic subjects, that the book suggests a need for the reader to believe that an individual is merely a set of arbitrary constructs the White imagination might animate and direct. In the end, what Johnson hasn’t imagined is an actual Japanese person but an archetype that reifies, rather than subverts, my cultural delusions.

This is why the transcultural or racial hoax is the worst form of cultural appropriation, X. It is not the accidental descent into race as negative metaphor but the deliberate activation of these metaphors. I wrote before that writing is a transgressive act, but the kind of transgression I’m interested in is when the writer, by paying careful attention to the way people unlike her construct their own narratives, subordinates her own authorial entitlement to let other voices through. She does not abbreviate someone else’s experience for a private joke, turning legitimate suffering into a grenade she can lob into any public space. The transcultural hoax argues that there is something essential, and ultimately imitable, about identity. The fact that so many fakes choose the experience of being traumatized—the fake slave narrative, for example, or the fake rape memoir—suggests they see the condition of being a person of color or a woman as itself traumatic. And when critics and readers defend the fake, whether on the basis of imaginative empathy or on the basis of style or on the basis that race itself is a construct, what they defend is the primacy of the White imagination not only to respond to or represent but to inhabit other people’s narratives. The author’s Whiteness comes to authenticate the fake: I praise the audacity of her hoax, I praise the White writer for creating an identity outside her own position, where perhaps I might dismiss the work of a Black poet who writes in the voice of a long-dead Yoruban slave as an expression of identity politics, an extension of skin color rather than talent. If I praise the fake while simultaneously downplaying the work of people of color, I privilege the White writer’s imagination with having a cultural power that exceeds that of the non-White one.

But while it is easy to excoriate such frauds as racists, theirs is a racism to which I have learned we are each party. If there is a social use to the hoax, X, it is again to point out the shortcomings of a publication system in which

so few voices of color get through. The fake merely responds to our communally held prejudices; she works within the triangulation of money, identity, and representation we ourselves established and protect. The transcultural hoax reminds readers of the terrible potency of our representations; like it or not, fakes threaten to become an accepted standard of cultural authenticity for underrepresented writers in a system that either cannot or will not distinguish between them.

Sadly, fakes are inevitable when we fetishize difference without working to understand it, or to sensitively represent it in our histories. I think this is how Charles Yu slipped into *Quiet Fire* to begin with and why the book’s editor, Juliana Chang, was so embarrassed when I contacted her about the mistake. Though what anthologist, undertaking such a task, wouldn’t have desired or even been trained to believe in Yu’s existence? In her email to me years ago, Chang wrote that she had learned of the hoax after the book’s publication. By that time, it was too late; now she lived with it. The fake in her anthology had become, over time, a real addition.

Currently, the book, published first in 1998, is still in print.

Paisley Rekdal is the author of a book of essays, The Night My Mother Met Bruce Lee; the hybrid photo-text memoir, Intimate; and six books of poetry: A Crash of Rhinos; Six Girls Without Pants; The Invention of the Kaleidoscope; Animal Eye, a finalist for the 2013 Kingsley Tufts Prize and winner of the UNT Rilke Prize; Imaginary Vessels; and Nightingale.

This essay appears in her newest book, Appropriate: A Provocation, which examines cultural appropriation. It is forthcoming from W.W. Norton in February 2021.



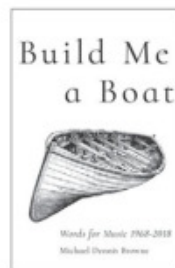
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TWO POEMS

MARILYN HACKER

Pantom with Trombone Player

The sun is a disaster waiting to happen,
The gypsy trombone player starts to blare
La Vie en Rose again, and *Hello, Dolly*.
I turn Fairouz up not to have to listen.

The gypsy trombone player starts to blare,
today, and yesterday, at noon, at seven.
I turn Fairouz up not to have to listen,
and hear my panic clanging in a cavern.

Today, and yesterday, at noon, at seven,
the sun in splendor, summer, and it scares me.
I hear my panic clanging in a cavern
where light and dark are blaring repetition.

The sun is splendid, summer, and it scares me—
the pain and disappearance I came back to,
where light and dark were blaring repetition,
replay—their names, their unforgiving absence.

The pain and disappearance I came back to,
the absent present, and that present absence
replay their names, their unforgiving absence,
their works and words dispersed in summer's rubble.

The absent, present in a present absence
remind, reproach, revoke the possible,
their work and words dispersed in summer's rubble,
their human presence strained through pain and finished.

Remind, reproach, revoke the possible
boys on scooters, girls on bicycles,
their human presence strained through sun and finished
dispersing in the glare of noon and traffic.

Boys on scooters, girls on bicycles,
messengers of an annunciation,
disperse in the glare of noon and traffic,
drag a chilly dissonance behind them.

Messengers of an annunciation
that will not be of birth or celebration
drag a chilly dissonance behind them.
The phone will ring, or there will be a letter.

It will not be a birth or celebration,
La Vie en Rose again, or *Hello, Dolly*.
The phone will ring, an email, or a letter.
The sun is a disaster waiting to happen.

Elegy

for Marie Ponsot

To bring you back, Marie, at least to me,
as we were, brilliantly not old or young,
above the ravine, on a Manhattan street, among
friends, among strangers, in dialogue, blessed were we
among women, prayer you hid for all to see
as title of what might read as a song
chafing at limits, but that would be wrong,

though there's no reading that was wrong entirely
to you, who'd give what anyone might find
your full attention, if it had been paid.
What attentive elements remained
in the half-locked box of an aphasic mind—
green words burgeoning in a green glade,
monastic multiparous solitude?

Multipara, monastic solitude
seemed sometimes like the object of desire,
or *was*. Teresa, mind inconveniently on fire,
on muleback, between convents, understood.
A convent once, a cabin near a wood
years later . . . thesaurus, notebook, the entire
sky and its swooping denizens. You require
just enough water. You forget about food . . .
Back in the world of marriage and divorce,
you observed, listened, wouldn't supervise
composed and decomposing families.
Once, with spiral notebooks on our knees,
Petrarchan sunlight getting in our eyes,
we sat for hours near the unsounded source.

For hours they'd sit near the unsounded source,
knowing despite crossed wires, it all was there—
determination, something like faith, despair
refused like blasphemy. You couldn't force
language, why would you, when it might traverse
your mind unasked. You'd lost the words to the Lord's Prayer
in English after the first stroke. It appeared
in Latin, on mental parchment—which, of course,
you back-translated, for quotidian use
in mind, at midnight, in a hospital.
A nicotine patch brought back Pascal
as gallstones brought you closer to Montaigne,
body's and mind's uncompromising truce,
that long-ago July in Avignon.

Beijing, London, Houston, Avignon,
post-war Paris; change, better or worse.
Queens childhood, many childbirths, a long divorce,
a long apprenticeship on each horizon.
There was always something to improvise on—
new alphabet, Tang statuette, red horse
on a cave wall, collaborative verse
while wine poured alongside the running dragon.
I stop the way you stopped when you composed
those tanka, riffed on your own words, weeks apart,
a bluejay, a blue ashtray, and you'd start
writing, crossing out, writing, ten minutes or
five hours on a couplet or a metaphor,
then you coughed, looked around you, notebook closed.

One day you closed the notebook, left it closed.
Was all the "after" after that an afterthought,
after what you learned, after what you taught,
the languages and strategies you used
to stay abreast, erect, alive? You posed

“with a rosetree up your spine” once, caught
in someone else’s image. But you sought
and found your own. You still sat straight. You dozed
between visitors, between internecine
battles. You hated war. You’d loved. They’d died.
After your youth of Latin verbs and wine,
you classed detritus from a battlefield.
The junk of war, the junk of love, revealed,
turning the coin, your face on either side.

I turn the coin, your face on either side:
absolute loss, absolute composure—
and wonder what we knew about each other,
if I misunderstood choices you made.
We were complicit, decade after decade,
wordsmith, itinerant, polyglot, mother.
There was no rupture, there was no closure
but absence, incomprehensible, denied.
I was across the always-defining ocean
that changed your life, that keeps rewriting mine.
Monique made what’s unbearable routine,
and gentled it, so that you could remain
your self-contained, observant self, pristine
in dialogue with all and anyone.

Your dialogue might be with anyone,
the uncertain young, infants, the wild old
—or so you hoped they’d be, taught and enthralled
by grandmothers, nuns, grocers. Free electron
at a kitchen table, on a night train,
stalled on your terrace in the March chill, shawled
and silent in a wheelchair, as you recalled
to view illuminations in your brain
that you might not enunciate again.
Misfired synapses were tragedy,
whose syntax once cohered in poetry,
whose unsaid subtexts no one will explain.
No cognate phrase parsed in this foreign rain
will bring you back, at least to me, Marie.

Marilyn Hacker’s many books include *A Stranger’s Mirror: New and Selected Poems 1994–2013* (W. W. Norton, 2015) and *Names* (W. W. Norton, 2010). She has been a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets since 2008, and she lives in Paris.

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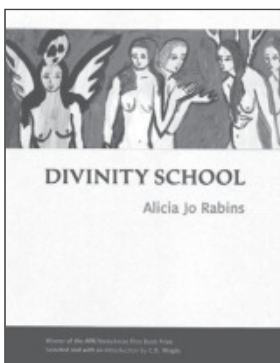
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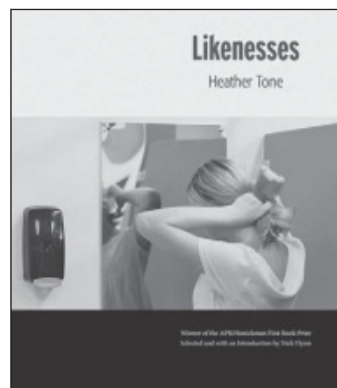
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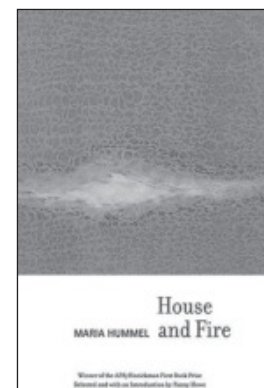
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TWO POEMS

FRITZ WARD

from Born

My oars fail me.
My arms fail you.
Ocean-lost
in all the moon
refuses to light.
How many ways
must we love
to survive
each other?

from Born

Welcome:
Here are the blanks.
Fill them in. Here are the guns.
And the alphabet.
You cry first,
then it's my turn.

Fritz Ward's poems have appeared in more than seventy publications, including American Letters & Commentary, Another Chicago Magazine, Blackbird, and Gulf Coast.

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

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

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Index of Advertisers Page

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Painted Bride Quarterly	6
The Poet and The Poem	19
Poetry Society of Vermont	12
Robinson Jeffers Tor House Foundation	19
Tom O. Jones	35
Warren Wilson College	10
Women's Review of Books	28
APR: Stanley Kunitz Memorial Prize	25
APR Subscriptions	36
APR/Honickman Books	25, 28, 36
APR/Honickman Titles	27, 35
APR/Honickman First Book Prize	12

NOTES FROM THE WILDERNESS

AN INTERVIEW WITH PHILIP METRES

by Karthik Purushothaman

A conversation with poet Philip Metres about his new collection Shrapnel Maps (Copper Canyon Press, April 2020) that takes a deep dive into the Israel-Palestine predicament, which, as the poet quotes a friend in saying, “is not complicated like a car engine, but complex like a forest.”

I first encountered Philip Metres in the 2012 anthology *The New American Poetry of Engagement* alongside Robert Bly, Bob Hicok, Yusuf Komunyakaa, the late W.S. Merwin, Sharon Olds, and my teacher Timothy Liu, among others I admired. “Testimony” (which appears in 2015’s *Sand Opera*) was the poem that stuck with me due to its bleak, dark-humored ending, with a heroic couplet rhyming “donkey” with “Iraqi,” as Metres paid tribute to artist Daniel Heyman’s “Portraits of Iraqis” through his lyrical sketch of an innocent detainee testifying about torture at Abu Ghraib. Blackened lines in the poem resemble redactions in U.S. Department of Defense reports, as well as omissions that might happen while jotting down a testimony real-time.

Although best-known as a present-day pioneer of such erasure poetry compiled in his 2011 chapbook *abu ghraib arias* and its full-length successor *Sand Opera*, Metres is as accomplished a scholar of political poetry as he is a practitioner. Just as he does over four original and four translated books of poems, Metres explores the scope of “war-resistance poetics” in two sprawling critical works: 2007’s *Behind the Lines*, and 2018’s *The Sound of Listening*. In the latter’s introduction, after meditating on Seamus Heaney’s somewhat fatalistic line, “In one sense, the efficacy of poetry is nil—no lyric has ever stopped a tank,” Metres replies by likening poetry to grassroots activism, where “change is not always visible,” heeding Rebecca Solnit’s call to write about “invisible victories.”

As a poet capable of limiting neither form nor content to a single subjectivity, Metres takes on the many dimensions—humane and inhumane—of the Palestine-Israel predicament in *Shrapnel Maps*, showcasing academic discipline, lyrical mastery, and gracious humanity in accounting for every perspective that needs accounting, to tell a story that, as he puts it, “is not complicated like a car engine, but complex like a forest.” Walking us through this forest in *Shrapnel Maps*, more than wanting to prove his point, Metres “hears the wilderness listen” (in WWII conscientious objector poet William Stafford’s words), and acting “in accordance with the larger architectures of the universe.”

I wanted to find out what exactly it is that Metres “heard” in this forest, so I sat down with him for a two-hour Zoom call. Below is a condensed version of that conversation.

KARTHIK PURUSHOTHAMAN I want to start with the length of *Shrapnel Maps*. What got you to write something that’s two and a half times the length of an average poetry book?

PHILIP METRES I think I have this maximalist impulse with my books. I said in an interview with Kaveh Akbar that I have this fantasy of a total poem commensurate with the immensity of life. In *Sand Opera*, that impulse moved beyond acting as a counterpoint to dominant narratives during the War on Terror. As the book began to take shape, I felt an internal pressure on me to include experiences around the wars, in the middle of the wars, that the wars touched and did not touch.

A similar type of pressure began to build as I was completing *Shrapnel Maps*. The only way to deal with that pressure, to encounter and bear the weight of the Palestine-Israel predicament, was a massive architecture. When Ilya Kaminsky read the manuscript version, he said, I don’t know, this seems like two books. The thought of that was absolutely wounding because, although it’s possible that it could have been two books, bringing all that matter together in a dialogic form seemed essential to me. I didn’t want, for example, “Theater of Operations,” the section about a suicide bombing, to take over our representational understanding of the larger work. That was a deep concern of mine. So I felt the need for other poems as part of the bulwark.

Of course, the book could be even longer. I was heartened by Tyehimba Jess’s magnificent *Olio* as a model, which enables us to ask, what is this 100-page limit on books of poems? It’s a commodity fiction, really, that people lose interest after a hundred pages. Although *Olio* is long, it earns its length. I hope I have earned the length of *Shrapnel Maps*.

KP When I opened the book, I was like, damn, this might take a while, but I read it twice, start to finish, each time without a break. I didn’t feel the length. And I’m glad you brought up *Olio*. Tyehimba is an amazing poet and I love his politics. *Shrapnel Maps* also reads like an anthology of stories rather than a collection of poems, although they are all in verse. “A Concordance of Leaves,” the part about your first visit to Palestine, is an epic poem. “Theater of Operations” describes a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv with poems from the perspectives of perpetrators and victims. “Unto a Land I Will Show Thee” has you talking to maps that don’t show Palestine. “Returning to Jaffa” tells the story of an elderly woman who was displaced during the Nakba. Can you give me a glimpse of your thought process on the politics around structuring your book the way you did?

PM I was trying to hit a note at the beginning, which would introduce in a soft, but persistently mysterious way, the predicament of two peoples co-claiming the same place. I wanted to find some way of entering into the work that would suggest that predicament. This book is not simply about Israel and Palestine. It’s about the larger human struggle to belong, share, and encounter each

other as neighbors, which literally means “farmer near you” (nigh-boor).

“A Concordance of Leaves” is a poem that invites the reader on a journey to this humble and yet majestic place in the West Bank, to celebrate the wedding of my sister and this man from there. There was something really grounded and personal, in which the politics was suffused rather than direct. Directly after “Concordance,” there’s a hinge poem, in the voice of the headmaster of a Jewish elementary school whom I know here in Cleveland. It needs to be there because, after spending over twenty pages in a Palestinian milieu, I want myself and the reader to confront why the state of Israel means so much to this man and others like him. In “Theater of Operations,” we enter Israel and Palestine again, through a set of contrapuntal dramatic monologues drawn on all manner of documentary sources; this enters us into the heart of pain and suffering that people cause each other.

As the book unfolds, it winds into deeper and deeper history as well. To me, there’s no way to understand Palestinian politics or narratives if you don’t understand Nakba or 1948, and we experience it through the story of Nahida Halaby Gordon, toward the end of the book. Even further, there’s “Future Anterior,” which is really trying to widen our sense of this human predicament of wanting to belong amid tightening systems of control and domination, and particularly in a place where water is hardly abundant, but where life has persisted for millennia. So there’s this larger ecological question about belonging.

The last poem, too, is a haunting poem for me. Not the poem I initially wanted to end with, but one that invites us to consider what happens when we no longer have the pain that we identify as something constitutive of who we are as human beings.

KP “The Bullet Dream.”

PM Yes. In some sense, the bullet’s removal for this man (actually, my brother-in-law) causes a kind of forgetting. And one of the great fears is, what happens when I no longer have this pain that I consider essential to who I am.

KP The title—*Shrapnel Maps*—is itself fascinating because it relates to a land and its people being defined by conflict, which is the American understanding of the Middle East. Then the poem “The Palestinian Refugee’s PowerPoint” has the phrase “a shrapneled map” describing a place that Nahida, the exile from Jaffa, is unable to return to, because she’s not able to put the land back together the way it was before the shrapnel scattered. I was struck by this idea of years of exploding metal scalding the body politic. I wonder how you reckon with this foreign object violating collective memory, history, and identity.

PM The titling of this book and the choice of cover image presented me with a bit of a predicament, which is that *Shrapnel Maps* invites the kind of orientalist reading of the Middle East as essentially a place of violence, despair, and ruin, right?

KP Right.

PM While the title has different valences—shrapnel can be read as adjective, noun, and verb. Maps of shrapnel, maps as shrapneling forces. I hope this cover image (the façade of a residential building peppered with bullet holes) is also subversive of a simplistic reading of the Middle East as equivalent to violence, terror, despair, and ruin. If you look at it carefully—it’s an incredible image by this Syrian artist, Tammam Azzam—you see first that it’s a ruined building, but the longer you look,

the more you see all these signs of life in the apertures of windows. The image itself is a portal. On the one hand, we do have to confront violence, oppression, despair, and ruin. On the other hand, other narratives complicate the simplistic story that “they have always been fighting.” Colonialism, for instance, is central to the story for Palestinians. From a Zionist perspective, there’s a story of persistence and survival. There’s a lot more behind, beneath, and erased by these imposing narratives that I’m interested in exploring.

KP I was particularly struck by “shrapnel-ed map,” the verb referring to a map physically destroyed by shrapnel, thus impossible to put back together. That was an epiphanic moment. It was in the middle of “Unto a Land I Will Show Thee,” the section in which you try to get a sense of a place from a bunch of ancient maps. It’s fascinating how many of them don’t have Palestine in them. Can you tell me more about what you learned from these antique maps?

PM I can’t remember why I first got the hunger to look at these maps, but I do recall that when my eldest daughter was going through Sunday school, she got this map to fill out, the one in the book.

KP Right, yeah.

PM It bothered me, enormously, because it was this typical Christian Zionist view of the land. A map is an imposition as much as it is a description. Edward Said thinks a lot about geography and the imagination in *Orientalism*, and this critique of cartography is part of the overarching critique of Empire. I hope when people read *Shrapnel Maps*, they are not only thinking about the deeply-embedded particulars of that place (Palestine/Israel), but also thinking about the ways in which Empire and human endeavor have been about erasing the lived experience of peoples, including places where we ourselves live. Like here in University Heights, Ohio, I don’t know the history 50, 100, or 200 years ago. I’m a settler colonialist, sitting in this space, and my ignorance precisely illuminates that for me.

KP Speaking of Said and *Orientalism*, I’d like to briefly segue into your scholarly work. One thing that’s fascinating about you is the militant desire to be self-critical and aware of the limitations of one’s subjectivity, which is crucial for an artist let alone a scholar. I feel like scholarship, nonetheless, comes with a certain finiteness or concrete clarity, whereas poetry can dwell in ambiguity. Do you find that the need for clarity interferes with the creative process, or does poetry open the academic up to wider horizons?

PM I think the questions in which I was most interested in scholarship were poetic problems I hadn’t worked out. I needed models to understand how writers can write about war distant from the scene of conflict. My political awakening was all around the Persian Gulf war, the first Iraq war of the 1990s. Seeing the whole institution of journalism subsumed by a hyper-patriotic act was eye-opening for me. At that time, the issue was censorship and lack of information, not disinformation. My scholarship considered not only what happened during that war, but also how artists confronted that lack of information, as a way to answer for myself how I might write poetry which could act as a truth-generating machine at a time when journalism wasn’t providing that. I had a passionate fury as I went through the library stacks trying to find out what happened, and whether there were any poems confronting this silence, this cover-up. In all of my work is also this fierce hunger to explore what’s difficult to understand,

or hidden, or marked by all manner of disagreement or disinformation.

So, my scholarly, critical urge meets my poetic urge. Even though the writing comes out different or serves different ends, my scholarship was always, in the back of my mind, an attempt to help me find models to write the books that I have been able to write.

KP That makes me think about what my inquiry is, what I want to accomplish in poetry as well, and what’s the connection between the two, which is what drew me to your theoretical work *Behind the Lines: War Resistance Poetry on the American Homefront Since 1941*. In it, you talk about “resistance poetry” having to be a “dialectic between visionary language and pragmatic didacticism.” How does this dialectic manifest in your poems?

PM I suppose the short version of the answer is, it’s tricky. On the one hand, I have tried to resist the impulse to prove and to convince. At the same time, that’s part of what happens in my work. There’s an argument in *Shrapnel Maps*, about how we might approach some of these incredibly entrenched and difficult conflicts and places. The visionary language thing, that’s the easy part—the Darwishian leap into the mystical connection that connects us all. Or it’s easy in the abstract, until we start talking about power, resources, and trust. But pragmatic didacticism is about dealing with the predicaments that the visionary aspect sometimes can’t touch. Both are necessary: we need to deal with reality as it is, and also have a vision for a future outside of it.

KP Also in *Behind the Lines*, you write, “war-resistance poems that test the limits of lyric poetry—extending the lyric through use of narrative sequencing, collage, disjunctive techniques, dialogic structure, multiple voices, documentary sources, discursive heterogeneity—offer a re-visioning of the possibilities of poetry engaged with the political realm.” I feel this could be the thesis statement of your career. How significant is the practice of such a form to you as a poet?

PM It seems frighteningly accurate in light of my work thus far. That dissertation clarified for me what I knew intellectually, but could not yet perform or execute. Coming to this realization was the culmination of a long period of trying to understand how other writers were doing this work. I had always thought that the beauty and the limit of the lyric poem was that it was just one voice, you know? What I thought could be a way forward was something akin to what the epic provided to the long history of poetry, and what the 19th-century novel did in the hands of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, enabling the great debates to come together in that space; co-exist, in a way, to use a word that has a political valence too. A radical thing happened in *Sand Opera* when I put the testimonies of the prisoners next to the words of the perpetrators. That was a moment of electricity, you know? Where those voices and human expressions of being were not coming together, I could put them together.

KP Even in *Shrapnel Maps*, there is something transcendental about the juxtapositions. For example, in “The Palestinian Refugee’s PowerPoint,” the exiled septuagenarian’s remarks are coupled with those of students who say such things as she doesn’t “look like a refugee” since she’s fashionable, and reading these two perspectives together is a “lost in translation” moment that facilitates greater understanding. Realizing how profound this achievement was to me as a poet led

me to wonder how meaningful it would be to a non-poetry audience. How important is it for the reader to grasp the form’s ingenuity to enjoy the pleasures of what it contains?

PM One of the things I wanted for *Shrapnel Maps*, which perhaps was a limitation in *Sand Opera*, was to reach more people, including those who may not go to poetry for ways of understanding, and others who may have different views of Palestine and Israel. I want to stage *Shrapnel Maps*. I want people to experience these voices. I don’t need anyone to understand the base and superstructure of the work. I want them to feel it. Sometimes, conceptual poetry is less appealing to me because I understand it on the level of intellect, but I don’t have the possibility of a metanoia, a conversion—that’s what’s important to me, and not how fancy my poetics are. And this happened with *Sand Opera* too, people having emotional responses to the text, having to reflect on their responses, and maybe changing their minds in the process. People meet a text where they are, and while I’m not a strict relativist, there is space for different imaginings of the work. I relish that. I think great work has a kind of durable mystery to it. And I don’t want people—this comes back to the pragmatic didacticism—to think I’m pushing them. I want to be accompanying them.

KP One such conceptual poetic form with which you have walked many readers through the war on terror is the erasure poem, which I believe can also be called a palimpsest?

PM In some respects. It’s all about layering textuality, which becomes a metaphor for layering histories.

KP Exactly. Even this morning, I was reading about how Rumi’s classic “Beyond the field of rightdoing and wrongdoing . . .” is an erasure because the original text included “Islam” in it, and Coleman Barks seems to have translated a fraction of the poem into its popular form. Add that to the exclusion of Islam from everything good, coupled with deliberate inclusion in counter-terror narrativizing. You applying the erasure poem to this context that intersects with redacted CIA material from Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo was a masterstroke. Even *Shrapnel Maps* gets its thesis through a redaction of a page of Mark Twain’s *Innocents Abroad*, giving us this great line: “I must unlearn a great many things concerning Palestine. I must begin a system of reduction out of so large a history.” Can you give me a brief history of your engagement with erasure poetry?

PM I did a review of a book called *Nets* by Jen Bervin, an erasure of Shakespeare’s sonnets, published by Ugly Duckling in 2004. That was a lightbulb moment for me. I thought, what would happen if you put this in the political context?

KP Right.

PM Because Shakespeare is Shakespeare, you know? The stakes are lower. But what if I applied it to texts that had political consequence? Because in myself, I felt this self-erasure, but also I witnessed and felt the erasure of Iraqis during the Gulf War. That was a persistent problem that I wanted to explore and confront. And if you’re reading poetry, you must be aware that erasure exploded . . .

KP Yeah!

PM To the extent that a former student and a brilliant writer, Chris Kempf, was reading the manuscript of *Shrapnel Maps*, and saying drop the Twain

erasures, this is an MFA assignment. It's not interesting anymore. Get rid of it! Besides, the form is now so ubiquitous, it's no longer subversive. It became an invitation for me to ask, am I pushing as hard as I can? It's not surprising that Twain is a bigot. Everybody knows that he was a product of his age. What he said about Arabs, he said about Jews as well. But this phrase—"I must unlearn a great many things I have somehow absorbed concerning Palestine"—I ended up keeping is so amazing, in that he himself was thinking about the fact that he didn't know much and needed to unlearn what little he knew. To me, that moment of recognition that all writers are in fact . . .

KP Seeking?

PM Thinking through this predicament, yeah, even though he fell into all the traps that we as 21st-century politically-minded people would recognize. Or, more likely, we too are falling into them and we don't know what they are yet. I was neither trying to renovate Twain's reputation nor disparaging him as another knuckle-dragging bigot. The interesting thing for me is not to ironize texts, but to wrestle with them and discover something I don't know.

KP I feel like you rescued him in a way by salvaging the most profound line from a page full of, you know, fucked-up statements, and it turned out to be the one grain of truth you needed to glean. This action defeats and rescues Twain at the same time.

Speaking of old white men, you quote Yeats in your theoretical works *Behind the Lines* and *The Sound of Listening*—your first post-Trump book—"the quarrel with others is rhetoric and the quarrel with yourself is poetry." What are your quarrels with yourself?

PM I mean, we are always not just ourselves. Our being, our identity, is precisely this wrestling. That's elemental to who I am. So, Yeats's quote almost became a mantra for me. I think what it says is, the poem is the site in which the self encounters the otherness of self and the self of others. Whatever we think is reality will come into question through this encounter. And that goes back to the Rumi phrase you mentioned before. Although Coleman Barks does enact a kind of Christianizing of Rumi, he also captures something in that spirit as well. Rumi has a great anecdote in which he's knocking on the door of heaven, do you know that?

KP I don't, but I'd love to.

PM Rumi knocks on the door of heaven. God says, "Who's there?" Rumi says, "It's Rumi!" and God says, "It's too crowded, go away." Then Rumi knocks again. God says, "Who's there?" and Rumi says, "It's you!"

KP Ha ha!

PM I love that widening sense of being rather than limiting ourselves to the nodes of identity. My father is Lebanese-American. He was a Vietnam veteran, and he's Catholic. My mom is of Irish and German descent. I'm the son of someone who fought in a war. My parents are both psychologists. They both brought me up in a religious tradition that has not been always as joyful and life-giving as maybe [laughs] it could have been, given its core ideas of love. There's me as an Arab-American walking around a predominantly Jewish Orthodox neighborhood, and encountering myself in them and them in myself. There's me, in these poems, struggling with my dad as a warrior, and myself as someone who has never held a gun. Me trying to engage with people who have very

different ideas of what's right and who belongs where. I like poetry that models the discipline of wrestling with the limits of our egos and senses of the world. That's why I have always loved the term "jihad." You could say Yeats is a jihadist. He recognizes that the truest war is the one over oneself.

KP You have nicely set up my next question. In *The Sound of Listening*, you say the scariest thing you ever wrote was, "Sometimes I'm afraid I'm carrying a bomb; that I'm a sleeper and I don't know when I'll awaken." Cut to *Shrapnel Maps* in which we get the first-person account of a suicide bomber. Was that you confronting your fears?

PM All of us who have imaginations and consciences, when in an airport, we go, "Do I have something I shouldn't have?" The guilty conscience has a sort of comedy in it; sometimes, people laugh at that line. But there's also that very real reality that Frantz Fanon describes so well, that we internalize the sense of who we are from the other more powerful than us, leading us to think, "Maybe that's who I am."

KP This is what Althusser called *interpellation*, right?

PM Yes, Althusser. When someone believes you're a monster, and treats you like a monster, soon you begin to act like one. To call it "the Israeli-Palestinian conflict" is deeply deceptive. Palestinians are a stateless people: living under military occupation, or as second-class citizens in Israel, or as refugees and exiles. Israel's economy is 26 times larger than Palestine's. Their army is among the strongest in the world. They have nuclear weapons. Yet to advocate for Palestinian human rights and freedom, I felt I had to confront suicide bombings—not to rationalize them, but to enter into their tragic dimension.

KP One thing I liked about *Behind the Lines* was you urging readers to go "behind the lines" of poets and meet the activists, community organizers, and even whistleblowers during war or in a movement. In *The Sound of Listening*, you cite the human microphone at Zuccotti Park during Occupy as a form of political poetry itself. In *Shrapnel Maps*, you dedicate tens of poems to such activists, but I particularly remember this poem titled "The Dance of the Activist and the Typist" that starts with the great line, "she inserts the ink ribbon of herself between the black roller of history," about the grace with which an activist puts her body on the line. I recognize some names—Darwish, of course, American poet Fady Joudah, and Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai. There's Nahida Gordon, the woman exiled from Jaffa as a 9-year-old in 1948. Also, there was a man throwing himself in front of a bulldozer to stop it from tearing down his house . . .

PM Ezra Nawi.

KP Yes, Ezra! Can you go "behind the lines" of *Shrapnel Maps* and talk about the activists whose work might have influenced the verses?

PM I think the keenest expression of the political is through intimate connections with people. Fady Joudah is a friend whose many conversations over a decade-plus of friendship informed the book in a profound way. There's Deema Shehabi, another friend and poet, to whom I dedicate "When It Rains in Gaza." So many incredible Palestinian Americans who, every day, by their very existence, testify against erasure. There's Jerry Isaak Shapiro, who has a totally different perspective and taught me to rethink the idea of what it means to be a Jewish nationalist, and the

history where that comes from. I make spaces in the book for these people who testify to a truth that I can only understand through my relationship with them. And of course, there are activists whom I wanted to lift up as models of justice-seeking and peace-making—like Emad Burnat, the guy behind *5 Broken Cameras*, the non-violent protest in the West Bank village of Bil'in; Ezra Nawi, this amazingly outspoken queer Jew who feels Arab and speaks Arabic; Huwaida Arraf, who co-founded the International Solidarity Movement; Rabbi Arik Ascherman, who works with Rabbis for Human Rights. These are the relationships in which the book finds its grounding, and it offers the reader a way out of the toxic limitations of identity.

KP Last question. In *The Sound of Listening*, I love that you point out that you had been resisting American imperial violence decades before #Resistance. Personally, I resist confinement to ideology and immunity to suffering—sometimes, I push myself to suffer emotions to resist desensitization. In the spirit of resistance sans the hashtag, personally and as a poet, what do you resist?

PM In some respects, the journey between my two critical books is between resistance and listening, which is to say the term "resistance" ceased to have the significance it had for me when it became a Democratic hashtag to oppose Trump. Trump is a symptom as well as a problem, and Biden (though I will vote for him) will not be a solution; unfortunately, his presence may make it more difficult to make transformational social change. At the same time, I don't want our activities as artists and human beings reduced to simply opposing. Slavoj Žižek talks about how, if we're limited to dissent or oppositionality, we are giving up the game from the start. So, I'm deeply interested in imagining other ways of being in the world, of making another world.

Going back to your earlier question about scholarship, one of the things that was so joy-inducing to me was going through stacks at Indiana University's library and finding William Everson's hand-printed books created in the Civilian Public Service camps, where pacifists were producing art while doing alternative service as conscientious objectors during WWII. Feeling those books and knowing that they were involved in a truly utopian project—being pacifists during WWII—which is almost an absurdity, right? They wanted to leave some mark of the vision of a human being that didn't involve killing, dreaming of another way of being in the world. That's what I want to get to.

As a writer, I know what's familiar, so I'm always asking, how do we resist our tendency to settle for the known? I want to keep growing, so I need to surprise myself, confront myself, and open myself. In jihad, there's the war, then there's the peace. Maybe more than the war with oneself, finding this peace is the ultimate jihad.

Karthik Purushothaman is a poet from Chennai, India, who now lives in New Jersey. Currently finishing his first collection, he has been nominated for the Pushcart Prizes and Best New Poets anthologies, and has had poems and essays in (or forthcoming in) Boulevard, Hyperallergic, Rattle, Subtropics, The Baffler, The Common, The Rumpus, and The Margins, among other places.

LEST I FORGET THEE

GERALD STERN

Ignoring the still waters
and the kingdom of Babylon
some call America
I practice my different strokes
in the three river systems of Pennsylvania
and once in a wool bathing suit
at the far end of the Steel Pier
a city block away from the safe sand
and my two uncles buried there
except for their noses.

Still waters also
in the quarry off Route 32
where our cars and bikes
lined up in the dirt
beside the concrete,
but there was no Babylon,
no one there mourning for their village,
only naked bodies leaping from rocks
and either hugging the shore
or swimming madly the half-mile or so
into the tall grasses
on the other side,
me among them.

And since there was very little music
we gathered around one of the tapes
sharing the sound until we dove back in,
but I no longer heard it
as I approached the grasses
though I heard something else.

Gerald Stern's many books of poetry include Galaxy Love (W. W. Norton, 2017); Divine Nothingness (W. W. Norton, 2014); In Beauty Bright (W. W. Norton, 2012); and Save the Last Dance (2008). His honors include the Paris Review's Bernard F. Conners Award, the Bess Hokin Award from Poetry, the Ruth Lilly Prize, and four National Endowment for the Arts grants. In 2005, Stern was selected to receive the Wallace Stevens Award for mastery in the art of poetry.