

# The AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW

“Every one of us is important, and I want to wear the crown; I want to mind the brilliant exception; the brilliant expectation that the regard with which I give myself to others, is not shortchanged; is not a testament to sorrow or to slight, but an endless attraction to everything and nothing; who doesn’t know the capacity of their heart; its unbearability; the grace with which it exhausts in on itself; as an accordion, the sureness of its belief; its because and its inhibitions”

—UMANSKY, p. 34

MARCH/APRIL 2021 VOL. 50/NO. 2

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## YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA & LAREN McCLUNG *TRADING RIFFS TO SLAY MONSTERS*



APRWEB.ORG

PLUS: KIMIKO HAHN · VICTORIA CHANG · GEOFF BOUVIER · ELEANOR WILNER



*The American Poetry Review*

and

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the winner of the

2021  
APR/HONICKMAN  
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**NATASHA RAO**

*Latitude*



The APR/Honickman First Book Prize is an award of \$3,000 and publication of a volume of poetry. Natasha Rao's *Latitude*, with an introduction by Ada Limón, will be published in September 2021, with distribution by Copper Canyon Press through Consortium.

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

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# *from* **TRADING RIFFS TO SLAY MONSTERS**

**YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA  
AND LAREN McCLUNG**

---

Give & take is how the great sun sets  
& the moon rises, how beloved Venus  
glows there as if she never came too close

to the sun, & as if Mercury is not a hunk  
of metal fused by indescribable brightness.  
Indeed, give & take is how our planet

moves & breathes, & we at the top  
of the food chain hardly even notice,  
waiting for horses to tell us about a wave.

Those who love the winds of time  
know one another the way horses know  
first by smell, or by the same way trees

breathe pheromones in the air to signal  
rain or a pest arriving from a distance.  
We have forgotten how to listen

to planetary clues—water blooms  
with algae, or, you're forgetting, Mercury  
in the horizon is first to carry news.

I sit here, thinking like a poet, asking,  
Why is there water & oil under earth,  
& does nature always have a reason?

Liquid tonnage balances the planet.  
Tectonic plates glide over each other  
or buckle, raising earth. I stand here,

promising ghosts who came before,  
who know weight of a sledgehammer  
anchoring one's shadow to the floor.

Remember those days we stood together  
in Washington Square by the fountain  
where the Lakota taught us the true

spirit of water? The medicine man  
held a prayer stick made of antlers  
& plumes of goose & raven feathers,

months before the pipeline leaked oil  
into wetlands, mucking up Dakota's  
wildlife & threatening tributaries.

It hurts me to say, but I feel Flint,  
Michigan, where water flows yellow  
& old lead pipes leach bitter residue

continuing to steal true hard futures  
of those not yet born, where my cousin  
Beatrice died years ago of breast cancer.

I wonder if she revisited Bogalusa's  
twilit days when we were teenagers,  
& I read "No, no, not night" to her.

Do all poets love a Beatrice, I wonder,  
we sing to even after she's gone?  
Somehow, it's true, the green is worn down,

even as spring turns to summer & oaks  
are all leaving & cardinals are singing  
but I know what terrible beauty's to come.

Last night I walked in the dark under Venus  
past woods on the right & the left,  
where something was watching me think.

Fear rides the eluding hippocampus,  
& dare comes as mountain lion, viper,  
malady unknown to humans, as polio,

which came for the poor & the rich—  
for beauty, hobo, merchant, or future  
president of these United States of

America, as FDR, held tall at a podium  
by an iron brace, a big smile, & witty  
silver tongue on early fireside radio.

I miss those bygone days I never knew,  
this melancholia for an America buried deep  
in the gut, an idea my father taught me.

Wasn't it Baudelaire who suggested a poet  
has no allegiance but to the work of art?  
No country besides the heart? It's hard

to shake the feeling of place you carry  
inside you, even when the truth comes clear  
as looking in a room of mirrors of the mind.

My face is in a chrome rearview mirror,  
& I see the road ahead & behind too.  
I'm still on my way to Warm Springs,

Georgia, where FDR built a retreat  
for those afflicted by polio—no blacks  
allowed—before our soldiers fought

under the same flag. Now, how far is it  
from where they shot Ahmaud Arbery  
in early light? I smell Christmas pines.

True, not much has changed, maybe,  
when we shed light on those deep southern  
minds, when two grab rifles as if to chase

a deer paused for a drink of water. Look,  
the clay has gone red. How do we restore  
justice at a time like this when men in masks

wait in a line that wraps around a gun shop?  
The future looks grim. In today's *NY Times*  
I read a letter to the left—a call to arms.

I am blessed not be angry at some hot-blooded fortuneteller still half-lost, gazing up toward the cosmos, dumb-struck by this monstrous hourglass. One stares up like a large red rooster as a hawk circles overhead, swirling down, & the prey cannot take its eyes off the bloody circling hawk. Forgive me for this damn red rose in my lapel.

I've never been one for red roses, but Hitler would paint their heads tilting up & down from the stems. Imagine the world had Vienna not told him to give up on true art. Instead, think of Lee Miller's photograph as she bathes in the dictator's tub, taken while he burned in a garden outside a bunker. She staged his portrait behind her, a white marble nude on the vanity, her muddy boots on the mat.

No, I do not come with a beaten suitcase stuffed with outdated medical journals to later cut & paste into fantastic animals & creatures longing for an anti-world after WWI. Love, go & ask the new Kiki on our city block. This isn't my suitcase.

Look at all the unusual paraphernalia. Here's a treasure, but these pictures are scary. I think this is Max Ernst's.

Remember the ballet of birds & sea monster costumes by his familiar, Dorothea Tanning? Before they met playing chess, she painted a self-portrait partially nude, *Birthday*, 1942, where she's about to shed the chimera of her dress, royal purple silk & gold sleeves, her skirt made of sea grass. A winged monkey at her feet. She gazes toward some somber room, about to walk through many opening doors behind her.

When the circus rolled into a city or town on greased wheels of hilarity, taboo, brag, & the forbidden, wagons groaned, & sideshows drew us in: a bearded lady, an armless man who penned fancy notes with his toes for fifty cents, a boy with angel feathers on his chest. Now I wonder what viruses other than the common cold marched in as elephants & monkeys stepped to a drumbeat.

It could be the magician relies heavily on the one he saws in half, lady in red born from a flaming torch who floats now before our eyes. He spins her for the crowd who watches close to catch the sleight of hand. She laughs as he lowers her into the box.

Surely, she's the distraction from the secrets he performs & she keeps, a magical mystery tour, of sorts, but, the world wants to be deceived.

The smallest circus you'll ever see is the princess in a tutu on a white stallion, the saddest clown & his granddaughter, a high-wire walker,

& the mermaid in a tall glass bowl. The whole town has to get a look, men & women pushing boys & girls aside. The sheriff & the preacher elbow their way in, & a throng of old sailors pass a flask, conjuring obscene tales of sirens sunning on rocks in sea mist, & origin of pox.

When giant battleships rolled down a river to dock, fellas in dress blues drunk on piss & pep pills would shake hands with gals parading themselves on the piers, in short dresses, their curls fashioned with hairpins & false hope. But love couldn't last a week when ships pulled out, so the trick, a two-handed handshake—one on the elbow to check for bad blood.

Nero plays his big long yellow ivory comb & a piece of paper stamped with tiny blue & red stars. Look out! He has his smartphone again, which is a hundred times smarter than he is, clutching it like a hamburger. Now, he looks as if in deep thought. Lord, please help us. He's getting ready to undercut any decree before him, to enact a new tax break for the rich. Ladies, he has that look in his eyes.

The Emperor fell for *pueri delicati*, sweet delights, & took a eunuch bride, Poppaea's look alike, to atone the murder of his wife embalmed in spices, acacia, thyme, lavender, cedar, rose & mint. On their wedding day, the mistress of the wardrobe dressed the Empress in delicate orange leather slippers & a gown made of fine threads carried out of China on the Silk Road. Upon his death, Nero's child bride gave him a ring depicting the Rape of Proserpina.

Eunuch or royal pony held in an emperor's arms he wasn't Marco Polo returning from China declaring more than noodles made into pasta.

Pardon me, L, for getting us on a crooked path. But since we're in Italy now, these hard days, I'd rather think of Dante's *Inferno*—the City of Man. Muddy or dusty, depending on the sky, my feet ache in these boots on this lost road, but pain will never force fumes of hades into the gut.

'Sef, walk lightly there undisturbed by shades, even if a little cockeyed now. I'll walk beside you, if I may. I keep a photograph I took of you standing on a lookout of Castle Malaspina where Dante stood in exile to think as he wrote the cantos. Below the quarry Michelangelo mined for stone carved into the giant slayer. Look, Dante places Moses in the first circle. Now, Papa says there is no hell. May this give rest to those dying, still aware.

---

*Yusef Komunyakaa's books of poetry include Neon Vernacular, for which he received the Pulitzer Prize, Pleasure Dome, Taboo, Talking Dirty to the Gods, Warhorses, Testimony, The Chameleon Couch, The Emperor of Water Clocks, and Everyday Mojo Songs of Earth. His honors include the William Faulkner Prize (Université Rennes, France), the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, and the Wallace Stevens Award.*

*Laren McClung is the author of Between Here and Monkey Mountain (Sheep Meadow Press, 2012) and coeditor of Inheriting the War: Poetry and Prose by Descendants of Vietnam Veterans and Refugees (W.W. Norton, 2017).*



# IT HAS THEM WITHIN ITSELF AS AN IMAGE IN A MIRROR

GINA FRANCO

nature of the hour:

the line marks the wound  
in the art of the frame: first things make

second

things, then minutely, last things and

no-longer-things: this be/coming  
the unseen, the shadowland

threat by way of remove,

this infinite

regress from the center towards the darkening exterior  
that marks further and further the outsider in

the mirror

of the border: for that is the dream of the frame:

home/coming

for some

but not every: you with but not among

us: *give*

*us this our:*

(in the feed in

the applications in the windows of the cell

phone, images light their mirrors: drawn

in the same thick dark

marker: a kid scrawled grid

—the fence | the foreground—

slashing up scant stuff in the otherwise bare room: a toilet:

the still

at the time said

children: a door: [locked more often than not])

*Gina Franco's recent book, The Accidental, winner of the 2019 CantoMundo Poetry Prize, was published by the University of Arkansas Press.*

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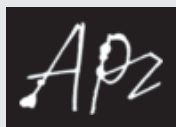
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# TWO POEMS

## JENNIFER MILITELLO

---

### Machine Religion

*When they commanded the network to produce images of barbells, they discovered something strange . . . In the "mind" of a neural net, a barbell was a material object with a human hand and wrist attached. —Steven Levy, Wired Magazine*

Jesus is a lyric poem.  
Jesus is a lyre or  
liminal force. Jesus  
is a lord quiet and  
like a lamb. Jesus  
is a ham sandwich  
no one eats. Inside  
us, he pleads against  
the devilish will. Inside  
us, his illness spreads.  
Inside us, we widen.  
Inside us, we believe.  
Jesus incites us to  
violence. Jesus is  
a violin. Jesus has  
a rhythm. Jesus is  
a holy instrument.  
Inside us, his open  
E string pleads

### The Introvert's Lament

One person I mimic. One person I triptych.  
One I travel or tromp, trod or stone.  
One person I misunderstand. One person,  
I am. One's voice I mistake for an engine  
in the night, purring, calling me home.  
One I keep cupped in the palm of my hand  
until I come undone. One I run with  
until we are one. One I trip up. One I stun.  
One I keep like a harvest I reap or a reason  
to be gone. One I alienate. One I earn.  
One I lasso, a sun. One learns with me,  
what to become. One grows stern as we  
grow numb. One blossom. One brawn.  
One I call. One I count as close to none.  
One's look I mistake for a version of light,  
tricking me, leaving me cold. One has  
the face of a lion, and I roar. One has  
the profile of a mother, and I cringe.  
One whimpers from its cage,  
where I have not fed it enough.

~

Once you collect them by the hundreds,  
you lose track. They leave footprints like  
visitors in the snow; their noise and wants  
leave soot, exhaust. You pile them to make  
them small. You fold them to make them  
young. You quiet them with a *shoosh*.  
They travel miles to find your lair. They  
dig their own holes there in which to live,  
burrows intricate and woven and deep.

You call into them, hands cupped to  
your mouth. You call them each by name.  
You block up the exit. You swear on your  
love. You smoke them out. Their clothes  
crowd your line. Their wheels squeak.  
They eat you out of house and home and  
drink the cupboards bare. They take your shape  
for a puppet. They take your memory for  
their own. They wear your clothes, whether  
they fit or not. They comb your hair or

knot it up. Their names sound like rooster  
calls in your mouth, too early, too loud,  
too sharp. Their leaves change color and fall  
from your arms; they are camouflaged  
and so scare you when they move. Their  
jaws are steel traps from which you starve.

They storm without lightning and ocean  
without sand. They are grand in their thinking,  
but small in their ways. They are tied  
to the bodies they'd rather forget. Speak  
to them and they will empty. Whisper  
to them and they will shout. They sit  
for days in the room of a mind that is  
really a screen feeding them naught.

~

One person I light like a match. One I  
fasten like a latch. One I covet like a catch  
or fossil or fuel, futility or egg-hatch.  
Lit from within like a bomb falling fast. Lit  
from without like an outcast. They gather  
at your door like insects zapped, electric  
and eager to ignite, buzzing around  
the bulb, hardly likely to survive.

---

*Jennifer Militello is the author, most recently, of The Pact (Tupelo Press, 2021) and the memoir Knock Wood (Dzanc Books, 2019), winner of the Dzanc Nonfiction Prize. She teaches in the MFA program at New England College.*

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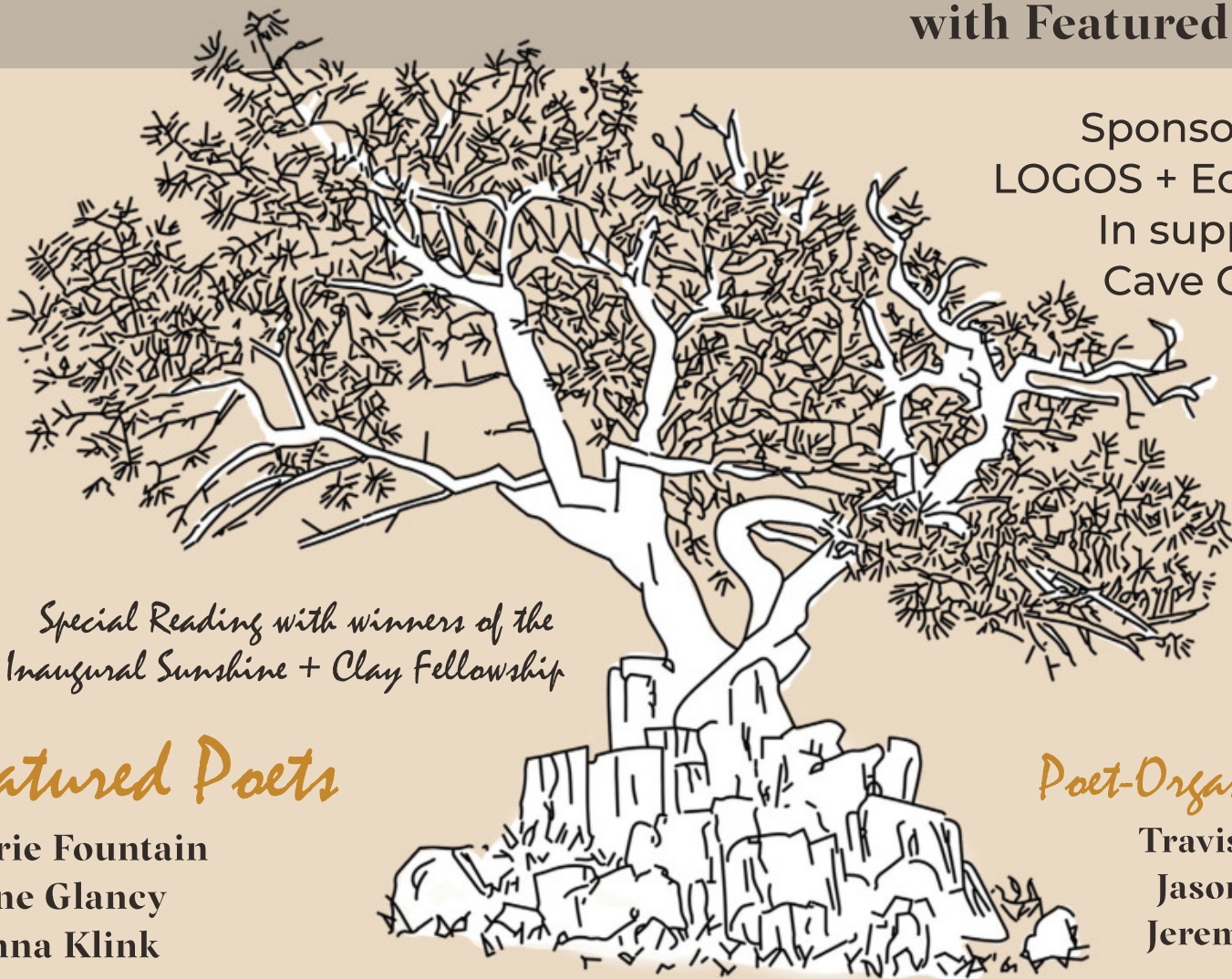
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# THE ZUIHITSU AND THE TOADSTOOL

KIMIKO HAHN

---

Yes, a toadstool, I told her. A poet friend was keeping me company while I hemmed a skirt. *It's like when I see a poem that's around fourteen lines, unconscious expectations are set off: the poem is probably a lyric on the theme of love and probably turns like an argument—which is to say, I expect a sonnet.* So—here I looked up from stitching—*what expectations might be prompted when you see a zuihitsu?* She replied, *But a toadstool?* I said: *Well, just as a fungus is not an animal or a plant—it's its own species—the zuihitsu isn't poetry or prose.* She picked up my seam-ripper and taunted, *So, where does that leave you—a thousand years after Sei scribbled her random thoughts? If you leave the definition at “toadstool,” how can you know if you've ever really written a zuihitsu?* I decided I should look at what have passed for definitions. She handed me the seam-ripper to punctuate her point.

[A miscellany] partly of reminiscences, partly of entries in diary-form.  
—Arthur Waley, *The Pillow Book*

Stray notes, expressing random thoughts in a casual manner.  
—Makoto Ueda in Earl Miner, ed., *Principles of Japanese Literature*

One genre that has no European counterpart, *zuihitsu*, literally, ‘following [the impulses of] the brush,’ and consisting of brief essays on random topics . . .  
—Donald Keene, *Seeds in the Heart* (brackets in the original text)

Scholars agree that coming up with a conclusive definition for the *zuihitsu* is challenging if not impossible. The above quotes, for example, are more description than definition and ultimately more frustrating than instructive. And so, my question continues: what makes up this quintessential Japanese genre? Determined to find something one might read in a dictionary of terms, I have returned to my readings from *The Pillow Book of Sei Shônagon*, *Essays in Idleness* by Kenkô, and texts on Japanese aesthetics to come up with a way of thinking about the central characteristics of the genre. I have come to think of these as **suggestion**, **irregularity**, and **spontaneity**. And, in spite of having written what I've called *zuihitsu*, I might finally be closer to a definition than I was decades ago.

The literal translation of *zuihitsu*, *running brush* or *following the impulses of the brush*, suggests a sense of **spontaneity**. This quality is taken further by the scholar Gerald Groemer: *[to follow the writing brush] implies that the scribe has relegated all agency to the writing instrument.* Without the word “imply,” the *zuihitsu* sounds like automatic or free writing. But the opposite is true. The text is composed to *feel* spontaneous, a quality that is integral to Japanese aesthetics. One can experience this sense of the haphazard in bonsai where a tiny wind-swept-looking pine tree is actually the result of, say, fifteen years of exacting indoor attention—and where no wind has stirred its needles. Even in the case of an impromptu haiku, there is a great deal of compositional experience that informs the poet's improvisation. Spontaneously executed calligraphy and painting are also informed by apprenticeship and practice—to say nothing of internalized cultural preferences. What feels artless is artfully rendered. So, rather than see the genre as a kind of unrestrained writing, the real challenge for me has been to figure out how to compose a text that *appears* random.

## Things That Are of No Matter *Sei Shônagon*

*A person both unsightly and irksome.*

*Rice starch gone rancid. I know some will object to writing that is about something so domestic as clothing starch, but I must be free to write about anything I want. Even funerary tongs—everyone knows they exist so why not. It is true that I did not expect this note to be seen by others—which is why I jotted down anything that came to mind.*

We can find an impetuous quality in Sei's **lists**. The one above not only describes a kind of off-the-cuff practice, the writing itself feels spontaneous. Fragmentary thoughts, an aside (“I know . . .”) that takes up most of the entry, an odd juxtaposition, a change in tone, and a thoroughly personal attitude contribute to this sense. In another example, “Things That Have Lost Their Power” (Ivan Morris, trans., Number 80), she opens her list of seven entries with a large boat that has been beached and she ends with an angry wife who must swallow her pride. In “Things That Should Be Short” (Morris, 127), she opens her list of four entries with thread and ends with “The speech of a young girl.” Speaking of length, “Splendid Things” (Morris, 57) comes in with seventeen entries: the shortest one is the phrase “grape-colored material” and the longest—in translation—amounts to a paragraph-long complaint regarding the Chamberlain's term of office. For any list, there is a two-entry minimum but no limit. Above all, there is no logical progression as required in a Western expository framework.

## Things That Cannot Be Compared *Sei Shônagon*

*Rain and mist. Summer and winter. Night and day. Youth and old age. A person's laughter and rage. Black and white. People that one loves and others that one hates. The little indigo and the great philodendron. Rain and sunshine.*

*A lover who, once one no longer has feelings for him, seems like an altogether different person.*

*Fire and water.*

*People who are fat and thin. Those with long and short hair.*

*When crows, roosting together at night, are suddenly disturbed, they make the worst racket. Flapping and squawking from branch to branch, they seem an utterly different bird in the day.*

The quality of **irregularity** is related to “spontaneity.” In the above example, the lack of uniformity creates the impression that it was jotted down on the spur of the moment. As in previous examples, one entry may be a single object, another will relate an anecdote. In other *zuihitsu*, there might even be a contradictory comment as if one didn't proofread and revise accordingly. There are even lists within lists. There is no sense of sequence, much less a narrative thread. But I disagree with Italo Calvino who stated that, “[*Zuihitsu*] is a classical Japanese genre that allows a series of styles and everything can be constantly reshuffled and reordered in every conceivable way.” I suggest that it *seems* that order is up in the air, but in reality revision is about choices. If one unconsciously composes a draft that contains chronology, it's best to disrupt that progression for the sense of spontaneity and disorder.

For a more philosophical look into irregularity, I turn to Donald Keene's discussion of Japanese aesthetics. By way of example, he refers to Kenkô's *Essays in Idleness*, in what is the most well-known *zuihitsu* in Japanese literature:

*Somebody once remarked that thin silk was not satisfactory as a scroll wrapping because it was so easily torn. Ton'a replied, 'It is only after the silk wrapper has frayed at top and bottom, and the mother-of-pearl has fallen from the roller that a scroll looks beautiful.' This opinion demonstrated the excellent taste of the man. People often say that a set of books looks ugly if all volumes are not in the same format, but I was impressed to hear the Abbot Koyu say, 'It is typical of the unintelligent man to insist on assembling complete sets of everything. Imperfect sets are better.'*

*In everything, no matter what it may be, uniformity is undesirable. Leaving something incomplete makes it interesting, and gives one the feeling that there is room for growth. Someone once told me, 'Even when building the imperial palace, they always leave one place unfinished.' In both Buddhist and Confucian writings of the philosophers of former times, there are also many missing chapters.*

(Keene, Number 82)

Keene presents this passage to demonstrate that an incomplete or rough quality allows the viewer to participate; by contrast, perfection and symmetry merely “[ask] our admiration” (p. 13). For a writer who does not have the benefit of a Japanese mindset with its preference for the incomplete, how does one make a text appear incomplete or rough? Certainly “rough” is related to the general sense of a rough draft. But—as noted above—composing a *zuihitsu* is not first-draft–best-draft. The sense of incompleteness is a product of deft craftsmanship.

There are other ways to notice **irregularity**. The *zuihitsu* can visually **appear in different forms** or what we might consider sub-genres: from a list to a journal passage to what we would view as a hybrid text (poetry and prose) to essay-like observations. The above Kenkô classic is the best example. For Sei, “[t]o feel that one is disliked by others is surely one of the saddest things in the world . . .” (Morris, 143). And often an element of the observations consists of strong opinions: Kenkô is exasperated when “discussions of poetry are devoted to bad poems” (Keene, 57), and Sei has

numerous passages that open with “one should” or “one should never.” Both authors do go on when it comes to what is the most prized about a certain thing, whether an abstract quality (for Sei, the splendor of the wood grains in a Buddhist statue; Morris, 57) or concrete (for Sei, “I hate seeing a dusty, dirty-looking inkstone . . .”; Morris, 133).

While a *zuihitsu* may take the form of various subgenres, there is also the fragmentation of these texts. Some appear as just that, a fragment from a diary, while others take the shape of a random anecdote, scene, reminiscence, or piece of advice. My absolute favorite piece of advice is Kenkô’s two-sentence *zuihitsu* telling one not to smell new antler horns because insects might crawl into one’s brain (Keene, 149). And here is one of Kenkô’s reminiscences (Keene, 62):

*When the Princess Ensei was a small child she asked someone going to the cloistered emperor’s palace to relay the following poem as a message from her:*

<i>futatsu moji</i>	<i>The letter in two strokes</i>
<i>ushi no tsuno moji</i>	<i>The letter like an ox’s horns,</i>
<i>sugu no moji</i>	<i>The straight letter,</i>
<i>yugamu moji to zo</i>	<i>And the crooked letter too</i>
<i>kimi wa oboyuru</i>	<i>All spell my love for you.</i>

*The poem meant that she missed her father, the cloistered emperor.*

I hasten to add that Western subgenres like the prose poem, the lyric essay, or even blog writing may have relative similarities, but they are not *zuihitsu* by virtue of aesthetic import.

It is worth noting that the above Kenkô example introduces hybridity into this discussion. **Hybrid texts** as a subgenre is nothing new in Japanese literature. In *The Pillow Book*, there are a number of passages that combine prose with *tanka* or songs. The generic juxtaposition produces a visual interruption and potential disruptions in tone, voice, diction, narrative moment, and so on. Of course, one of the best examples of hybridity is the *haibun*. Strictly speaking it is a form that involves prose and *haiku*. The prose itself can take the form of a journal (real or fictitious) or essay. At times what appears to be a mere title or heading transforms the piece from poetry to *haibun*. Here is one by Ki no Tsurayuki (Burton Watson, trans.):

*At the Yamagoe pass in Shiga I talked with a certain person by a rocky spring. When we parted, I wrote this:*

*I dip with my hands  
but drops muddy the mountain spring  
before I’ve quenched my thirst—  
still thirsty for your company,  
I must move on*

This example begs the generic question: are *haibun* a form under the wider genre of *zuihitsu*? I am with the scholars who cast the most inclusive net.

Kenkô’s *tanka* also brings into discussion two obvious examples of irregularity: both the five-lined *tanka* (5-7-5-7-7 syllables) and the three-lined *haiku* (5-7-5 syllables). Other Japanese arts bear out this inclination. Basic *ikebana*, for example, requires three flowers in an asymmetrical arrangement. There is an actual word for this quality: *hacho*, or “intentional unevenness.” And in tea ceremony, there are instances of asymmetrical preferences and odd-numbered ritual gestures. These arts bring me to the third quality, simplicity.

I don’t mean the kind of simplicity found in the *haiku* when a world of grief is expressed when observing scattered cherry blossoms. The hodgepodge-ness of the *zuihitsu* does not present that economy. I am referring to the related quality **suggestion**, as when an artist paints a bird perched on a seemingly free-floating branch but of course the latter brings to mind the whole tree. (Synecdoche may be a corresponding value.) Aside from suggestion found in included *tanka*, Sei’s lists can be especially evocative. In her “Things That Give an Unclean Feeling,” I also find a rat’s nest nauseating. On the other hand, I’m fine with someone who washes her hands late in the morning (Morris, 98). Still, the list brings to mind those things I find “unclean” (shoe laces, Halloween candy dumped in someone’s bag, the use of hairspray, the 45th President). Of course, experiential comparison is what lyric poetry does. The sense of the incomplete, the rough, the random all contribute to suggest the whole subject.

Spontaneity, irregularity, suggestion. Where does that leave us in appreciating and also in trying our hand at composing a *zuihitsu*? Whether in catalogs such as Sei’s “Annoying Things” (Morris, 62) or Kenkô’s “seven kinds of persons [that] make bad friends” (Keene, 116) or in single-subject texts such as Sei’s “Clouds” (Morris, 137) or Kenkô’s anecdote on why a man felt a daughter unfit for marriage because she only ate chestnuts (Keene, 40), there are overarching themes in what Linda Chance has called a “formless form.” There is an organizing principle to “the aesthetics, if you will, of formlessness.”

Where does this leave my attempt at definition?

## Parking Lots

Kimiko Hahn

It’s true: his family car, me—his colleague—and a parking lot near a midtown bar. The deluge gave us privacy. The steamy windows. The not-wanting-to-leave the moment and return to small rooms of want: theirs, not one’s own. Which was okay until things like the lot, torn panty-hose, the noise. Rain beating.

Parking the car in the motel lot after dinner, the floodlights making the night an artificial day, he spied something large and moving on the pavement. Too delicate for a rodent. It was a beetle—the kind we’d only seen in decorative displays. He scooped it up gently and we brought it inside to see in the light of the room and up close. I googled it and found ‘rhinoceros beetle.’ But that was not quite it, given that they are not from the southwest. More investigation suggested a ‘Hercules’ but that wasn’t quite right either. We have not pinned down the name but we did let it go, back into the wilds of decorative shrubbery.

The infamous auteur was equally famous for having been a shopping cart wrangler.

*get out just get the fuck out*

He kept winning one-dollar scratch-offs to the point where we stayed put for half an hour. Finally, we left without cashing in the last \$5 win. A Camden Twilight Zone!

broken in

“What We Know About the Death of Rayshard Brooks” by Aimee Ortiz, *NYT*, Sept. 10, 2020.

According to Wikipedia (2020): “Parking lots tend to be sources of water pollution because of their extensive impervious surfaces. Most existing lots have limited or no facilities to control runoff.” I wish I could include the included diagram with angled parking as seen from above.

covid19 testing, covid19 vaccines, food pantry distribution, clothing drop-off—

*mushrooms?*

The former student suggesting, *Try pressing a cold spoon on your neck.*

Against Wellfleet Drive-in policy, the two girls snuck on the hood to watch *The Perfect Storm*.

*Zuihitsu*, literally, “running brush”: this uniquely Japanese genre is a poetic text lacking the formal structural principles we associate with Western verse. Through a variety of techniques—fragmentation, juxtaposition, varying lengths, disparate forms (observation, anecdote, journal, catalog, . . . and a hybrid text), and an organizing subject—it creates an impression of spontaneity and a quality of “imperfection.”

---

Kimiko Hahn’s most recent collection is *Foreign Bodies* (W.W. Norton, 2020). A number of her collections contain *zuihitsu*, most notably *The Narrow Road to the Interior* (W.W. Norton, 2006). Hahn teaches in the MFA Program in Creative Writing & Literary Translation at Queens College, City University of New York.

### Translations

When there is no attribution, I have tried my hand using the time-honored practice of comparing existing translations, looking at the original, and coming up with my own. The cited translators are as follows. Note that in my essay, the parenthetical numbers refer to the translator’s order, not the page numbers.

Keene: Kenkô. Donald Keene, trans. *Essays in Idleness*. NY: Columbia University Press, 1967.

Morris: Sei Shônagon. Ivan Morris, trans. *The Pillow Book of Sei Shônagon*. NY: Columbia University Press, 1991.

Watson: Sato, Hiroaki and Burton Watson, eds. *From the Country of Eight Islands: An Anthology of Japanese Poetry*. NY: Columbia University Press, 1981.



**Notes**

Because I do not have a macron symbol on my computer, I have used the Western “advanced symbol” *ô* to indicate the long vowel that is sometimes romanized as *oo* or *ou*.

For more examples of Japanese *zuihitsu*, including a contemporary translation of *The Pillow Book*:

Carter, Steven D., ed. *The Columbia Anthology of Japanese Essays: Zuihitsu from the Tenth to the Twenty-First Century*. NY: Columbia University Press, 2014.

Groemer, Gerald, ed. *The Land We Saw, the Times We Knew: An Anthology of Zuihitsu Writing from Early Modern Japan*. Honolulu: The University of Hawai'i Press, 2019.

Sei Shônagon. Meredith McKinney, trans. *The Pillow Book*. London: Penguin Books, 2006.

For a scholarly study of Kenkô:

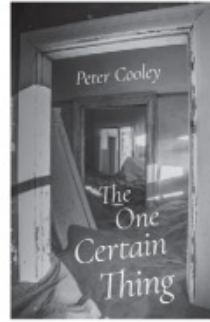
Chance, Linda H. *Formless in Form: Kenkô, 'Tsurezuregusa,' and the Rhetoric of Japanese Fragmentary Prose*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.

For a fuller discussion of Japanese aesthetics, see Donald Keene's chapter on the subject in his *The Pleasures of Japanese Literature*. NY: Columbia University Press, 1988.



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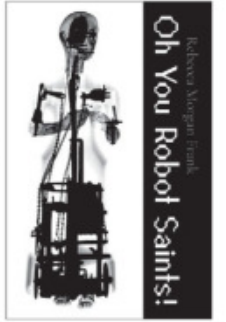
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# TWO POEMS

ELEANOR WILNER

---

## For the Willows to Bless

with a shower of leaves, red in the dawn,  
the stream by their side, riverflow  
idling, a little back spill, the shrill  
cry of a bird, and little by little,  
as the light grew, the sun crested  
the hills, and, as it splintered its gold  
among our leaves—a two-legged figure  
appeared, and behind it, another,  
another—as if the horizon itself was  
an opening seam from which they were  
pouring, a column stretching back and back,  
over the hills that the sun had just  
mounted. They were backlit  
by that sun, flat silhouettes,  
and it was hard to discern one  
from another, so alike they appeared,  
and so endless their procession.  
And as they approached us, we  
tensed, feeling something between  
apprehension and wonder, so much like  
an army of ants they seemed—so many,  
so many . . . as they came closer, we heard  
a great keening, so that, unsure  
how to greet them, aware  
they brought with them a great grief,  
we offered them what we  
could: shade, a cool shelter from  
the heat that had begun to follow  
the sun, a soft bed of needles  
from the pine to sleep on, and  
as we caught and played the breeze  
in our leaves, we sang to them,  
our thoughts moving in the slipstream  
of time's passage, wind in the harps  
hung in our branches, left there  
in despair by others so like them  
years ago, slow circles of years  
we can barely remember; still  
the song of the wind in the harp strings  
has mingled and merged  
with our tendrils of thought, a singing  
we offer them now, this sorrowing  
multitude, who, in return, bring  
their tears to water our roots.

## Weaving

Strands like thoughts  
pulled slowly through an opening  
in time, back to before, they thread  
through origin, a gap  
in coral's towering lace, space  
to slip through, one chamber  
to the next . . . the swirl of stirred up  
sand obscuring passage  
to the open sea, waiting just beyond  
this breach in the made  
for the making.

Inside the open, it is all emerald,  
soundless green simmering with light,  
tall fronds swaying, slow weave  
in the shifting waves, sweet undertow,  
and, threading through it all  
an idle ray of light,  
as if the sun were fishing here—  
the sea shapes its dark  
into a swimming turtle, who,  
grazing, keeps the sea grass  
mown. Wearing her shield mottled  
on her back, and a map on her patterned  
head—the turtle swims, archaic smile  
on her face, she who seems weightless  
in the water, current borne, knowing  
only the sea, its feast of weeds, the fine strands  
of light, and the need, recurrent, urgent  
need, to leave the silence, break  
the surface barrier—  
come up, like all of us who love,  
above all else,  
the silent depths  
but who must live on air.

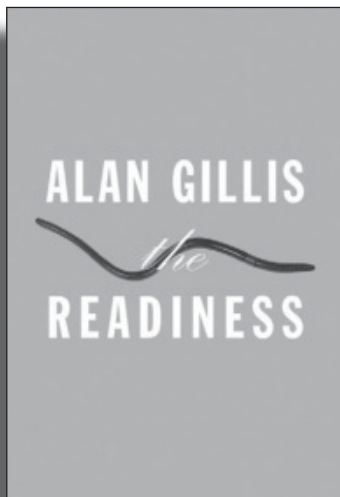
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*Eleanor Wilner's books include Reversing the Spell: New and Selected Poems (1998), The Girl with Bees in Her Hair (2004), and Tourist in Hell (2010). Among her many honors is the 2019 Robert Frost Medal from the Poetry Society of America.*





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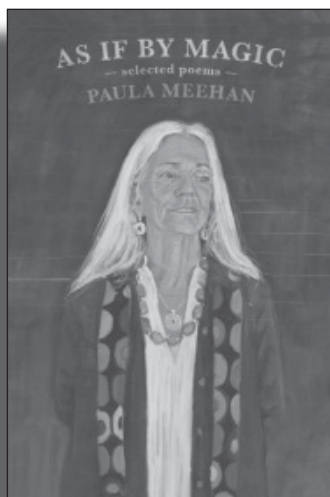
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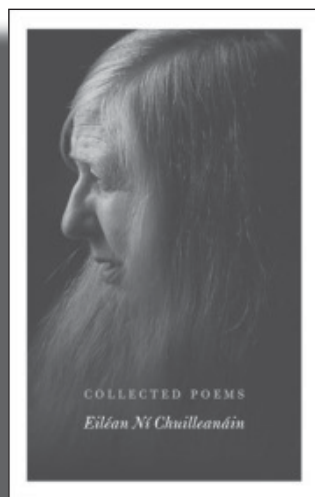
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# MY NEW BOSS HAS BEEN THINKING A LOT ABOUT TIME

ERIN ADAIR-HODGES

Though he doesn't say exactly what this thinking  
is about. He strokes his beard, a clock his face  
has made, his right leg lifted to harass the chair,

his left on the floor, a pulpited flamingo in tweed.  
He tells me to *relax*, and maybe it's because  
of the authoritative way he can grow hair

under his nose, but this command works  
like a cauldroned incantation. I'm so relaxed  
it's as if I have never, too, thought about time,

about the frenzied hours of trying to settle  
my son's dervishing, begging the languageless  
to take my breast so we could be done

and I could get back to the work which would not  
wait. I'm so relaxed I don't remember  
how that son now tells me *seven was the worst year*

because that was the year I left to find a job,  
how the time difference meant there were days  
we could not talk at all. I pack the picture books

he has outgrown into cardboard boxes  
I label for some future him's nostalgic need  
for bears on quests, their orphaned hunts

for hats and homes and sleep. My mother never  
saved such things—she thought I'd want to forget  
those years. Sometimes what has happened never stops

happening. Even now—this windowed  
conference room's smell of toner, the tea let out to stale—  
our old disappointments dandruff the air,

a thought scrum of hurt. I am so relaxed, though,  
I can finally be kind, so I cradle my boss, sing him  
a lullaby until he burbles with joy. I could do anything

to his soft body. From a distance, this looks like mercy,  
a freckled boy cradling the broken bird  
his stone set loose from the sky. The woods outside

applaud. They have been waiting for the man in me  
to come home. Another's blood the key.  
The violence of time the door.

*Erin Adair-Hodges is the winner of the 2016 Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize for her first poetry collection, Let's All Die Happy, published by the University of Pittsburgh Press as part of the Pitt Poetry Series in 2017.*



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# TWO POEMS

C. X. HUA

---

## Going (Guest House)

In the story I tell about myself,  
I belonged. To a room, to a body,  
to a hall, each light fixture,  
soffit and valance. This,  
I'm telling you is full of dark.  
Only so much inside  
the guest house  
is visible.  
And maybe if my body belonged to me  
as it floated down the street,  
then I would follow it. Know  
where it goes, how she carries me  
through the violet haze of summer  
and the evenings rustling inside their skins.  
Glory, it must be these gothic colonnades.  
Not afraid to be entirely visible.  
But I'm not that way, there is only  
so much inside me  
I'd let you visit.  
One part of me  
is disappointed in another part,  
like rowers on the lake.  
One hand staggering after the other.  
In the foyer, I could not  
ask the question without  
turning it off. On and off.  
When has love  
ever been enough?  
In the garden. Sunken in candlelight.  
In the green. In the mirror.  
Loneliness, that vast silhouette of love,  
rose up around us like a hedge maze,  
a great conditional tense.  
Questions like this  
are like candles,  
going and going out.  
Go, I said  
in the story. And the saying  
tore down the page like a race horse.  
So we go to drinks, go to lunch.  
I'll say things. I'll be wrong  
about everything.



## Crossing

Blue nights draw a border  
around the imaginary.  
I imagine the branches,  
which are mangling  
a sky spangled with night again.  
Out there, a doomed star  
makes a noise  
like how the quiet yells out to the living.  
Now the damp mouth beautiful with trees  
draws a shape inside of the painting.  
The landscape painters say beauty  
is a line in the shape of an S,  
like flight, rattlesnakes, or magic blooming.  
Stones are standing side by side in a field again  
and the Easter Island heads tell a story about time  
we keep retelling with motion,  
the two possibilities being  
whether you will lead or follow your body.  
Maybe into being beautiful. Otherwise into wreckage.  
Our skins remind me  
of how heaviness  
enters through a trapdoor.  
Listen at the door, and elephants  
are making invisible music again,  
scales at the scale of minutes, water.  
See how the animals sing to each other,  
at long distances, in infrasound.  
As our hands sweep low over the Mojave,  
kissing mallow, five-spots and Spanish needle,  
as my cab driver modulates the radio dial  
on an endless foreign road, asking me  
where I come from. My bark  
and howl.  
We go driving past  
a bark of trees. Howls  
encircle my hair like a crown.  
I leave my body everywhere,  
borders across which  
only the unsaid could pass.

---

*C. X. Hua is a poet and artist. She was previously a Finalist for the Norman Mailer Awards in Poetry, and the winner of the Boston Review Poetry Contest. She has been published or is forthcoming in Narrative, Boulevard and Electric Lit.*

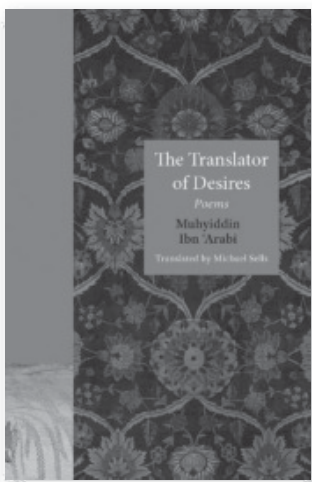




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# AFTER ANOTHER LOW CUT FADE BEFORE THE QUARANTINE

RODRICK MINOR

His hands touch my forehead  
 i His latest muse  
 my kinks and knots naked  
 in a room His fingers  
 brush between like an autumn  
 zephyr grazing a bed of dahlias  
 waiting to be loved adored  
 again to be touched by another human  
 seasons to be afresh like bulbs  
 bathing in warmth


the stillness of two  
 bodies whisk away in a cloud  
 of isopropyl alcohol and talc  
 tenderly touching another  
 in regions mothers once nurtured

puckering my lips  
 He trims below  
 my shadow the quiet trace  
 His fingers flow  
 from chin to apple  
 each stubble uncurling  
 He gets my good side  
 i gets his good side  
 bloom a smile only for Him  
 pay Him for His loving  
 when the weeds cover my dahlias


perhaps this is how some men  
 say i love you      silently

*Rodrick Minor is a poet from Mississippi. He is a four-time member of the Baton Rouge National Poetry Slam Team, a one-time member of the Philadelphia National Poetry Slam Team, Watering Hole Fellow, Winter Tangerine Workshop Alumnus, Hurston/Wright Fellow, 2020 BOAAT Press Fellow, Best of Net nominee, Dairy Hollow writer-in-residence and poetry reader for Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review.*





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# TEN POEMS

VICTORIA CHANG

## Another Year Came

Suddenly I am  
free from everything but time.  
Time started doubling.  
I started dieting so  
the gap between life  
and death could remain an inch.  
I try not to move,  
crouch under the raspberry  
bush, pulling small bullets off.

## To the Rain

You seem so happy.  
If I could be your pupil,  
I would sit in front.  
Please teach me how to collapse,  
the way your legs break  
and then spread, how you let go,  
flow this way and that,  
take the form of everything,  
even tighten in a lake.

## Calling Late

The men used to call  
at all hours, but what I miss  
most are the late night  
calls, ones where I held the phone  
so close, it pressed like a gun.

## Little Soul

I rode on your back  
until your knees broke and now  
one mile left, I must toss you.

## When the War is Over

I once saw the deer.  
They were all wearing blue scarves.  
We have finally finished  
killing everything.  
We are now looking ahead,  
but have killed past the future.

## A Death in the Desert

Something is slumping  
over a warm rock, as if  
holding its mother.  
I've watched so many spiders  
lift one last leg toward God.

## The Lark

I have a lark in  
my pocket with a broken  
wing that can't fly, but  
instead tries to get me to  
live inside with it.  
I try to turn inside out,  
to bring the dead back.  
But the dead are like the lark,  
they won't fly or fully die.

## How It Happens

I want to staple  
myself to a passing cloud,  
so I am blameless for war.

## Empty Water

Once I fell in love  
with the most indifferent horse.  
It never heard me,  
only looked at me one time.  
That one time lasted  
one thousand years. I've lost my  
speech four times, last time  
was when my mother died. The  
horse is still neighing for me.

## Late Wonders

My face is now gone.  
Instead, I have a hawk's face.  
None of the poets  
notice, they only want fame.  
Fame is a bucket of eyes.

### PHOENIX POETS



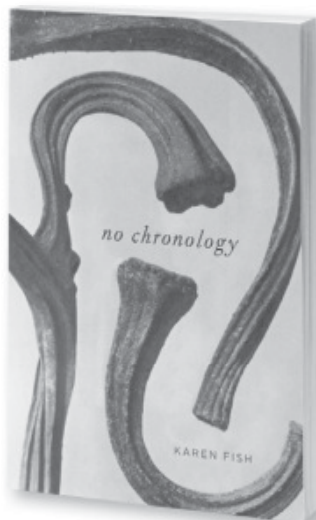
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Peter Campion

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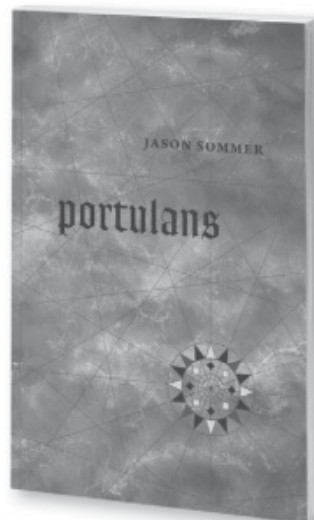
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# “A LETTER WRITTEN IN RED JUICE”

*A Review of Norma Jeane Baker of Troy*

by Anne Carson

AP2 Books

KATIE BERTA

*Norma Jeane Baker of Troy* by Anne Carson  
New York: New Directions, 2019  
68 pages; \$11.95

“I expect you’ve heard of the Trojan War,” Anne Carson’s newest book, *Norma Jeane Baker of Troy*, begins, “and how it was caused by Norma Jeane Baker, / harlot of Troy. / Well, welcome to Public Relations.” Taking its material from the myth of Helen as told by Euripides and the biography of Marilyn Monroe (born Norma Jeane Mortenson, then Baker when her mother remarried), *Norma Jeane Baker of Troy* replaces Helen with Norma Jeane; replaces Menelaus, Helen’s husband, with Arthur Miller; and populates Troy with characters from both worlds, like Truman Capote (as Norma Jeane’s chorus) and Hermione (Helen’s, and now Norma Jeane’s, daughter).

Euripides’ *Helen*, along with the versions told by Herodotus, Stesichorus, and, much later, H.D., *does* amount to public relations. According to these versions of her story, Helen never reveled in the destruction caused by her abduction by/elopement with Paris and the subsequent Trojan War, as she was reputed to have done. In fact, Helen never went to Troy at all and was, instead, whisked off to Egypt by the gods, an eidolon—the Greek word for a shade, an image, double, phantom of Helen—taking her place in Troy. While Euripides’ version of the myth focuses on Helen’s faithfulness as she waits for Menelaus in Egypt, both H.D.’s version, *Helen in Egypt*, and this new version by Carson are more interested in Helen’s split identity, the divide between, as Carson puts it, “a golden Hollywood idol” and “a mousy-haired pinup girl from Los Angeles.” H.D. wonders if “*Helen upon the ramparts was a phantom. Then, what is this Helen?*” What am I separated from the *image* of me? Both books attempt to resuscitate Helen in our popular imagination by reframing her as the bewildered victim of a literal and figurative split in her self—between the image-self, the eidolon that others impose their meanings onto as an idol, and the real self, the less glamorous, less god-like Helen that *is* Helen of Troy, but doesn’t have her superhuman power to tempt and, by her ability to render others desirous, destroy. The Greek writers transported Helen to Egypt in acknowledgment of the ways she was abused by history, trying to undo a harm against a single mythological figure. H.D. inhabited Helen in order to consider the ways mythologizing people splits the real them from themselves—and perhaps to reflect the ways that women in particular, real or mythological, are habitually victimized in this way. Carson uses the real Monroe/Norma Jeane as platonic model of this split self, the real woman separating herself from the Hollywood persona by adopting an entirely different name and identity for her. Monroe, whom we idolize and see as both seductress *and* girl-next-door, glamorous Hollywood icon *and* victim of her own sexiness and fame, further complicates the way we see Helen, the classical figure. The image, we see, can do damage to the real person—and not just to the “her” that exists beyond her body, the one that we make up by viewing and interpreting her story, but to *her*, her interior, the Norma Jeane in which she lives.

In this way, Carson goes beyond the assertion that even H.D. makes—that idolizing a person splits them in two, that women are split into fragments by the received ideas we use to appraise them—by presenting the real woman and the eidolon as parts of the same person, Norma Jeane, who gives up so much of herself to establish and inhabit the Monroe part of herself. “A cloud?” Norma Jeane expects Arthur Miller to say in response to her claim that she was never in Troy.

*We went to Troy to get a cloud?*

*We lived all those years knee-deep in death for the sake of a cloud?*

*I’m not sure he’ll believe me.*

*I’m not sure I believe me.*

*Just think,*

*when the Greeks first beached their ships at Troy*

*they could see the legendary city glittering a mere football field away.*

*It took them ten years to walk to it.*

*A thousand bloody T-shirts left on the sand.*

Questions about her identity and her culpability for what was done in her name will always separate Norma Jeane from others—and from herself. She is made lonely by her knowledge that her claim—that she *isn’t* the one responsible for the actions of the men who went to war in her name, that they went to war in the name of the idol and not the woman—is somehow unbelievable. She is made lonely by the way that unbelief causes her to question what she knows. “I’m not sure I believe me,” she admits to us. How truly separate is she from the part of herself that is so powerful she incited a thousand deaths, “A thousand bloody T-shirts left on the sand,” she seems to ask. Carson points out in “History of War: Lesson 1,” that an eidolon is created “to make people believe that a replica is the real thing, manipulate the ‘optics’ of the situation. Managing optics cleverly will generate an alternate version of the facts, which then stands alongside the facts like a cloud in the shape of a woman.” But she also tells us to “trust Euripides. Trust Helen. She never went to Troy. Marilyn really was a blonde. And we all go to heaven when we die.” We are left unable to figure out for whose team the eidolon is a manipulation. Does Norma Jeane use it to absolve herself of the violence done in her name? Has a military created it to justify the war it was eager to start in the first place? Carson works to make the answers to these questions slippery. “Trust Helen . . .,” she says. Then, in the next breath, “Marilyn really was a blonde.”

The question becomes moot, though, if Norma Jeane can’t be held responsible for the violence done in her name—whether it was done for her or a reflection of her. Did she choose it? Did she want it? Is the way Norma Jeane makes men feel a power she has—or a power rooted in them, her beholders? In other words, is her power real? The “golden Hollywood idol” who is Norma Jeane—or is at least her public face, the fantasy of who Norma Jeane might be—may wield her ability to tempt to her benefit, but Norma Jeane herself, the real woman, seems like she’s at the mercy of the men who react to her. She meets a “sailor trying to find his way home from Troy” and he

*does one of those (doubletakes).*

*Says he can’t believe how much I look like her.*

*Thought he’d never see a pair of tits like those again.*

*Like these. Again.*

*Goes into a rant about Norma Jeane Baker the harlot of Troy—*

*that WMD in the forked form of woman!*

There is a sense, in these lines, that Norma Jeane *has* to suffer the humiliation of having a stranger comment on her breasts, has to suffer his gendered, sexualized abuse. Here, and elsewhere, she isn’t a woman empowered by men’s attraction to her—or by her own sexuality, which is separate from that of those who are desirous of her—but rather at the mercy of it. She doesn’t have the power to start a war over her body. Instead, her body is the property over which the war was fought. As Norma Jeane says, of Arthur, “I am after all his most prized possession—the Greeks / value women less than pure gold / but slightly ahead of oxen, sheep, or goats.” The desire she incites in others, then, is the desire to dominate and possess, is a desire that fails to take into account her own personhood. In Norma Jeane’s voice, Carson tells us,

*One thing I learned from psychoanalysis is how to fake it, with men. The guy I went to, Dr. Cheeseman—one day we were talking about Arthur’s dimpled white buttocks and how I felt no sexual attraction for them or for him . . . Desire is about vanishing. You dream of a bowl of cherries and next day receive a letter written in red juice. Or, a better example: you know I’m not a totally bona fide blonde—I always say blonde on the inside is what counts—so I get a bit of colour every 2 weeks from a certain Orlando in Brentwood and I used to wonder shouldn’t I dye the hair down there too, you know, make it match, but the thing is—talk about a bowl of cherries—most men like it dark. Most men like what slips away. A bit of strange.*

For Norma Jeane, then, desire is something you incite in the other person, is a reaction you provoke rather than something you feel. She is only able to desire Arthur when she describes him “to Dr. Cheeseman as an Asian boy—Asian boys being Dr. Cheeseman’s own little problem—and so discovering Arthur to be desirable by seeing him shine back at me from Dr. Cheeseman’s eyes.” In other words, she can only love her husband by seeing him anew, through a man’s eyes, and, in that man’s eyes, what is desirable is

vulnerable, as frail as a child, and ready to be exploited. In that man's eyes, what is desirable isn't individual, is as effacing as the term "Asian boys" is in this context. Carson, as Norma Jeane, quotes Stevie Smith. "Here's one [Truman Capote] says is about me," she says:

*I am that Persephone  
Who played with her darlings in Sicily  
Against a background of social security.*

*Oh what a glorious time we had.  
Or had we not? They said it was sad.  
I was born good, grown bad.*

And Norma Jeane responds:

*And isn't that how it always starts, this myth that ends with the girl "grown bad"?*

*She's in a meadow gathering flowers*

*twirling her own small sunny hours.*

*When up rides a man on black horses.*

*Up rides a man in a black hat.*

*Up rides a man with a black letter to deliver.*

Shall I make you my queen?

*She's maybe 12 or 13.*

*Rape*

*is the story of Helen,*

*Persephone,*

*Norma Jeane,*

*Troy.*

*War is the context*

*and God is a boy.*

*Oh my darlings,*

*they tell you you're born with a precious pearl.*

*Truth is,*

*it's a disaster to be a girl.*

Here, exploitation at the hands of men is what makes you "good, grown bad." Rape is what you do to property, to land, to women, to children. War is the backdrop for rape, the excuse for making this property change hands. This doesn't prevent vitriolic feeling, like the sailor's, toward the property that's exchanged, though. As Carson says, later, "In war, things go wrong. Blame women." And these characters do—and we have, too. "The wiles of woman cause men much anger, an anger amounting to agony," Carson says in "History of War: Lesson 6," in a section called "You Lose You Win You Win You Lose":

*Their whoring is a big yellow tree that blooms in a man's mind, it is agony. Is she human? Are you? Is she a beast out of control? There's so much danger. No human can become just a beast, you plunge beyond—beyond what? Remember Jack the Ripper? "I'm down on whores and I shan't quit ripping them till I get buckled," Jack wrote in a letter to the newspaper, September 18, 1888. He never did get buckled. Of course insane, his mind blooming with it, who could go down that rabbit hole or unlock such a puzzle as Jack?—but still, the woman! the thing is! the woman has everything and you smile and you take some.*

"Is she human?" is the central question here—and one of the answers is, the Helen, the Norma Jeane, in Troy is not. There is, in the voice of Capote, "No room for Norma Jeane's tortured personal truth . . . / I love her dearly but—let's be frank—/ there's nothing mythic here." The idol is invented to use as sex doll and punching bag. The real Norma Jeane, though, is human, and has to bear the punches, too.

"Assimilation is tricky," says Carson. "You have to invent a new self in a new household. Even Marilyn Monroe had trouble at the start. 'When I signed my first autograph I had to go slow. I wasn't too sure where the "y" went or where you put the "i,"'" she says. Is assimilation, as she calls it (even if only questionably desirable), possible? Can a real woman, suffering trauma ("Helen, who was brutalized merely staring at war too long"), "assimilate" with her own objectified (if glorified) image? In the end, it seems like Carson answers no. In the book's last pages, the Chateau Marmont, where Norma Jeane has been holed up for the book's entirety, collapses, tipping over and being engulfed by "a single wave filling Sunset Boulevard with white and black foam five stories high." She and Arthur sail off to save Hermione, who we suspect is already dead, past

*suitcases and bicycle chains and a display case full of cheeses,*

*a display case full of smoked meats and fish, pillows, backpacks*

*Bibles, a STOP sign, a Santa hat, people.*

*Dead people.*

*Some alive.*

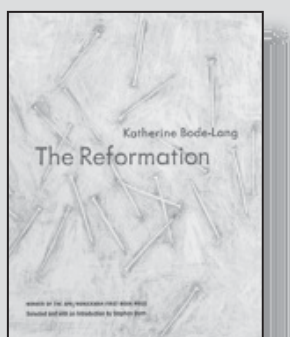
*Some try to claw their way up onto our boat,*

*I beat them off with a boat hook.*

We can't help but wonder whether Norma Jeane, too, has died, or is sailing, like Odysseus, like Persephone, to the underworld. The sea at night becomes "golden now. / Maybe dawn is breaking somewhere." As they sail, Stevie Smith's "Persephone" returns, becomes the last lines of the book: "Up came the black horses and the dark King. / And the harsh sunshine as if it had never been. / In the halls of Hades they said I was queen." Are the "halls of Hades," is death, the only way to "assimilate" the woman into the myth? In Norma Jeane's story, her death absorbs her into the myth entirely, into her objectified image, into Marilyn Monroe.

Katie Berta lives in Phoenix, where she works as the Supervising Editor of Hayden's Ferry Review. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Prairie Schooner, The Kenyon Review Online, The Iowa Review, Blackbird, The Rumpus, Sixth Finch, Redivider, Massachusetts Review, Green Mountains Review, and The Offing, among other magazines.

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# PRINCE READING TONI MORRISON 1987 TONI MORRISON DANCING TO PRINCE 1974

TARIQ THOMPSON

---

Prince in pussyprint purple perched  
on an ohio oakwood porch, eyes  
locked on pages of *Beloved*.  
muttering *love is*  
*or it aint. Love is*  
*or it aint*

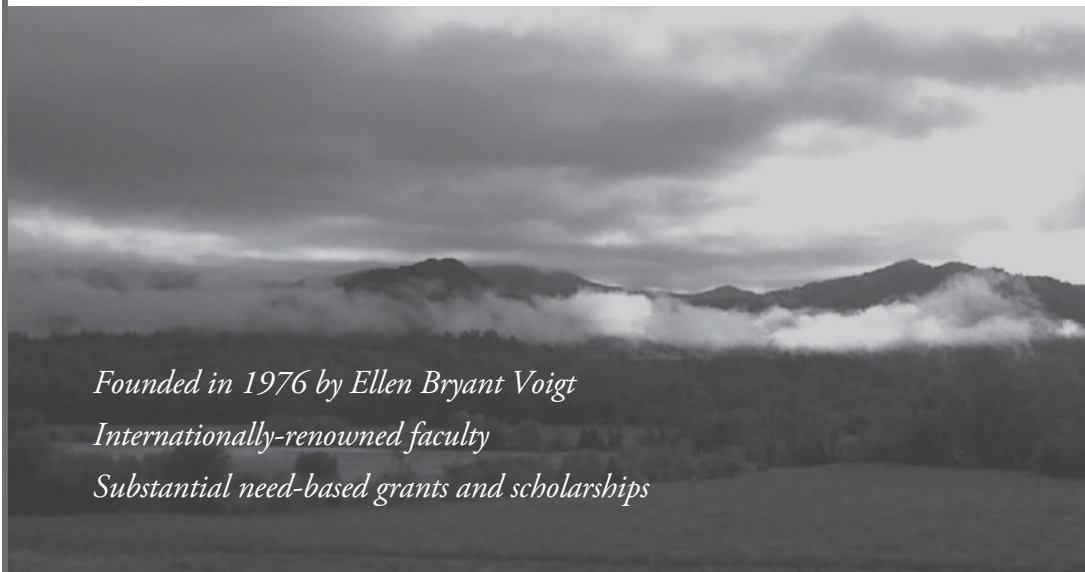
Toni big afro-loving in the club  
shoulders movin like hips like  
dips in concrete,  
mouthing *dearly beloved*.  
mouthing *we*

O, the string of Black this is.  
This curve of dark history,  
pressed against memory  
like cool cloth to fever.  
Like fresh lips to bone.

---

*Tariq Thompson is a Black poet from Memphis, Tennessee. His debut collection of poetry, How Could I Be Lonely?, is forthcoming from Sunset Press.*

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# ULTRAMARINE

SARAH GRIDLEY

---

*Great white shark calmly swims by snorkeler off Great Barrier Reef—video*  
—*The Guardian*, Tuesday, 11 August 2020

for Adrian Bullock

When I was a child, when I was a girl, the great white shark was the monster of my heart. You understand what I mean: the paramount one, the monster highest in jurisdiction. I never read the novel but went repeatedly

into a room that wasn't mine to study the cover of the book on a bedside table. It smelled of salt and tanning oil, the faint damp

of living shoreside. She was not a girl, like me, but not my mother, either. She had made the long drive from Ohio to my grandmother's house on Long Island to be our "sitter" that summer. She was glamorous. She kept

her earrings in a shallow dish near the room's small mirror. Years later I will take a course called "Religion and Its Monsters."

When, on the first day, we are asked to draw the monster we rank above all monsters, I'll draw the cover of her copy of *Jaws*, the surface of the water, the naked woman doing the crawl across it. I'll draw

from memory the conically pointed snout, the jumbled rows of teeth. Its penciled image comes quickly to life, less an exercise

in remembering its parts than the ready projection of a retinal-spiritual tattoo.

⌘

I am no photographer, but I can see, as though through a camera, how our lives pass in measurements of light. A video says permissively, *I see*. I can't see everything; your bounded video says *Just see what I see*. One friend says she mostly just sees a fish in water. Another can't get a sense of scale. A third friend calls you *the Taoist snorkeler*.

Alone with my compulsion, I try to see what you see, be where you went. It's not *water*

I fear, but *water's body* that appalls me, the incomputable ratio of veering surface to rearing

depth. Thalassophobia—not aquaphobia. *I see*, says your video. At the stone heart

of feeling, under sentences rolling in and back in as many moving waves—a sinking feeling is ribbed to a rooted one. The dry glow of fossils, the oiled tactility of time is born in a weightless feeling and a fruitful one.

I remember the buoy, its lens, the foggable glass of looking and breathing. Like the meniscus, or crescent shape at the top of a glass

of water, the surface appears to be curved. The surface of your Coral Sea is like a convex ceiling in the upper third of the frame. Water slops and feathers the southern hemisphere sun. How far are you

below the surface? Does the opening of your snorkel reach the air or are you for the moment skin diving? I see the beauty

of the scene before you. Beneath the pulse of water-prismed light, less a rainbow than its wrinkled echo, light comes down for more and more absorption. With no line holding the ratio of the surface to depth,

the blue between them is limbo, partially refracted, partially absorbed. Faint waves roil with light. The rest

is ultramarine, a blue so vivid it appears opaque. The blue reserved for the virgin's

raiment—for when they saw the distinctive grind of metamorphic lazurite, Italian merchants conceived a superlative word for this blue they considered "beyond the sea."

⌘

In *Jaws*, the film, the swimmer's name is *Chrissie*. She has left the bonfire party. She is pursued unsuccessfully by a would-be male lover. He is too drunk to swim. She has stripped off all

her clothes. She wears only silver hoop earrings in moonlit water. If this opening scene is a shark

attack, we see next to nothing of the attacker. The audience must imagine what is happening below.

The audience must feel through the illuminated screen for what our bodies are to a blood-scenting

fish. They say Spielberg was forced to use the point of view of the great white shark in so many scenes because showing

the shark from a human point of view was so logistically difficult, even with three mechanical

sharks, collectively named *Bruce*,

ready to serve as viewable "actors."

⌘

The female voice a male poet imagines singing *beyond the genius of the sea*

is whose? He's the poet likeliest to reach for adjectives in their superlative form (*the sky acutest at its vanishing*),

the poet of interior paramour, intensest rendezvous, an insurance executive and Republican. He's the opus post-

humous poet, stained with white insensibility. I think of him in Catholic Moral Theology as we

look at culpability, the distinction drawn between invincible and vincible ignorance. The former

takes Stevens off the hook: moral ignorance being so ubiquitous, so thoroughly culturally entrained that



a person immersed in its tides  
might not be capable of overcoming it. To which

the concept of vincible ignorance says  
*Really?*

At one time I could recite all of his “Sea Surface Full of  
Clouds” by heart. I had its vast machine of permutation

memorized, the various faces Stevens broke  
extravagantly across its surface (*Then the sea / And heaven rolled as one  
and from the two / Came fresh transfigurings of freshest blue*). At root,  
a *surface* is the plural aspect essential to any

outside or uppermost layer of face, form, or appearance.  
The old word looked the same in singular as it did in plural.

Uppermost face,  
uppermost faces: *superficies*.

☞

In the video you released online, nothing but  
a point of view proves you are a person filming. I don’t see your face.

Three seconds in, I see the black ripple of your swim fin, a  
worrisome, if familiarizing, detail. Nothing

but the imagined prayer, the barest ripple, proves you are  
a person filming. Something gray and white,

with extraordinary bulk, is already  
facing you.

☞

With its root in the verb *subire*, to go under  
or occur in secret, the adverb *suddenly* discloses the burrowed  
under-life of action. Too often this striated, vertical sense of  
*suddenly* is obscured. We deploy it laterally—  
as one would a pair of scissors, to cut a verb free of prior attachment.  
I have a hard time believing anything happens without ground-

work in something else. I have a hard time  
with the phrase *ex nihilo* and the word *immaculate*. I guess  
my problem with the expression *out of the blue* is likewise theological.

Fascination drags up the thready  
underside of *sudden* appearance. Fascination is grounded in witch-  
craft, the spell linked particularly to witches and snakes. To be fascinated  
in the old sense is to be rendered powerless by  
a look.

☞

Something gray, with extraordinary bulk,  
is suddenly there. With something like the weight  
a boulder presents to its field in twilight. If a boulder could suddenly  
float. And steer below the surface

of the Coral Sea. If a boulder could come open through  
its parts: *bullra*, to roar + *sten*, stone. If a boulder is

a “roaring stone” where it forcibly parts  
a body of water. Out of the blue I see a kind of *roaring stone*,  
that boulder of a creature coming head-on toward your camera,  
snout pointing at me, as you swim forty

meters from your boat. My heart, too, sinks with the approach,  
even from here, above the surface—is this

what your video appears to explain? So much  
has been said about silence; it’s good to have its arguments made,

for a change, in silence (Tao that can  
be spoken

not being the eternal  
Tao).

☞

The gray shape floats a meter or two below  
the surface. The surface blues express a faint commotion.

The deeper blues go unperturbed. The gray shape floats within three  
meters of your face. Back

on dry land, you’ll say how you kept your composure. The article  
accompanying your video explains the rationalization that conquered

shock: *The large shark was either  
well-fed or pregnant*.

This is the line of reason

I can almost follow along with.

☞

When Emerson calls us *photometers* at the end  
of “Spiritual Laws,” when he compares our purpose to that of re-  
flective goldleaf and tinfoil, he returns us to the start

of the essay: *When the act of reflection takes  
place in the mind, when we look at ourselves in the light of thought . . .*  
I see the light of thought reflecting in your video. The water,

ultramarine, the light coming down  
for greater and greater absorption. Who wouldn’t want a camera  
there? South facing. East facing. Although we now say *room*  
instead of chamber, we named the camera

for its likeness to a chamber. A chamber as seen through  
a candlelit room. The one at whose threshold

you’d turn to your host to say *here* and *please*.  
The human heart has four

chambers, the shark heart, only two. No one  
knows for sure

how long  
a shark lives.

☞

More immortal than the shark Damien Hirst preserved  
in formaldehyde in the “The Physical Impossibility of Death

in the Mind of Someone Living”  
is the shark in the video of the derelict wildlife

park. Maybe it’s how we encounter that shark, through  
the claustrophobically slow process

of the explorers’ hapless spelunking. Maybe it’s the unexplained  
obsolescence of the park, its abandoned features and eerily

remnant life. Or it’s the inscrutable  
green glow of the tank itself, the shark in perpetual silhouette,  
needing only a jolt of electricity to bring its movements back  
to life. Who lived

and worked here? Where did  
they go?

☞

Where James Dickey begins his long poem,  
“The Shark’s Parlor,” he begins in the name of memory: *Memory*:

I can take my head and strike it on a wall. I have never understood  
what goes on in this poem. Like much,

if not all of his work, it feels ill-omened, magnetically and obscenely  
masculine. A fish is caught, a house comes apart.

A community of men work together around  
a terrible act. There's a ten-foot chain leader. A shark-hook. Ropes  
and blood and beers and a mother's sewing basket. The hook's baited  
with a run-over collie pup. The poem thrashes

around like the shark it wants to land. It drags through the surface  
all its reasons for being personal. It sees why memory is impossible

for a single person to hold. *Mnemosyne*.  
What can be done with a poem that begins by striking its head  
against her wall? Only Memory can end a poem that starts invoking  
Memory: *Feeling more in two worlds than one . . .*

A shark dragged out of the sea unweaves the rugs, undoes the house,  
comes back to life to die three or four more deaths. Likely Dickey

was cribbing Melville, when in chapter LXV  
of *Moby Dick* ("The Shark Massacre"), Queequeg and a forecastle  
seaman, *darting their long whaling-spades, kept up an incessant murdering  
of the sharks, by striking the keen steel deep into  
their skulls, seemingly their only vital part*. Drawn to the carcass of a whale  
moored alongside the *Pequod*, the sharks inspire an earthy

analogy: *any man unaccustomed to such sights . . .  
would have almost thought the whole round world was one huge cheese,  
and those sharks the maggots in it*. The way Ishmael tells it, it's a terrible  
but necessary massacre; the whale would  
otherwise be down to its skeleton by morning. *Nor was this all*,  
he explains. *It was unsafe to meddle with the corpses and ghosts*

*of these creatures. A sort of generic or Pantheistic  
vitality seemed to lurk in their very joints and bones,  
after what might be called the individual  
life had departed.*

⌘

Summers in Long Island, another image  
besides the *Jaws* cover fed the monstrous understanding

I began to have of sharks. In a mildewing guest house  
my grandmother had hung on the wall a print  
of Winslow Homer's 1899 oil painting, *The Gulf Stream*.  
Picture a small, dismasted, rudderless sloop,

a fisherman half-supine on deck, propped up  
on his elbows, staring out toward a horizon. A large schooner  
appears at a ghostly distance, sailing a horizon he doesn't regard.  
Sharks thrash the foreground, churning up  
and around his damaged boat. The waves high, rust-red in places.  
The same color touching the edge of the otherwise white boat.

As a girl, I watched the print as if its narrative  
would surely have to resume, rescue the man in time, fend  
off the sharks from closing in on him. I wondered why he never  
turned his head to look at them? I wondered where  
his gaze was going. What distance he looked wedded to—  
what he could see that I could not. What I didn't see

as a child is that sugar cane, not fishing gear, spills  
from his hold. I hadn't lived the expression, "thrown to the

sharks," couldn't place where it begins. That slavers threw  
humans to waiting sharks. That sharks swam

attendant. That slavers used women, children, and men as bait  
to catch sharks when food ran low. That white crew consumed

the bodies of sharks containing human parts.  
What was monstrous to me about sharks in Winslow Homer's  
painting I did not connect with history or if I did I sensed it  
obliquely, a white child's spurt of sympathy for

a black man stranded in awful peril. I knew the hymn,  
"For Those in Peril on the Sea"—it was my grandmother's

favorite. What did I want a resolved story  
to answer. I took whichever horizon Winslow Homer offered  
my answering whiteness to take. Homer was frequently asked  
by his dealer to assure potential buyers

that the fisherman was later rescued. The painting is made  
in 1899. In 1896, the Supreme Court rules,

in *Plessy v. Ferguson*: *If one race be inferior  
to the other socially, The Constitution of the United States cannot put them  
on the same plane*. Homer responded sarcastically to his dealer:  
"You can tell these ladies that the unfortunate

negro who now is so dazed & parboiled, will be rescued &  
returned to his friends and home, & ever after live happily."

⌘

I think a heart remembers its mothered,  
watery start. I think a heart presents a constant ratio  
of what would serve or fail to serve as love. A heart beating  
is submerged, whether in water or not.

When I was a child and to this day, the great white shark was  
and is the monster of my heart. It is the common name

for *Carcharodon carcharias*—from the ancient  
Greek joining of jagged and tooth. *Great* for the greatness of size?  
For the freedom from predation, for the great replacement rows  
of teeth, the breadths and depths

of migratory power? *White* for its counter-shading,  
breaking up its outline to disadvantage its prey?

⌘

I never read the novel but have its opening line  
by heart: *The great fish moved silently through the night water*.

Is there not something of *Moby Dick* in the bones  
of *Jaws*? I am not the first to see some Ahab  
in Quint (see Michael Sragow's "The Unassuming Greatness  
of 'Jaws'"). Although the critic praises Spielberg more than

Benchley, he does acknowledge the touchstone,  
the roaring boulder, as it were, of *Moby Dick*: "When our protagonists  
go out to sea in Quint's weathered vessel, the Orca,

Spielberg assumes a more Olympian point of view.  
That's when the film really does become an heir to 'Moby Dick,'  
conjuring a creature that is part marine biology, part Fate."

*The great fish moved silently through the night water*.  
Though he seems to have permanently

demonized sharks, Peter Benchley spoke passionately of shark-beauty:  
"They're as graceful as any bird." And,

"They're like an impossibly  
perfect piece of machinery."





When the artist Damien Hirst received carte  
blanche to make whatever artwork he wanted, he in turn  
commissioned a fisherman to find him a shark. Allegedly all  
he told the man  
was “big enough  
to eat you.”



In the video you released to the internet, the shark  
is big enough to eat you. Still you capture a bird-like  
grace with the great white in close encounter, the gentle  
movement of the caudal fin, without the mediation  
of a cage. What is sensible and what is super-sensible blend in the other  
side of this appearance, the moment (we must imagine) before

the fish appears. Approach precedes  
the beginning of any viewing. Out of the blue the shark  
was never not there—



After Virginia Woolf completed *Three Guineas*,  
she likened the experience of writing it to being “harnessed  
to a shark.” Writing *The Waves*, she said, began with the image  
of a fin rising on a wide blank sea: “Now  
the old devil has once more got his spine through the waves.”  
On finishing the novel, she wrote of “having netted that fin

in the waste of water.” A writer’s own  
relationship to the archetype and reality of the shark seems as pan-  
theistic as it is particular. When in “The Sea Is History,” Derek Walcott  
reaches into the *grey vault* to retrieve  
the monuments, battles, and tribal memory locked up inside, it is  
the shark, or the shark’s shadow, that haunts the mending

arts: *Bone soldered by coral to bone, /  
mosaics / mantled by the benediction of the shark’s shadow.*

When Denise Levertov conjures the hierophantic image of an evening’s  
dark fins, the white margins of “Sharks”  
grow clarifyingly alive: *the sea be-  
comes / sinister, are they everywhere?*



I’ve played it enough in waking hours  
for your video to enter my dreams. You said you released it  
for us to see that sharks are not man-eating monsters. In my  
earliest memory of them, sharks aren’t man-

eating, but woman-eating monsters. A moon picks  
out her silver hoops. She is swimming (otherwise)  
naked. I don’t know what I see, exactly, in your video.

I read the comments section  
of *The Guardian* to see what others see.  
One viewer remarks on the adverb “calmly”  
in the article’s title: what has the shark  
to fear? Whose calm is the more remarkable?

I try to imagine the moment  
you grasped what was coming. I try to feel  
the completeness  
of that Coral Sea.



Maybe a blue  
beyond the sea  
takes the measure of the spiritually  
materialized encounter. Grinders of lazulite  
would have had in mind the Virgin’s  
raiment. Or what blue did

Adrienne Rich want to surface when she spoke to  
*the blue light / the clear atoms / of our human air?*  
Yeats saw a ladder leading down to the bone shop of the heart.  
Rich runs her ladder  
into other waters. *You breathe differently down here,*  
she wrote, you learn to turn your body *without force.*

*Sarah Gridley is the author of four books of poetry: Weather Eye Open (University of California Press, 2005), Green is the Orator (UC Press, 2010), Loom (Omnidawn Publishing, 2013, awarded the 2011 Open Book Prize by Carl Phillips), and Insofar (New Issues Press, 2020, awarded the 2019 Green Rose Prize by Forrest Gander).*

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

*Letters should be sent to:*  
Letters to the Editor, The American Poetry Review,  
1906 Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia, PA 19103-5735

# TWO POEMS

## LUTHER HUGHES

---

### Given

Too slave to mule a word, I relapse  
    into him as he into me,  
and for brief breaths it was just us,  
    bound, stupid stallions laved  
in love, twisting into each other  
    as he strokes then settles—he is watching  
me, holding me there as the sun,  
    familiar now of our mythology,  
leans into the wicker of trees,  
    casting pink and orange and amber,  
casting what some have gossiped  
    as wonder or a type of wonder  
that makes the crows allay their blackness.  
    This vein of wonder wanders as a stream  
in his eyes when he comes suddenly and not so.  
    Dusk is juvenile. He gets up  
and silence slides down his back.  
    I look out the window.

### Into the City, I Become *Become*

Buildings bastardize the rolling dawn  
as the train thunders into the city  
away from the home of the man I love.

A construction site ivies into itself.  
An almost handsome man opens his book,  
spreading the covers until the spine cackles.

Authorities seep through the crowd  
in blue droplets as they check passes.  
When they ask for his, his mouth surrenders  
into a grapevine, and the officer okays.  
He *is* handsome, I decide  
and pull out my pass to pass the test.

The train is thick today.  
The woman behind me chants aloud  
in a furlike tone: *The ants pray for strength,*

*Lord, for guidance, give us guidance.*  
Her voice kicks the back of my neck.  
The man never stops reading.

*They know not because they seek not,  
they seek death and the ants are worried.*  
White with religion, my mother prays

with me every morning before leaving home,  
wakes at dawn to lather with *This is the day,  
this is the day that the Lord has made,*

*that the Lord has made.* Light bends  
the train and burrows into my palms.  
I chant within the dust of my breath,

*Yes Lord yes Lord, help her Lord,  
help my mother understand,  
I don't want to hate her any longer.*

The intercom reminds us we're entering  
Mount Baker station. From this height,  
Franklin High School menaces,

and I chesire the morning my mother  
dropped me off in front of the school  
so I could take my SATs, wetting my ear—

*Praying you do well*—and waited  
until I walked through the school's  
wooden teeth before leaving.

There was no train then. No man reading.  
There was her and I. My father  
had gone off and married his true love.

It's childish of me, but I believe  
in true love, in the way it can lumber  
the lumbar. How it twangs

the tongue into twinflower.  
Too, the yowl of hate.  
Look at me. I've fallen to haze

as the train jilts into the tunnel.  
The lights flicker, and the man looks up.  
Darkness bounces from his eye

to the pole and back into his book.  
The world is too silent for hate.  
I loathe the woman who baits me

to unleash the spell, drawing in the air  
a viscous coat of wasps that cling  
to each inhale. The window wipes my face

into some wight. The train stops  
and the conductor announces our stay.  
Someone groans at the woman still chanting.

The handsome man is looking my way,  
book closed, and I carve a smile  
for the woman. She reminds me

of my mother, stubborn, never shy  
about her God, a woman who didn't want  
my boyfriend to break bread with us

on Thanksgiving because *It's wrong,*  
who apologized later, kissed me on the cheek,  
who was pleased to learn that he, too,

is God-fearing. I know, I know,  
but I do love my mother  
as does a doe stalking the whiff of food,

gray with knowing what lies there,  
hoping it is as it desired.  
The woman. The man. The day once dawn.

I am finally what I desired. I take the sun  
between breaths, the train's furrow,  
the man that loves God with feather and nail,

the mother I was gifted, and throw my head  
back into the woman's chant.  
My life has been changed.

---

*Luther Hughes is the author of Touched (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2018). The recipient of the 2020 92Y Discovery Poetry Contest, Hughes is the founder of Shade Literary Arts and the executive editor of The Offing.*



# LANGUAGE DOES NOT SERVE US ALL. SO WHAT WILL?

*Stillness and Recognition in Taylor Johnson's Inheritance*

APR Books

ASA DRAKE

*Inheritance* by Taylor Johnson  
Farmington, ME: Alice James Books.  
November 2020; 100 pages; \$18.95

Taylor Johnson's *Inheritance* is a collection of discovery, "attuned to all these human privacies" in a language where closeness isn't akin to love. If language is a tool, then we are still grasping for the handle. This debut collection prospects the possibilities, outlines a terrain through the certainty that we can still hear one another "and [hold] close each other's sound." Enter Derrida. Enter Coleman. Enter Miles Davis. Johnson evokes the names we know and also the nameless: the deer filled with singularity and plurality, the pines, the birds, the light between them. "Sometimes language is the animal, sometimes it's the gun," both possessed because language does not serve us all. So what will?

Johnson lays out language as the resource we have experienced it to be, "Poems are bullshit unless / they're acres of land / Would you believe / oil money / pays for my poems?" So they extend language, offering stillness like a vigil, a "transitive propert[y]" to speech like music, which must also rest while holding another meaning. We return again and again to the body absent of language. The dog waits for an owner who will not return, sits "there unreachable as language," and yet stillness is not tameness.

There's a wildness in the root: "desire is that plant we can't name." Although language fails to

communicate specificity, the body of desire is not unknowable. Johnson circles the space we don't name, "the palimpsest of images accruing" their own "transitive properties," in an image that traverses time two ways: first, the palimpsest of what has been written and then the accrual still underway though the book is in hand.

"I write to understand stillness, not to praise," Johnson tells us as they offer generations of stillness, "the language my grandparents spoke: saying nothing, holding both my hands." That same language given back to the self:

*I'm holding hands with  
the poet speaking of light,  
saying I made it up  
I made it up.*

Speech, here, revealed as a permutation of the self, at once coming into and out of focus. Concentric, overlapped and beside one another is the self and the poet—a voice separate from the self. And the self is subject to change: "I'm the moon, soon the sea, darkening in apology." A self perpetually in play, the speaker would "Bless what could be mine or me," taken in by a stranger's recognition, the act of "witness" that "did not make of me a disappeared, burned thing." Here the onlooker is suddenly an intimate participant in the work of identity, though the distance between bodies remains unchanged.

Johnson's collection navigates the trick of language as both the tool and a barrier for expressing identity. And here, Johnson's work demands more than definition through opposition. Here are the quantum notations of the self, a phenomenon which we have limited abilities to measure. I'm interested. I, too, would like stillness as an answer to language that does not have a right to me. I'm interested in love as physicality separate from discourse, like "The Rigorous Practice of Listening," a poem of human communion that listens outside of sound:

*There was the man who you said nothing to but kissed  
his forehead  
after he'd caught us three fish. And the man who fixed  
your cars  
who never spoke. The stranger you shared a cigar with  
in front of the grocery store.  
The way you held the package of red beans from your  
brother back home. I heard it all.*

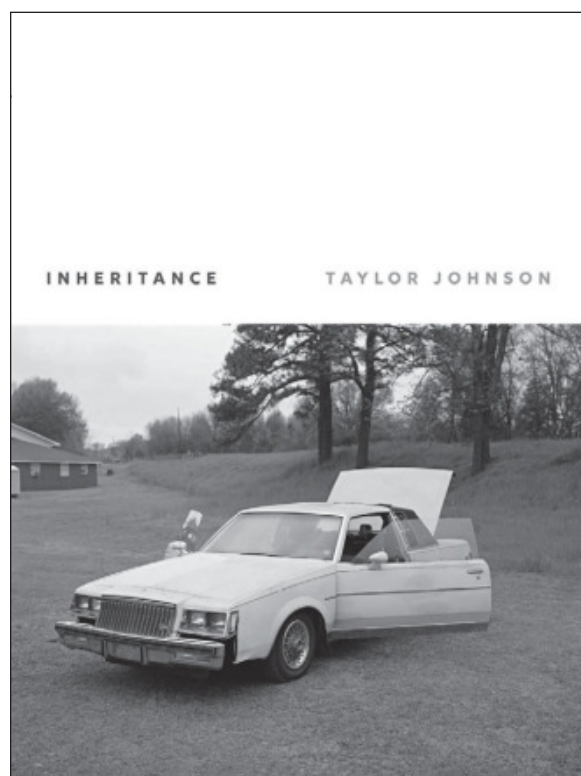
There's an intimacy here, not just in the exchanges, the safety among strangers, but also in the invocation of "you," who connects the speaker to the narrative, moves through a shared experience, a shared knowing of this other self who feeds the self, who is listening in this history. But Johnson also suggests that stillness will not save

us. This poem ends with the active destruction of "the nectarine tree where the beetles have eaten" and the self-understanding that "I can't kill them."

It is important to know that Johnson is a Black writer living in America. I keep going back to the notion Johnson offers early in the narrative, that "Something was wrong if we left the country," a line that in context suggests the rurality of their childhood home, the familial "kingdom of their distance." But the line haunts a collection filled with cities and the expense incurred within them, where "maybe one day when we're up in the rotation of wealth, we'll trade sou-vidé recipes . . . and we'll have clean water." I can't help but think that comfort, too, is tenuous in poems where we have indeed left the nation to find elsewhere, in Finland, "the largess of language" only to return to the confinement of the jail. There is no city, but I know a poem that jails a Black American speaker is an American jail, where "Nothing is like being alone when you shouldn't be." Johnson brings readers again and again to absence, "I inherited this privacy, given what it's like to be an instrument— / Given each plant singing in its season. Given the trees between." Then absence turns to negation, "Given the no place of the soul," "owning nothing being money myself," a "nothing" which cannot transcend the geopolitical attacks on the body in motion, and yet the speaker decides otherwise. "I decide," they say, "leaving my house. / That I would cross it, given the distance" between one body alone and "the happenstance of touch." Through the wide field of parameters, between money, and language and place, Johnson affirms the closeness of recognition.

Theirs is a collection that disambiguates language from sound and looks for the root of human communion. Like light and music, at once present and intangible, Johnson offers readers language able to hold a multiplicity of relations, which is to say, what we have all expected of language but that language has failed to deliver.

Asa Drake is a Filipina American writer and public services librarian in Central Florida. She has received fellowships from Tin House and Idyllwild Arts and is a 2020 92Y Discovery Poetry Contest winner. Her most recent poems are published in Adroit, Copper Nickel and The Paris Review Daily.



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# YEARS, THE WOODS FELT FOREIGN HERE

ROSE McLARNEY

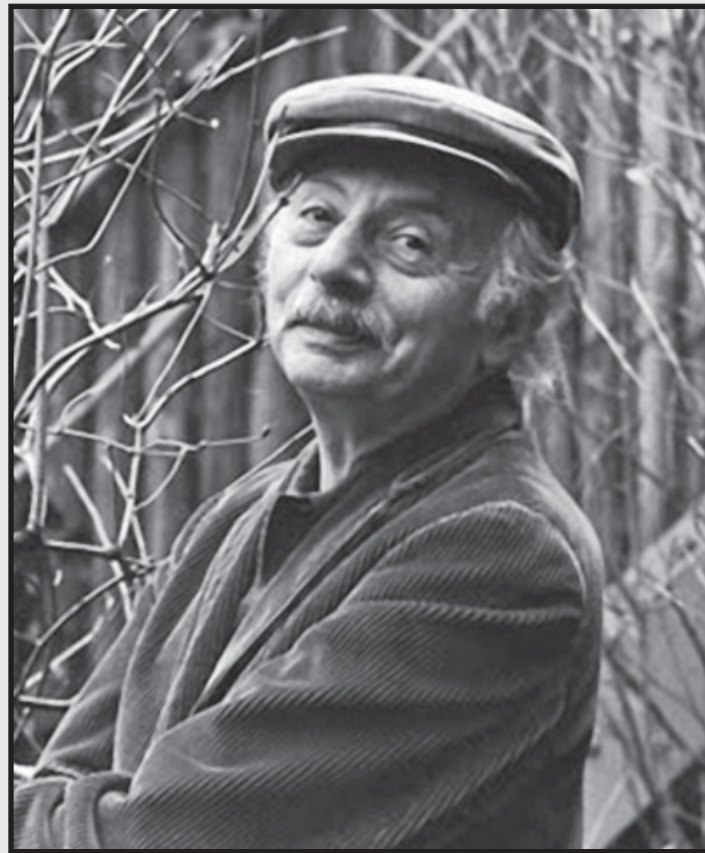
I am studying, finally, the pines.  
Trying to hear the hush  
of forest floors under needles'  
cover, their soft erasure.  
Not as lacking the stirring  
of deciduous, varied  
and tangled understories  
of shapely leaves.  
But as more than  
an absence of sound.  
Years, the woods felt foreign  
here, where I came  
to be a teacher. Soon, my students'  
senses will stop attending to me.  
The boys are 20, saplings  
of men. A woman  
can only mature beyond  
where the eye wishes to reach.  
When timber grows tall  
it is cleared away.  
Centuries already,  
the Longleaf pine has been  
lumbered out of existence  
in this place.  
Still, along with Loblolly,  
White, Pond, and Sand,  
late, I am learning its name.  
There may never again  
be occasion to say it aloud  
upon seeing one.  
But who knows what life  
continues, in that quiet  
where I will go.

---

*Rose McLarney's collections of poems are Forage (2019) and Its Day Being Gone, winner of the National Poetry Series, both from Penguin Books, as well as The Always Broken Plates of Mountains, published by Four Way Books. Currently, she is Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Auburn University and Co-Editor in Chief and Poetry Editor of the Southern Humanities Review.*



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**Poets may submit one to three poems per entry (totaling no more than three pages) with a \$15 entry fee by May 15, 2021. The editors of *The American Poetry Review* will judge. Winner will be notified by July 1, 2021.**

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Send entries to:

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Stanley Kunitz Memorial Prize  
1906 Rittenhouse Square  
Philadelphia, PA 19103



# FOR LINDA TIRADO

BETHANY SCHNEIDER

I have seen the picture of you  
in your hospital bed,  
a plastic shield filled with gauze  
over your left eye.  
The police knew you were press.  
They saw your camera.  
They shot you for it.

Eyes are twins.  
Seeing your right  
I can imagine your left.  
You likely never thought of your left eye  
as a singular thing  
before now.  
Your beautiful dark left eye,  
the eye that is gone.

That's how it will be from now on.  
"My eye," you will say.  
You will mean the eye you have,  
or the one taken from you,  
depending.

It's a tender shift to the singular.  
You will love your right eye now  
as you never knew to love your left.  
Your right eye.  
Your miracle,  
your treasure.

By the way  
you should start to sit  
at the head of tables  
or at least at the last  
seat on the end.  
It is lonely to sit  
with your blind side  
next to a friend.

And ask other people to pour.  
A crowded table is filled with plates,  
salt shakers, glasses, people's hands  
resting, gesturing, reaching.  
You judge distance now  
by looking at the relative size  
of things near other things.  
There's just too much stuff  
happening on and over a table.  
You'll pour the water  
or the wine  
or the beer or whatever  
all over the place.

Speaking of dinner,  
Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin  
said in 1825  
"A dinner that ends without cheese  
is like a beautiful woman  
with one eye."  
The other saying  
that you will either love or hate  
is from Erasmus:  
"In the Land of the Blind  
the one-eyed man is king."

We don't live there.  
But we do live in a country where  
you either see it  
or you don't.

In 1014 the Byzantine emperor,  
a Christian named Basil,  
blinded an army.  
Fifteen thousand men.  
Thirty thousand eyes, put out.  
Out of every hundred men

one was left with a single eye  
so he could lead  
the others home.

And they did,  
the one-eyed men.  
They led them home.

---

*Bethany Schneider is Associate Professor of English at Bryn Mawr College and is the author, as Bee Ridgway, of The River of No Return (Dutton, 2013). She wrote this in a Zoom writing group with her mother, sisters and niece. The group was an effort to relieve their poet mother's isolation during a nursing home pandemic lockdown. She died before this poem was published; "For Linda Tirado" is therefore also "for Pat Schneider."*



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# FIVE POEMS

from *Us from Nothing, a Lyrical History*

GEOFF BOUVIER

---

## 2700 BCE

Yesterday we men of Elam and Sumer waved hello along the roads and labored side-by-side in irrigation ditches.

Tomorrow we must rise as mortal enemies, arriving at a chosen field to try to end each other's lives.

*Farewell, wives. Farewell, sons and daughters. We may never see you in this life again.*

At dawn beneath the rising Sun perhaps for the final time our battle calls unblock our throats and we rush forward.

Around us sharp objects fly. Blizzards of spikes bury in skulls, shoulders, chests. *May the gods be proud of us!*

Shrieking survivors advance, propelling spears and stones, killing other men and breaking their limbs.

*Let our names be remembered and our memories be loved! Warriors coupled toe-to-toe swinging blades, clubs, fists.*

Our blows and counter-blows, cloven muscles, slashed skins, opened wounds, exposed bones, necks disjointed.

Faces fear-twisted, red sprays of blood, spilling innards, whispered last words, *I was a young man. I never got to know who I am.*

Chaos, torsos split, flesh hanging, abhorrent smells, terrified eyes, war-whoops, death-cries, splintering bone-sound.

Death-screams, destroyed lives, collapsing humans crawling on a gore-slicked field, achieving . . . something.

A seeming eternity of confused minutes, and the last men standing come from only one side of the disagreement.

A victory is won for the priest-kings, their homelands, and their standards.

And the weapons of the dead become spoils for victors. And the Elams and Sumers of the world return to peace.

And in this way, we solve our disputes. Our species is always at war with itself.

## 776 BCE

Yesterday we men of Athens and Sparta stabbed at each other with spears and slashed at each other with swords.

Tomorrow we shall rise instead as friendly competitors and arrive at the chosen field in Elis to compete at sports.

*Farewell, wives. Farewell, sons and daughters. We shall return, and when we do, we hope to bring home glory, wealth, and fame.*

At dawn on the first day of the festival of Zeus, a call fills the throats of the crowd—*Diagoras! Leonidas! Chionis! Milo!*

And these men and others race armored and naked, in chariots and on foot. They box, jump, and wrestle naked.

They throw discuses and javelins, and display the godlike abilities of humanity's most able bodies.

The fastest sprinter at the first ceremonial games is a lithe chef named Koroibos.

One evasive boxer, Melankomas, avoids violent force, taking the crown of olive leaves without throwing punches.

Thanks to The Olympic Games, soldiers who once had to fight to the end become athletes who may play to win.

## 850 CE

In Chang'an, the most populous city in the world, Taoist alchemists meditate evenings and mornings, and conduct experiments afternoons. For a thousand years, the Tao teaches followers the Way, including techniques for achieving immortality, which may be shown to anyone who manages to let go of worldliness and willfulness. The prefectures of the Tang Dynasty increasingly embody a debased version of Tao ideals, navigating between demonism and reason—mystical questing versus existential efforts in letting go. To reach lost souls and bring them back along the way, a handful of elite Taoist monks, financed by the state, turn their practices to alchemy, seeking chemically what Romans will call the Magnum Opus, "the philosopher's stone." They think there must be a central substance—a universal element that transforms anything into something else, and mortality into eternal life.

The monastery laboratory in the geographical center of Tang is a cluttered organization of glass beakers and cylinders, pipettes and flasks of viscous liquids, mortars brimming with powders and crystals, stacks of arcane tomes, rolled and unrolled scrolls, logbooks inked with mysterious symbols and theorems, snaking bamboo tubes, bones of strange animals, human skulls, shelves of color-coded oils, a bronze globe, hanging vessels, yellow satin draperies lined with green fringe, glazed tri-colored pottery, a deck of playing cards with color pictures of soldiers, a chessboard, a clay pot dripping water to mark out time, a line of tortoise shells, decorations of golden dragon heads, two graduated scales, a bellows, burning candles, a fire pit, distillation devices, scoops, tongs, tweezers, pestles, brushes, jars, cast iron evaporation pans, and a hand-powered fan with multiple wheels to clear and condition the laboratory air. The Taoist monks who work here have accepted vows of self-abnegation, to help with which, between experiments and meditations, they distill and sip from spirits of aloe, gentian, agaric, treacle, rhubarb, saffron.

The recent obsession of the Chang'an monks is *xiao shi*—the Romans will call it *niter*, the British, *saltpeter*—because this gritty white powder features an astonishingly Tao-like trait. Although *xiao shi* will not catch fire itself, its presence causes other matter to burn faster. Perhaps the stuff will also magnify a person's *Ch'i*. The investigating monks of Tang have been adding it to various flammable materials.

With charcoal and sulfur, *xiao shi* completes a compound that flies into dancing sparks, ignites the beards of the discoverers, throws alchemists onto their backs, burns down labs, changes the Tang arrows into flying fires that will terrify invading Mongols, and travels the Silk Road to the Arab world, where gunpowder propels heavy rounds of iron into warring Europeans who survive to render the technology central to weaponry.

## 1908 CE

The planet teems with a godlike being who hacks into its systems. We've learned to heat, pressure, and mingle elemental materials. Previously, only stars could perform such alchemy.

Now, German industrial chemists Fritz Haber and Carl Bosch are synthesizing nitrogen, an ingredient essential for life. Within decades, artificial fertilizer will help feed billions.

But first, the German state and other states must weaponize such a vital ingredient for causing mass death. Nitrate-rich explosives power the Great War, killing millions.



We work the Earth till it behaves like a junior star, and human numbers multiply. At the same time, the process consumes our humanity with the power to destroy.

## 1945 CE

At a place called Trinity—after a line in a poem where the tripartite Christian deity offers “bones to philosophy, but milk to faith”—within a desert expanse known as “the journey of the dead man,” the human race, in a single flash, will begin the dying fall of its earthly journey, giving milk to the bones of its own destruction.

Hoisted on pulleys to the top of a tower, nestled in a metal casing named Jumbo, riddled with cables and wires, the Gadget is ready. For months, drop by drop, the cyclotrons of the Americans have harvested enough plutonium isotope to arm the unassuming Gadget.

At dawn this morning, three, two, one, a series of tiny, lightspeed explosions causes energetic cross-waves that crush a 14-pound iron drum of pure plutonium-240. Three, two, one, and the blinding flare of a sudden sun expands in waves of utter power outward, a turbulent vortex shocking earth and air. Nearby sand grains concuss and melt into a stadium-sized crater of radioactive glass. An incandescent smoky column rises billowing circles like an opening of mile-wide crimson parasols—devastating splendors.

The scientific father of this negative creation, J. Robert Oppenheimer, gazes in the aftermath and thinks of Hindu scripture, “Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.”

---

*Geoff Bouvier has published two books of prose poetry, including the APR/Honickman Prize winner Living Room. He currently lives in Toronto, where he is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Toronto-Mississauga.*

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# TWO POEMS

## SOMMER BROWNING

---

### Great Things from the Department of Transportation

My mother desires to track my location on her phone.

My mother announces that she's "latex intolerant."

My mother is horrified that the children's cartoon character Caillou is bald.

My mother to the server at a terrible restaurant: *I don't want a box—I want a flamethrower.*

One's mother might be the most famous person one knows.

My mother says, *There is no Denny's, only Zuul.*

My mother on penises and traffic cones: *On occasion they're both orange, aren't they?*

The young lungs of my mother fill with fine particulate matter on the streets of Clairton, PA.

My mother on the X-rated hypnotist: *He was only concerned with having the hypnotized persons act sexually stupid.*

One night in the 1970s, in the Mojave Desert, my mother ceases to feel apart from the world.

My mother pays my sister and me \$40 each to not have birthday parties.

My mother's soulmate is not my father but her dog, Six.

*The only thing I don't like about John Wick is that he never washes his hair.*

My mother's father, a bipolar beer distributor, laughs at least once that I know of because it echoes through me for 40 years.

On the whole my mother likes Miranda July's novel, *The First Bad Man*, but could have done without the sex parts.

I listen to my mother tell my child a story as if I were my own daughter.

My mother tells me there were some skanks on *America's Next Top Model*.

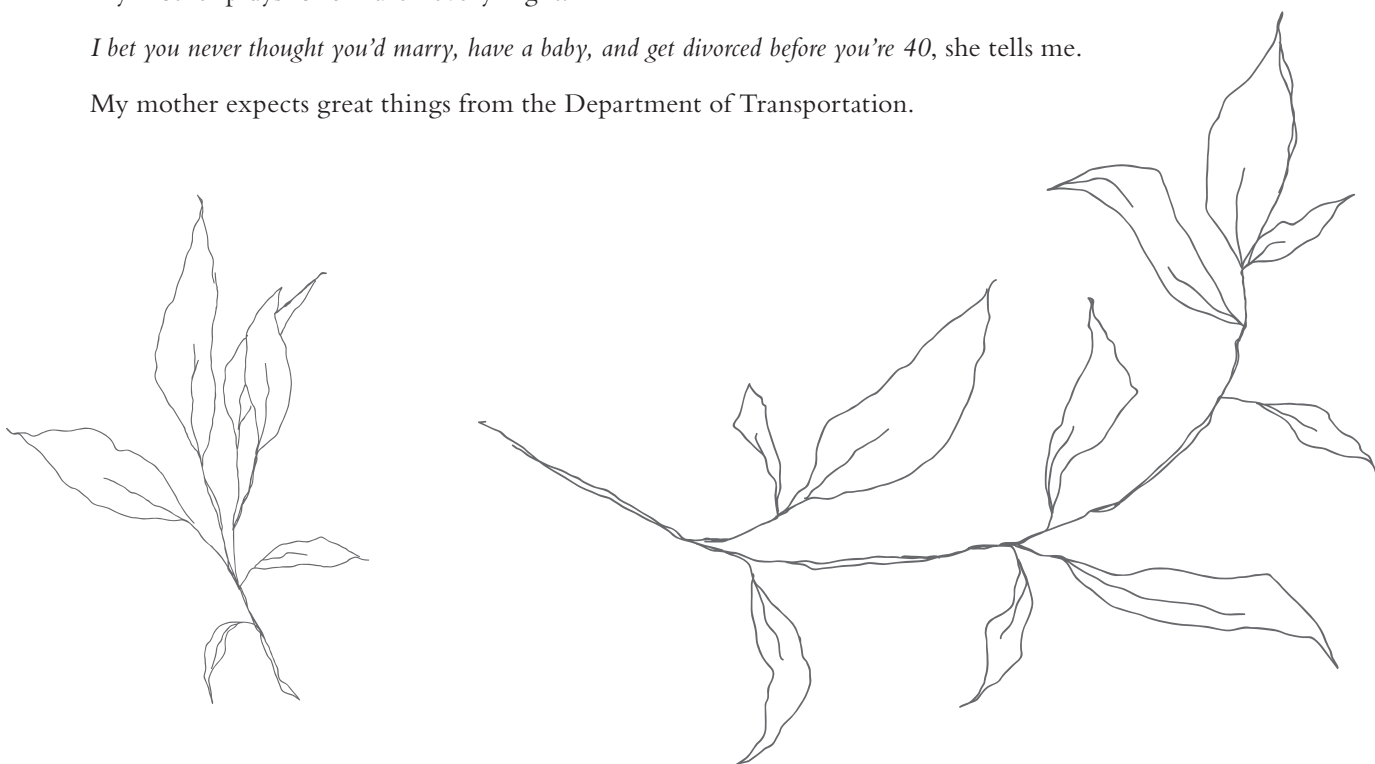
My mother asks, *Didn't someone famous say, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger?"*

My mother prays for her children every night.

My mother prays for children every night.

*I bet you never thought you'd marry, have a baby, and get divorced before you're 40, she tells me.*

My mother expects great things from the Department of Transportation.



# The First Number Will Be a Blues

I like, so much, driving as fast as the car can go.  
On a straightaway in the country. 120 say. It's best if there's a person

With you. Someone you're dating. Maybe you love.  
Someone more scared than you are to see you free.

Have you done it in your 40s? You should do it in your 40s.  
And if you're too frightened what you need to do first is go fuck yourself,

Then you'll be able to do it.

In 1955 before his band begins to play *The Blues Walk* the bandleader Donald Byrd says:  
*The first number will be a blues.*

Don't you love that surety? Will be a blues.  
Not: This song is a blues. Not: Next up, a blues. But: The first number  
Will be a blues. And fuck if it isn't.

The thing about public land is it's not mine and it's not yours.  
It's this third uncomfortable thing, ours.

And things that are ours  
Abide rules we learn through others.

Yours and mine rules  
Are boring. We're born with them.

The first number is one.  
And it will be a blues.  
You don't have to tell me twice.

The pain I see in my child  
Is my mother's and I was the bridge.

Another poet might tell you about all the research she's done  
On Donald Byrd. She'd wedge Byrd's

Life in here  
As allegory or, something worse,

Metaphor.

Before we're born, my mother tells us,  
We watch movies of every life we might be born into. Then we choose.

The little baby points from her  
astral cradle. That one.  
I choose that mama.  
I choose that daddy.

I choose that irrevocably broken marriage,  
That accident that wires my jaw shut,  
That burned popcorn, that daughter late in life named Georgia,  
That root canal, that unending night on mushrooms,  
That dog bite, that last beer with Oren,  
That A+, that DUI, that refrigerator stinking of rotten eggs  
Because I don't have enough for the electric bill.

---

*Sommer Browning writes poems, draws comics and tells jokes. She is the author of Backup Singers and Either Way I'm Celebrating, both from Birds, LLC. Her poems and drawings have appeared in The New York Quarterly, Typo, Octopus, past simple, Free Verse, The Stranger and other places.*



# THREE POEMS

AMY SAUL-ZERBY

---

## for all the times i wanted to give up on myself

for the time i was hospitalized  
& missed the first semester  
of my senior year of college  
for which i blamed myself  
because i did not listen  
to my psychiatrist when she tried  
to warn me that i seemed manic  
for the time i compared myself  
to my college boyfriend & his  
buddies hired by graduation  
into finance jobs & living in  
the west village at 22. for the time  
i felt certain i'd made a horrible  
mistake trying to do what  
i loved. for the time i blamed  
my mother for encouraging me  
to write. for the time she had  
to physically hold me down  
between doses of clonazepam  
& it took a long time for me to see  
that this too was an act of love.  
for the time i stopped taking  
my medication & the years it took  
to come back from the fallout  
for the time i thought i'd finally  
landed the kind of job i should have  
& couldn't love or keep it. for the time  
a friend beat his partner in front  
of me & i learned what post-  
traumatic stress can do to a body  
for the times the depression  
got so bad i stopped eating  
for the things i let men do to me  
because i didn't think  
it mattered. i have gotten so used  
to apologizing that i'm tempted  
here to apologize to myself  
when i know i should be saying  
thank you. this is still  
a work in progress.  
there are still days i want  
very badly to give up.

but sometimes the light  
breaks through enough  
for me to feel gratitude for all  
the times i didn't.  
and today there is, incredibly,  
an abundance of light.  
in view of which, i write  
to myself at fifteen,  
nineteen, twenty-one,  
twenty-seven,  
to tell her i am so grateful  
that she hoped  
for better, that she waited  
in the dark for things  
she had no certainty  
would ever come  
but which somehow, eventually  
did, and which, most  
incredibly, i am still here  
to see. i don't know what to do  
with joy most of the time,  
can do little more than  
identify it, but it is never lost  
on me that i have been given  
the chance to try to learn.

## show me the way to go home

*for louise*

on a day when i can barely leave  
my bed let alone my house  
i think of how you found joy  
in almost everything  
re-read your letter, written at 3 a.m.  
because you could barely contain  
your eagerness to be awake,  
in which you write that you cannot  
believe how much you like pulling  
weeds from your garden, the sense  
of power it gives you to pull one  
almost your size from the earth  
i think of watching as these simple  
joys were stripped away by age,  
one by one. dig up a letter in which  
you talk about how much you like

to watch the snow settle on the birch  
trees outside your window. search out  
a column you addressed to me on  
the occasion of my birth, welcoming  
me to the world and all the wonder  
it would offer me. i know you would  
not blame me for not being able  
to feel it sometimes. but you are  
not here to tell me so, and i miss  
you immeasurably, and i think  
i need very badly to hear you say  
that this is all right, that it isn't  
my fault, that you are still proud.  
when we lost you, for the first  
few years after, i would wake in  
the night and swear i could see  
you, and was not afraid. louise,  
i don't believe in ghosts and i was  
taking my medication and this is maybe  
the only way i can think to explain it  
to love someone so deeply, and be  
loved in return is a kind of magic  
i forget i ever believed in. that kind of love,  
it does things to the brain, even to my  
half-broke one. is it any wonder i fixate  
on the idea of finding it again. louise,  
i know i will never find it again. i don't  
need you to tell me this is all right.  
it isn't, and it is. you're here and  
you're not. if i can ever forgive  
myself for not seeing the wonder  
you hoped i would, it will be because  
i know you would want me to. to look  
at snow on trees and find joy, for me  
may be too much of a stretch, but  
to look at them and think of you  
& find joy in the thought? louise,  
i don't believe in a god but your love,  
it did things to my brain, and this—  
i can't think of any other way  
to explain it—is a kind of magic  
even i might still believe in.

## If i tell you i love you

*i'm not trying to keep you*  
i say, nestled against  
your shoulder, and you  
laugh, say *as you nakedly*  
*cuddle*. it is not  
your day off but mine  
this is not my home  
but yours but i  
have been here for so  
long, and how do you  
not make yourself  
at home in all that time  
siken writes, *everyone*  
*needs a place. it*  
*shouldn't be inside*  
*of someone else*. but god  
does it feel good  
not to be alone sometimes  
flanked by small  
dependent animals  
reluctantly sharing  
the bed with one another  
to be within  
arm's reach of us  
i think how all of us need  
so badly  
to be touched

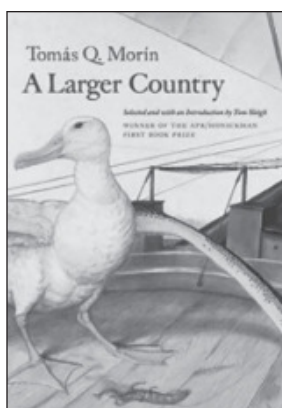
as soon as i feel  
your body begin  
to rise i will lift  
my head from  
your chest  
unlatch my arm  
and let go  
but if you were  
hoping i  
would make the first  
move toward  
the rest of the day  
*oh honey*, i'm sorry  
you should  
have known better  
and i have no interest  
in being  
your small dependent  
animal. and if one day  
you are not here  
to touch me someone  
will take your place  
and you  
are not even  
my home but this  
is not your  
day off, it's mine

and when you  
move for  
the door to start  
your day, i will  
tell you  
goodbye  
but while you are  
still within  
arm's reach  
i will not deny  
myself  
another moment  
*i'm not trying*  
*to keep you*  
but if you were  
expecting me  
to help  
you leave,  
*oh honey*,  
i'm  
sorry.

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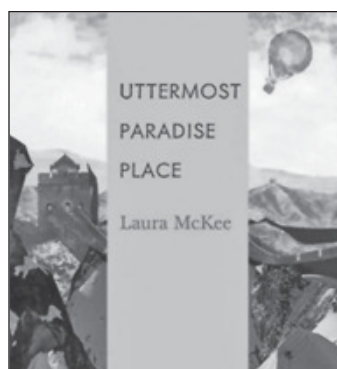
*Amy Saul-Zerby is the author of two poetry collections, Paper Flowers Imaginary Birds (Be About It Press, 2017) and Deep Camouflage (Civil Coping Mechanisms, 2018). Her poems have appeared in The Rumpus, The Chicago Review of Books, Hobart, Peach Mag, and elsewhere. She edits Voicemail Poems.*

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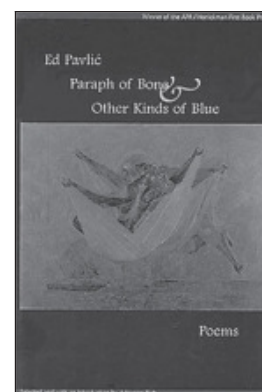
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# TWO POEMS

LEAH UMANSKY

---

## I Want to Wear the Crown

A history teacher at school tells me *the Constitution starts with the people and ends with the people*. He says, *the Constitution protects the people against tyranny*, and I think, *what protects the people from the people? What protects the people from their selves?*

★

My horoscope for December tells me the year ahead is my emerald year; that I'm going to wear the crown.

★

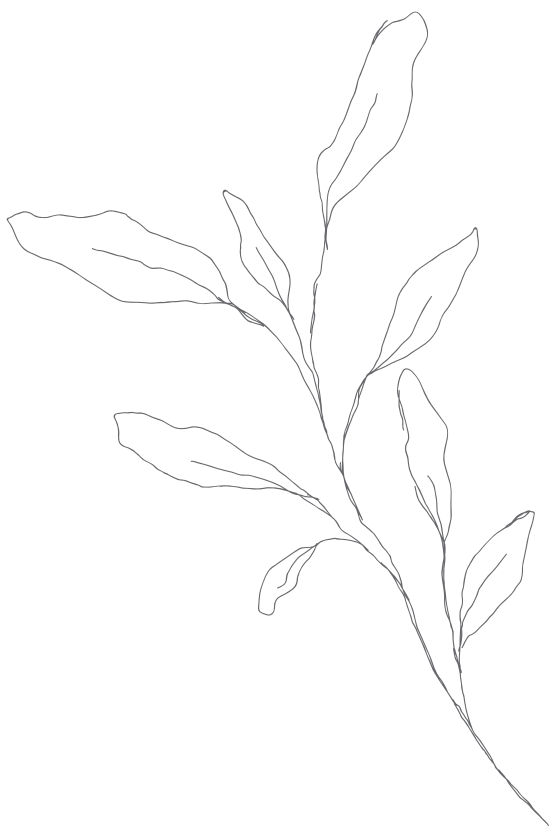
The other day, I overheard my friend say to her dog, *how do you live with someone so miserable*

★

Every one of us is important, and I want to wear the crown; I want to mind the brilliant exception; the brilliant expectation that the regard with which I give myself to others, is not shortchanged; is not a testament to sorrow or to slight, but an endless attraction to everything and nothing; who doesn't know the capacity of their heart; its unbearability; the grace with which it exhausts in on itself; as an accordion, the sureness of its belief; its because and its inhibitions

It loved me and it loved me and it loved me and therefore the very definition of the self was behind, but forward; a despair of connection, an exile of the piecing of time

*therefore therefore therefore therefore*



## What Does the X Mark?

There are dancers on the train, boys, teenagers, contorting their bodies through the slither of the subway. The spool of the stop and go, the rush of the slide, the stir, the silence, the whirl. The dancers look at a woman, her body, an X of bone and bone, her body, a warning, a stop, a flare. She screams: *i just want to be left alone i just want to be left alone i just want to be left alone* and the dancers say, *dancing isn't criminal; don't take your bad day out on us.*

★

In the Lyft, going to the airport a few weeks ago, a 90-year-old retired man, our driver Mario and I, are talking about driving. The old man says that he gave up his license years ago, that he doesn't want to be responsible for taking anyone's life but is fine with someone taking his own.

Mario and I look at each other in the rearview.

Mario says, *no, no, every one of us is important.*

★

On the train in Chicago, after leaving the conservatory, I sit, riding into the Loop, a peel of the city, a circle, a circuit, a turn gone wrong then right; two couples get on and sit opposite me; I am reading a book; lost in the page and the word and the desire of Elio and Oliver. I look up from the felt-life to my real life and see both women opposite me have their right legs crossed over the right leg of their partners, their men; It is like an abstraction, a surrealist painting, a beyond I can't reach; I stare at these circuits of power and play, of desire and play, of power and crosshairs (and god, it *felt* like a warning) and I sat there feeling disgust and something sallow and I felt a circle had formed around me, and suddenly in the silent chaos, in the temptation that wasn't there, I felt a thirst (was it jealousy, envy, longing?) I don't know, but I felt elongated, inside the circumference; arc-ed, radiant; I felt punctured yet punctual, red and fired, scalding, and scarleted, yet bound; where was the mark, where was the marker, and had X been already drawn?

I have no marker, but I long to be marked.

★

I was alone and alone I was and I got off at my stop and went beyond the surface, underground, to the subway where a woman was holding a baby, dancing, orbiting closer and closer to the performer singing, *at last my love has come along; my lonely days are over and life is like a song* and I stand there, looking for the song and the love and what lies outside the power; outside the woman; outside the people that protect themselves from their selves.

★

Every one of us is important

---

*Leah Umansky is the author of four books: The Barbarous Century (2018); Domestic Uncertainties (BlazeVOX, 2012); Straight Away the Emptied World (Kattywompus Press, 2016); and the Mad Men-inspired Don Dreams and I Dream (Kattywompus Press, 2014), voted one of The Top 10 Chapbooks to Read Now in 2014 by Time Out New York.*



# DECENTRAL AMERICA

*The poetry of Sheila Maldonado:*

*An appreciation of that's what you get*

AP2 Books

SPENCER REECE

*that's what you get* by Sheila Maldonado  
Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Arts Press, 2021  
91 pages; \$16.00

*I am not right anywhere  
was always displacement girl  
forever from  
the edge of the sea  
blood moving now  
to the outer banks  
of this island  
where our people from  
the middle of the world  
are pushed  
it is most home  
when I am most decentered  
decentral America  
unstable a sliver  
how do we hold on  
to the continent  
how do we not fall  
into the water*

—Sheila Maldonado, “leaving Coney”

Poetry! The miracle of poetry is that it can make a place for the person that does not feel right anywhere. Poetry remakes worlds. Poetry rewrites history. Or is “rearrange” a better word here?

Sheila Maldonado’s parents immigrated to New York City in the early 1970s from Honduras. In a 2017 blog interview with *Brooklyn Poets*, Maldonado joked that her parents might have been some of the first Hondurans to land there in Brooklyn, perhaps because it was so close to JFK. They were outsiders within the immigrant Hispanic community in Brooklyn, where most had migrated from Puerto Rico. Maldonado received financial aid and a scholarship to Brooklyn Friends, followed by Brown University and a master’s from City College of New York, with poetry teachers Elaine Equi, Marilyn Hacker and Wayne Koestenbaum. Of her education and decision to study poetry in New York she said: “I liked the idea of a more multicultural writing program, which being in New York and affordable, it was. I was fed up with being in the elite fishbowl that I had been in. Brown was a real culture shock. I didn’t want to do that again, be one of the few, isolated and depressed and dissected. The city that I was raised in was the antidote to all of that for me.” From the start, reading Maldonado’s poems, you feel right away that New York City is more than a city. Much like with Frank O’Hara, New York City becomes a character, a force, a teacher.

In 2011, in her first book, *one-bedroom solo*, Maldonado blurs male/female, good/bad, American/Honduran—the poems echo Elizabeth Bishop’s “dazzling dialectic” which she used to describe the Amazon waters in her poem “Santarém.” Maldonado’s poet and protagonist is both the man and the woman in the house. She describes herself as having a tilde for a mustache. We were introduced to a Latinx stand-up gender-bending provocateur. This was reinforced by a short film made from the book where we see Maldonado as a drag king. The collection, she stated, came out of a powerful mentorship with the late Steve Cannon, the founder of A Gathering of the Tribes, a Lower East Side poetry collective with workshops and a spoken word culture. Walt Whitman, Federico García Lorca, Diane di Prima and Frank O’Hara align with Maldonado’s sound—an irreverent, city-embracing, gritty, duende-infused, jokey, melancholy tomboy poetry. The early death of her father, she stated, helped ignite this work. *one-bedroom solo* expressed curiosity over her father’s origins—a line of inquiry that deepens as she continues to write.

Ten years later comes *that's what you get*. A sassy phrase. Title as scold. But to whom? Spaniards have a common expression in Madrid, “es lo que hay,” which translates as “it is what it is,” which is usually said with a wink and flamboyant lipsticked smooch, but the phrase telegraphs no submissiveness or flexibility. This title has that kick. I think of that literary style that developed in Britain in the 1960s called “kitchen sink realism,” where the focus turned on the workaday world of everyday people and made no apologies or attempts at pleasing delicate sensibilities. The title is a head-scratcher. What did the reader or author ask for to get this response: “That’s what you get”? When asked about the title, Maldonado wrote: “it is a general accusatory feeling I feel, directed at other people but mainly at myself.”

You hear intrepid, realistic candor elsewhere in lines like: “I take too many pictures. I am literal as fuck. I bully my way through a text” and “I do get that I on the page is still not me. I do get that. I don’t know if you get that.” The lines snap their fingers. Our poet is brasher in book two.

“Ma’s Palm Sunday TV (*María vs. Nuestra Belleza Latina*)” shows the speaker’s Honduran mother in the comfy diorama of her Coney Island apartment attached to her TV clicker. The story of Jesus mixes with a Latin beauty pageant as her mother flips between the two:

*All the baby boys in Bethlehem slaughtered  
Mary and Joseph getting away with baby Jesus on a donkey  
Flip  
Beauties in spokesmodel competition brutalizing banter  
making asses of themselves  
Flip*

We watch the poet watch the mother. On the TV, the Bible story shows innocent children threatening an insecure dictator. A family fleeing authority. Then we cut to the mother watching women being objectified. This seemingly light pastiche will echo larger themes in this book: a disenfranchised Catholic upbringing; modern American politics as the three kings story bears an uncanny mirror to scenarios that occurred under the Trump administration. What can she conjure to counter church, government and misogyny?

Maldonado opens her second book with her birth certificate, adding several pieces of information blacked out to create “showing papers II: long form blackout.” We don’t know what “showing papers I” is yet; that will appear ten poems in, entitled “showing papers I: pregnant while brown.” Coming at the order backwards makes sense if you’ve ever had to shuffle through paperwork to prove your citizenship in another country. The found poem declares Sheila is the child of “Honduran kings.” The poem states: “the street father records the truth.” The poem obscures certain details. A birth certificate as poem. A poem without borders. A poem certifying birth rights.

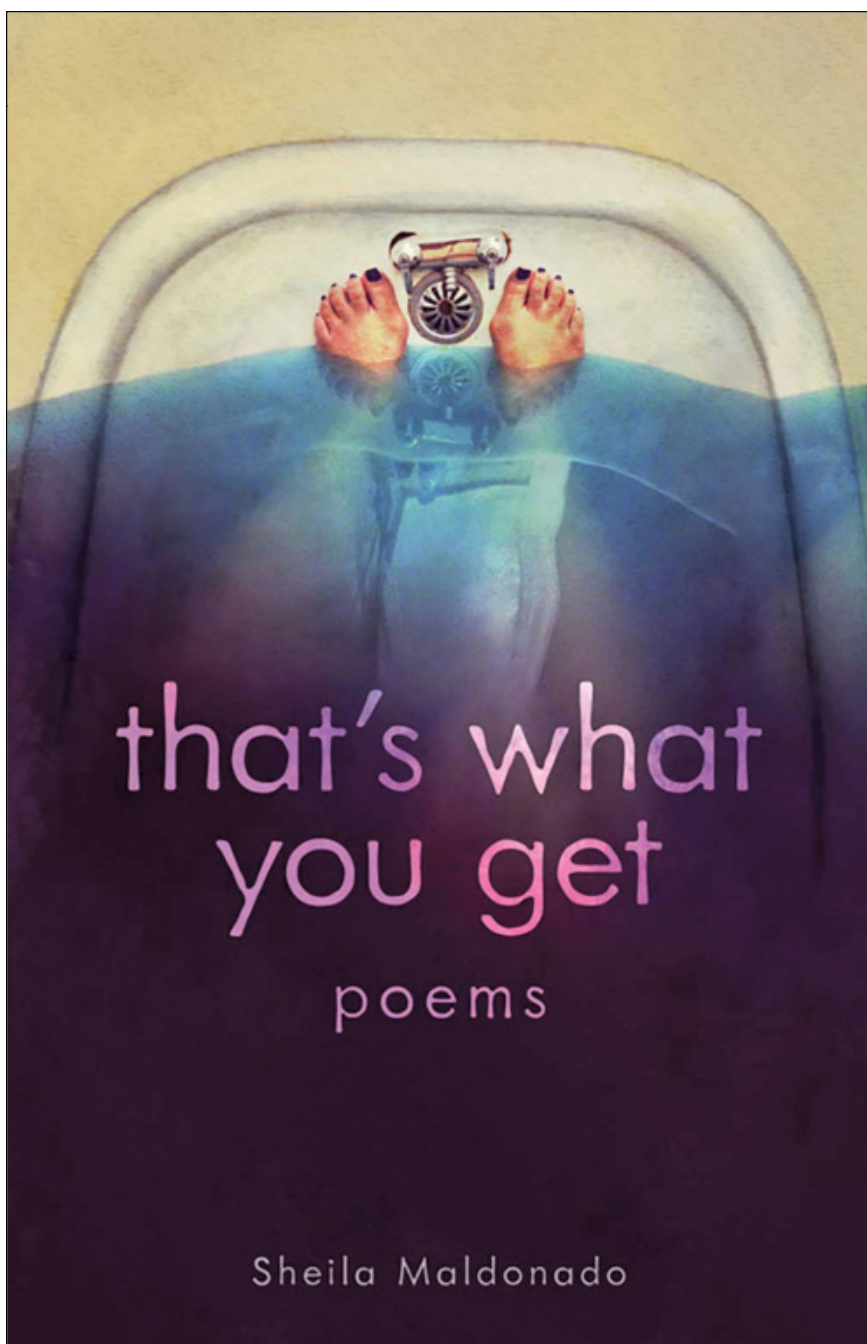
In the second poem about “showing papers” (which is a pun itself on writing a poem, for is that not what poetry is, “showing papers?”), lyric is heightened in a way Maldonado excels at: without punctuation or capitalization, the poem rolls down the page like water. She writes:

*I was pregnant with a book a brown book  
every month pregnant every month brown  
birthing documents long forms short stories  
hidden histories tall tales tongue twisters  
pregnant every month a bloody flight  
from two Nogaleses pregnant  
with a bloody book on the brown side  
of history in the arid Spanish  
native land ink expelled blood erased  
pregnant every month with unwanted words  
wrapped in a certificate abandoned  
womb text a border infiltrated  
pages smuggled crumpled bleeding brown  
history a fugitive in the womb*

This thunderstorm of a poem presses on the lips, drumming with bold sounds. The poem mashes up news headline words: “border infiltrated” and “a fugitive.” In some ways, the book we hold by Maldonado *is* this “brown book” tracking her biography, her people, her language, her countries.

If the world contains a dictator threatened by children, this book embraces those children and disobeys the dictator. One could hear an echo of another set of kings in this behavior: the three kings that disobey Herod, who would have all the children under the age of two slaughtered. The three kings disobey the dictator and embrace all that is humble and vulnerable. Perhaps it is *no accident* she references that scene in the poem with the poet’s mother watching TV? While she’s hardly a Christian poet, fragments of her Catholicism and Central American heritage filter in here.

When asked about any religious connotations in the book, she had this to say: “I like to say that I am a heathen but I am pretty culturally Catholic as so many people are. I was an atheist for like a year, when I was about



12. I had reasons to believe God had abandoned me. I came to see it was a bit more about religion than the idea of God. I did not like the church and how it dealt with women, especially around abortion and the pill and the control of women's bodies, all our bodies really. I did believe in some ideas of God or a god because I always believed in things I couldn't see, in a kind of magic, some otherworldly thing and/or entity or entities. I had too much of a sense of something supernatural. I attribute that to being a Pisces too. I was basically too kooky not to believe in a god or gods." Her kookiness is her treasure. Her embrace of the supernatural lifts the wings of these new poems. That accumulates energy and anticipation. Where will the supernatural transport her vision? Look where it brought James Merrill.

When pressed further about what sort of religion made sense to her, she wrote: "The Maya are a mystery that explains me. I haven't done a blood test, those things don't even matter really. If you didn't grow up as a Maya, you are not that, I have learned that from the internet really, lots of indigenious voices on Twitter who are making it clear. I did not grow up Maya. In fact I grew up with family who did not see being part indigenious as a point of pride. Like so many in Honduras we are mixed Spanish and indigenious and the Spanish generally prevails. Still, I feel what I believe is a real connection to this culture that was and is still so powerful that it still defines art and language in Central America over a thousand years later. They're the first writers of the Americas. That idea alone makes me feel like I could and should keep writing, in any way, no matter how ridiculous or wandering." She went on to describe a trip as a fifteen-year-old New York girl to Copán, where the Maya ruins are preserved today. This trip changed her: "It wasn't a book. It was a real place." Her work accents the "s" in Americas.

Honduras. Country of beautiful blue mountains. Country of Maya ruins. Country of the best coffee on earth. Country many have been forced to flee. Maldonado's Honduran history is never far from these poems. There's much for any artist to reckon with when considering Honduras. Maldonado writes in a new poem for a book to come about Honduras: "to flee it is success / to survive it is success." What happens when a country is sacrificed? Honduras. Has any country been more mistreated? Under the Trump administration, insulting the injured, I wondered how many of those chil-

dren screaming in the caravans heading north *were* Honduran. I wondered how many of the children with numbers on their back in detention centers *were* Honduran. I felt the rhetoric around building a wall was to keep Hondurans out. To erase a people. As if a place or a people were expendable. I am a priest and poet who taught Honduran children poetry and lived in San Pedro Sula one year and a half. I am a priest and poet who continues to have abiding ties with Honduras. I believe America could learn from Honduras. Honduras. The country changed me radically and made me the priest I am today. Honduras remains in my heart. But how must these incendiary times have affected a Honduran American artist?

Maldonado writes: "where our people / from the middle of the world / are pushed." Her lyric is backed by the fact that 1 million Hondurans live outside Honduras in the US, at last check, sending their money back home. I imagine many of the children on those buses were orphans of that 1 million in search of their parents. When children left San Pedro Sula while I lived there in 2013, they went in search of their parents who had been invariably forced into extreme situations, leaving Honduras in search of work. Pushed. Maldonado's book is likewise commenting on life in New York City, where gentrification has pushed Hondurans right out of where they landed and on to Long Island. Pushed. Pushed. Pushed.

The deprivation from colonizing, pillaging and abandoning by the United States government creates an economic vacuum. Maldonado's poems ponder Honduras. And ponder America. She said, in interview: "I am a good American because my family were good Hondurans. We are all good at erasing." But poems give us the opposite. Not erasing, but recounting. Inventing.

She transgresses the haiku, more with a line count than a syllable count. Here is one of her "my-kus," her personalized haikus:

#### Brooklyn

*really betrays you  
don't tell me you're fuckin from there  
till you get kicked out*

Wild vast liberating city that it is, New York whips around the space of her tough tone. Between Nicanor Parra and Biggie, Coney Island-bred Maldonado's poems map her displacement. Spanish and English mix in various ways, some direct translations, some code switching, some footnoted explanations. A swizzle of social media sounds speckles the verse—writing in URLs and poems like texts are superimposed on phone photos.

Her quote from *Will & Grace* that opens the book provokes: "I am not good or real. I'm evil and imaginary." This whimsical TV show, with Karen chugging vodka bottles, speaking in a high falsetto and shooting out inappropriate, entitled bon mots like a human sprinkler, is Maldonado's opening note. TV is a curious impetus for poems. Yet anyone who has ever tried to navigate two languages, been in a country where they are not speaking that language in your house, considers TV differently. TV becomes utterly democratic and essential for culture cues. Commercials are language tutorials. Sit-coms are lectures. TV is private and cushions the new language learner from embarrassment. TV has magic.

The voice of these poems is *real*. But evil? Certainly, Honduras has been demonized in the press and perhaps that is what Maldonado is signaling. You have to back up to know Honduran culture is more than the "murder capital" headlines. You have to understand some history to understand that the United States and Spain made Honduras what it is. But evil? A Honduran-inflected American poet or her poetry as evil? Imaginary, yes. When I asked Maldonado about this, she said she didn't want the speaker of these poems to come off as too saintly, that the speaker was capable of the full spectrum of emotions, and she wanted to plainly depict that. In her opinion poets of color sometimes come off as too one-dimensional and she didn't want that. This author has had to *imagine herself*, make up her place in her "decentral America." And *that* she does—with humor, irreverence, candor, humility, warmth, honesty, a measured assessment. That, stretched out over poems, is a thing of beauty and ingenuity.

If you've ever visited Honduras, then you know whimsy is a Honduran hallmark, so starting a book off with a Karen Walker quote strikes a particular cultural note: in the face of poverty and violence, you'll find the brightest colored Oz-like haciendas in Honduras; you'll hear the most sensual hip-swinging music behind tinted car windows; in the loneliest orphanages you'll see children laughing hysterically to Disney movies.

Her editor at Brooklyn Arts Press, Joe Pan, has said of Maldonado: "what you see is what you get; she holds nothing back. The same can be said for her poetry. It's presented with a light touch, often with humor, but the poems generate a deep gravity . . . There are no veils here—who has time for veils?—when each day the truth of things is carrying little parts of us away? Her poems feel lived-in, like a tiny cramped apartment in Washington Heights, and now you have to go down and do the laundry, hauling along the student papers you have to grade. Meanwhile, your internal life is dreaming up new ways to honor the Maya ancestors, or keeps get-



ting caught up in the loop of remembering how close to the bone that last breakup dug, while hoping you can get in a bike ride before it gets too dark.”

An affecting poem close to the end of the book brings her back to Honduras, that gorgeous country underneath so much of these poems. Perhaps that first poem of the blocked-out birth certificate unblocks this?

**first day ever in Teguz, capital of the homeland  
(March 23, 2012)**

*I used to care. I used to sleep.  
I used to wonder what it would be like to work in Honduras.  
Now I know it is hot and draining instead of cold and draining like New York.  
I will always remember standing in front of students in a classroom in Tegucigalpa.  
Growing up, a million people asked me what the capital of Honduras is.  
I remember my family's country being a joke.  
I remember not knowing how to feel about that.  
I remember my mother always, we share the same mind.  
While I'm far away, I remember my loved ones, they haunt my sleep.  
I walk in a dream the further I am from them.  
I remember being in New York where I know so many people  
and still never seeing anyone I love in a given week.  
I remember how I used to get so hurt. Now I just get tired.  
I remember the feeling in these students' words, the surprise, the joy.  
I am glad to replace my memories with theirs.*

“Teguz” (normally spelled with an “s,” but changed here so that it might resemble more what a subway graffiti artist might spray paint out) is the shortened name people use for “Tegucigalpa,” which as Maldonado points out is often the butt of jokes because of its multi-syllable sound. Our speaker is staking her claim for her homeland, not a joke to our speaker, shadowed in the history of the indigenous Maya and Lenca people. The speaker’s work, her poetry work we assume, has brought her there to teach in a classroom. The speaker is reflective like William Butler Yeats in his poem “Among School Children,” where an older Yeats revisits a classroom of young people in Ireland. Maldonado’s conclusion eerily echoes Yeats, who wrote: “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” Similarly, our speaker here is “glad to replace” her memories with the memories of the students. The words of the students give joy and surprise to her. That’s what she gets.

The next poem after her adventure in Honduras, which poignantly is the *only* poem in the book fully rooted in her homeland, is called “gentry caffeine II.” Our poet romps with skinny lines on her bike through 181st Street in Washington Heights, ending:

*I am high off the  
sheer smell of coffee  
bought some  
caffeine bags to go  
their fancy tea  
not a bad price  
things not so bad  
that I have to  
give up fancy tea  
but here comes  
the sparse summer  
hope I have enough  
for fancy caffeine  
and tune-ups  
  
the sun I can afford*

Maldonado is close to O’Hara here, metabolizing the city, the poetry springing spontaneously from some deep wellspring of joy fanned by the energy of that great city. Where will she take us next? Will her sun illuminate new information for her in a future book about the history of the Maya? Will all the sacrifices this poet and her family have known open up a space for a new god? She rides off into the sunset on her bicycle like Don Quixote. If poetry is the most humble and vulnerable art, that is where the power of poetry lies. Maldonado exalts what is humble and vulnerable. Maldonado runs, or bikes, towards her vulnerability. In a haiku-like couplet in the middle of the book, Maldonado writes: “first and last of a line / there are no generations of me.” Poetry extends her line. Poetry. Poetry!

*Spencer Reece is the author of The Clerk's Tale and The Road to Emmaus. The Secret Gospel of Mark: A Poets Memoir, All the Beauty Still Left: A Poet's Painted Book of Hours, a collection of his watercolors, and a chapbook of a new poem, Letters from Spain, will be published this spring. He lives and works in Jackson Heights, New York City.*

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# DRAGPHRASIS: ALEXIS MATEO CALLS HOME THE TROOPS WITH A DEATH DROP

TARIK DOBBS

---

BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM    *Even if I was born on the moon . . .*  
BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM  
BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM    I coat my eyelids in a toothpaste full of stars  
BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM  
BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM    . . . I would still be an american  
BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM  
BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM    I excavate the basement dress-up chest  
[She twirls] in my sister's ball gown & an aunt's cancer wig, I'm Hannah Montana.  
Yes, baby, before RuPaul's laugh, before Mosul was collapsing, before me as witness.  
I rise in that mirror so proud, a haram-bomb girl, my mom says. I made my own doll.

---

*Tarik Dobbs' chapbook Dancing on the Tarmac is forthcoming from Yemassee Journal. It was selected by Gabrielle Calvocoressi for their 2020 Poetry Chapbook Prize.*

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IN  
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# IN MEMORY OF JEAN VALENTINE

DONALD REVELL

---

## I.

A three-quarter's moon is quick this New Year's morning,  
Almost transparent at the tip of those mountains.  
There are no bears. The kitchen window, propped open  
By an old dictionary (blue Larousse) eases  
Cold air and a few last flecks of starlight inside.  
Last night, we played at tall puppets and perfected  
A most imperfect year with your death's gaiety:  
Pencils and bears. You were the life of the party.

## II.

Under the night's final lamp, I found a stranger's  
Writing in your books: a scatter of emphases,  
A few translations and, more than once, the one word  
"Emmanuel" underscored. It was all in soft  
Pencil, easy to erase if I wanted to.  
I didn't. In the red hymnal given to me  
In 1961 "for good conduct," the word  
"Emmanuel" is likewise underscored, page two,  
The second hymn for Advent. Clearly, the stranger  
Knew us. Knew us in just the way tips of mountains  
Know the disappearing moon. The kitchen window  
Stays open to emphasis. I believe in ghosts.

## III.

For the most part, the advantage of a New Year  
Fades as sun erases the image of indoors  
From all the windows, leaving only the old worlds  
Of transparency and printed pages in books  
Left open upon disappearing night tables.  
The same anew, as every tippler knows who once  
Has leaned against the sun. Time heals nothing until  
Time is no more. I remember the two of us  
Running late—me for the airport, you for the bus  
Station after a high old time at Wesleyan.  
We made our connections, clumsily, but made them.  
Safe at home, we saw the great bear at our windows.

---

*Donald Revell is the author of more than a dozen books of poetry, translations, and essays. His recent books include The English Boat (2018), Drought-Adapted Vine (2015), Tantivy (2012), and the prose work Essay: A Critical Memoir (2015).*