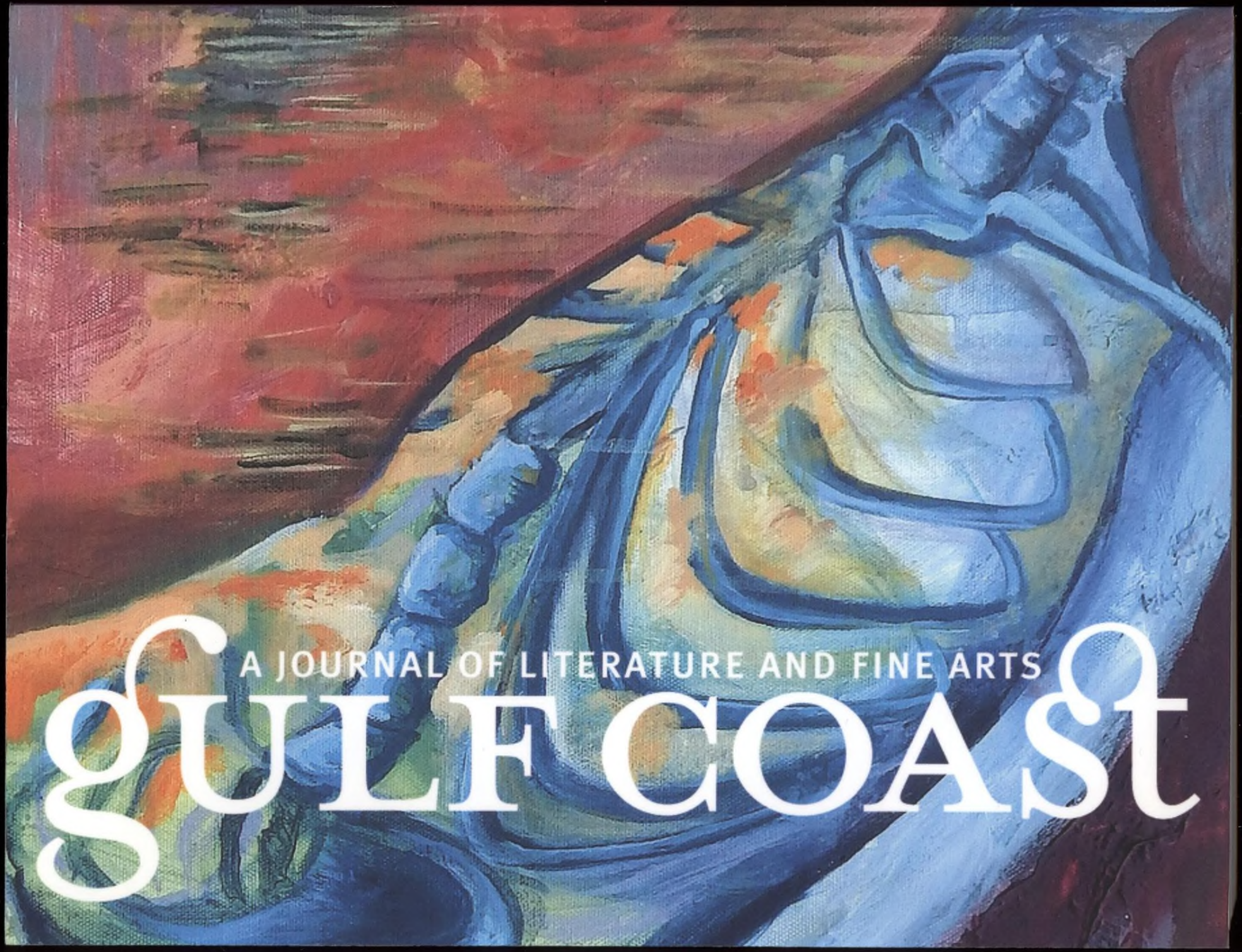

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS

# GULF COAST

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# Cutthroat

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS

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A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS VOLUME 28, ISSUE 2

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## *Editors' Note*

*"If anything is sacred, the human body is sacred."*
—Walt Whitman

*"My body is like breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I don't think about it, I just have it."*
—Arnold Schwarzenegger

Dear Readers,

We live in complicated times, and recent current events seem to be kaleidoscoping into an ongoing shuffling and reshuffling of those complexities. Uncertainty and fear permeate our current cultural landscape, and as we've watched this issue take shape what we've found is an impulse toward grounding. Many of the pieces in this issue strip down their subject matter and inhabit physical forms. Bodies recur as ground-zero, where we grapple with issues of identity and sexuality, whether the larger world supports or denies us support in our grapplings. Sustenance, too, shows up again and again, reminding us all to stay fed and feed our communities how best we can in the midst of our world's challenges. Our own community at *Gulf Coast* is growing staff as we welcome Digital Editor Georgia Pearle, and Art Editors Rachel Cook and Maria Luisa Minjares to the fold.

"How can one write from experiences that are marked as unintelligible, or unspeakable?" This question rings throughout Ching-In Chen's roundtable on trans poetics and throughout the issue as a whole. The difficulty to put language to experience is one that permeates the issue as well as a desire to push against language hegemony.

The translation in this issue is full of the body as landscape. The translated language becomes the transformative platform for a new landscape, the way the body becomes the wall that bounces the echoes of time. Laura Cesarco Eglin's Portuguese translations of Hilda Hilst's poems show the body in between languages, "Tento prender teu corpo Tua montanha, teu reverso." "I try to capture your body your mountain, your reverse." Carina del Valle Schorske's translation of Marigloria Palma's work asks us to "Prolong our flesh with clocks and nerves, / with the hammer's keening, the love of native species, / the sympathy of shoots and stems and leaves." Regardless of linguistic differences, the body remains a constant.

Carmen Maria Machado's short story begins with this image: "my mouth fills with the dust of the moon." In language languid and ever-searching, she brings us into relief with the pull between desire and need, sustenance and grief. Machado's narrator asks, as so many of us ask and are asking, "Will I ever be done, transformed in the past tense, or will I always be transforming?" The speaker of the penultimate paragraph of her piece tells us, "I will curl into her body, which was my body once," and we are reminded of the histories that shadow and

haunt us. Our special features section brings the question of history back into the fold as we include a conversation with George Saunders about his novel on Abraham Lincoln. Saunders discusses Lincoln and the relevance of time, "whatever the afterlife is, it has a lot to do with this moment right now." This idea shapes time as anything but a line.

Leila Chatti asks us to consider the ways in which apparently small, interior calamities grow and telescope out as we encounter time and the wider world, writing, "I was young enough to think anything / that bled was a wound. The Moon /," and sam sax tells us, "There is nothing innate in the brain / about love or the objects we lust after," much as we may want to make the intrinsic and extrinsic illuminate ever greater meanings as they collide in our lives.

The art in this issue of *Gulf Coast* focuses on the object. The definition of object ranges from something material that may be perceived by the senses, to something mental or physical toward which thought, feeling, or action is directed, or something that when viewed stirs a particular emotion. The word can be thought of as thing unto itself—äbjekt—or an action—əbˈjekt—depending on the inflection of your voice. The slippery nature of the word relates to the meaning of the artwork discussed in this issue of the journal and the way these artists think about materials, things, objects, whistles, diamonds, human ashes, records, and sounds. In our current political climate, the value of certain objects—art and literature—is constantly being questioned, and it is at this cross-roads that these artists, Jamal Cyrus, Dan Graham, Jill Magid, Liz McCarthy, and Pauline Oliveros, are crucial. Their work and the words penned about them carefully consider the meaning of the art object and how its specific material can invoke profound meaning about the world. How a diamond can be made from human remains that also represents an archive and legacy of an artist, how the legacy of Al Green's finding faith materializes itself in the classic southern dish of grits, or how a clay whistle can be both a playful toy and a mechanism for bringing people together intimately enough to kiss. Each of these narratives unfold in the pages alongside the literature in the issue in haunting ways, revealing how artists and writers are considering being present in today's society.

# 2016 PRIZES

## *Gulf Coast* Barthelme Prize
**Judged by Jim Shepherd**

**WINNER:**
Andrew Mitchell
"Going North"

**HONORABLE MENTIONS:**
Marya Hornbacher
"A Peck of Beets"
&
Molly Reid
"Fall from Grace"

## *Gulf Coast* Prize in Translation
**Judged by Idra Novey**

**WINNER:**
Carina del Valle Schorske
for her translation of
Marigloria Palma's poetry
(*Spanish*, Puerto Rico)

**HONORABLE MENTIONS:**
Tim DeMay, for his translation of
Esther Tellerman's poems (*French*)
&
Andrej Pazdirek, for his translation of
Kamil Bouska's poems (*Czech*)

ANNOUNCING THE 2017

## BARTHELME PRIZE
## JUDGED BY ROXANNE GAY

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AND THE 2017

## *GULF COAST* PRIZE IN TRANSLATION
## JUDGED BY JOHN KEENE

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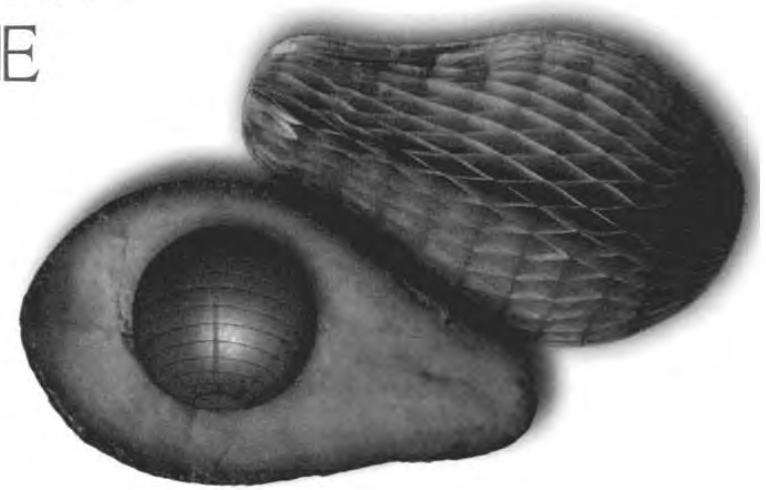
# the 2016 BARTHELME PRIZE



## JUDGED BY JIM SHEPHERD

*"Going North" through both the colloquial assurance of its voice and the performative bravura of its syntax pitches us headlong into the middle of a contentious marriage likely further hamstrung by trauma, and its dreamlike (nightmarish?) progression of events and telescoping of time is reminiscent of Grace Paley's work—talk about high praise!—and at once wry and haunting and sad in its economical evocation of the lives we've lived and the ones we still imagine.*

— Jim Shepherd

# Going North

*Andrew Mitchell*

It's following us, pull over, my husband says, to which I say, It's dark, to which he says, Please, Ellie, let's not fight over this one, and so I pull to the side of the road. Lo and behold, the truck pulls behind us, its headlights inflating our Buick with glow. Call the police, my husband says, and though this seems like an overreaction I dial 911. The operator asks me to state my emergency. It's my husband's emergency, I say, and she says, Tell me the color of the truck. Dazed, I say, Truck? I've said nothing about a truck. Due to the headlights, I can't distinguish its color. Blue, my husband thinks. Or avocado-green. The health benefits of avocados are extraordinary, the operator says, to which I say, Excuse me? to which she says, Listen, go tell the driver of the red truck about the time your son ate that piece of homemade oatmeal soap, thinking it was chocolate, at the apple orchard in Maine. I cup the speaking-end of my phone, turn to my husband and whisper, Something isn't right, just as the truck's headlights go out. Hello? the operator says. Help, I say. Some folks are in bed, she snarls, and I explain that my husband and I are headed to Bronson Mountain to sleep beneath the stars because we hiked that mountain on our first date and tomorrow we're getting married. Except wait, we married twelve years ago. Remember, Ellie-phant, we're going to be fine, the operator says, which is something my father said the night my mother died, so I say, Dad? and the operator says, Tell me about Collin, but I don't want to discuss Collin near my husband, so I step out onto the road, into the sweet night air, just as the truck's headlights come back on. Pumpkins, I say, because there are suddenly dozens of pumpkins scattered in the road. I walk to the red truck. Behind the steering wheel is my husband and on his lap is Collin, and because I'm so happy it takes me a moment to realize the red truck isn't actually a red truck, no, it's our kitchen table, and on this table Collin maneuvers a toy truck through the streets of a miniature town he's built from cans of soup and boxed pasta—Cupboardville! he calls it—and to my father I say, I love you, and he says, A-vo-ca-do, and in the backseat of the red truck my husband sits alone,

except he's old now, hardly recognizable, and he says, There I go, as our Buick lurches into the road and speeds away, and I say, I'm here, right here, and climb into the red truck, shift into gear, and drive north as fast as I can, until at last the road is full of pumpkins and we have no choice but to abandon the red truck and walk together the rest of the long, long way.

# A Peck of Beets

*Marya Hornbacher*

My second husband once walked into the house by the lake, carrying a very large basket of beets. They were freshly picked, dusty with dirt. I said, What is that. He said, These are beets. I said, Why have you bought a peck of beets. He said, It's only a half-peck. We paused so he could think of a reason for having bought the beets. Finally he said, The girl at the farmer's market was very persuasive, I felt sorry for her. I replied, No. The girl at the farmer's market was very pretty. She felt sorry for you. No, he said, flushing the way he did, all the way from his chin to the top of his balding head over which he had taken to combing the remaining strands of his hair, and I said, without thinking, You look like a beet. He said, You're so cold. Why are you so cold. How can a woman be so cold as you. Why are you never happy. You ruin everything. I was surprised by his reaction, but did not disagree. We kept the beets in the cellar, which is where beets should go, I suppose.

*Molly Reid*

# Fall from Grace

The first one, a visitor from out of town, slipped on a mossy rock and fell one thousand feet into the gorge's open mouth. Then Marcy Eldritch, a week from her thirteenth birthday, leaned too far out a third-floor window. The neighbor broke his neck, lost his balance cleaning his gutters. Ten people dropped twenty floors when an elevator cable broke in the bank building downtown.

They keep falling. One after another. City officials are hesitant to call it an epidemic, but the media has no such qualms. Details are sensationalized, distance hyperbolized, physics made graphic. It seems all anyone talks about these days. At the grocery store, in line at the post office. *Did you hear about the dentist/window cleaner/taxidermist/baker who slipped on the/stepped over the precipice/stair/scaffolding/lip of the well?*

Not all falls are fatal. Most are doing it more often: tripping on shoelaces, cracks in the sidewalk, showing up for work with scabs, bruises, Band-Aids across chins and noses and knees, wincing.

My wife says it's a hex. She believes in witches, my wife. Baba Yaga in her little hut on chicken feet. Someone in this town, my wife won't say who, *did something.*

All this seems like a steep price to pay for one person's mistake. But I guess who knows, all you can do is be extra careful. Keep antibiotic ointment on hand. Avoid high places.

Three teachers from the elementary school fall off their Vespas. A three-year-old falls into the lion exhibit at the zoo. Dr. Wheeler, who is not a real doctor but is very good at fixing bikes, falls from the climbing wall at the gym. My wife keeps falling out of bed. I wake to the familiar *kathump* then theatrical groan as she crawls back under the sheets.

I have my own theories. Because people have lost all sense of what's real. What's important. But maybe our souls, or whatever you want to call the part that speaks in dreams, what attaches us to the universe, to the stars and the antelopes, know better. Maybe they throw our bodies down to humble us, to remind us what the ground feels like, to remind us of these bodies.

But some of us already know. Some of us are already so in our bodies these days they throb at the slightest touch.

My confession is that I feel lighter. I haven't fallen once. While everyone around me plummets, while my wife tumbles from stairs and curbs and nothing at all, flat ground, while the bruises drift like shadow continents beneath her skin, I remain intact, upright. Buoyant, even.

I begin to test my luck, just to see what the limits are. I lean over extravagantly high balconies, climb tall trees, take my dinners on the roof. What does it mean to fall from grace, to fall behind, to fall apart? What does it mean to fall in love?

*Lean back*, my wife says, holding out her arms behind me, *I'll catch you.*

# the 2016 PRIZE in Translation

## JUDGED BY IDRA NOVEY

*The translation of Marigloria Palma's radical, radiant poems into English is long overdue, and Carina del Valle Schorske's English versions are as fierce and lyrical as the original poems. Palma writes of the parrots making their way to Puerto Rico from the gardens of the White House, of the bullet that is her island, lodged in her chest. Every one of the poems in this collection took my breath away, and del Valle Schorske's translations capture the verve and vitality of Palma's voice with extraordinary precision.*

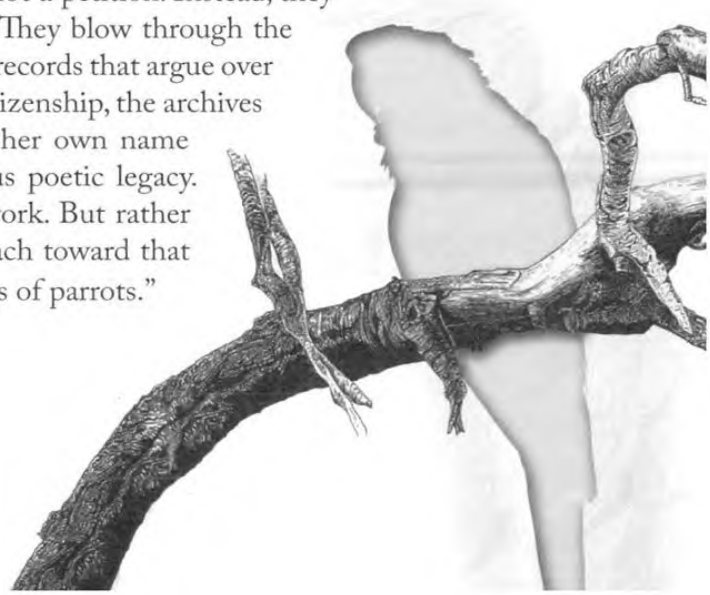
— Idra Novey

# Translator's Note

*Carina del Valle Schorske*

Was Gloria María Pagán y Ferrer born in Canóvanas or Loiza? In 1918, 1919, 1920, or 1921? As the restless, childless, and upwardly mobile daughter of a single mother raised in rural poverty, she is difficult to track through Puerto Rico's imperfect government records. But the scarcity of verifiable biographical information is counterbalanced by the embarrassment of riches she left us in her long life as the multimedia artist Marigloria Palma: folklore, drawings, plays, novels, autobiography, and at least a thousand poems. *The Night & Other Electric Flowers* (1976) offers one example of diasporic experimentation continuous with the feminist pastoral poetics of Julia de Burgos but contemporary with the politically charged performance of the Nuyorican scene. Both influences often romanticize the tropical landscape of the island as a site of authenticity. But Palma recognizes an ecosystem in "biochemical crisis" blurred by "violated moonlight"—without pretending that she herself is immune to the seductions of poetic illusion. In her characteristic mode of high lyricism and ironic erotics, human figures are "whipped" by sweet breezes, "squeezed tight" and "oppressed" by the sea. The violence of these intimate attachments to the island—to its flora, fauna, weather, and rhythms—is symptomatic, for Palma, of the violence that keeps Puerto Rico in its place as a colony, as a tourist destination, and even as a would-be nation. These poems want to "set the sea on fire."

If it feels uncanny to read these poems against the backdrop of our contemporary Puerto Rican debt crisis, we might wonder when a colony is not in crisis, not in debt. We might wonder, with Palma, over the "solvency" of her sadness. Do its assets exceed its liabilities? If it's advertised on the "street corner of her eyelids," who will buy it? Her tears might be "pestilent," but she keeps planting them: in "the shadowless womb of [her] arithmetic misery," like strawberries in "the cracks of the sidewalk." Palma is well aware of the fickle market for weeping women: soon we'll be "old news" again. These poems are not a petition. Instead, they release a "howling in the paperwork." They blow through the reams of petitions, polemics, and court records that argue over the island's status and the fictions of citizenship, the archives that have both harbored and hidden her own name from the public despite her prodigious poetic legacy. Translation is another form of paperwork. But rather than legislate meaning I've tried to reach toward that "Love I don't know, the free green wings of parrots."



*Marigloria Palma*

# Confesión de lo obsceno

Mi tristeza, ese carton mojado que gime
contra el muro;
esa fusión de lluvia y árbol muerto,
esa perra perdida en un bosque de humo,
ese trozo ensuciado de amarillo periódico.

Tiene nueve caderas mi tristeza sin alas.
Su solvencia es de ajo: es humilde y es sobria.
Siete bocas pregonan su humedad en la esquina
superior de párpados.

No conozco la lágrima ni su química esencia.
Leo los titulares: crimen, bombas, incendio
y me quedo despierta empotrando quejidos
en el cientre sin sombra de mi pena aritmética.

Y en esta realidad de huevo y lágrima
de metales que sienten y se expresan,
de numérica frente ensangrentada,
mi tristeza es la cosa pestilente
que disuelve la lluvia.

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY CARINA DEL VALLE SCHORSKE

*Marigloria Palma*

# Confession of the Obscene

My sadness, that wet brown box
moaning against the wall;
gum of rain and dead trees,
that bitch lost in a jungle of smoke,
that yellow scrap of old news.

My wingless sadness has nine hips.
Her solvency is steeped in garlic:
humble, sober. Seven mouths
sell her wetness on the street corner
of my eyelids. I don't know tears

or their chemical composition.
But I read the headlines: crime, bombs, fire
and I stay up late sowing whimpers
in the shadowless womb
of my arithmetic misery.

And in this egg and tear reality
of sentient expressive metals,
this bloody screen of numbers,
my sadness is that pestilent thing
that breaks the rain back down.

# Amigo, Esto Que Duele
## (un poematón)

Puerto Rico es una bala hinchada entre mi pecho.
Es algo que me duele, que me seca el retoño.
Por su culpa soy trescientas bombillas
de ilusión apagada...

Antes tenía una fronda de campos exaltados,
un lucero amarillo temblando en el copete.
Pero antes yo era la retórica ciega.
Yo era un balón de gas con sombrero adornado;
un papagayo esléndido.
Antes yo no tenía un línea en la frente
ni un grillo zumbador en el cerebro.
Era una niña diáfana, era una niña alegre.
Yo era una risa nómada a lomo de camello
y mi conciencia era harina sin cocer.
Repicaba tambores por los largos pasillos
de la idea transitada. Lo que decían, decía
y lo decía más alto.
Iba en la procesión del aplaudido
o disparaba el grito derramando la espuma que contagia.
A la zaga del féretro, si lloraban, lloraba.
Y adueñada del hoyo, comandando el vacío
con la esbelta sonrisa como trigo esparcido
de mi puñado de tierra
que estrellaba la fosa.

En mi vida flotante, en mi ayer,
yo era mosca de papel barnizado.
Cada idea con peluca doblegaba mi cresta,

*Marigloria Palma*

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY CARINA DEL VALLE SCHORSKE

# Friend, This Is What Hurts
## (a mega poem)

Puerto Rico is a bullet lodged in my chest.
It's what hurts me, what sucks my spring dry.
Because of Puerto Rico I'm three hundred
light bulbs of illusion gone dead.

Before, I had a green frond from exalted fields,
I had a bright yellow star that trembled on the hilltop.
But before I was nothing but blind rhetoric.
I was a featherhead with a fancy hat, a splendid parrot.
Back before I had a single line on my forehead
or crickets crowding my brain. I was a diaphanous girl.
Happy. I was a nomadic laugh on the back of a camel,
and my conscience was dry flour. I went drumming
down the long corridors of well-worn theories.
What they said I said, and I said it louder.
I used to follow the procession of applause, spit
contagious slogans. In the line behind the coffin,
I wept if they wept. I was master of the grave,
commandeering the void with a svelte little smile,
and the dirt I threw in the ditch was a fistful of cake flour
that dusted the darkness with stars.

In my floating life, in my yesterday,
I was a fly on flypaper. Every idea
with a wig on it made me grovel,
tunneling through the eardrums of my onion soul.
Infatuated? I was three hundred light bulbs burning,
a zero in every dimension, a staircase tripping over itself.

horadando los tímpanos de mi alma de cebolla
¿infatuada?
Yo era entonces trescientas bombillas encendidas,
cero dimensionado, escalera que trepa.

Amigo, eso era antes, ahora todo me duele.
Me duelen las costillas rojas del flamboyán,
las palmas desahuciados, el mar con su epilepsia
tan azul y tan mío...

Me asesora el ladrido de una nueva conciencia,
un Puerto Rico silba en mitad de mis bronquios,
una ponzoña vierte veneno en mi sonrisa
y es un tiro de estrellas mi emoción controlada.
La otra y yo nos rompimos al mirarnos de frente.
Hubo aullido en los trámites...
Puerto Rico es cabeza de alfiler jorobado;
estrellita que flota en la risa convulsa y vedeazul
del océano. Su minuscule cuerpo,
su humildísima estirpe
lacera los ijares de mi enternecimiento.
Es que lo estoy pariendo cada cuarto de hora.
Lloro mi llanto agrio, siento mi grito híbrido.
Yo lo quería gigante, piafador, desdoblado
y es minúsculo beso de geográfico inválido.

Yo podría decir:
la palabra que nutra la verdad de un poema
endurece su magia. Yo podría gritar:
vengan treinta madonas con el pecho espumoso
a lactarle la esencia a la isla en el mar.
No lo digo, no basta.

But friend, that was before. Now everything aches.
The red ribs of the flame tree bruise me,
the evicted palms, the sea with her epilepsy
so blue and so much mine…

A new conscience barks at my heels,
Puerto Rico whistles my windpipe in two,
a tonic drips poison into my smile, and my heart
is a bottled storm of shooting stars.

We shattered when we faced each other.
There was a howling in the paperwork.
Puerto Rico is a hunchback pinhead,
a little star floating on the bluegreen
convulsions of the ocean's laughter.
Puerto Rico's tiny body, her lowly race
strips the flesh from my tenderness.
It's just that I'm in labor every fifteen minutes.
I cry my bitter cry. My hybrid scream.
I wanted it huge, hoofs pounding out of me.
But it's a miniscule kiss of invalid geography.

I could say:
the word that feeds a poem's truth
makes its magic last forever. I could call down
thirty virgins with foaming breasts to nurse
us on the essence of the island-in-the-stream.
But I won't say it. It's not enough.
I would rather say:
listen, Puerto Rican. Let your brain grow
rapacious teeth and feed your life on the pulp
of thought, fly the fanatical flag of I want

Yo prefiero decir:
oye, puertorriqueño: cría dientes voraces
en la masa encefálica; alimenta tu vida con papilla
de ideas; enarbola la fanática unción del yo quiero y
demando, la esclavitud del puedo, la devoción elemental
de debo, el impulse adiestrado del conozco...
Puerto Rico es enano y será siempre enano en el gran
universo. Rompe la cruz infame en donde crucificas
tu devocíon al agro. ¡Hazte duro! ¡Hazte martir!
¡Muere tu dulce muerte!
¿Debo decir y yo esto...? ¿ Y qué tal si dijera...?

Hay que halarle el ombligo a Puerto Rico,
adensar su cumbrera, echar bosque de ideas sobre
el bosque de hojas, fabricar con el seso la extensión
que nos falta. Abundar con la magia del pequeño
cerebro
los muñones sin piernas, mar afuera, alto viento
hacia el fuego sin macula.
Prolonguemos su carne con relojes y nervios, con afán
de martillo, con amor de habitantes,
con afecto de vástagos.
¿Tú me oyes, amigo? ¿Tú sientes la potencia que mi
voz desparrama? Mete tu hombre y empuja mi dolor
hacía
el cielo. Nos crucifica el mar, puertorriqueños...
¡Seamos incandescentes, incendiemos el mar!

and *I demand*, the slavery of *I can*, the elemental
devotion of *I must*, the educated instinct of *I know*.
Puerto Rico is a runt and will always be a runt
in the universe. Break the infamous cross
where you suffer for your devotion to the old farmland.
Make yourself hard! Make yourself a martyr!
Die your sweet death!
Should I say such a thing?
And what if I do?

Puerto Rico: the cord must be cut.
Cast a forest of ideas over this forest of leaves,
let our senses see what we can't reach.
Multiply the amputees
with the magic of our little mind,
the surrounding sea, high winds
whipping up a pure flame.
Let's prolong our flesh with clocks and nerves,
with the hammer's keening, the love of native species,
the sympathy of shoots and stems and leaves.

Do you hear me, friend?
Do you feel the power my voice proliferates?
Shoulder my pain and push it skyward.
Puerto Ricans, the sea will crucify us.
Let's be incandescent. Let's set the sea on fire.

# San Juan y sus cotorras

**1.**

Ya vienen las cotorras.
Vienen de Casa Blanca, de la orilla del mar.
Son campenazos verdes, estallido plateado,
parloteo espumoso y discurso de algas.

Vuelan en ramilletes como los grasos ángeles
de telas religiosas, felices y enlazadas,
destrozando la frente matinal del silencio,
desgarrando el encaje de su tunica áurea.

San Juan es una aldea que se mete en un cuadro
con so loma afeitada, con los azules lejos,
un burrito, unos cardos, un lirio averiguado,
un niño, unas contorras, un castillo encendido
por un sol de honda rabia...

Vamos a ver: empecemos de nuevo.

Se levanta el vestido de claridad fornida,
se calza las chinelas, se acristala el zumbio
y se fija en el borde de todas las ventanas
multiplicada en ojos de interiors que miran.
Se alza el abecedario circular de su frente.
¡Cotorras, oh cotorras dulcísimas y nuestras!

*Marigloria Palma*

**TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY CARINA DEL VALLE SCHORSKE**

# San Juan & Her Parrots

**1.**

The parrots are coming now.
They come from the White House, the seashore.
They're great green bells, a silver blast,
sparkling chatter, a discourse of algaes.

They fly in bouquets like the happy tangles
of fat angels in religious tapestries,
shattering morning's front of silence
and rending the lace of the aureal tunic.

San Juan is a village in tableau
with its close-cropped hill and distant blues,
thistles, lilies, parrots, a little donkey,
a little boy, and a castle burning
under the sun's slingshot rage.

Let's see: we'll start over.
The city rises in her finely spun gown of brightness
and fastens her slippers, she hums a crystal song,
and she sees all the eyes peering out from the
frames of the multiplying windows.
The alphabet flies circles around her forehead.

Parrots, the sweetest parrots! And they're ours!

**2.**

Despierta, amor—ensueño
que vienen las cotorras con su alfabeto verde
a componer palabras para nuestro murmullo.
Vienen de Casa Blanca, de sus hondos jardines.

Amor que no conozco,
por tu cara perdida, por mi voz encontrada,
pasan las alas verdes de las contorras libres;
el cielo es escritura viajera de esperanza.

Es la hora del alba.
La ciudad empanada sobre sus pies de piedra
Saluda la tulipa gaseosa de la lumber.
San Juan encorsetado dentro de su muralla
mete sus pies antiguos entre sus calcetines.

Amor, mi nada-nunca,
desprecia la emplumada caricia de la sábana,
la ciudad es miel tensa. Por sus fauces azules
emiten las cotorras nuestro grito enterrado.

Salta, respire, amor; sé tu no-ser y muere.

**2.**

Wake up, love—I've dreamed
the parrots are coming with their green alphabet
to write lyrics for our murmuring.
They're coming from the White House, from its deep gardens.

Love I don't know
the free green wings of parrots
pass through your lost face, my found voice,
and the sky is hope's drifting scrawl.

It's dawn.
The city stands steep on her stone toes
to welcome the hazy tulip of morning light.
Inside the corset of her fortress San Juan
slides bright stockings over ancient feet.

My love, my never-nothing.
You refuse the sheet's feathered caress.
The city is strained honey. The parrots beam
our buried cry through blue jaws.

Leap, love, breathe; I know your non-being
and so it dies.

# de *la noche*

Pasa...
ahumada en su hermosura,
silenciosa.
Las nalgas navegantes,
jineteadas por un azul oxígeno.
el suspiro ahuecado,
su gaseoso suspiro de alfileres:
pulmonar filamento en donde abrevan
los caballos bronceados de la hora.

Ella...
trastornada, sensual, obscena, fertile.
Risa violeta altiva.
Con su talle oprimido por las manos
nerviosas del océano.
Con el busto sonoro
lleno de carcajadas y chirridos
emolientes de sexo.
Estelares costillas:
versión de vidrios trémulos,
inefable expresión y sed redonda.

Ella...
Marejada de párpados cerrados,
estructura fluente de altos muslos;
el alborozo circular: los senos de
aguamiel platinada.
¡Y sus brazos! Sus brazos
trashumantes hechos de cabeceos de paloma.

Ella, la noche, se está muriendo ahora.

*Marigloria Palma*

**TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY CARINA DEL VALLE SCHORSKE**

# from *The Night* [selections]

She passes
in a smoke of beauty,
silent.
Wayward hips
jockeyed by blue oxygen.
Hollow sigh fizzing, pinpricked,
pulmonary filament where the day's
sun-bronzed horses gather, now, to drink.

She is
deranged, sensual, obscene, fertile.
Imperious purple laughter.
With her waist squeezed tight
by the ocean's nervous hands.
With her boombox full of cackles
and the lubed-up squeaks of sex.
Astral ribcage: this time it's trembling
windows, ineffable phrases, deep thirst.

She's a wave of closed eyes,
the fluent forms of thigh-highs,
joy-in-the-round: her breasts
are quicksilver sugarcane.
And her arms! Her migrating arms
are made of pigeons nodding.

The night—she's dying now.

A las seis de la tarde empiezan a crecer
Las amapolas en las manos moradas del crepúsculo.
Arde el cielo en la flama de gallos peleadores.
La brisa se hace esponja de succión cristalina.
Se apaloman los nervios de la hora en la blanda tension
alicaída. Las ventanas empluman sus quijadas simétricas.
A la ciudad le nace la plateada corola, la expresión
de letargo, la conciencia de cobre.

Es en este momento cuando el sol se suicida.
Salta al mar arrastrando su decreepita antorcha.
De su sangre amarilla suben flores bermejas
que orifican los peces y deslumbran las perlas.

Carcajada escarlata.
Se ha diluído el sol en los labios del agua.
Lo recoge la noche con sus manos de humo
y lo avienta en tensiones de fugaz golondrina.
Hace girar la noche su vientre barnizado
al son de truculentos lucerismos del anca.

Hay rumor de semillas en la sangre del hombre,
entre los desniveles de su amor y su ritmo.
Es su amor un disparo que atraviesa la noche,
que desata en su carne tornasol el suspiro.

Noche armada de manos que dibujan la sombra
y arman la flauta diáfana del coquí verspertino.
En la cruz de la esquina un farol solitario
cuaja un grito amarillo con su lengua de búfalo.

*Marigloria Palma*
**TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY CARINA DEL VALLE SCHORSKE**

At six in the evening the poppies begin
to bloom in the dusk's purple hands.
A ring of fire snares the sky in a cockfight.
The breeze becomes a crystal sponge.
The hour's nerves come down to roost,
crestfallen. The jaws of the windows grow feathers.
A silver halo forms around the city,
a lazy look, a copper consciousness.

Now is the moment for the sun's suicide.
It sinks in the sea dragging a decrepit torch.
From that yellow blood dark flowers rise,
gilding the fish and making pearls shine.

Scarlet cackling.
Now the sun's just a bit of spit on the sea's lips.
Night gathers what light she can in her hands of smoke
and fans it to a flame with a sparrow's frenzy.
She turns her shining belly toward the sound
of cruel stars coughing.

There's a rumor of seeds in man's blood,
in the valleys between his heart and its beating.
His love is that shot in the dark, that sigh
torn loose from the body's sunflower.

Night's navy of dark hands distributes
an artillery of clear flutes: *coquí, coquí.*
On the corner a solitary streetlight
bites its black tongue to keep from crying.

Cielo de cuello negro y gargantilla de oro...
Estoy sobre mis pies, Conejos ágiles
De donde arranco yo, toda ternura,
Simple en la construcción de ser humano,
De animal-maravilla, para enfocar con mis
Pequeños ojos tu gran fogata mágica.

La luna es sólo un cuarto de naranja madura
navegando en el oleo transparente del cielo.
La luz es una replica de pollos amarillos
y un zumbido de abejas desveladas que tiemblan.

La negra sombra de las casas guarda
en su ceñudo y misterioso ombligo
el ladrillo afilado de la lluvia
mágica de la noche, su frenético gesto,
su bostezo gaseoso y esa estrellita
y huella de sus pasos.

El viento es fiel pianista sobre el verde
teclado de las olas, pura jarinería:
jazminada, jazmín y jazmincillo, bajo el muñon
del ala que se eleva de la espuma ritual
de su coraje.

Sortilegio de oscuras mariposas
soplan los grandes labios de la noche.
Hacia ellos va mi sueño batiendo sus claveles
desde la cruz mojada de mi aliento.

*Marigloria Palma*

**TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY CARINA DEL VALLE SCHORSKE**

The sky has a black neck, a gold throat.
I'm on my feet, these nimble rabbits carry me,
all tenderness, in my simple human form,
animal-marvel, to turn my tiny eyes toward
the bright magic of your blazing.

The moon's just a quarter of ripe orange
skiffing the sky's transparent oil.
The light's a mob of yellow chickens,
drones of sleepless bees that buzz and shake.

The house's black shadow locks it all up
in its grim, mysterious navel: the sharp smell
of brick drenched with night's magic rain,
her frantic gestures and deep yawns,
that little star and the trace of her footprints.

The wind is a faithful pianist over the green
keyboard of the waves, babylonian profusion:
a pure garden of wind, jasmine, jessamine,
blows beneath the brave wing rising
from the sacrament of seafoam.

An augury of dark butterflies
blows through the night's big lips.
My dream chases them, whirling
carnations on my breath's wet cross.

Estoy sembrando fresas de emoción en la acera.
Con sus labios de alambre
el horizonte silba su verdad antagónica.
Miro sus labios firmes de cristal mentiroso.
Más acá rige el hombre con su grito disperso,
su fragante amargura...

Medianoche, desde mi sed contemplo la ciudad aterrada:
mar de pupilas plásticas. Edificios que huyen
recogiendo los hombros,
que se tuercen en fuga sin moverse del sitio,
arrojando cangrejos por las negras axilas
sin calor de sus sombras.

En el día la ciudad es canario de numéricas
flautas; alumbradas partículas le conforman el ritmo.
Es un huerto gigante de simétricas fugas
de ladrillo y cemento, un conjunto de cáscaras,
un compuesto de vísceras, un discurso geométrico.

Por la noche la ciudad se transforma.
en sus senos ahumados las estrellas palpitan;
golondrinas errantes le dibujan la vértebra
y emoción de hojalata por sus venas circula.
Perros enmascarados con ladrido de aguja van surciendo
las grietas de su oscura política
y si llueve, es violeta la emoción de la lluvia.

*Marigloria Palma*
**TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY CARINA DEL VALLE SCHORSKE**

I'm planting strawberry feels in the cracks of the sidewalk.
The horizon whistles its hard truth with wire lips.
I can spot the lie in that fine-cut crystal.
Over here man rules with his scattered cry,
his bitter perfume.

Midnight: in my thirst I consider
the terrified city:
sea of plastic pupils. Buildings bunkered down,
twisted in flight but going nowhere, flinging crabs
by their cold black armpits from inside their shadows.

Daytime, the city is a canary cage of numbered
flutes; bright motes mark the beat. It's a deep grove,
parallel fugues of brick and cement, ensemble of seashells,
assemblage of viscera, a geometric discourse.

At night the city transforms.
Stars pulse between her damp breasts;
wandering swallows trace her vertebrae
and her heart is the heart of a tinman, pulsing.
Muzzled dogs go mending chinks in her
obscure politics with the fine needles of their barking.

And if it rains, the feel of the rain is purple.

*Leila Chatti*

# Night Ghazal

I boil night on the stove; soak it until it's thoroughly done, black.
We drink it like tea, unspeaking—swallow its moths, distant suns, black.

Through the telescope's silver barrel, litter of white stars
already dead. They glitter like shrapnel. The sky, gun-black.

The blood comes and comes; I spend all night in the tub,
water running. It pours from me: gush of child undone. Black.

I tell him, *fill my darkest places*. My fingers grip too hard,
leave small moons along his back. The bruises come, black.

Dream, small death. I become a phantom above the bed.
Sleep, the simpler twin. The same eyes closing. The same gone black.

# The Blood

She had the blood, too. Bathtubs filled
to enameled lip and her body
pouring. As a girl, I thought being
a woman meant your life spilling from you
like a cup of juice you kept knocking over.
I was young enough to think anything
that bled was a wound. The moon
waited like a round-faced witness
in the window each month, steam
erasing the mirrors and the walls
weeping. All night the tap running
and running. I wanted to know
how pain made a woman
curl like a pill bug poked with a stick.
I wanted to know everything about suffering
so I could avoid it. I was young enough
to think things like that, seven years
small, when calamity was skinned knees and little
brothers and an upturned sundae
crashing to the floor like a chandelier.
All I knew of disaster was Hollywood
movies where houses were swallowed
easy as bubblegum and spaceships
hovered like gnats out of reach—ruin always
at a distance—and you could press your face into
your mother and everything would be all right
once you turned on the lights.
Sometimes, now, when the ache comes
and I am coiled in dark water, I remember

that distant self like a daughter
I gave up or lost in a bustling
food court and never saw again,
the remembering painful.
And sometimes I wonder if she knew
why her blood came angrier
than any other's, blood like my blood,
which now seethes and conspires and appears
on MRI scans like a black eye or a crop circle
or the earth's eager void.

*Mahogany L. Browne*

# i rather talk slick about that slum king fixin' this door than dat cop use my black ass for target practice

my ob/gyn office keep a cop in its arms / like i don't know how to walk with my insides scared already / like my womb don't shake when my period late / like my period ain't ever late in the first place / in bklyn ain't nobody not moving too quick / everybody is just a body waiting for a cold bag / every bag is plastic hinge w/a squeaky door & a slum king w/ an attitude problem / slum king keep his cards closer to the cops than his bible / slum king keep a for rent sign on a building that squeeze families out of twenty-year-old leases / & he ain't fixing no bathroom doors / no / he don't move too quick or the fire alarm might sound / you never know who make the slum king mad / 'cept he ain't never know a day w/out them bodega boys / & i say, i rather talk slick 'bout tha slum king fixin dis front door than dat cop use my black ass for target practice / cause imma need a carton of 2% no matter the week / cause bodega boys eat thanksgiving dinner in front the stoop / & turkey w/stuffing taste good no matter which way you cut it / 'cept if a hot one coming s l o w / still slum king ain't fixin' nothin' but the roof / he only fix what land him in the city's mouth / like when the roof caved in on the kitchen / but never when folk fight in the hallway / throw trash down the stairwell or leave furniture broke in threes / no / not even after we complain 'bout the loud neighbors in 3B / how every time they tussle in the bed / you can hear her screaming & his footsteps / so loud & on top our head it's like a cop coming / down / down / down / how 3B cum so loud the bodega boys shake they heads towards the ceiling / how they tongue click / then h i s s every time a girl strut by the parkway / it sound like a moan / clean & loud & sweet / as curdled milk.

*Michael Holladay*

# Slacklines

I like your stomach hair, I told him, and he frowned down at me, confused, curious. Then he smiled, a slack-jawed smile. I braided them, the hairs, wild wiry things, pale like the goose-necked lamp curling on its stand, a pale kind of white gold, the hairs, I twisted in my fingers, tying them off.

What I didn't tell him: your hairs remind me of my brother. His name was Jack, not my brother, this guy in my bed with the stomach hair. We had chatted on our phone apps, and we both wanted sex. I live in a high line apartment in Louisville, the Highlands, away from Harlan County, KY, where I grew up, away from those Black Mountains, that sprawled spring of bluegrass where you could get beaten down. Each time, on my dates, if you want to call them dates, I say, Let's go out. You can't come over for a one and done, that's too easy, too nerve-inducing, I want to see your face before you fuck me. I say, Let's go to El Mundo. Have you had their margaritas (fresh squeezed limes, no corn syrupy mix)? Have you had their tacos (Kentucky bison)? They're the best in town. So, I sat with him, this Jack, while guacamole creamed his lips, and he fidgeted. He was broad shouldered, also like my brother. He said he worked in healthcare, and I let him bore me with the details. I sipped a salted margarita and nodded. I clenched his leg, and he stopped talking, scanning the crowded tables, a hair-teased woman eyeing us, two men groping each other in a trendy Mexican restaurant, and Let's get out of here, come on, I said. El Mundo. The margaritas. The guacamole. The nodding. The interest. The leg clench. It's my bit.

This Jack, he's different. Afterwards, I normally want them to leave. I don't want to cuddle up. Their hot skin is too balmy, and I don't want to be touched that way. But I wanted him to stay. It was going on 2 a.m. We made out, he was silky, we stripped each other, I clasped his pecs to feel him. He licked me, primed me, and I pushed him into me, no lube so it hurt, but once I eased into the rhythms of his body, it was natural, and there was something about him—that stomach hair, so golden, and as he rocked against me, fucking me, he was more than I could take. And I think I can take a lot.

You remind me of my brother, I wanted to tell him but didn't. When I saw his profile picture, a typical mirrored roll-your-eyes gym shot, I didn't think much about his face, but at El Mundo, while he told me about his boring-as-hell work, I kept trying to place him, and then his dimples indented, my brother's. Then those shoulders. Enter his hairs, and it was too much. I lay across his chest, he held me against him, and my head moved up and down with his belly as he breathed, which was weird, but I liked it. Jack. Solid. The lamp igniting those hairs, I wanted to tie them. You can stay the night. Do you want to stay the night?

Uh huh. I like you, he said. And I let him like me. I wanted to let him like me. Maybe it was his teeth. My brother's teeth, braces made them perfect, but before braces they were spaced out, a sliver in the center. He was older than I was by six years, my brother. He walked his lines with so much grace and ease, so balanced, and I had no balance. So Jack's teeth brought me back to my brother. I wanted him to bite me, make those circle dents in my skin.

I like your stomach hair, I told him again.

You're drunk, he said.

I'm not, I said. I hopped out of bed. The floor tiles made a line, and I put one foot down, then the other, and walked, one foot forward, then the next, this is how you move with balance. I can walk this line without falling, I said.

In the morning among coffees on the nightstand (If they do end up staying the night, which, again, I usually do not allow, but if, for some reason, they do, I never make them coffee, because coffee means they'll stick around, but I made coffee for this Jack), he said, So am I going to see you again? If they ask this question I tell them, No. Sorry, but no. Nothing personal, but no. I don't really say

no. I tell them yes, but the yes means no, I think no when I say, Yeah, sure. I told Jack, Yeah, sure, but I wasn't saying no. I was saying—I don't know what I was saying. I let the Yeah, sure be the Yeah, sure.

I kissed him, begging for it again, and he fucked me again, and I said, Bite me with those teeth of yours, and he bit, jaw on my shoulder, and it hurt how I like, hurt me while you fill me, my body, your body, his body. My brother's name was William.

I tied his knots. He had this matted, delicate, curlicue hair, he was delicate but muscled, William. He walked lines. When I say that, I mean he walks slacklines. I used to tie his knots. Out on the Hayworth's farm spreading in our backyard, he found two sturdy oaks, showed me how to tie off. I was eight, he fourteen. You do it with webbing, build an anchor. At each point, you tie different hitches, knots keeping the line strong, and I tied them. I still remember. Make two double loops, knot them to carabiners, then double the webbing over so it's secure. William had to be secure. Sometimes he would say, Re-do, because the tension between the two points wasn't right, and I would re-tie his knots, his support. He hoisted onto the line and balanced. He had seen someone on TV walk clear across Niagara Falls, no harness. I would suck on cherry popsicle after cherry popsicle and watch William, balance, fall to the ground, get up, balance, walk, then fall again, and back on the line again.

He left. He got the hell out of Harlan. He slacklines. It's what he does, what he was meant to do. Me, I was meant to do nothing in Harlan. I was sixteen when he left me with Dad. He couldn't take Dad. Sometimes he would say, Hey, Derick, you try, and he lifted me onto the line, and I would only last for thirty seconds, then when I almost fell to the dirt, he caught me. I don't know how he balanced so perfectly. He practiced in between those oaks for years. He slacklines in Yosemite now. Someone from my town, this girl named Laila with three kids now, called, and asked me how I was, and I said, Fine, and then she said, Did you see about your brother? He made the news. He is not in the circus. When you think tightropes, you may think circus. He is not in the circus. It started that way,

as entertainment, spectacle. There were the great highwire artists of the 1800s. Charles Blondin conquered Niagara Falls, and Maria Spelterini crossed Niagara to celebrate the US Centennial, Con Colleano, the Wizard of the Wire, the first to somersault, and I could go on. Philippe Petit walked the World Trade Centers in the '70s. Now it's sport for those who want a bigger challenge than rock climbing, which is William. He used to climb Black Mountain with buddies. He would be gone for whole weekends, and Dad would glance down at me from behind his paper and say, Where is your goddamn brother? I wouldn't know. And Dad would stare at me, and how to survive would be to not move, and he won't notice you, he won't notice your body. So William left.

Last year, he walked 3,000 feet above Yosemite, the Taft Point gully, no harness, world record. When that story came out on different news sites, when I heard from Laila, it was the first I heard about where he was. I hadn't spoken to him in years, not since he left. For all I knew, he could've been dead. I knew he risked his life all the time. In 1887, walker Stephen Peer fell to his death off a line in Niagra. The fear of William's death had become so common I stopped fearing it. Sometimes, when I'm especially bored at work, an assistant—aka secretary—to a lawyer, when the spreadsheets are done and depositions delivered, I scroll through his news stories. He called the other week. I'm not sure how he got my number. I let it go to voicemail. He cleared his throat, readying himself, and said, It's me, like I was supposed to know, and then, Call me, I heard about Dad. I haven't called back. Dad's in bad shape according to Mom. I've kept in touch with Mom, she calls sometimes when she wants to chat, never mentioning Dad, she needs to get out of there herself, and she knows why William and I both ended up leaving but doesn't say anything. There she was calling me about him. All the alcohol has gotten to his liver. I clicked off my phone and went to work.

Jack came over again. I had waited two days, then texted. He stood in my doorway, those arms, that Adam's apple bobbing as he said, I'm glad you texted. I didn't think I would, but I had been drinking wine, and I thought about the sound of William's voice in that message, gruff like he had a cold, comforting. I poured Jack some wine.

So what do you want to do? he asked.

You know what I want to do, I said. I turned on the twinkly Christmas lights lining the perimeter of my bedroom in a soft glow. When Jack was having sex with me, his body melded to mine, the words came out. I said, Slap me. He looked at me, stopped. William's sheets always smelled like unwashed sleep. He had pictures of mountains and Michael Jordan taped in his room, and once, I creaked the door open, thinking I would jump against him, make him wrestle me the way he would toss me around like a teddy bear. He was lying on his bed, naked. His was my first naked body. Ribs thin, belly paunch, hair under his pits, and he was making these soft moans, stroking himself up and down, the most vulnerable, beautiful thing I had seen in all my eight years. Violent, too, peaceful but violent. I touched myself the way he did, watching him through the crack of the door, my stroke synced with his, mimicking him, and that's how I always felt before he left, an imitation of him that would never be him.

Slap me, I said to Jack again.

Are you sure?

Yes, don't think about it. Just do it.

I let a few weeks pass and hadn't called William back. After three wines while watching TV, I would hover my finger over the Call Back button, almost pressing down, then toss the phone away again and replay whatever TV episode. Then after thinking of William, that lead me to Jack, and I would call him instead, and he would come over. He slapped me that one time. I think he wanted to know what it meant. It was lovely, hard against my cheek, my face on fire, could've been harder. We had sex a few more times after that, but I refrained from asking again. I wasn't sure. I didn't want to press him too much. But I also didn't know what it meant, I didn't want to apply any kind of meaning but I couldn't help think, what is the meaning? What is the meaning of this? I wasn't used to asking what I wanted when I didn't know the why of the want.

Jack was over again. We were in my bed, and I rubbed my leg against his. Thai takeout sat on the nightstand, curries getting cold.

Will you tell me your secrets? he asked.

What kinds of secrets?

Any kind.

Why?

Because I want to know you, he said. He was wearing a lumpy sweater but was naked from waist down, and I hated that.

Take off that sweater, I said.

Why?

Because I hate how it looks. You look like two different people.

Here's what someone might want to know. I was eight when it started. Before Dad got home from work, William crouched me down and said, Listen, when he gets like that, you know that crawl space in the shed? I was in checkered boxers holding a new doll, a Raggedy Ann, secondhand, and our shag carpet itched my legs. I caressed Ann's hair. Hey, are you listening? William asked. I wanted him to pick me up and hug me, my smaller body wrapped in his. He said, Go into that crawl space and hide when he gets like that, okay? Pretend we're playing Hide and Go Seek. I'll stay in here while you hide, and I'll come get you when it's over. And William was right. Dad would stomp into our house with work boots, crack open beer after beer, pour whiskey after whiskey. He lounged in his recliner, and when he got up, he stumbled, colossal overhead, and he looked at me. What the fuck is this? Boys don't play with dolls, he yelled at me. What the fuck is this, and he grabbed my arm out of the socket. Dad, hey, William said. It's okay. I gave him that doll, he said. He told Dad to leave me alone. Dad said to William, You don't tell me what to do in my house, you good for nothing shit. Most of the time it would play out this way. William would stand up to him. When he distracted Dad, I would run out to the shed and curl myself into the nook William showed me, and I would think of nothing but William, imagining his sinewy limbs cradling me. When William came into the shed afterwards we sat there for the longest time, I saw his bruises, juicy, raw, fresh along his sides. I touched them. They felt like mine. The bruises and scars were his and mine together, we shared.

I don't have any secrets, I said to Jack.

Everyone has secrets, Jack said.

Like what? I said.

I don't know. Maybe not even a secret. Just tell something about yourself. I feel like I don't know you.

What do you want to know?

Where did you grow up?

I grew up on a farm, I said. There were chickens and cows, and I fed them and played with them, and it was perfect.

Really? he said.

Yes. Really. It was perfect.

I don't think I believe you. No one's life is perfect.

You don't have to believe me.

What are we doing?

Fucking and watching horror movies and eating Thai food.

I mean in the long run.

I don't know. Can you take off that sweater?

If I take off the sweater will you talk to me? I nodded, and he took it off. I grazed my fingers along his side body, much better. I like you, he said.

I know you do.

I was thinking, I don't know, he said. I'm not seeing anyone else. I don't know if I want to see anyone else but you.

Are you asking to be boyfriends?

I guess so.

Years ago I had a boyfriend, but he's easy to forget. I almost think I've never had one. I said, Can't we just keep doing what we're doing?

Is there someone else? he said. There wasn't anyone else. I wanted Jack to be there when I needed him, but there were times I didn't need him, I couldn't stand him, I needed to be with only myself. His stomach, his hairs, his teeth, his side body. William. I still haven't returned his call. He called again but left no message. I would look at the missed call or listen to the message from the other month, then I would text Jack to come over.

No, there's no one else, I said.

Okay. I like you a lot. I want you to know that. You'll tell me if there's someone else?

Sure, I said.

William left. I was sixteen, still living with Dad, still in Harlan, going to school, staying quiet. There was this boy named Nathan I kissed sometimes, and we gave each other blow jobs. He was scrawny, and I was only into him because he was the only one in that town open enough to be into me. I hated the cologne he wore, too much clove. I took what I could. We stripped each other's bodies. People called us all kinds of words. Guys at school keyed his car, carved those words into the metal. Eventually everyone in town knew. It got back to Dad. William was gone. Dad grabbed me by the arm, shoved me down, undid his belt, welted me, strikes one two three were raw, and everything after that numb. I screamed at him, You motherfucker. There was no more crawl space. I curled up and thought of nothing except how much pain I could take, my body raggedy. I was finally able to get out. I opened the door, and Dad chased after me. I ran to Nathan's house. He snuck me into his window. In the mirror, I didn't recognize my face, the blood. William wasn't there. Nathan took me to a hospital, and I got stitched. Bleeding internal, blood vessels crushed, abdomen, spleen, CT scans, pumping fluids I lost. I left Harlan the next week. I moved to Louisville, and that was it.

Jack kissed my forehead. You ready, he said, and he inched into me. The pain at first. But then that first pain turns to so much pleasure. Slap me, I said. He hesitated at first. Then he slapped me. Punch me, I said. What? He stopped. Punch me, I said. If you feel the pain again, you can feel it differently and release it. I said to Jack, Punch me. Do it. Don't think about it.

I know how William walks his lines. It has to do with center of mass. While on a slackline, balance comes from shifting the center of mass over the base of support. Mass has to equal zero, your mass nothing. In the human body, this means shifting weight over legs or arms. Some hold poles, and others hold their arms in a T like William. I know how it works, but I could never do it. My center of mass is not like William's. Do you have to clear your mind of everything? Or do you think of everything? While the wind blows against you, while boulders and mountains surround you, death underneath, do you forget? Or do you let everything seep into you? All I know is that it requires you to look forward and find one central point of focus, pretend nothing else exists, and you can't let go.

Jack always says now, Are you sure? Or I don't know about this. I don't know if I want to, he says. But I always say, I want it. Bite me, slap me, punch me, spit on me, your whore, your slut, your anything you can think of. His punches are nimble, hurt in all the right ways. My body opened up, my skin opened up, the slap not enough, the bite not enough, so punch me. Do it. And after hesitating, Jack does. I'm letting him, and I'm in control, but I'm submitting to him, and there is power in submission. William. It's been almost a month since he called.

What about this? I said to Jack.

Jack was naked in front of me. If I looked close, his pores like sand paper. William catching me while I fell off the line, always catching me. Hiding in the crawl space. Thinking of nothing but William. His skin so supple while he stroked himself. What? Jack asked.

I held up the belt, looping it, the metal of the buckle water-cool against my skin.

Jack looked at the belt in my hand, then looked at me, his eyes going between the two, like he tried comprehending the belt and me together. This is, he said. This is. I don't know. It's too much. Do you think?

No, I said.

Can't we just have, like, normal sex?

What's normal sex?

You know what I mean.

I don't.

I'm sorry, he said. Maybe we can watch a movie?

I don't want to watch a movie. I want you to fuck me while you strangle me and hit me with this belt.

He sighed, those teeth. I'm not... I don't like doing this to you.

I like you doing this to me. It's okay. I want you to.

Look, he said. Maybe we want different things.

Fine, I said. Fine then.

Jack left. I went to work. I pulled up William's news stories at my desk, shifting to spreadsheets if my boss walked by. I was having trouble sleeping again. The ratio

of Jack in my life had reduced the ratio of my insomnia, equaled out, cancelled to zero, and now it was off again. I would come home and binge *Friends* at night with a five-dollar bottle of wine. William, I couldn't stop thinking of him. Where he was. What he was doing at this exact moment. Whenever I thought of William, I called Jack instead, but now there was no more Jack, so I was left with nothing but William, how it always was in the end. I had to call him. I called him. He didn't answer. Then he called me back. It flashed William. I said, Hey, and he said, Hey.

Where are you? I asked.

California. Yosemite.

I knew that, I said. I saw your news stories.

Yeah. So, how are you?

I'm a secretary, I said.

Are you still in Harlan?

No, I'm in Louisville now.

That's good, he said. That's really good. I tried listening to his background, but it was only his voice. He said, So, I'm thinking of coming back to visit. Maybe in a week.

Oh yeah?

Yeah. I guess I should see Dad. Do you know how he is?

I don't know, I said. I haven't visited him. He was in the hospital, I said. I know that much. But I don't know if he's still there or back at the house or where.

Yeah, I understand.

What do you understand?

Listen, he said. I've wanted to tell you this for a long time.

What do you want to tell me?

I'm sorry.

He didn't need to say that. I said, What are you sorry for?

I'm sorry I left you there. With him.

What do you mean?

Come on Derick. You know what I mean. What he did to you.

I don't know what you mean.

I heard about what he did to you. Fucking, that guy, Brian Vetter, he told me. You remember him. I used to climb with him.

I don't remember him.

That's not the point. Look, I was so scared for you there.

The thought of William's skin came to me. I said, So I bet you've gotten a nice tan out there. California and all. Do you have a nice tan?

Will you listen to me? You're always doing that.

Doing what?

Changing the subject.

I didn't know what the subject was.

All I'm saying is, I'm sorry I left you with him.

He didn't need to tell me about his own guilt. There wasn't anything to forgive, so I didn't forgive. I said, I've heard California is nice. Is it nice?

William sighed a classic William sigh. Yeah, he said. It's nice here.

When I told Jack there wasn't anyone else, there was someone else. I didn't count this man because we only chatted on our phones, swapped photos, messaged about sex and what he wanted to do to me. He was Leather, Dominant, wanted me for a Sub. He was forty-five, called me Son and Boy. He was typical, shirtless shot, leather jock-strapped. He told me his name, but I only remembered his name online, which was Spike. A few days after Jack left, I messaged Spike. Time for El Mundo.

He had this oversized brow, a shaved head, bristles at his receding hair line. What he said he would do to me in our messages: tie me up, whip me, sling me, make me beg, make me his, piss, degrade, he didn't do safe words. I got to El Mundo early and sipped a margarita before he walked in. He mumble grumbled. He ordered the tamales. The whole time I saw him in another way, pictured him owning me. I had another margarita. So where do you live, he asked me.

The Highlands, I said.

Can you host?

A bit of sour cream sat on his lip unnoticed. I watched him chew. His jaw was flabby. Not like Jack's, not like William's. William used to pop his jaw, and I loved the sound and motion of his mouth. Maybe, I said. I don't know. Two margaritas at El Mundo will get you there. Three will make you drunk. I had four. I told myself

this was right. I said I couldn't host, because I didn't want him to know where I lived. I said, What about your place?

He had a wife, it couldn't be his place, so he suggested a Motel 6. I got into his pickup, and we sat in silence on the way. A hat shadowed his forehead, thick jowls, and I wondered if he could give me what I was looking for out of Jack, the release in pain, but pain I wanted. Spike was supposed to be an experienced Dom. I wouldn't have to prod him to go further, to keep hurting me. He would do it willingly. I could submit to him completely. When we checked in, he carried this backpack from his truck. The floor of the room was stained and zigzagged. He took off his puffed vest and unbuttoned his top button. Neither of us spoke. I let him tell me what came next. I stepped closer to him to try and feel intimate. No kissing, he said. No girly shit. He was one of those. He undid his buckle and flopped his cock out of his pants. He grabbed me rough by the shoulders, commanding my body. I tried to relish in someone commanding my body, the force. He pushed me down and said, Suck it Boy. I did as he asked. He was calling me Boy. He moaned and said, Deeper. As I choked on him, something felt off. This was supposed to be arousing. He pulled me up. I let him strip off my shirt. Hold out your wrists, he said. He took out handcuffs from the backpack full of kink. The metal of the cuffs dug into my wrists, making abrasions, a hint of pain I tried feeling into. I was latched to the bed, submitted to Spike, what I thought I wanted. He took my pants off with a hard tug, and I was naked for him, but I was struck with this feeling of being too exposed, not like with Jack, maybe because Spike felt more like a stranger. Be a good Boy for Daddy, he told me. I was aroused, but these words weren't affecting me the way I thought they would. He got in my face, his lip snarled against my lip as he said, Tell me how much you want me. Beg for me, Boy. I told him what you're supposed to say, what they say in videos. I need your cock Daddy. Fuck me with your fat Daddy cock. He said, More Boy. He put me in a leather jockstrap. This felt more like his fantasy than mine. Tell me more, he said. I said what you say. I'm your whore. I'm your boycunt. I'm Daddy's Boy. I'm your cum slut. I wanted these words to turn me on. I tried feeling them as I said them, but they felt like nothing saying them to Spike.

He put a collar on me, spit on me. I tried to find feeling in the degradation. He tied on nipple clamps, they caused pain, there it was, some real pain at two of my most sensitive points. Feel it, I told myself. It can be a release like with Jack. That's what I was searching for in the pain, the past released. The collar and clamps were attached to a leash. I was on my knees. Lean into Daddy's cock, he said, and I curved my body, jutting my hips upward to prop against his torso. He pulled the leash back and it choked. I tried to feel release. He pulled back on the leash more forcefully, and it tugged my nipples so hard they felt like they could rip off. More pain. Keep feeling into it, I kept telling myself. He slapped me. The sting coated my face, like with Jack, but this didn't feel the same. He took out a whip, and he hit my back and side, one after another. This is what I had wanted from Jack's slaps and punches and what I wanted to push even further. But it wasn't happening with Spike. Jack, William, they aligned for me. Spike wasn't a placeholder for anyone. Each whip hurt more, and I almost couldn't take it. This pain didn't release me of anything, not of William or of my father. This pain created more pain. I didn't want to do this anymore. Spike was about to piss on me. He was saying, You're my slutty piss pig, you need Daddy's piss, all things I heard Doms say in online videos, I didn't respond. Spike shouted, Right? He whipped me, and it hurt in ways I didn't like, this was too much. I looked at Spike, and I thought, he's not Jack. His jawline wasn't like William's the same way Jack's was. Would it have been different with Jack? If he were the one whipping me, about to cover me in his hot piss, would I feel release in the pain? Spike pissed on me, the warmth washing over my body. He said, You wanted it so you're going to take it. He used his piss as lube to fuck me hard. I wanted him to stop, but I was this far. I let it happen.

I came home, took a shower, put salve on my bleeding nipples and the whip streaks. I plopped my beat-up body onto my bed. I felt more hollowed out than anything. I played '70s disco. William had called again, and I let it go to voicemail. He said he was in the Lost Arrow Spire. It's where Darrin Carter, slackline trailblazer in the '80s, broke a bunch of records, and I assumed William wanted to break another. There are all kinds of different records. A record for distance, height, slackline, highline, waterline, harness or no harness. They all topple onto each other. William said he would be back in Harlan in a week, his first time since

he left, to see Dad. I won't go. I won't see him, Dad. I won't see William. There is no reason to try to set things right. There is only this: Dad could have killed me that night when I was sixteen. I took what he did to me, I almost let it happen, I almost let him beat me to death because I believed that's what I deserved, and William was somewhere else. There we were: Dad, reduced to a sickly, fragile lump in the hospital or not in the hospital, his organs failing, not remorseful about anything; William, living from camp to camp in Yosemite, balancing his lines, adrenaline, focusing to forget, his ribs, his torso, arms in a T, his skin; me, eight years away from Harlan, going to work at the dullest office job, coming home, ashamed at craving pain as release, not sleeping, re-watching the episode where Rachel fucks up the Thanksgiving dessert, repeat, over and over, telling myself I don't need to be knotted to anyone but thinking of texting Jack, again, at 3 a.m. If there's a funeral, I won't go to the funeral. There is no metaphor. There is no forgiveness. There is no closure. There is no story.

*Hieu Minh Nguyen*

# Dear X

Sometimes when I wake up & my body does not follow, I imagine it is busy lying beside you on the hillside above the McDonough baseball field, where the sounds from the interstate fill the empty bleachers until each *woosh* & horn is a father cheering behind the chainlink backstop. I imagine what you would say to me now if I told you everything:

Andrew is an EMT, Kayla is a nurse, Matthew is buff & does acid, Arimis is in prison, Michael's teeth finally grew back, Mai & Emily & Justice are all mothers & still hate each other.

I imagine the *holy shit*, the *noway*, the *some things never change*. I imagine the words I've learned for us both, spoken with your boy voice. & of course I imagine you better than you were (happier, even), but you deserve that. You deserve an ironed shirt. You deserve new shoes. I describe your funeral like a party you forgot to attend. It wasn't the same without you.

I imagine what you would say to me now if I told you what really happened: the teacher, my body molting green in her hands, how she would find me at the neighborhood playground. Even in the

summer. But you loved her. You would stand on top of the hill & wait for her car to round the corner. She'd bring us snowcones. She'd wiped my mouth with the hem of her skirt. Sometimes, when I hate you for leaving, I wonder (& please forgive me) why she didn't choose you. She must have known. I imagine her face shattered with the same brick you tossed at Mr. Leroy's truck. I imagine the school flattened by your laughter. I imagine us slow dancing in the gymnasium with a gas can & a cigarette.

One more thing before you let me go: once, I chose a man because he looked how I imagine you would now. Soft hair & a flat smile. I asked him not to speak. I asked him to slap me.

What am I supposed to do now, now that I've spent most of my life without you, but still need you to save me?

As he was leaving, I thanked him, though it wasn't for what he assumed. How could he have known? He gave me a body I did not know I missed. He gave me a body I bring with me to the hillside & lay out in the sun.

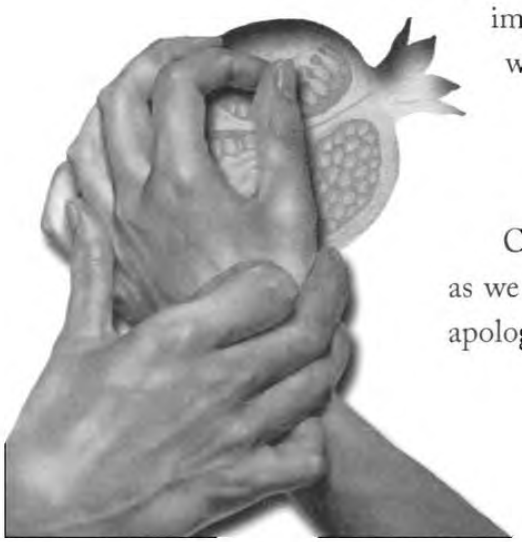
*Corey Van Landingham*

# Apologia

"I just can't get down with all the self-flagellation," I tell my partner, Chris, who's been Catholic his whole life—previously in religion, now in countenance. It's the first Friday of Lent, and we've just finished the Stations of the Cross at St. Francis Xavier Church in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. It was my first Lenten service, and I'm trying, at the bar afterward, to recount my experience as respectfully as possible. "It's so…excessive." I don't want to offend him, but I want him to understand why I'm feeling unsettled. More so, I want him to admit that there is something to be unsettled about. "Yeah, that wasn't the best version of the text," he says. He holds his pint glass between both hands, staring down into the beer. "It was a bit melodramatic."

During the service, Chris knew each word to say, and when. He knew the verses, the vast choreography of repentance, when and where to turn as the priest walked the Via Dolorosa. I, on the other hand, an atheist from the age of ten, knew nothing. I did not repeat the words of the meditations printed on the pamphlet. I did not bless myself. I didn't sing. I didn't kneel. I am slightly angry that he didn't warn me there would be so much kneeling. The entire congregation was able to witness my indignation, as they fell to their knees at every station. We could at least have chosen seats in the back.

"We often detest characteristics in others that we recognize as representative of ourselves," I tell my creative writing students at the beginning of every fiction unit. Of course I found the excessive repentance disgusting. "How impure yet is my love!" "I beseech You." "I weep for the sins which I have committed against You."



Chris—gracious, charming—shook the priest's hand as we exited the church. Bowing my head, I felt the urge to apologize. For attending. For my lack of participation, of belief.

"I am sincerely sorry for ever having offended You."

Houston, Texas, four years earlier. I wake to Miles straddling my face. If this is the first time, I probably laugh. If it is the third or fourth or twelfth, I push him off of me, raise my voice. I remember him telling me, more than once after these incidents, not to yell at him, however I don't remember ever yelling. I haven't yet turned down a Fulbright to Colombia to live with him—that comes a bit later—but I've helped him move into a bright cottage in the Heights, and am staying for the summer. Instantly, we were won over by the fig and kumquat trees in the backyard, the extra bedroom that he would make into his woodworking studio, the small, separate garage nestled in the back. Upon seeing the narrow gravel path that lead from the street to the garage, I told him, laughing, that I would *never* try backing up out of there.

The morning after we arrived, he made me. Of course, I could have said no. I could have refused. But there I was, smashing his not-old Subaru into a corner of the garage upon trying not to hit the fig tree while backing out. Instantly, I cried. *I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry*, I said over and over again. I don't recall his reaction, which is probably telling, but I do remember resentment welling up inside me alongside my guilt. I *told* him I didn't want to.

This was before I began, accidentally, to break things—mugs, champagne flutes, double-walled espresso shot glasses, a plate or two. Before a previously nascent clumsiness was amplified by the fear of breaking any more of his belongings and born into a cringing, full-blown beast. This was before I woke up with his dick on my forehead, before I understood the terms of my staying-there.

*I'm so sorry,* all that second Texas day long.

It was my mother who first called my attention to how much I apologized. Having spent three years living across the country from her during graduate school and only seeing her for the occasional holiday visit, she could measure me in a

way I couldn't measure myself. Sure, I was aware of the apologizing in an oblique manner, but I was horrified that someone else had noticed it. The weird, obsessive habit I had acquired was no longer my private anxiety—had I said I was sorry for being late? For working late? Did I apologize for waking Miles up? If not, I better say it again, just to make sure. And again. And again—but something else for which I must repent. "I'm sorry..." I said to her, before I knew what I was saying. Sheepishly, I had to stop myself from repeating it.

In *On Apology*, psychiatrist Aaron Lazare's book on the myriad ways of why and how we apologize, the power of apology is outlined as such: "to heal humiliations and grudges, remove the desire for vengeance, and generate forgiveness on the part of the offended parties. For the offender, they can diminish the fear of retaliation and relieve the guilt and shame that can grip the mind with a persistence and tenacity that are hard to ignore." The apology process, as he calls this, reconciles and restores broken relationships.

While this might all sound obvious, Lazare's exhaustive look into the rapid growth of apology after World War II (many reasons are offered for this, from the growing horrors carried out by and inflicted upon humans, to new media making apology easier and, perhaps, more necessary, to the growing global village and our dependence on the safety of those whose fates within which we're entangled, to a shifting of power, where previously powerless groups are able to assert themselves and demand apologies) at both a private and public level is keen, incisive even. Detailing his own personal apologies, the private anecdotes of others, and a long list of public apologies—nation to nation, leader to country—the proliferation of repentance is not, one gathers, a positive occurrence. Instead, much of these fall under his term of "pseudo-apologies" where "the offender" (one might deconstruct the entire language of the apology process) tries to obtain the rewards of apology without every actually earning them. He looks toward Chinese apology companies—"paid surrogates of apology"—with well-educated, professional employees who send letters and flowers to offended parties on behalf of the

offender. The conditional apology—"If you were hurt, I am sorry"—is outlined and scrutinized as a shallow effort to dodge guilt while insinuating the other's sensitivity to be the real fault. Similarly, "I'm sorry you feel that way" and "I'm sorry if that's how I made you feel." These pseudo-apologies don't carry out the three actions of genuine, or effective, apologies, which 1) acknowledge the offense adequately, 2) express genuine remorse, and 3) offer appropriate reparations. There is, Lazare asserts, a "price of an effective apology." The rewards of which "can only be earned. They cannot be stolen."

Apology, then, as economics. Monetary restitution, of course. Blood money. In Korea, perpetrators of serious crimes, such as rape, may offer money to the victim. If accepted, punishment is often excused.

After a month or so in Houston, dragging my feet about getting the necessary immunizations and paperwork for the Fulbright, still not having found a place to live in Bogotá, I was delivered some information that could change my lot: I received an email inviting me back to a writers' conference I had attended the summer before. The Fulbright program wouldn't let me reenter the country to attend, and so, after convincing myself that I was turning down one opportunity for a better one, for my future, my writing, I decided to stay in Texas, with Miles. I found a job serving tables at a fancy restaurant. We got a cat.

I met Miles at my favorite bar the beginning of my last year of graduate school in Indiana. While I was no longer wearing my ring, I was still, I suppose, engaged to another man who lived in another state. I needed time, and space, I had told my fiancé a week before, but I had not yet told him the consequences of said time and space. What I *had* done was drink so much tequila, so quickly, that one of my friends had to put my shoes on for me in her hallway and walk me home. I thought—still sick into the next evening—that I could very possibly die. But that didn't stop me from drinking, a couple nights later, so much that I threw up, violently, in my car while I was driving. Nor did it prevent me from getting drunk by myself and carving long lines into my thighs with a pair of scissors, a habit from

my youth I had hoped I'd left behind. Nor from not eating, not really. And none of this stopped me from having already had multiple pints of bitter beer, that evening, and pressing in closer to this Miles, a friend of a friend.

He was a geologist, and he was, upon completion of his PhD, headed to work for a large oil company in Houston. He was going to get the hell out of this Midwestern shithole, he said. He was going to make a lot of money. In a nerdy scientist kind of way, Miles was attractive, with then-unhip, wire-rimmed glasses, and I wasn't blind to the muscles (he was, he said proudly, training for a triathlon) visible when he pulled off his sweatshirt. He would, for all intents and purposes—those being: sleep with someone who was not the only man I had slept with for the past six years, and drink enough not to care—do. On our way back to his apartment, I asked, self-righteously, if he was ashamed at all about his future career, about working for a company that was so fucking up the world. "Not really," he replied. If he didn't take the position, someone less responsible, less intelligent, someone who cared less, would.

There is much to be said about gender and apology, more than enough for its own essay. But, rather than delve into the research that suggests women have a lower threshold for what they perceive as offensive behavior, leading them to apologize more, or that women apologize as much to strangers as they to do to those with whom they're close, I want to talk about shampoo.

Or, more specifically, about a 2014 Pantene advertisement that garnered significant media attention for its portrayal of female apology. The commercial begins with a question centered on the screen: Why are women always apologizing? Cut to a meeting, where a stylish woman—pixie haircut, leather jacket—apologizes to the faceless man, presumably her boss, who stands above her. "Sorry, can I ask a stupid question?" she stammers. Then, scenes of women apologizing to loved ones (apologizing in the kitchen, mid-handoff of baby to husband, or after pulling some covers back onto her side of the bed), to strangers (as a man sits down next to a woman, perhaps too closely, in a

waiting room, and she, yes, apologizes). "Don't be sorry," the ad then implores. "Be strong and shine." The previous scenes are shown again, but revised. To begin with, they cut out the apology completely, but then the women start substituting the words "sorry not sorry."

A brief Googling of the ad will show its wide coverage, in media outlets, blogs, interviews with the Pantene creative team. All over, women exclaimed how painfully true, how difficult to watch the ad was.

What is difficult for me, however, is the final addition of the phrase most anyone, in 2016, hears with a cringe. Sorry not sorry. For here, as I read the phrase, in its elision, lies an apology. Sorry, that I'm not sorry. While Pantene imagined itself as breaking out of the mold of perpetual female apology, it was, in fact, reinscribing it.

To a man on the bus I don't touch as I sit down. To the couple taking up the entire sidewalk I run around. To the man who opens the door for me. To the people I can't hold the door open for. To the boy bagging my groceries. To my students. To my friends. To the mailman. To the woman who spills her glass of wine all over my pants. To the men whose whole lobe of foie gras I dump on the floor. To the man who wants to buy me a drink. To the man who sits too close. To Miles. To the groups I pass on the escalator. To the man pumping my gas. To my mother. To my mother's dog.

My mother still keeps a handwritten note from me, from when I was about six. "I'm sorre I got jrms on the cookies I am going away," it says in slanted green marker.

Apparently, in the midst of frantically baking holiday cookies, my mother had snapped at me when I reached up to grab one. After writing the note, I ran away for the first, and only, time. Granted, I ran away to the other side of the fence. But I enacted my retribution, making her search for me, making her shower me, once

found, with apologies. Though we still laugh when she brings up the note, she always says, "God, I'm so sorry. What a horrible mother."

Genuine apologies, according to Lazare, establish a future willingness to make changes.

I've often had little faith in the future, for myself, for the children I assume I will someday have, for the planet. "Yes, dear ones, Oakland was a magical city near the ocean where I once lived. Now it's a modern-day Atlantis, and our coastal Sacramento, Las Vegas, Denver will also someday drown."

Elazar Barkan, founding director of the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation, writes that, at a national level, owning up to historical injustices indicates "political stability and strength rather than shame." Maybe, offering out so many I'm sorrys, I was trying to shore up some semblance of stability, of being settled—in situation, self, geography, love.

For proffering a private apology has its own implicit power dynamics. Apology as interpellation. Roping the offended party into a kind of contract, an apology implies he can either perform his duty and accept, forgive, or he can breach it, deny or ignore the offender, refuse to let her off the hook.

Cue Milton.

Before Eve's postlapsarian speech to Adam, Milton describes her haste to divulge what had happened: "in her face excuse / Came prologue, and apology to prompt." Some sources claim that within these lines lies an editorial mistake, that Milton had meant to write too, not to, signaling Eve's premature apology. Almost as soon as she commits the offense she is justifying her actions. Excuse and apology seem, then, closely aligned, perhaps even interchangeable. In this quoted version above, however, her apology is distinct from, and spurred by, the initial excuse. As in the prologue to a play, the excuse swoops in first, providing explanation, exposition, before she launches into "her story told."

Apology: early 15th c., "defense, justification," from Late Latin *apologia*, from Greek *apologia* "a speech in defense," from *apologeisthai* "to speak in one's defense," from *apologos* "an account, story."

Eve is hopeful that the story of her "wilful crime"—and all its enervation, its allure in the telling—will diminish her guilt. There is, she hopes, divine absolution in narrative, just as she imparts to Adam the tree's "divine effect / To open eyes, and make them gods who taste."

I've been talking with a student of mine about dialectics, about which I know very little. She's a psychology major, and is working on a memoir about her experiences with an eating disorder. Much literature on these disorders discusses black and white mentality—food bad, thin good—the compartmentalized mind that allows one to so damage the body. We're talking, the student and I, about the present self, how sometimes only time and distance allows us to see gradations, for gray areas, for blurriness. Time complicates, almost all creative nonfiction purports, in one way or another. Reason, or what one once thought to be reason, cannot hold. In this space—the messy space a future "I" creates by "A Christmas Carol"-ing one's own life—one might be forgiven.

We were always wrong, we never knew enough, we were right but didn't know it, we were only fooling ourselves, we were scared, but we didn't know it, we were killing ourselves, we were wrong but didn't know it.

And the multiplicity of future "I"s thus destabilizes every utterance, every word on the page. "How," my student left our meeting asking, "can we ever know anything in the present?"

Apologia, while sharing apology's roots in narrative, admits not regret nor guilt, but desires, instead, to make one's position clear, to offer an explanation in the face of accusation, to justify one's belief. The great Greek rhetoricians—

Plato, Isocrates, Aristotle—all described apologia as such (Plato's own *Apology*, reproducing Socrates' arguments while on trial, is one of the earliest, and probably the most infamous, of the genre). Augustus Caesar's apologia—*The Deeds of the Divine Augustus*, the account of his triumphs while ruler—was carved, in 14 AD, into bronze pillars outside his tomb. Later Christian apologists, such as Paul the Apostle, Augustine of Hippo, Aquinas, and Pascal, defended their faith against its critics.

We are well-versed, today, in the apologia. Truman, Nixon, Clinton. That, in the public realm, performance and persuasion outshine any repentance. In a way, any public *apology*—Kanye West, Mel Gibson, Tiger Woods—becomes an *apologia*. A dramatic act. And is not Eve's such? A merging of obligatory contrition with thrilling story, rhetorical skill? Her soliloquies and love-songs in *Paradise Lost* nearly rival Satan's charm.

When it comes to formal, public apologies, perhaps the only ones that might hold up are communal, not individual. (I'm thinking of California's apology to Chinese immigrants for its discriminatory laws passed in the 1800s.) The dramatic act—for a state, for corporeal and corporate bodies—doesn't hold the same import as it does for an individual. The intimacy involved in narrative, in language, dissolves at this level, allowing, strangely, a genuine apology for prior sins.

California does not, at the end of the day, have to face Adam.

Sometime near the beginning, Miles makes it clear that we are to have sex, in some form, every day. If we don't, he will reach such a state of discomfort, of pain, that he will have to go off, to the bathroom, ashamed, and "take care of himself." This, he tells me, is what his ex made him do. He would spend his evenings alone, in the bathroom, masturbating. For some reason, with us, it never comes to this. At first I want him just as much. I'm happy to have sex one, two, three times in a day. Then the late nights at the restaurant catch up to me. I'm tired. I'm drinking too much. My libido tanks. But if I just go down on him, I think, he'll shut up. He'll shut up, and I can go to sleep.

I'm sure we both thought of it, in some ways, as my duty. What I owed for living in that nice house, among his nice things, eating nice food and drinking nice beer.

Thus I engage in our unspoken economics. My mother jokes about me being a "kept woman." Not, of course, a joke, and especially hurtful because of its truth. The first time I insist on paying a portion of the rent, he doesn't cash my check. I'm relieved.

I make sure, however, eventually, to at least take care of the groceries. Let this be my one contribution, I have to beg. The grocery store becomes my sanctuary. There, I can take my time. Miles is not watching my every move, and I spend over an hour each trip, making slow circles around the store, touching the tropical produce I never saw in the Midwest.

Sex and apology had, that year in Texas, similar goals, similar effects. The quick-and-dirty. The let's-get-it-out-of-the-way. The I'm-too-scared-to-deal-with-anything-larger.

Each time we have sex, Miles tries to fuck me in the ass. There is mild humor to it, at times, as I swat him away. Later, he tries more insistently. He does not ask. He hurts me. I push him off.

It isn't fair, he complains; when we first started dating, it was an act we engaged in. "You liked it." I had breached an unspoken contract. He insinuated that, if he knew it wouldn't continue, he might not have wanted to sustain a relationship. To have me move in. He had invested in a physical raw commodity, and he expected to see returns. I'm sure I said I was sorry.

It was exhausting, and, at times, frightening, but wasn't it also, in a way, thrilling? To be so wanted—no, Miles said, needed—that he would risk any retribution, any punishment, to have me? This was a man who never apologized. This was a man who knew what he wanted.

On the cusp of the new millennium, Lazare finds, people wanted, desperately, to clear their consciences. Yes, the possibility of End Times, but also, more than any sad New Year's Eve party pledge of our simple futures, we saw the largest slate of our lives to be cleared. In order to make up for our actions in the previous millennium, we tried to make good on our apology debt. We created a kind of warehouse of apology. A surplus.

I understand this, in a way. I keep trying to convince myself that maybe, in my knee-jerk, constant contrition, I was attempting to make up for apologies I never said. To my ex-fiancé. To my mother. To my father. Carrying a certain amount of guilt around inside of me—the evening on his last-hurrah rafting trip, when my father called me into his cabin to talk, for one of the last times, and I, too tired, too stoned, sat in silence, for a few minutes, before retreating to my own room—that can't properly be let free, maybe I apologize just to make sure.

Forgive me, father.

I began to apologize—much like Eve—immediately, in the moment. It became a reflex, which surely, without thought, can't possibly contain a sincere apology. Or am I so always-sorry that it's become a part of my being, my body?

"Are you," my mother once asked, "really sorry?"

Terribly. When what I do so often seems wrong, I want to think that language will save me, give me grace. What I never accounted for, though, was that my heaving of apology rendered it empty to everyone other than myself. If she so heaps on repentance for not remembering to feed the dog, I'm sure my mother wondered, is she really sorry for snapping at me? For not paying off the money she owes me? For not being around more while her father was dying? No wonder so many of my friends began to roll their eyes when I said I was sorry. It was a limping phrase. I had forced my own self-image onto the language I hoped would free it. I made it trite, pathetic. I made it clumsy.

One of Lazare's theories is that there have been more apologies after the design and implementation of the nuclear bomb because "we are attempting to change our behavior in order to survive."

That year in Texas I was trying desperately to survive, but did I ever attempt to change my behavior? Or was I so steeped in self-pity and loathing that I became inert, unable, or, more frightening, unwilling, to do anything to change my relationship, myself?

"How little weight my words with thee can find," Eve says to Adam. Yet language must, if delivered at the proper time, if attached to fitting sentiment, hold high office. At the end of *Paradise Lost*, she utters nearly the same words to Adam as immediately after the Fall, but her apology is now, we understand, sincere. She admits full responsibility, no longer casting herself into the role of the victim. Indeed, she names herself "sole cause to thee of all this woe."

Thus Eve becomes the central protagonist of Milton's epic. She has the last word. While her flexibility (in morality, in countenance) does, yes, lead first to their great predicament, it also leads eventually to her final supplication, and salvation. Mother of redemption—by Eve the "Promised Seed shall all restore." With wand'ring steps they depart from Eden, armed with, one might say, that greater commitment to make changes in the future that demarcates the genuine apology.

That, or, perhaps, Eve knows what her future looks like without Adam, without God. *Is* her final speech genuine apology, or is it necessary self-sacrifice, self-preservation, or, more significantly, preservation of their future progeny? Is this conflict resolution, social contract? Eve wants to believe in desire, in love. And she is willing to admit all wrong in order to maintain hope for them. Whether or not she does indeed feel remorse, her apology is the epitome of action. Her language propels them out of Paradise, into their—our—future.

The world was, we know, all before them.

Lazare writes that often, in patients, he sees excessive apologizing stemming from an urge to "placate the threatening parent of their childhood." "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Please don't hurt me."

I become more and more unsettled in my house with Miles. Eventually, I try to tell my mother something about our relationship. "Did he hit you?" she asks. Thankfully, I can say no.

Yet Miles finds many other ways to hurt me, and I find many other ways to let him. He likes to dig his fingers into the back of my neck until I tell him to stop. He is too rough during sex. He pushes me hard, one morning, against the tile in the shower. I bruise easily. When I tell him he's hurting me, he calls me a pussy.

But there is a psychological element, too. It becomes hard for me to distinguish between something I should and should not apologize for. Everything I do is wrong. I wake him up when I get home from my closing shift. I try to eat dinner, to brush my teeth, to undress quietly, in the dark, but he is waiting, in bed, angry. In the morning, four hours later, when he has to get up for work, he turns on every light and sings loudly to the cat and jostles me awake.

I ask for more day shifts, so that we can be together at night, I tell my boss. Really, I don't want to drop another spoon and rouse him. I want to eat dinner with the light on.

When I decide to finally leave him, I go to the grocery store to call my mother. She makes me agree to a safe word, one that I can text her if I'm in trouble. It's a flower, something significant from a book she's reading for her book club. Standing in the household goods aisle, amidst the very durable Teflon pots and pans, we plan my escape. I delete all of our text messages, the proof of our phone calls, after each trip.

The week before I leave, Miles is in Alaska for work. I pack up all of my belongings, and I have not yet told him that I am leaving for California—something he knew was coming, eventually—the day after he returns. I have not told him that I'm leaving him. There are many frantic trips to the post office with boxes of my books I'm shipping to my mother's house. I sell my car. I work my last shifts at the restaurant, and I drink the wine my coworkers buy for me. I drink a lot of wine.

I come home, two nights before Miles returns, reeling. In the morning I can't find our cat. More than Miles, I'm dreading leaving her. Our long, lazy mornings together, when Miles was at work, were the best part of my Texas life.

Finally, I hear her. She's trapped in the downstairs closet, where I hung up my apron, for the last time, the night before. Drunkenly, I had locked her in, and, after spending the night swatting underneath the door, I assume, trying to free herself, she's injured one of her front legs. She falls trying to follow me up the stairs. She is exhausted, and limps around pathetically before I call the vet. As soon as we get there—a forty-minute drive, as nearly everything is in Houston—I get the sinking feeling that I haven't shut the garage door. I must have, I tell myself. I've never forgotten to do so. But I was in such a rush to get her to the one available appointment before I leave town. Filling out the paperwork, wiggling my finger inside the metal bars of the cat carrier, looking at my phone and realizing I have no one to call to go check on the house, I convince myself more and more that the door is open. Miles' three expensive bicycles are on show for the entire block. Too, his vast collection of mail-ordered woodworking tools. His kayak. I leave the cat at the vet, telling the receptionist, in tears, what I've done. She doesn't know if she can hold my appointment. I don't know what Miles will do if I fuck up this badly.

I race home. The garage door is, of course, closed. Please, I plead with the receptionist. Please.

Our last night alone, I rock the cat in my arms. *I'm so sorry*, I tell her. *I'm so sorry.*

In Book 10, after Adam's largely misogynist speech, Eve kneels down in front of him, in the position of the supplicant, and begs for his forgiveness.

> She ended weeping, and her lowly plight
> Immovable till peace obtained from fault
> Acknowledged and deplored, in Adam wrought
> Commiseration; soon his heart relented
> Towards her.

There is a quality of purging, to the apology. Peace obtained. Confession.
"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Don't hurt me."
"I am sincerely sorry for ever having offended You."
Apology, I realize, transmuting into my own personal form of prayer.

I live, now, in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Almost daily, I run through the battlefield, by Pickett's Charge. Near the end of this route, I'm on the side of the North, looking down across the wheat field to where the Confederate Army would have struggled. But, in the beginning, the run is along West Confederate Avenue. I pass by bronze soldiers leaning forward on the North Carolina monument. I pass granite memorial slabs. My favorite monument, however, of the entire battlefield, is the Virginia Monument. At the bottom, soldiers, representative of their occupations (the farmer, the mechanic, the artist), stand together while, high up above them, on a granite pedestal, is Robert E. Lee, cast in bronze, riding, regally, his horse Traveler.

"It is all my fault."

That's what Robert E. Lee said, after his fatal charge. "I thought my men were invincible." This stands in stark contrast to the rest of the battlefield, where monuments exist as war's apologia. Its raison d'être. It tells, very clearly, through easily drivable one-way streets, placards, informational signs, detailed inscriptions

in the statues, the narrative of the war. Not *I'm sorry*, but *here's how to die with honor*. Men gasp for last breaths. They are wrapped in bandages. They are shown in every state stone and bronze will allow. And each side makes its argument. And it's glorious, what men say instead of I'm sorry.

Some time in our first year of dating, Chris emails me after one of our fights. He says that he is concerned about a trend he sees in our relationship. He is always, he writes, the first one to apologize. He worries that this gestures to a certain power dynamic, my withholding of apology.

After my initial anger (I was the offended party, I insisted), then pride (had I broken my habit, without knowing it? Was I suddenly cured?), I felt ashamed. I had not, as I hoped, mastered apology, but was still ignorant to its nuances, its demands. I was still unable, it seemed, to articulate a genuine apology. In revision—in elision—I missed the point entirely. Sorry not sorry.

Once, during one of our more tender moments, Miles told me about an instance of severe hazing he experienced at a university notorious for the frequency of these questionable acts. He was a lacrosse player, and, as a freshman, he and a few of his teammates were kidnapped—as is the ritual—made to strip, and handcuffed to a radiator in a fraternity house's basement. The young men were left there—I don't remember how many nights—nearly naked, and without food.

It was the only time I remember seeing Miles cry. The memory of submission, of sexual humiliation coming back to him in waves. At the risk of tired tropes, one can see the inevitability of him later asserting his dominance. Even now, at the risk of sentimentality, my heart hurts for him.

This is the one sincere form of apology I trust myself with. The sympathetic apology. I'm sorry that you were hurt, are hurting.

In other words: I hear you. I'm listening. Tell me your story. Did he hit you? Are you really sorry?

I try, now, to take my time with apologies. It may take a week for me to send the text, the email, to make the call of contrition. It may take a year. There are countless drafts of a still-unsent letter to my ex-fiancé, five years later and counting. I'm still composing everything I wish I had said to my father before he died while I was standing in the next room. Between the event and the speech act, the narrative erodes. Or maybe it divides, splitting off into separate strands, distinct threads. It's laborious, the gathering them back together, following each back to their origin. One can see the trace of myth.

And what's lonelier than the genuine apology, where the self stands back to witness the world turning around the chaos she has caused? Supposedly, the salvation of the entire human race required the apology of a woman. Eve didn't get it right, not the first time. ("How can we ever know anything in the present?") But, though she may be hand in hand with Adam, through Eden Eve takes her solitary way.

*Natalie Scenters-Zapico*

# There Is No Such Thing As Confession In Latinx Poetry

1. During the Mexican Revolution I set up a lawn chair at the bank of the Rio Bravo and watched men kill other men. Near me a woman passed around a bottle of champagne, so I had a glass.

2. He told me to only make rice because the medication made everything taste of chalk, so why make anything more complicated than the food our mothers used to stop our stomachs from speaking to God.

3. His stretch marks are train tracks down his back. In Utah a stranger told him his skin was ugly. When you know hunger, the body can't understand being full and leaves scars to deal with gluttony.

4. In a glass box with a little metal latch I collect my tears. For a place to sleep I will give my tears to you. With just one drop, I promise they will revive your dying plants.

5. I am a woman who knows how to turn her beauty on and off, how to change its bulb, how to wash her face with white vinegar until it shines like glass.

6. I am not I, and he is not he, and they are not they, because we have crossed this bridge that is no one's back, but concrete, and metal, and wire that will gash us to enjoying the blood in our gums as false confession.

*Catherine Bresner*

# To Know a Thing

Let me tell you
about the atomic tangerine/aquamarine
cerulean/magenta mantis shrimp.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mantis_shrimp>
How its body is a thermonuclear bomb
of beauty that defies a box of crayola crayons.
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crayola#The_Crayola_Experience>
How out of all of the crayons in the box
the ones I always choose are burnt sierra
and neon carrot.
How this reminds me
of my childhood in unsentimental but
very specific ways: My mother's
lipstick [flamingo pink] crushed onto her mouth
in thick swabs. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joan_Crawford>
My father's mood on a Tuesday at
6pm through the front door [steel smoke]
to greet a woman who didn't love him anymore.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zelder_Paradox>
About how I want to love a thing
like a president loves his wars.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_W_Bush_president>
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_W_Bush_painter>
How knowledge can be a euphemism
for wreckage, as in *I will wreck you.*
How I am terrorized by human
frailty: The first time I saw a person
die, it was not of old age. On the 42 bus
downtown she died, over & over again,

despite defibrillation. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murdering_Airplane>
That experiments have been conducted—are being conducted
—about increasing the longevity of life,
and how do you feel about that? is a question never asked.
How this also reminds me of my mother.
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aboulomania>
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brinicle>
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Escapology>
And my father.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kramer_vs._Kramer>
And how I am a terrible thing on two legs.

*sam sax*

# On Conversion Therapy

grandpa's initial response
upon learning i was queer
was to look to history
for all the ways he could fix me :

hypnosis : group talk : cocaine : bladder washing : electroconvulsive shock therapy : strychnine : chemical & non chemical castration : rectal massage : bicycling : institutionalization : inducing vomit while looking at homoerotic images : orgasmic reconditioning : cold showers : prayer : satiation therapy : psychotropic medicines : etc.

the first endocrinologist experimenting in the field
transplanted the testicles of straight men into homosexuals
attempting to hormonally reorder their orientation.
of course without immune suppressants their bodies
rejected these unfamiliar organs.

all precious stones are made this way
through a process of applied heat & pressure

even now we know queerness
is a kind of possession

dibbuk headed thirst
thirst headed dibbuk

the priest replaced by the therapist
each swallow a quiet quiet exorcism

as a boy i held a woman for a time
& her body was a rejected organ
in my hands

what i mean is once i was a boy

of course i tried to take my life
into my own hands

choir of children's tylonel
all singing joy to the world

the knife singing an older song

the liquor the liquor

i haven't forgiven my grandfather
& don't think i will

there's nothing innate in the brain
about love or the objects we lust after

when i attempt to place my tongue
on the blood root of desire
it ends up torn out of my mouth

before the advent of analysis
faggots were either gods or monsters
either ended in jail or in pleasure
or in heaven or in flames

my grandfather's ill
my grandfather loves me still

family is the mineral vein
& love is the hand that polishes

who gives a damn
about my forgiveness

# On Prep and On Prayer

*High Risk Factors*

+ inconsistent condom use;

I slip

+ sexual contact associated with substance abuse;

my arm

+ history of prior STI;

into the earth

+ anonymous sexual partner(s);

& pull out

+ multiple sexual partner(s) (> 1 per year);

the fat heart

+ forced/coerced sexual contact;

of a deer

+ history of tattoo;

shot through

+ history of MSM;

the stomach

+ sexual contact with known positive HIV partner(s);

by famine

+ sexual contact with known IV drug use by patient or partner(s);

& watch how

+ history of body piercing;

it still

+ history of shared razors.

throbs

**Fig. 1.** Jill Magid, ***The Proposal (detail)***, 2016. Photograph by Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen/Stefan Jaeggi.

# Marigold, Horses, & A Diamond: Jill Magid's *The Proposal*

*Lauren R. O'Connell*

*Marigolds to summon the ghost. Horses to represent the life.*
*A Diamond to reincarnate the body. The Proposal to access the legacy.*

In a minimal black ring box with white interior cushions rests a 2-carat blue diamond set on a silver band. The ring's simple form doubles in a mirror positioned within the lid of the box, and the diamond's semi-polished surface gleams under a spotlight in a room washed with deep blue light. What is not visible to the eye is a micro-laser inscription on the diamond reading "*I am wholeheartedly yours.*" In many cultures, a ring like this is given as a gift during a marriage proposal. The proposal impregnates an already precious object with sentimental value and engages symbols of love, commitment, and possession (both of the ring and its wearer). However, this particular diamond is formed from the cremated remains of Mexican architect Luis Barragán (1902–1988). The ring and its proposal are part of an intricate story involving the deceased architect, his archives, and a corporation.

*The Proposal* is New York-based artist Jill Magid's most recent chapter in her ongoing project, *The Barragán Archives*, which investigates the legacy of Barragán and the posthumous separation of his personal and professional archives. Upon his death, the architect bequeathed the two archives to separate entities. The professional archive, consisting of Barragán's work and copyrights, went to his business partner, Raúl Ferrera. Only five years after Barragán's death, Ferrera committed suicide, leaving the archive to his widow who later, under fiscal distress, consigned it to a gallery in New York. In 1995, Rolf Fehlbaum, owner and CEO of the Swiss furniture company, Vitra, allegedly purchased the professional archive for $2.5 million as an engagement gift for his then-fiancée, Federica Zanco. While the personal archive remains in Mexico City at Casa Barragán, which is now a museum and UNESCO World Heritage Site, the professional archive (along with all copyright to Barragán's works and name) resides in a bunker below Vitra's Switzerland headquarters under the auspice of The Barragan Foundation. In 2013, Magid wrote her first letters to Zanco and The Barragan Foundation, requesting access to the archive and to work collaboratively with the foundation on an upcoming exhibition. Magid's requests were declined, and she was sternly reminded that the foundation held all copyrights to Barragán's work.

**Fig. 2.** Jill Magid, Still from work-in-progress film, 2016. Photo by Jarred Alterman.

With this decline for access, Magid began to ask, "What happens to an artist's legacy when it is owned by a corporation and subject to a country's laws where none of his architecture exists? Who can access it? Who can't?"[i] *The Barragán Archives* pivots around these questions and takes its form through a series of exhibitions of different titles.[ii] Each exhibition's parameters adjust based on the copyright laws of the country where it is shown, revealing potential answers to Magid's legal and philosophical questions. *The Proposal* was first presented at Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen in Switzerland, only a two-hour drive from Vitra's headquarters, and then at San Francisco Art Institute, the institution that commissioned the project. For *The Proposal*, Magid unveils an installation of objects, documents, and video that outlines her journey to offer Zanco a gift—a diamond made from the architect's body set within an engagement ring—for a gift in return—to reunite Barragán's professional and personal archives in Mexico and to allow public access to the privately owned archive.

**Fig. 3.** Jill Magid, video still, 2016. Photo by Jarred Alterman.

While neither exhibition of *The Proposal* took place in Barragán's home country of Mexico, the room-sized floor medallion made of real and fake flowers and sawdust installed in the center of the gallery draws a connection to his country's rich cultural history. *Tapete des Flores* (Carpet of Flowers) (2016) references a decoration made of flowers and colored sand found in towns across Mexico on Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), a national holiday to honor the dead and pay tribute to their spirit form. This flower carpet pays homage to Barragán's life and spirit. Marigolds are the traditional flowers used for the holiday's tapete des flores and ofrendas (offerings). Their fragrance, along

[i] http://sfai.edu/exhibitions-public-events/detail/jill-magid-the-proposal

[ii] Exhibitions in *The Barragán Archive* include *Der Trog* at Art Basel Parcours (2013); *Woman With Sombrero* at Art in General, New York (2013), Yvon Lambert, Paris (2014), and Museo MAZ Guadalajara (2014); *Homage* at RaebervonStenglin, Zurich (2014); *Quartet* at South London Gallery (2014); *Ex-Voto* at LABOR, Mexico City (2016); and *The Proposal* at Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen (2016) and San Franciso Art Institute (2016).

with other flowers, is used to attract spirits and lead them to their altars. At the San Francisco opening of *The Proposal*, numerous buckets of marigolds filled the outdoor courtyard, their earthy and pungent aroma drawing in the guests and possibly the ghost of Barragán. The display of marigolds and a tapete des flores is a symbolic gesture that commemorates the architect and his Mexican heritage.

The most solid connection to Barragán comes in the form of the 2-carat blue diamond made by Algordanza Memorial Diamonds in Switzerland. The significance of a memorial diamond is that it is formed from the cremated remains of the deceased, a very difficult substance to obtain when the death took place nearly thirty years prior. The film *The Exhumation* (2016) documents the unearthing of Barragán's ashes at La Rotonda de los Jaliscienses Ilustres in Guadalajara, under the supervision of his living relatives and with the permission of Mexico's municipalities. As the workers chiseled away at the wall containing a box with the remains, Magid presented Barragán's nephew, an aging man, with a small statue of a silver horse—a figure often used by Barragán throughout his life. The nephew's fingers gently outlined the statue in recognition of the familiar shape before placing it in the funerary urn with the seventy-five percent of leftover ashes. The statue matches the weight of the twenty-five percent of remains removed to make the diamond. The horse's tilted head peered out from underneath the organic matter on the way to its final resting place. Once the exhumation was complete, Magid headed to Switzerland to hand deliver Barragán's body to the memorial diamond makers, who transformed his remains into a unique diamond. The culmination of the process and exhibition is the engagement ring.


**Fig. 4.** Jill Magid, ***The Exhumation*** video still, 2016. Photo by Jarred Alterman.

On May 31, 2016, Magid proposed to Zanco at Vitra's campus in Switzerland with the diamond engagement ring and a handwritten letter outlining the proposal. Zanco did not accept the ring nor agree to the proposal that day. However, the proposition still stands as Magid expressed in her proposal letter to Zanco that, "This is a gift which requests a gift in return. The ring will always be available to you, and to you alone, whenever you are ready to open the archive to the public in Mexico."[iii] Magid's open-ended gesture poetically exposes flaws in systems of value and power, specifically in relation to the privatization of something as precarious as an artist's legacy. In one aspect, *The Proposal* offers discreet symbols as conduits to understand the many ways that legacy can take shape as a physical object—the archive and ring—or as intangible as the memories of a man's life and passions. The fragrance of marigolds to summon Barragán's ghost, a statue of a horse to represent his life, and a diamond made of his body, all brought together to form a proposal that adds new meaning to a fragmented story and legacy.

[iii] Letter from Jill Magid to Federica Zanco outlining details of *The Proposal*, May 31, 2016.

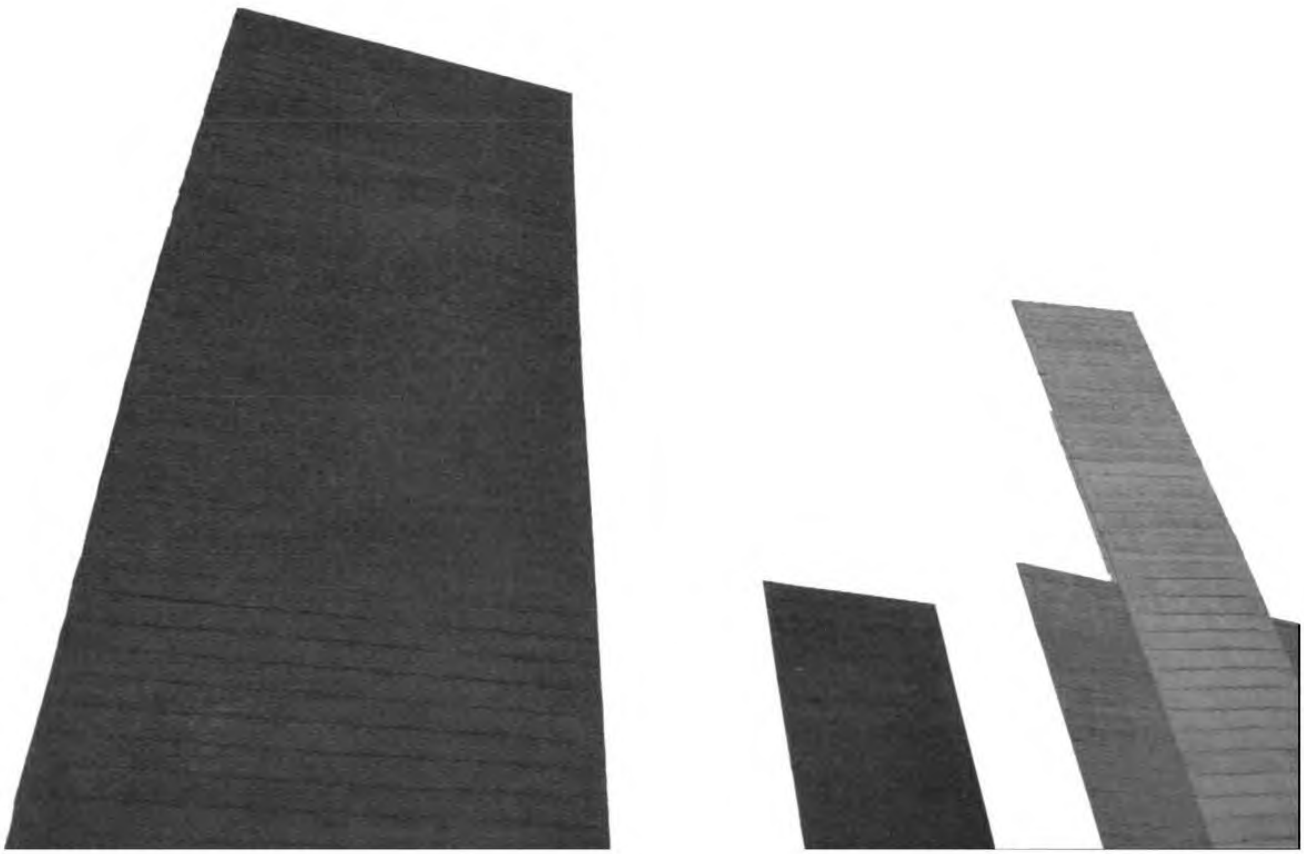


**Fig. 1.** Photo of Whistle Hangout: Banff Center, Canada, 2015. Installation view. Image Courtesy of the Artist (Liz McCarthy).

# Collectivity, Materiality, and the Performative Object:

## An Interview with Liz McCarthy

*Andrew Finegold*

*For the past two years, artist Liz McCarthy has been making whistles from clay, hosting "hangouts" during which people are invited to play with them, and freely distributing them to participants. More recent work has involved larger, less mobile whistles with multiple mouthpieces, and video and installation pieces that explore the materiality of clay. Art historian Andrew Finegold met with her in her studio at the end of 2016 to discuss her practice.*

**Andrew Finegold:** How did you begin working with whistles?

**Liz McCarthy:** I entered grad school working on a long-term project, the "Whistle Hangouts." The source of this was thinking about whistles as a kind of object that is

used in play, but also in ritual, as a kind of archetypal form that crosses cultures. As a kid, my dad—I had hippie parents—he had it as a ritual object or as an object to meditate with, and he had this container of instruments that he would use, but then those became my toys. So, it had this double function, and that was where I was first exposed to this. Later, I was thinking about something I could make out of clay that I could make a ton of, so then I started doing little whistles, and hosting "Whistle Hangouts," where people could come and take the object. But then, this element of having a whistle object that wasn't even a whistle...

**AF:** Yes, these objects are intriguing for their ambiguity and openness. It seems like they're intentionally left very amorphous, with traces of your handling of the material—so the materiality is clearly important—but then they're not closed objects, but are meant to be activated by the audience, even demanding that the audience interact with them, and then being dispersed in the world. All this suggests that the object is an ongoing event. Can you talk a bit about that aspect of your work? What is your practice trying to get at?

**"IT SEEMS LIKE THEY'RE INTENTIONALLY LEFT VERY AMORPHOUS, WITH TRACES OF YOUR HANDLING OF THE MATERIAL..."**

**LM:** So a lot of the work is based around the body and the body interacting with the material world, and that negotiation of the body, as a material object, with the material around it. So with these [whistles], I was thinking about the idea of collectivity, and I came from a background of working in collectives. I came to Chicago to start an art space in 2009, and I ran this art space, Roxaboxen Exhibitions, for three years. It was really fun, and we had shows, and we had studios, and there was also a collective, so we had a house we shared. And I also worked with the ACRE residency. So I was really invested with this idea of collectivity and community, but I was thinking about how an object can do that or an object can participate in the same way. So that was what led me to this project: How do I make an object that can produce that effect of physical collectivity and collaboration, but also play, which is also really important to me? So that was how it began, but my thinking has begun to shift

towards questions about the body in the material world, and also an eroticism or sexuality that also gets invested in that.

**AF:** I think that definitely comes across just in the hand-held whistles, even as your more recent, larger work has become more explicitly eroticized. Even these small, amorphous lumps of clay are erotic in that, first off, your clay is usually flesh-colored, which immediately evokes the tactile body. And then your manipulation of the clay—your finger impressions—as well as the organic, even ergonomic forms into which the whistles are sculpted, points to an articulation with the body. And then, in light of the previous observations, the putting of one's lips to the object—blowing the whistle—has something intimate about it, like a kiss. But then, the flipside to that [eroticism] is this video performance of yours that involves you squeezing a long tube of brown-colored clay, clearly evocative of feces. In an art context it's unavoidable that that would bring to mind your namesake Paul McCarthy's scatological performance videos. So I wonder if you could talk about all this—the erotic and scatological materiality of the body that you're playing with, but also what I assume to be an intentional invocation of Paul McCarthy's work, and how you see your own practice in relation to the broader context of the art world.

**"THE PUTTING OF ONE'S LIPS TO THE OBJECT—BLOWING THE WHISTLE—HAS SOMETHING INTIMATE ABOUT IT, LIKE A KISS."**

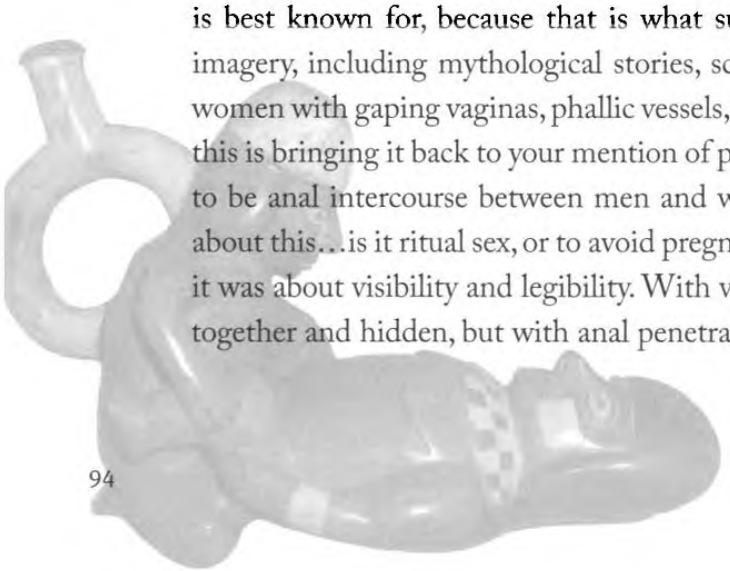
**LM:** I love Paul McCarthy, especially his latest body of work at Hauser and Wirth. I'm fascinated by the way he addresses physical and cultural mediation by combining abject materiality with iconic forms. These recent metal sculptures, mostly his gnomes, are done in a way so that it looks like clay and like they're falling apart. And they look almost exactly like the clay I've been using... For a lot of the work that I make, what is really important is that I have this physical body that I can't get out of, and that this is my material that I've been given and that I exist in, and that material is both sexual and abject, and is also a form and material that is constantly changing. My body is not a fixed object, but is something that is mutable; it's a vessel or container, but one that is constantly changing. So in that particular piece, another thing I was thinking about was the relationship with the material—where the agency is embedded in

the maker versus the material, and how the material can take on the qualities of the maker, but also how the maker takes on the qualities of the material. So in that piece, what I was thinking about was making coil pots. When you make a coil pot, you make a log, basically, that turns into the coil eventually. But at the same time it's like digging into the [unformed] clay to pull out a form. Now I'm working on that as an extended video series. I'm working on another one that simulates handle making, but where I'm basically jacking off the clay, even though it's very much the traditional way handles are formed. So it's thinking about the movements of the body that are dictated by traditions of making, but how these can become eroticized. In that video, I'm also thinking about pornography and its trope shots. I recorded it from a first-person perspective [mimicking a standard trope in pornography]. So it's looking at these traditions or repetitive actions from both fields—ceramics and pornography—and how these can become similar or overlap.

**AF:** This calls to mind several things to me. First, is a scene from the movie Ghost…have you seen that? While it's not pornographic, it's eroticized pot-making, conflating making a pot with making love, an eroticism of process and the sensuality of working with materials.

**LM:** Right.

**AF:** And also this brings to my mind Moche erotic pots…are you familiar with them? The Moche were a culture from the North Coast of Peru, from about 1-600 CE, and they made hundreds of thousands of ceramic vessels—what the culture is best known for, because that is what survives—which depict an abundance of imagery, including mythological stories, scenes of everyday life, and erotic vessels: women with gaping vaginas, phallic vessels, intercourse. But a lot of the vessels—and this is bringing it back to your mention of pornographic tropes—show what appears to be anal intercourse between men and women. There's been a lot of speculation about this…is it ritual sex, or to avoid pregnancy, for example? One possibility is that it was about visibility and legibility. With vaginal intercourse, everything is brought together and hidden, but with anal penetration, the genitals of both individuals can



be exposed to the viewer's gaze simultaneously. This would be similar to modern pornography, which often privileges certain sexual positions based on the logic of camera angles rather than bodily pleasure.

**LM:** There is a fascination of anal in pornography, which I find entertaining because it crosses over into the "fecal" zone. But the other thing I was thinking about too, with pornography, was the way the body is becoming a material, the way it's changing. There's a cycle with a climax—with a beginning and an end, but the potential for a cyclical event to happen—but also it's a person changing another person's body.

**AF:** But what about the effect that pornography, and its ubiquity now, has had on our lived experiences and expectations?

**LM:** So the other thing about pornography is that it's an objectification and exists in this objectified world and puts the body into an object zone, and what interests me about the kind of play is that it's about manipulating material with a more erotic physical agency where the eroticism... you know when you're thinking about third-wave feminist dialogue about pornography and thinking about the eroticism versus the objectification, I'm definitely interested in eroticism, and the power of eroticism and the sensual experience of the body. The issue of pornography is that many times the female body is the object or becomes the thing that is affected. In my work, I'm becoming the female body that is making the object.

**"THE ISSUE OF PORNOGRAPHY IS THAT MANY TIMES THE FEMALE BODY IS THE OBJECT ... IN MY WORK, I'M BECOMING THE FEMALE BODY THAT IS MAKING THE OBJECT."**

**AF:** Empowered.

**LM:** Right. Many times I will actually subvert who I am in the videos or images, because I do want there to be ambiguity. I don't want it necessarily to be myself, but I feel that I'm the best at performing for my work. And so that's been an issue lately...this stuff has become self-portraiture in some ways, but it's not necessarily

important that it be so, and I'm wondering if I should bring it into a place of asking people to enter the work, like in the "Whistle Hangouts," where they would be more collaborative, and invite people to come in.

**AF**: By inviting people to enter into the work, it leaves it more open as to what these objects are and gives the objects some autonomy. It's not just you—the maker—saying, "This is what it is." Like pornography, the art world tends to present these idealized forms, and your practice, at least in the case of the "Whistle Hangouts," seems to push back against that, and is resistant to this objectification. Even if you're making objects, you're leaving it open and you're challenging the viewer, who is challenged to not just remain a passive consumer, but rather becomes an integral part of the work. The "Whistle Hangouts" engage the viewers as active participants, in an open-ended way and without specific expectations involved. I see this as real social practice—as opposed to much of what gets categorized under this term, which is predominantly activist and/or didactic, trying to make a statement about social relations—where you use the idea of the social as part of the medium itself. Just as you're working with the clay and letting the materiality of the clay have a voice in dialogue with you as you are working with it, the social aspect is left nebulous and open, posing questions rather than insisting on a certain stance. This leaves it as a challenge to the viewer to reflect on the realm of the social as an integral part of the piece.

**"BY INVITING PEOPLE TO ENTER INTO THE WORK, IT LEAVES IT MORE OPEN AS TO WHAT THESE OBJECTS ARE AND GIVES THE OBJECTS SOME AUTONOMY."**

**LM:** Yeah, and that's really important to me, to not tell the viewer too much and also to give the viewer their own speculative agency. With the whistles, I've been asking people to give me back content, to document where these things end up and how they take on the identity of the person who has them.

**AF:** [Looking at some of these documentations] And how they are placed into arrangements with other objects and the effect that relational context has on


them...like all of a sudden this becomes a sci-fi shape by being placed next to a Star Wars ornament...

**LM:** But then this one is like a rock.

**AF:** And I was noticing the lipstick on some of these [mouthpieces].

**LM:** Yeah, yeah. I really like when residue gets built up on the surface of them. And that's another thing too. These pieces [the large whistles] I think about as autonomous objects, but also as performance objects. Recently, I was asked to do a show where these will just be put in someone's living room, like on the couch, hanging out, so they would take on their own personalities in that domestic space. I want them to exist in different realms, moving between an art context—like what you were saying before about the ideal object—but then to become a casual participant in a domestic space as well. And in terms of their forms, I feel that these really have their own personalities, their own character.

**"THESE PIECES [THE LARGE WHISTLES] I THINK ABOUT AS AUTONOMOUS OBJECTS, BUT ALSO AS PERFORMANCE OBJECTS."**

**Fig. 2. (above)** ***Whistle Residue Documentation***, 2015. Image from Whistle Hangout Residue Image Archive. Image Courtesy of Whistle Hangout Participant.

**AF:** They seem to demand that the viewer contorts their body to interact with them. If four people play this [large whistle] at once, then it becomes like a game of Twister, so it's also exerting influence upon the social dynamics.

**LM:** Yeah, these ones I think are a little more demanding than the singular ones, because they involve multiple people at once.

**AF:** So, about the technical aspect...how did you learn to make a whistle? The sound is so rich and deep—which creates an interesting contrast between the amorphous, anti-aesthetic forms of the objects and the clarity of the sounds that they produce—and it seems to me (although maybe I'm completely wrong) that such an effortlessly rich sound would take a lot of technical know-how to engineer. And, do you intentionally make different notes for different whistles?

**LM:** My mom gave me a book on how to make a whistle. I was at a residency and I just spent three days teaching myself how to make a whistle out of clay, which is actually more difficult than I thought it would be. Now I can make one in like fifteen minutes. When I first started researching it, I looked at all the different historical possibilities of what a whistle could look like and what it could sound like. I was doing research on aerophones, including ones from different traditions. And I was replicating different possibilities for the shape. The earliest versions of the little whistles were more referential to actual archaeological objects like the wind whistle in Japanese culture and early Pre-Columbian objects—basically every civilization has had

**Fig. 3.** ***Whistle Residue Documentation***, 2015. Image from Whistle Hangout Residue Image Archive. Image Courtesy of Whistle Hangout Participant

some version of the aerophone—so I was looking at those and messing around with that. But I grew frustrated with only referencing these past cultures, because I was thinking about the object as something that was this archetypal form, but that becomes embedded in a specific contemporary experience. So I decided that I didn't want a referential form, and that was how I ended up with what I've been doing now. I think about [their forms] as basically rocks or organs.

**AF:** I feel that they're much more bodily referential. Rocks seem more inert, while these seem much more organic.

**LM:** Yeah, and I think that having the little hole gives them more of an identity, because it's like an eye, almost, or a mouth.

**AF:** And it has a voice...you blow into it, and it speaks.

**LM:** Yeah. I think that the sound is something that I can play with, where some have a high-pitched voice, and some have a low-pitched voice, and I try to make a variety. When somebody comes to the object, and they want to take one, they will seek out ones that specifically have a high-pitched or low-pitched sound. So there's a desire to have different tonalities with the "Whistle Hangouts." With these [the larger objects], I like them to be more surprising, and often the form determines the sound. All of these consist of smaller whistles embedded within the larger object. I tried really hard to make a big whistle, but it turned out to be impossible because of the physics of air waves. This one has two mouth pieces but one hole, and it requires more collaboration because if you blow too hard it won't work.

**"YOU CAN'T REALLY CONTROL THE EXACT NOTE A WHISTLE WILL PRODUCE, BECAUSE AS SOON AS YOU FIRE IT, IT SHRINKS AND THE SOUND IT PRODUCES WILL CHANGE."**

**AF:** What I initially found surprising with the smaller whistles was the ease of use. They sound a little like blowing across the top of a bottle, but that seems like it

takes more skill on the part of the user, whereas your whistles are pretty idiot-proof, and simply blowing into them produces an incredibly rich sound. To me, that speaks of the skill that went into making it, which takes the onus off of the blower.

**LM:** Yeah. There is some chance involved in engineering the sound. You can't really control the exact note a whistle will produce, because as soon as you fire it, it shrinks and the sound it produces will change. You can make a generally high- or low-pitched whistle, but precise notes aren't possible.

**AF:** When you have the Hangouts, with groups of people playing with the whistles together, does it sort of naturally and inevitably move towards music making?

**LM:** Yeah, totally. And that's something that I really like. When I was doing a residency in Canada, there were all these jazz musicians that I invited to come hang out and play the whistles. It was funny to see what these experimental jazz guys did with them. Suddenly the whistle is not just a whistle, but it's a percussion instrument, or they're blowing into it in weird ways. It unfolded this whole potential of the object, which was no longer limited to producing one tone, but was now given multiple uses. In making them, I wanted a one-toned object.

**"SUDDENLY THE WHISTLE IS NOT JUST A WHISTLE, BUT IT'S A PERCUSSION INSTRUMENT, OR THEY'RE BLOWING INTO IT IN WEIRD WAYS. IT UNFOLDED THE WHOLE POTENTIAL OF THE OBJECT..."**

**AF:** So, never with multiple finger holes?

**LM:** No. Sometimes when I do [whistle-making] workshops, people will do that. For me, I like the single tonality of the object, where it was more a sound icon of the object.

**AF:** So it's more like it's the object's voice, rather than the object as something to be played?

**LM:** Right. And I think that's important to me, that the object has a voice or its own personality.

**AF:** Where do you see your practice going from here?

**LM:** One thing I'd like to experiment with is the performance of these objects, where their positions are changed while they are being played, requiring the performers to adapt their bodies to new circumstances.

**AF:** One of the other pieces I saw of yours during the open studios exhibition was a carpet with clay fragments and residue scattered across it. Was this the remains of a performance that occurred there, or was this an installation that was set up to be as it was?

**LM:** That piece I call "The Pen" (like a pig pen). In future iterations, I want that piece to be more like a Gesamtkunstwerk. I think of it as a constant performance; from the beginning of making it to the end, it's constantly changing. It uses dry clay, and wet clay, and fired clay, and those get combined. As the work is sitting there, it's drying, it's breaking, it's falling apart. There's the initial performance of installing the piece, which begins that cycle, but then it continues to play out throughout the period that the work is in place. So this can never be precisely replicated, but all the elements can be recycled. Parts of it get broken down; pieces might get pulled into another installation, or they might get wet down and reused [as new clay]. It's not allowed to be as much of a consumable object.

**"IT USES DRY CLAY, AND WET CLAY, AND FIRED CLAY, AND THOSE GET COMBINED. AS THE WORK IS SITTING THERE, IT'S DRYING, IT'S BREAKING, IT'S FALLING APART."**

**AF:** Are you coming to this from a classical training in ceramics? Or were you attracted to the material for its hands-on plasticity and mutability?

**LM:** I came from a photography background. I still pursue large-format black-and-white photography, for example in documentation photographs of "The Pen." I lived in Asheville, North Carolina, for five years and did some clay work while I was there. I wasn't satisfied by that scene, though. I had a bunch of friends who are still there and are dealing with this issue of appropriation: when you take up a tradition, how do you change it? You can't just make the same Japanese pot that a Japanese master ceramicist from the seventeenth century made, that now becomes some American exploration of wabi sabi. There's a lot of that happening there, of people drawing on past [ceramic] traditions to replicate those objects, and I question the point of doing this. So I was really frustrated with that aspect of clay and rejected the pursuit of making the perfect pot or mug that's a model of skill. So I went for photography, because it felt like this way I could document the performance of life and aspects of moving in space and time. But I came back to clay with the whistle project, because it seemed perfect for what I needed it for: evoking aspects of touch, and the body, and the deep time of mud and the earth.

**AF:** Can you talk a little about your drawings? Are these documentations? Are they a way of planning future whistle forms?

**LM:** When I first started making whistles, I was looking at all these pictures of ancient and prehistoric whistle objects that had been found, and I was sketching those as a way to research potential forms. Those translated into the actual objects. But then your body gets to this place where it learns the requirements of the material and the object, and I got to these places where I would get stuck making the same forms over and over again. So then I returned to making drawings, because by doing so I could think outside of the conditioned bodily interactions with the material. It enabled me to think about a form in different ways, that I'm then able to create in clay. Clay, as a material, does dictate what you can do with it to some extent, but it also requires significant collaboration with the body of the maker, and to that extent it is sometimes a fight or a struggle with the material to reach certain ends or balance. I think this process of working points back to that potential of a shared physical agency. I shape the material, and the material shapes me.

*John Gosslee*

# All of the Plant is Edible

I watch the stars hide behind each other
and it's another beautiful day of sin in the world.

She opens the magazine and the seam bends,
the nails crawl like beetles across my back
and my body sleeps.

There's nothing different than yesterday,
the harmony is laid over the chord like it's fresh,
the past is a rubber pickaxe bouncing
back into the moment with the weight
of the day before yesterday behind it.

*

The secret is where the tongue rests,
the oxidation of enamel in the mouth
night after long night and I want to wake
next to the hands I know in my hair.

My skin sticks to itself in the humid air
and there are no texts to relieve the shock
of finding my own body on the doorstep.

The music doesn't relive the storm,
it puts the body in touch with how the wind moves.

In the open mouth of the night,
the thought moves out of the muscle,
my heart beat, a heavy rain
in the kettle of my chest.

## Jill Magid: *The Proposal*

Courtesy of the Artist; LABOR, Mexico City; RaebervonStenglin, Zurich and Galerie Untilthen, Paris.

**p. 105. *The Proposal*, 2016**
Uncut, 2.02 carat, blue diamond with micro-laser inscription "I am wholeheartedly yours," silver ring, ring box, documents.
Setting design by Anndra Neen.
Photo by Stefan Jaeggi,
Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen.

**p. 106. *Tapete de Flores*, 2016**
Walter and McBean Galleries,
San Francisco Art Institute.
The *Tapete de Flores* was produced by Calixto Robles and Victor Mario Zaballa and designed in collaboration with Mario Arturo Aguilar Gutierrez and Elesban Ernesto Sandoval Díaz of Arte en Flores, Mexico City.
Photo by Gregory Goode.

**p. 107-108. *The Exhumation*, 2016**
Video still.
Photo by Jarred Alterman.

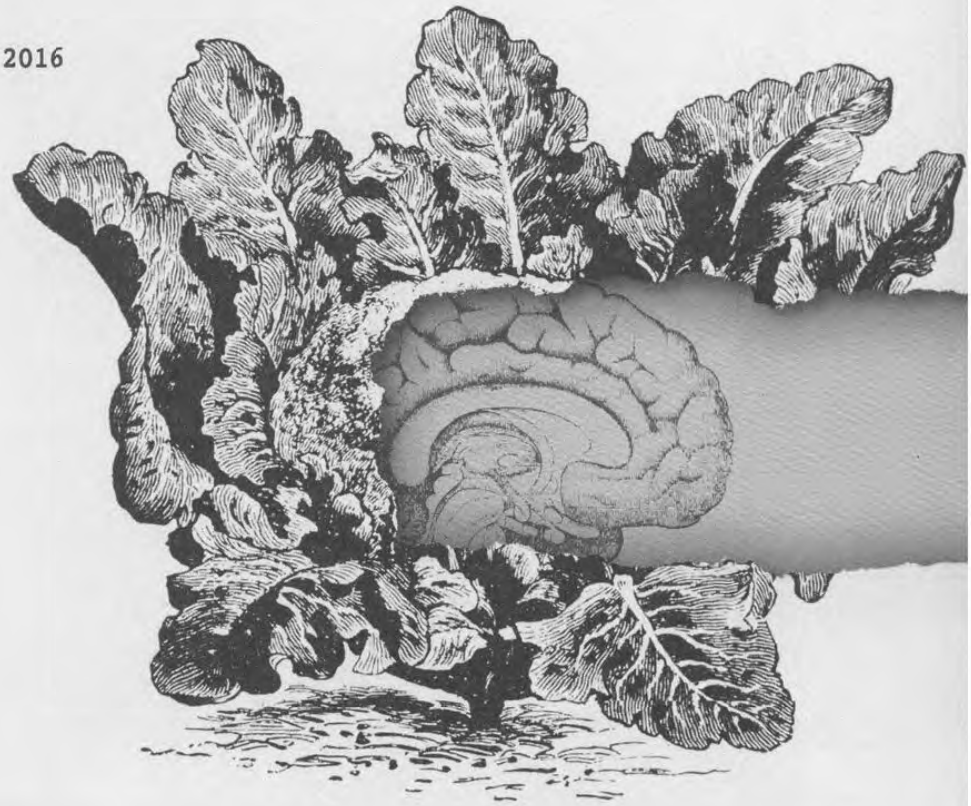
**p. 109. *Jill Magid*, 2014**
*Flaunt Magazine*.

## The Artwork of Liz McCarthy

***p. 110-111. The Pen*, 2016**
Documentation from performance installation.
Synthetic carpet, wet clay, dry clay, bisque fired clay.
Carpet: 16 x 18 inches.
Courtesy of the Artist and Heaven Gallery

***p. 111. Whistle Built for Three*, 2016**
Bisque fired clay.
24 x 11 x 13 inches.
Courtesy of the Artist.

***p. 112. Mature Female with Wet and Dirty Clay Material*, 2016**
Stills from digital video.
Duration 5:14 minutes.
Courtesy of the Artist.




Dearest Luis
I am wholeheartedly yours
Neil

*Carmen Maria Machado*

# Eight Bites

As they put me to sleep, my mouth fills with the dust of the moon. I expect to choke on the silt but instead it slides in and out, and in and out, and I am, impossibly, breathing.

I have dreamt of inhaling underneath water and this is what it feels like: panic, and then acceptance, and then elation: I am going to die, I am not dying, I am doing a thing I never thought I could do.

Back on Earth, Dr. U is inside me. Her hands are in my torso, her fingers searching for something. She is loosening flesh from its casing, slipping around where she's been welcomed, talking to a nurse about her vacation to Chile. "We were going to fly to Antarctica," she says, "but it was too expensive."

"But the penguins," the nurse says.

"Next time," Dr. U responds.

Before this, it was January, a new year. I waded through two feet of snow on a silent street, and came to a shop where wind chimes hung silently on the other side of the glass, mermaid-shaped baubles and bits of driftwood and too-shiny seashells strung through with fishing line and unruffled by any wind.

The town was deep dead, a great distance from the late-season smattering of open shops that serve the day-trippers and the money-savers. Owners had fled to Boston or New York, or if they were lucky, further south. Businesses had shuttered for the season, leaving their wares in the windows like a tease. Underneath, a second town had opened up, familiar and alien at the same time. It's the same every year. Bars and restaurants made secret hours for locals, the rock-solid Cape Codders who've lived through dozens of winters. On any given night you could look up from your plate to see a round bundle stomp through the doorway; only when they peeled their outsides away could you see who was beneath. Even the ones you knew from the summer are more or less strangers in this perfunctory daylight; everyone was alone, even when they were with each other.

On this street, though, I might as well have been on another planet. The beach bunnies and art dealers would never see the town like this, I thought, when the streets are dark and liquid chill roils through the gaps and alleys. Silences and sound bumped up against each other but never intermingled; the jolly chaos of warm summer nights was as far away as it could be. It was hard to stop moving between doorways in this weather, but if you did you could hear life pricking the stillness: a rumble of voices from a local tavern, wind livening the buildings, sometimes even a muffled animal encounter in an alley: pleasure or fear, it was all the same noise.

Foxes wove through the streets at night. There was a white one among them, sleek and fast, and she looked like the ghost of the others.

I was not the first in my family to go through with it. My three sisters had gotten the procedure over the years, though they didn't say anything before showing up for a visit. Seeing them suddenly svelte after years of watching them grow organically, as I have, was like a palm to the nose; more painful than you'd expect. My first sister, well, I thought she was dying. Being sisters, I thought we all were dying, noosed by genetics. When confronted by my anxiety—"What disease is sawing off this branch of the family tree?" I asked, my voice crab-walking up an octave—my first sister confessed: a surgery.

Then, all of them, my sisters, a chorus of believers. Surgery. A surgery. As easy as when you broke your arm as a kid and had to get the pins in—maybe even easier. A band, a sleeve, a gut re-routed. *Re-routed?* But their stories—*it melts away, it's just gone*—were spring morning warm, when the sun makes the difference between happiness and shivering in a shadow.

When we went out, they ordered large meals and then said, "I couldn't possibly." They always said this, always, that decorous insistence that they *couldn't possibly*, but for once, they actually meant it—that bashful lie had been converted into truth vis-à-vis a medical procedure. They angled their forks and cut impossibly tiny portions of food—doll-sized cubes of watermelon, a slender stalk of pea-shoot, a corner of a sandwich as if they needed to feed a crowd loaves-and-fishes style with that single serving of chicken salad—and swallowed them like a great decadence.

"I feel so good," they all said. Whenever I talk to them, that was what always came out of their mouths, or really, it was a mouth, a single mouth that once ate and now just says, "I feel really, really good."

Who knows where we got it from, though—the bodies that needed the surgery. It didn't come from our mother, who always looked normal, not hearty or curvy or Rubenesque or Midwestern or voluptuous, just normal. She always said eight bites are all you need, to get the sense of what you are eating. Even though she never counted out loud, I could hear the eight bites as clearly as if a game show audience was counting backwards, raucous and triumphant, and after *one* she would set her fork down, even if there was food left on her plate. She didn't mess around, my mother. No pushing food in circles or pretending. Iron will, slender waistline. Eight bites let her compliment the hostess. Eight bites lined her stomach like insulation rolled into the walls of houses. I wished she was still alive, to see the women her daughters had become.

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And then, one day, not too soon after my third sister sashayed out of my house with more spring in her step than I'd ever seen, I ate eight bites and then

stopped. I set the fork down next to the plate, more roughly than I intended, and took a chip of ceramic off the rim in the process. I pressed my finger into the shard and carried it to the trashcan. I turned and looked back at my plate, which had been so full before and was full still, barely a dent in the raucous mass of pasta and greens.

I sat down again, picked up my fork and had eight more bites. Not much more, still barely a dent, but now twice as much as necessary. But the salad leaves were dripping vinegar and oil and the noodles had lemon and cracked pepper and everything was just so beautiful, and I was still hungry, and so I had eight more. After, I finished what was in the pot on the stove and I was so angry I began to cry.

I don't remember getting fat. I wasn't a fat child or teenager; photos of those young selves are not embarrassing, or if they are, they're embarrassing in the right ways. Look how young I am! Look at my weird fashion! Saddle shoes—who thought of those? Stirrup pants—are you joking? Squirrel barrettes? Look at those glasses, look at that face: mugging for the camera. Look at that expression, mugging for a future self who is holding those photos, sick with nostalgia. Even when I thought I was fat I wasn't; the teenager in those photos is very beautiful, in a wistful kind of way.

But then I had a baby. Then I had Cal—difficult, sharp-eyed Cal, who has never gotten me half as much as I have never gotten her—and suddenly everything was wrecked, like she was a heavy-metal rocker trashing a hotel room before departing. My stomach was the television set through the window. She was now a grown woman and so far away from me in every sense, but the evidence still clung to my body. It would never look right again.

As I stood over the empty pot, I was tired. I was tired of the skinny-minnie women from church who cooed and touched each other's arms and told me I had beautiful skin, and having to rotate my hips sideways to move through rooms like crawling over someone at the movie theater. I was tired of flat, unforgiving dressing room lights; I was tired of looking into the mirror and grabbing the things that I hated and lifting them, claw-deep, and then letting them drop and everything aching. My sisters had gone somewhere else and left me behind, and as I always have, I wanted nothing more than to follow.

I could not make eight bites work for my body and so I would make my body work for eight bites.

Dr. U did twice-a-week consultations in an office a half an hour drive south on the Cape. I took a slow, circuitous route getting there. It had been snowing on and off for days, and the sleepy snowdrifts caught on every tree trunk and fencepost like blown-away laundry. I knew the way, because I'd driven past her office before—usually after a sister's departure—and so as I drove this time I daydreamed about buying clothes in the local boutiques, spending too much for a sundress taken off a mannequin, pulling it against my body in the afternoon sun as the mannequin stood, less lucky than I.

Then I was in her office, on her neutral carpet, and a receptionist was pushing open a door. The doctor was not what I expected. I suppose I had imagined that because of the depth of her convictions, as illustrated by her choice of profession, she should have been a slender woman: either someone with excessive self-control, or a sympathetic soul whose insides have also been rearranged to suit her vision of herself. But she was sweetly plump—why had I skipped over the phase where I was round and unthreatening as a panda, but still lovely? She smiled with all her teeth. What was she doing, sending me on this journey she herself had never taken?

She gestured, and I sat.

There were two Pomeranians running around her office. When they were separated—when one was curled up at Dr. U's feet and the other was decorously taking a shit in the hallway—they appeared identical but innocuous, but when one came near the other they were spooky, their heads twitching in sync, as if they were two halves of a whole. The doctor noticed the pile outside of the door and called for the receptionist. The door closed.

"I know what you're here for," she said, before I could open my mouth. "Have you researched bariatric surgery before?"

"Yes," I said. "I want the kind you can't reverse."

"I admire a woman of conviction," she said. She began pulling binders out of a drawer. "There are some procedures you'll have to go through. Visiting a psychiatrist, seeing another doctor, support groups—administrative nonsense,

taking up a lot of time. But everything is going to change for you," she promised, shaking a finger at me with an accusing, loving smile. "It will hurt. It won't be easy. But when it's over, you're going to be the happiest woman alive."

My sisters arrived a few days before the surgery. They set themselves up in the house's many empty bedrooms, making up their side tables with lotions and crossword puzzles. I could hear them upstairs and they sounded like birds, distinct and luminously choral at the same time.

I told them I was going out for a final meal.

"We'll come with you," said my first sister.

"Keep you company," said my second sister.

"Be supportive," said my third sister.

"No," I said, "I'll go alone. I need to be alone."

I walked to my favorite restaurant, Salt. It hadn't always been Salt, though, in name or spirit. It was Linda's, for a while, and then Family Diner, then The Table. The building remains the same, but it is always new and always better than before.

I thought about people on death row and their final meals, as I sat at a corner table, and for the third time that week I worried about my moral compass, or lack thereof. They aren't the same, I reminded myself as I unfolded the napkin over my lap. Those things are not comparable. Their last meal comes before death, mine comes before not just life, but a new life. You are horrible, I thought, as I lifted the menu to my face, higher than it needed to be.

I ordered a cavalcade of oysters. Most of them had been cut the way they were supposed to be, and they slipped down as easily as water, like the ocean, like nothing at all, but one fought me: anchored to its shell, a stubborn hinge of flesh. It resisted. It was resistance incarnate. Oysters are alive, I realized. They are nothing but muscle, they have no brains or insides, strictly speaking, but they are alive nonetheless. If there were any justice in the world, this oyster would grab hold of my tongue and choke me dead.

I almost gagged, but then I swallowed.

My third sister sat down across the table from me. Her dark hair reminded me of my mother's; almost too shiny and homogenous to be real, though it was. She smiled kindly at me, like she was about to give me some bad news.

"Why are you here?" I asked her.

"You look troubled," she said. She held her hands in a way that showed off her red nails, which were so lacquered they had horizontal depth, like a rose trapped in glass. She tapped them against her cheekbones, scraping them down her face with the very lightest touch. I shuddered. Then she picked up my water and drank deeply of it, until the water had filtered through the ice and the ice was nothing more than a fragile lattice and then the whole construction slid against her face as she tipped the glass higher and she chewed the slivers that landed in her mouth.

"Don't waste that stomach space on water," she said, *crunch crunch crunching*. "Come on now. What are you eating?"

"Oysters," I said, even though she could see the precarious pile of shells before me.

She nodded. "Are they good?" she asked.

"They are."

"Tell me about them."

"They are the sum of all healthy things: seawater and muscle and bone, I said. Mindless protein. They feel no pain, have no verifiable thoughts. Very few calories. An indulgence without being an indulgence. Do you want one?"

I didn't want her to be there, I wanted to tell her to leave, but her eyes were glittering like she had a fever. She ran her fingernail lovingly along an oyster shell. The whole pile shifted, doubling down on its own mass.

"No," she said. "Then, have you told Cal? About the procedure?"

I bit my lip. "No," I said. "Did you tell your daughter, before you got it?"

"I did. She was so excited for me. She sent me flowers."

"Cal will not be excited," I said. "There are many daughter duties Cal does not perform, and this will be one, too."

"Do you think she needs the surgery, too? Is that why?"

"I don't know," I said. "I have never understood Cal's needs."

"Do you think it's because she will think badly of you?"

"I've also never understood her opinions," I said.

My sister nodded.

"She will not send me flowers," I concluded, even though this was probably not necessary.

I ordered a pile of hot truffle fries, which burned the roof of my mouth. It was only after the burn that I thought about how much I'd miss it all. I started to cry, and my sister put her hand over mine. I was jealous of the oysters. They never had to think about themselves.

At home, I called Cal, to tell her. My jaw was so tightly clenched, it popped when she answered the phone. On the other end I could hear another woman's voice, stopped short by a finger to the lips unseen; then a dog whined.

"Surgery?" she repeated.

"Yes," I said.

"Jesus Christ," she said.

"Don't swear," I told her, even though I was not a religious woman.

"What? That's not even a fucking swear," she yelled. "*That* was a fucking swear. And this. *Jesus Christ* is not a swear. It's a proper name. And if there's ever a time to swear, it's when your mom tells you she's getting half of one of her most important organs cut away for no reason—"

She was still talking, but it was growing into a yell. I shooed the words away like bees.

"—occur to you that you're never going to be able to eat like a normal human—"

"What is wrong with you?" I finally asked her.

"Mom, I just don't understand why you can't be happy with yourself. You've never been—"

She kept talking. I stared at the receiver. When did my child sour? I didn't remember the process, the top-down tumble from sweetness to curdled anger. She was furious constantly, she was all accusation. She had taken the moral high ground from me by force, time and time again. I had committed any number of sins: Why didn't I teach her about feminism? Why do I persist in not understanding

anything? And *this*, this takes the cake, no, *don't* forgive the pun; language is infused with food like everything else, or at least like everything else should be. She was so angry I was glad I couldn't read her mind. I knew her thoughts would break my heart.

The line went dead. She'd hung up on me. I set the phone on the receiver and realized my sisters were watching me from the doorway, looking near tears, one sympathetic, the other smug.

I turned away. Why didn't Cal understand? Her body was imperfect but it was also fresh, pliable. She could sidestep my mistakes. She could have the release of a new start. I had no self-control, but tomorrow I would relinquish control and everything would be right again.

The phone rang. Cal, calling back? But it was my niece. She was selling knife sets so she could go back to school and become a—well, I missed that part, but she would get paid just for telling me about the knives, so I let her walk me through, step-by-step, and I bought a cheese knife with a special cut-out center—"So the cheese doesn't stick to the blade, see?" she said.

In the operating room, I was open to the world. Not that kind of open, not yet, everything was still sealed up inside, but I was naked except for a faintly patterned cloth gown that didn't quite wrap around my body.

"Wait," I said. I laid my hand upon my hip and squeezed a little. I trembled, though I didn't know why. There was an IV and the IV would relax me; soon I would be very far away.

Dr. U stared at me over her mask. Gone was the sweetness from her office; her eyes looked transformed. Icy.

"Did you ever read that picture book about Ping the duck?" I asked her.

"No," she said.

"Ping the duck was always punished for being the last duck home. He'd get whacked across the back with a switch. He hated that. So he ran away. After he ran away he met some black fishing birds with metal bands around their necks.

They caught fish for their masters but could not swallow the fish whole, because of the bands. When they brought fish back, they were rewarded with tiny pieces they could swallow. They were obedient, because they had to be. Ping, with no band, was always last and now was lost. I don't remember how it ends. It seems like a book you should read."

She adjusted her mask a little. "Don't make me cut out your tongue," she said.

"I'm ready," I told her.

The mask slipped over me and I was on the moon.

Afterwards, I sleep and sleep. It's been a long time since I've been so still. I stay on the couch because stairs, stairs are impossible. In the watery light of morning, dust motes drift through the air like plankton. I have never seen the living room so early. A new world.

I drink shaking sips of clear broth, brought to me by my first sister, who, silhouetted against the window, looks like a branch stripped bare by the wind. My second sister checks in on me every so often, opening the windows a crack despite the cold—to let some air in, she says softly. She does not say the house smells stale and like death but I can see it in her eyes as she fans the door open and shut and open and shut as patiently as a mother whose child has vomited. I can see her cheekbones, high and tight as cherries, and I smile at her as best I can.

My third sister observes me at night, sitting on a chair near the sofa, where she glances at me from above her book, her brows tightening and loosening with concern. She talks to her daughter—who loves her without judgment, I am sure—in the kitchen, so soft I can barely hear her, but then forgets herself and laughs loudly at some joke shared between them. I wonder if my niece has sold any more knives.

I am transformed but not yet, exactly. The transformation has begun—this pain, this excruciating pain, it is part of the process—and will not end until—well, I suppose I don't know when. Will I ever be done, transformed in the past tense, or will I always be transforming, better and better until I die?

Cal does not call. When she does I will remind her of my favorite memory of her: when I caught her with chemical depilatory in the bathroom in the wee hours of morning, creaming her little tan arms and legs and upper lip so the hair dissolved like snow. I will tell her, when she calls.

The shift, at first, is imperceptible, so small as to be a trick of the imagination. But then one day I button a pair of pants and they fall to my feet. I marvel at what is beneath. A pre-Cal body. A pre-me body. It is emerging, like the lie of snow withdrawing from the truth of the landscape. My sisters finally go home. They kiss me and tell me that I look beautiful.

I am finally well enough to walk along the beach. The weather has been so cold the water is thick with ice and the waves churn creamily, like soft serve. I take a photo and send it to Cal, but I know she won't respond.

At home, I cook a very small chicken breast and cut it into white cubes. I count the bites and when I reach eight I throw the rest of the food in the garbage. I stand over the can for a long while, breathing in the salt-pepper smell of chicken mixed in with coffee grounds and something older and closer to decay. I spray window cleaner into the garbage can so the food cannot be retrieved. I feel a little light but good; righteous, even. Before I would have been growling, climbing up the walls from want. Now I feel only slightly empty, and fully content.

That night, I wake up because something is standing over me, something small, and before I slide into being awake I think it's my daughter, up from a nightmare, or perhaps it's morning and I've overslept, except even as my hands exchange blanket-warmth for chilled air and it is so dark I remember my daughter is in her late twenties and lives in Portland with a roommate who is not really her roommate and she will not tell me and I don't know why.

But something is there, darkness blotting out darkness, a person-shaped outline. It sits on the bed, and I feel the weight, the mattress's springs creaking and pinging. Is it looking at me? Away from me? Does it look, at all?

And then there is nothing, and I sit up alone.

As I learn my new diet—my forever diet, the one that will only end when I do—something is moving in the house. At first I think it is mice, but it is larger, more autonomous. Mice in walls scurry and drop through unexpected holes, and you can hear them scrabbling in terror as they plummet behind your family portraits. But this thing occupies the hidden parts of the house with purpose, and if I drop my ear to the wallpaper it breathes audibly.

After a week of this, I try to talk to it.

"Whatever you are, I say, please come out. I want to see you."

Nothing. I am not sure whether I am feeling afraid or curious or both.

I call my sisters. "It might be my imagination," I explain, "but did you also hear something, after? In the house? A presence?"

"Yes," says my first sister. "My joy danced around my house, like a child, and I danced with her. We almost broke two vases that way!"

"Yes," says my second sister. "My inner beauty was set free and lay around in patches of sunlight like a cat, preening itself."

"Yes," says my third sister. "My former shame slunk from shadow to shadow, as it should have. It will go away, after a while. You won't even notice and then one day it'll be gone."

After I hang up with her, I try and take a grapefruit apart with my hands, but it's an impossible task. The skin clings to the fruit, and between them is an intermediary skin, thick and impossible to separate from the meat. Eventually I take a knife and lop off domes of rinds and cut the grapefruit into a cube before ripping it open with my fingers. It feels like I am dismantling a human heart. The fruit is delicious, slick. I swallow eight times, and when the ninth bite touches my lips I pull it back and squish it in my hand like I am crumpling an old receipt. I put the remaining half of the grapefruit in a Tupperware. I close the fridge. Even now I can hear it. Behind me. Above me. Too large to perceive. Too small to see.

When I was in my twenties, I lived in a place with bugs and had the same sense of knowing invisible things moved, coordinated, in the darkness. Even if

I flipped on the kitchen light in the wee hours and saw nothing, I would just wait. Then my eyes would adjust and I would see it: a cockroach who, instead of scuttling two-dimensionally across the yawn of a white wall, was instead perched at the lip of a cupboard, probing the air endlessly with his antennae. He desired and feared in three dimensions. He was less vulnerable there, and yet somehow, more, I realized as I wiped his guts across the plywood.

In the same way, now, the house is filled with something else. It moves, restless. It does not say words but it breathes. I want to know it, and I don't know why.

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"I've done research," Cal says. The line crackles like she is somewhere with a bad signal, so she is not calling from her house. I listen for the voice of the other woman who is always in the background, whose name I have never learned.

"Oh, you're back?" I say. I am in control, for once.

Her voice is clipped, but then softens. I can practically hear the therapist cooing to her. She is probably going through a list that she and the therapist created together. I feel a spasm of anger.

"I am worried because," she says, and then pauses.

"Because?"

"Sometimes there can be all of these complications—"

"It's done, Cal. It's been done for months. There's no point to this."

"Do you hate my body, Mom?" she says. Her voice splinters in pain, as if she is about to cry. "You hated yours, clearly, but mine looks just like yours used to, so—"

"Stop it."

"You think you're going to be happy but this is not going to make you happy," she says.

"I love you," I say.

"Do you love every part of me?"

It's my turn to hang up and then, after a moment's thought, disconnect the phone. Cal is probably calling back right now, but she won't be able to get through. I'll let her, when I'm ready.

I wake up because I can hear a sound like a vase breaking in reverse: thousands of shards of ceramic whispering along hardwood toward a reassembling form. From my bedroom, it sounds like it's coming from the hallway. From the hallway, it sounds like it's coming from the stairs. Down, down, foyer, dining room, living room, down deeper, and then I am standing at the top of the basement steps.

From below, from the dark, something shuffles. I wrap my fingers around the ball chain hanging from the naked light bulb and I pull.

The thing is down there. At the light, it crumples to the cement floor, curls away from me.

It looks like my daughter, as a girl. That's my first thought. It's body-shaped. Prepubescent, boneless. It is 100 pounds, dripping wet.

And it does. Drip.

I descend to the bottom and up close it smells warm, like toast. It looks like the clothes stuffed with straw on someone's porch at Halloween; the vague person-shaped lump made from pillows to aid a midnight escape plan. I am afraid to step over it. I walk around it, admiring my unfamiliar face in the reflection of the water heater even as I hear its sounds: a gasping, arrested sob.

I kneel down next to it. It is a body with nothing it needs: no stomach or bones or mouth. Just soft indents. I crouch down and stroke its shoulder, or what I think is its shoulder.

It turns and looks at me. It has no eyes but still, it looks at me. She looks at me. She is awful but honest. She is grotesque but she is real.

I shake my head. "I don't know why I wanted to meet you," I say. "I should have known."

She curls a little tighter. I lean down and whisper where an ear might be.

"You are unwanted," I say. A tremor ripples her mass.

I do not know I am kicking her until I am kicking her. She has nothing and I feel nothing except she seems to solidify before my foot meets her, and so every kick is more satisfying than the last. I reach for a broom and I pull a muscle swinging back and in and back and in, and the handle breaks off in her and I

kneel down and pull soft handfuls of her body out of herself, and I throw them against the wall, and I do not know I am screaming until I stop, finally.

I find myself wishing she would fight back, but she doesn't. Instead, she sounds like she is being deflated. A hissing, defeated wheeze.

I stand up and walk away. I shut the basement door. I leave her there until I can't hear her anymore.

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Spring has come, marking the end of winter's long contraction.

Everyone is waking up. The first warm day, when light cardigans are enough, the streets begin to hum. Bodies move around. Not fast, but still: smiles. Neighbors suddenly recognizable after a season of watching their lumpy outlines walk past in the darkness.

"You look wonderful," says one.

"Have you lost weight?" asks another.

I smile. I get a manicure and tap my new nails along my face, to show them off. I go to Salt, which is now called "The Peppercorn," and eat three oysters.

I am a new woman. A new woman becomes best friends with her daughter. A new woman laughs with all of her teeth. A new woman does not just slough off her old self; she tosses it aside with force.

Summer will come next. Summer will come and the waves will be huge, the kind of waves that feel like a challenge. If you're brave, you'll step out of the bright-hot day and into the foaming roil of the water, moving toward where the waves break and might break you. If you're brave, you'll turn your body over to this water that is practically an animal, and so much larger than yourself.

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Sometimes, if I sit very still, I can hear her gurgling underneath the floorboards. She sleeps in my bed when I'm at the grocery store, and when I come back and slam the door, loudly, there are padded footsteps above my head. I know she is

around, but she never crosses my path. She leaves offerings on the coffee table: safety pins, champagne bottle corks, hard candies twisted in strawberry-patterned cellophane. She shuffles through my dirty laundry and leaves a trail of socks and bras all the way to the open window. The drawers and air are rifled through. She turns all the soup can labels forward and wipes up the constellations of dried coffee spatter on the kitchen tile. The perfume of her is caught on the linens. She is around, even when she is not around.

I will see her only one more time, after this.

I will die the day I turn seventy-nine. I will wake early because outside a neighbor is talking loudly to another neighbor about her roses, and because Cal is coming today with her daughter for our annual visit, and because I am a little hungry, and because a great pressure is on my chest. Even as it tightens and compresses I will perceive what is beyond my window: a cyclist bumping over concrete, a white fox loping through underbrush, the far roll of the ocean. I will think, *it is as my sisters prophesied.* I will think, *I miss them, still.* I will think, *here is where I learn if it's all been worth it.* The pain will be unbearable until it isn't anymore; until it loosens and I will feel better than I have in a long time.

There will be such a stillness, then, broken only by a honeybee's soft-winged stumble against the screen, and a floorboard's creak.

Arms will lift me from my bed—her arms. They will be mother-soft, like dough and moss. I will recognize the smell. I will flood with grief and shame.
I will look where her eyes would be. I will open my mouth to ask but then realize the question has answered itself: by loving me when I did not love her, by being abandoned by me, she has become immortal. She will outlive me by a hundred million years; more, even. She will outlive my daughter, and my daughter's daughter, and the earth will teem with her and her kind, their inscrutable forms and unknowable destinies.

She will touch my cheek like I once did Cal's, so long ago, and there will be no accusation in it. I will cry as she shuffles me away from myself, toward a door

propped open into the salty morning. I will curl into her body, which was my body once, but I was a poor caretaker and she was removed from my charge.

"I'm sorry," I will whisper into her as she walks me toward the front door.

"I'm sorry," I will repeat. "I didn't know."

*Reyes Ramirez*

# Hijo, please

***1.***

Get Celli. Tell her to gather enough change
to buy some apples. Make sure they are green.
I want the sourness to overwhelm mi lengua
like the weight of el sol on naked naked skin.

Also, bring me mis pastillas.
It hurts to be angry but feels so good
to be as pitiful as a perro with whittled teeth
and a desperacion to walk on two legs.

Hijo, marry a Mexicana because the desire
for something sweet is natural and mi gente
have understood this desire since they
ripped the hearts out of chests and showed

the glistening arteries to the sky,
all hot and sticky and breathing deep and quick
in gasping fascination with la gloria of
being alive.

***2.***

You were always el mas feo.
Everyone else in the family is gorgeous,
beautiful Mexicanos with blue blue eyes
that could pass off as europeos.

I give birth to you and tu padre gets all the credit.
Your cheeks tan gacho as if you were melting
and eyes vacant like bones
que barbaridad que asco que lastima.

As my body lies dying, Tomás, cortame el pelo,
all of it, take it to Mexico,
and throw it into a gust so my soul
disappears like honey into leche.

Make sure my body burns away in fuego
so that my skin does not rot trying to find juventud,
yellow like the left behind skin of a cicada
that may be crushed between los dedos.

*3.*

Me fui and I'm not coming back.
The American air tastes like mierda,
not fit to morir in because I've experienced
peace once and was not so aburrido

as these people think, tirando bleach everywhere
y drinking wine that smells like culo.
Yo quiero pain that I've earned,
salvation in the blood under mis uñas.

Mi madre collected: sea shells, bracelets,
and nunca killed her chickens. Anything
as long as it could be destroyed.
I want to go home.

I don't care for the violence.
Yo soy la violencia.
I return to it
like a wave back into the sea.

**4.**

I don't like it when you say things
and you mean them.
Cosas como 'no,' 'I don't care,' and 'ya,'
as if you want to go into another world.

Yo recuerdo when you were chiquito, chiquito:
you would eat tomatoes not with bites but nibbles
that wore away el piel,
chunky jugo trickling out.

You would never talk,
masticando tomatoes to the center,
never blinking, a stain of red pulp
remained around tu lips, cheeks, and teeth.

Nunca did you make efforts to clean it off,
so I leaned in to wipe your face
and I would laugh and smile and say
mi niño, niño mío

*C. McAllister Williams*

# Turnbuckle

In my dreams, I am always wrestling &
I am always the Ultimate
Warrior & you are always Andre

the Giant. We are always hugging.
I mean grappling. I mean separating
features from face. You stick your thumb

in my eyeball. I see so many colors. I fashion
you a gift. Singlet. Destroyed heart. We introduce
each other to the consequences of elbows.

We tie off our muscles, explore
pulp. I'm positioning my face
as a bruise. Hematoma. When it comes

time to rumble, we surprise ourselves with razor
blades, invitations to concussions. If I press
my head to your head, we go petechial.

Light gets wobbly, bells never stop
ringing. Chairs are involved. Top ropes. My fists
catch themselves, catch bullets like fake

magicians. You give me an ax handle, big
boot. Cover yourself in back hair & frenzy. I slather
myself in leather & slurred words. Sweat.

Powerslam. Chokehold.

*Kyle G. Dargan*

# Another Poem Beginning with a Bullet

My aunt is still alive—let us begin there instead—
and I step off the 34 Montclair into a breeze-
quelled dusk. Thanksgiving eve. It takes
twenty of my strides, or ten seconds, for the bus
engine belts' wheeze to dissipate. The hush
cracked by a pistol just before a getaway car tears
out the driveway of that lone, ill-zoned apartment
complex I loathe—its tall carcass, cop cars for flies.
I assume the gunners have seen me en route
to my mother's. I break—an Olajuwon pivot,
talking footwork—and I'm striding north
up Glenwood. Not too fast, not hinting I think
they know I've seen their make and plates,
their faces. And how many nights have I
juked through this city—an 8-bit millipede
chopping corners sharp so trouble could not trace
a path back to my mother's house?
Or how many nights, while mother worked,
did I sleepover at my aunt's—defying lights-out
to play, blast those millipedes that lived inside
the grey Nintendo cartridge? Something shooting,
something crawling—always. I'm shuffling
towards my aunt's house, where millipedes
hid, where I hide until I can double back
—my neck unscrewed, head on swivel. No one
on the block keeps a porch light burning
except my mother, that yellow bug-bulb

that now tints our veranda's canvas—there
a small Pollock reproduction in fresh blood.
And who walks over blood and then knocks?
But I do. I need to have my mother answer
the door, unharmed. It makes no difference
if I am announcing myself to a gunman,
for if that gun has already harmed my mother,
one more person would have to die—
the gunman or I. But she answers my knock.
Tells me how she opened the door for a man
who'd been held at gunpoint across the street.
He'd flinched just as the combustion I'd heard
expelled the bullet. With a grazed skull, he'd crawled
towards my mother's light at the same time as I fled.
The ambulance has come and gone, carrying him
down to the trauma center. The city no longer stops
at mother's door. It has come inside now, has bled
here. In the living room. The night's long odds bend us
into slouching as we sit. But my aunt is alive,
and at tomorrow's feast I will see everyone. I will
remember this years later as one of the good days.

# Louisiana Disaster Recovery 3.0

*Mary McMyne*

*after Brian Bilston*

## Voice 1

roll up your sleeves. wade on into the floodwater
so fast that you miss the moccasins and nutria
keeps Instagramming. the tap water
be purified, the trash on the streets picked up. say a prayer.
moving. eat boudin. drop some cans at the food bank
the corner. all we need is grit and elbow grease to get through

not
everyone
can
get
around
this.

## Voice 2

again. not another tidal wave of dirty water.
of the houses on our street has gone under.
you imagine? losing everything not once, not twice—
outta here—but three times, *cher*. I can't wrap my brain
it. first my house, then Ma's, then Maw-Maw's underwater.
is the way the world ends, not with a bang but with a river.

# Bars of Blue

*Wesley Rothman*

Hand-me-down blue, that's
our royal high-ness. This, our
our kind of blue—sailed, revolutioned, majestied—hand-me-down majesty,
hot-stepping constellation of ringed colonies, rows & rows in an old

glory sky—passed along, crisp as a bill,
for the end of days. Vigilante
true-skewed blue. Prayer vigil for the slaughtered. Everyday vigil
vigil. Vigilance for the unknown hour when justice floats. People blues

at night. All blues bent & bending
blue booze & blue yous. Get down
a body abed. The locomotion of a blue train chugging blue smoke &
hearted, bend your heart low to learn how inescapable blue is, un-

debatable on this fly-highing
slinky, how to loosen the sound
album known as America, the bluetiful. Because the west end taught me
of *languorous & lackadaisical*. Bruisy music strikes up the fat sobs of futility, the verdict

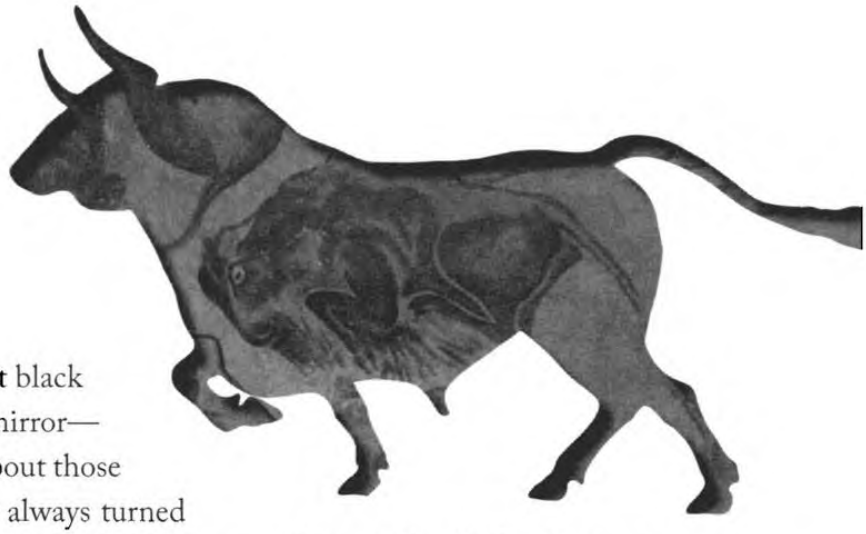
of insanity: repetition, repetition, repetition, expecting the unexpected. Of course,
we'll get something fresh. This city & the next fall under different stars,
when we play this same tune in the next city, or the city after,
towns of different stripes, crowds indigo & midnight,

sapphire & steel, cobalt, federal. Pluck a string, plunge a piston, strike those hungry
length of your spine. What kind of blue are you-you? Snow blue, drum blue,
wooden notes. How they grumble the whole upright the whole
brushed high-hat-in-a-club-forty-years-back blue? That

before-blues rubs off on you. Even when you can't hear them, they're playing you like
the same-same tune. From a different key, it's still the same old slinky-slanky tune
yellowed sheet music, fingers worn narrow chiming the same tune,
the sweet land of bright blue spangles, gleaming cities covered in you.

*Keagan LeJeune*

# Sedentism



That their hair was that flat black painted on the inside of a mirror—that's what I remember most about those boys. And that their eyes were always turned down. You could never see their color, but you guessed it was the shade of acorns. And that they were hardly ever alone, always clinging together, making like a cloud of boys moving across the campus. Sometimes you would see them bunching up on the sidewalks or right before a class huddled just a bit away from the door to sneak into the room. But they were never late. Never early, just right on time. They were never going to do anything that might draw any attention. And they never wanted to settle one way or another any part of what anyone believed or didn't believe about them. You could tell there was a fierce pride in that, never wanting to be at all a part of it.

And they were all the sons of farmers, and that was obvious. And on the first day when he walked in the class, I could see he was wearing the farm all over. Not that he had a speck of dirt on him. Really, more than anything, he was so clean and that's what told me. All those boys were so painfully neat with their school things and their hair was cut short over their ears and their shoes always polished and black and reflecting your blurred self back at you when you looked at their shoes tucked up under the desks. And he was so neat and clean, even more so than the others. His fingernails were pared and washed and waxy, which turned them as translucent as smooth moons. I could smell the Barbasol and Bryl drift up off of him as he walked by, and as I watched him burrow into a desk I could tell, too, his mother had made his clothes stiff. His shirt so white and crisp it looked like a sheet of paper.

I don't know how, but for some reason he was in this class without that cloud of boys around, and he was sitting stiff and compact in his desk in the last row. He looked like a little brick house standing by itself in a bunch of empty lots. All the yards next to my house were still dirt. They were leveled and packed and waiting for someone to buy them. So many times I would come home from school and just stop and stare at it, and, looking at it, I wondered sometimes if the house knew how alone it was or

if it believed that over the years all the emptiness near it could slowly disappear and fill with husbands and wives and little families that would turn it into an ordinary street someone would want to live on. Maybe it even saw all those barren spaces and thought that one day it would look back and miss how lonely it all used to be.

I can't explain why so many times that bothered me. It's the same with anything like that, like his desk by itself at the back of the room or like a chair at a party pulled far away from its table and left there standing all night alone. I've always wanted to walk across the floor, wrap my palm around the top of that chair, and tug it back to a table, no matter who's even sitting there. I knew girls who could do it, the ones who could click over to it without a second thought and do it, no trouble at all, or the ones who could make such a show of it that nothing else in the whole night long would seem so close to the shamelessness our mothers told us to avoid. I wasn't like either of those. I wasn't the one who could talk to him or sit near him or cross over to him and drag him from that place he had set so carefully for himself.

And that they were always so cautious and careful. They all had this way of positioning their bodies in their seats or turning the pages of their books, almost as if they had adapted every part of themselves to become ignorable. It was not shyness. I knew shy boys. This was like something learned in all of them, a trait they groomed themselves to have. There is a way the belly of a fish blends with the white sky and at the same time its back blends with the blue-black river so that fish beneath it and birds above it can't see it swimming where it is. He was like that. I didn't know any other men who had this skill to make themselves disappear in that sort of way. But in him and those boys, there was so much effort put in trying to be the right size of small.

So never a word in class if he could help it, barely a breath, and when the professor called on him, at first he would try to nod his way through his answer and if that didn't work, then he would give a single word, which was always deep and guttural, and you could tell mostly everyone thought the sounds he made came out like his mouth was full of rocks, like when he opened his mouth and said that one word, a fat rock dropped out onto his desk. And if he had to give an answer that forced him to string several words

together, they fell out his mouth the same way but only smaller, like pebbles that were smooth and hard and that no one thought to be any good for anything, except everyone understood the professor must ask him something.

But to me they were. I tried to keep them. They were lovely and seemed lucky almost. They were rare and shaped so slowly and full of his mouth's effort to form them, which we were learning in that class was a sort of power hard to deny.

We sat day after day hearing the professor lecture about all the oceans and lakes and rivers that had come and gone and come and gone, about shells found on mountaintops and the windless mountaintops now swallowed in seawater, about bridges of ice and the imperceptible glacial creep that carved and etched and altered the world's surface, which is nothing but a floating surface that people don't think of, and about the earliest ones of us and river deltas rich from flooding and how we and them were intertwined so that without floods people would have never been able to be settled in one place and be fertile and multiply.

The silt and marshes and the giant lake of slush beneath them all were the reasons for my father coming here. He could tell by the layers of rock far below us the likeliest places to find oil. He had a knack for it, he said. I had thought other places seemed as empty as a place could be. So many places had so few people, not even abandoned but just never touched. Here, though, whatever wasn't water was half-water or moving to it. And even with people around, the water made it seem so forsaken.

One slow-moving river loitered through the city before it seeped out into the Gulf, and all these bayous and canals and drainage gullies crisscrossed the roads. The place always had cars lost and turning around at dead-ends and tons of neighborhoods cut off from the heart of things in the middle of town. All around was either marshland or flooded rice fields, and even a lot of people's yards had sunken pockets that held miniature swamps dense with oaks and moss and reeds. Everything always seemed sweating or covered in rain or rotting or mossing over, and all the noises you ever heard were muffled by rain falling or the sounds of frogs calling for it or ditch water draining off or somewhere water dripping from one stagnant pool to another.

All the miles of slush and sludge underneath us, I could sense that, and I could tell that our home was just floating on a thin sheet of crust and that we were always swaying. I would get sick from it. When I first mentioned it to my mother,

she told me what I suggested was impossible, so I tried to deny it, but one day my father brought home a cardboard tube full of rolled photographs taken from a plane. He spread them on the dining room table and put something thick and heavy in each of its corners so it couldn't curl and close. Flat and held down on the table, the truth was undeniable. The city was more river than land and looked like a veil of laced waterways was draped over it, and everything was slanted and slipping downward towards the bottom of the image—a large blank swath of gray with GULF OF MEXICO typed across.

Then I knew why, if you stood in front of our house during a storm, you could see water running through the grass out onto the sidewalk, and then out into the road as your water joined with all the rainwater rushing out all of the other lots on the street. And if you followed it, you could see how all the yards and roads and neighborhoods flowed from one to another and how all the plots of houses and blocks of town, tilted that way, seemed really one moving river just waiting for enough rain to become again what it was.

One day, it rained and didn't stop, and the yards became thick and soggy and the roads flooded, and you could see the water in the culverts and ditches moving in reverse and the rainwater bubbling up from the street drains and lifting the thick steel covers off the sewers. I thought the river had finally decided to reclaim the city as a part of itself and everyone would understand and become part of it and then the Gulf and then the whole ocean. But it never happened. When it stopped raining, the water went back into the ditches and the gullies and the other places made for it all over, and it slowly headed south toward the marshy flatness and the seawater and that gray blob waiting below us.

But it was water that brought me closest to him, so it's funny that way. One morning a shower streaked across the campus. There wasn't much rain, just enough to turn the sidewalks shiny and black, and after class, at the door of the hall he saw me standing there watching the other girls getting ready to step outside. They smiled and talked, and their fingers knotted scarfs around their hair and tucked up loose strands until they looked just as neat and tidy as if they had done it before a mirror. Then, they drew their umbrellas to themselves, unsnapped their straps, and let them fall to their sides. There was no lining up,

no announcing each girl's turn, just one by one each girl stepped squarely into the doorframe. Then, she opened and raised her umbrella in one fluid motion, unfurling its fullness just as she stepped from the door and under its protection.

I could only see each girl's curved legs as she walked from one building to the next. Each pair was quick and pointed and precise, and they seemed so sleek and filled with purpose. I'm sure he saw me motionless at the door and thought I didn't move because I had no umbrella and not because I was stuck in the awe of it, wondering what it must be like.

The hall's entranceway had two sets of stairs swirling up on each side, and when all of the other students left, each of us sat on one side and the opening between us stood like a cave. We didn't say a word but could hear each other across the space—the shuffle of my books or the tapping of his finger against the wall. We sat there for a time, and I was glad someone else had been left behind and I guess he was too because his breathing was heavy and constant and full of dullness and satisfaction. Then, I heard him stand and move away. When he was gone, I walked to his side of the stairs and saw a small bare patch of wall beneath the handrail where his finger had pricked and flicked away the chipped paint and waterlogged and flaking plaster. And I understood.

There were moments in the classes that followed that seemed somehow to find their source in that day. Without realizing the how or why of it, I think he had been drawn up and out of himself, even if just a touch. You could tell. There were days when he wasn't slumped so far into his desk. And sometimes he nodded without ever being asked a question. And I don't think I was the only one who could see how there were instances when his head raised just slightly enough to flicker a quick flash of color from his eyes before disappearing. And on the day the professor started on the earth's first humans and their hunting and fishing, his massive shoulders rolled up like a wave and his body was ready to break with energy. Then it happened. Some unseen current in him shifted, and he spoke without being asked, and one sentence after another poured out of him.

He began describing all the different ways water had gathered here—flooded fields, ponds, lakes, rivers, pools, marshes, bayous, gullies, drains, washes, coulees, canals, marais, bays, gulfs—and then explained bit by bit which creatures waited in

each of them and if they should and could be caught. And then he described the oldest ways he knew that people had once fished these places. He described sets of families digging out sections of the beach, waiting for the tide to surge over the sand and then pull back, and then searching the burrowed pools for what had been trapped there. He described how with bare feet a person wading through a bayou could feel for the hard ridges of a turtle and then dive to pull it to the surface or how a group of people in a line could wade a shallow oxbow lake separated from a river and thrash and beat the water until the fish crowded one end so much that a person there could reach his hands in and toss the fish onto the shore. And he explained how in bayous swimmers could reach beneath rocks or inside sunken trees and with their hands catch a fish waiting silently and still but always willing to clench to some hand tempting its mouth.

Then he raised his hands before him and began showing us how to grip our thumbs and forefingers into the soft depressions on the fish, gaps just behind the fish's skull that were good places to take hold. He explained that we would be able to feel the empty notches beneath the skin and squeezing there that we could pull the fish from the water and carry it over the bank, though its body still would be glassy and slick. And with his gestures, he showed us how to pierce the lower jaw with a branch to hang it from a tree, and how and where to slice the skin before pulling it straight down and off the body, and then where and why to open its belly, and how to use our fingers as a spoon to rid it of all its unwanted insides. And his words went on until the end of the class when everyone rose and walked out, not in silence but in that heavy hushed movement and speech people take on when they've been witness to something unused, like an old way of making a fire or divining water in the ground, but still necessary, if only to prove the length people have belonged to a place.

In a way, I guess I was happy because I knew all the words he said that day would change him. I knew it would make him not sag his shoulders so much or not tuck his chin into his chest. And the next time we had class, I knew when he walked in he was different, that his body wasn't so small and sunken as it had been and that he wasn't being so careful anymore and that he could, if he wanted, do something stupid or brave or out of the blue. And for a moment, I guess, I was

glad. And he wasn't in his desk long. The professor asked him to the front of the class, and then he wasn't in his desk, and it all was different and would never be the same. You could tell.

The professor brought him up and stood him in front of us. He was broad and unsure and the sun had turned him as rigid and russet as a penny. He would put one hand in his pocket and shift his weight in that direction and then remove it and place the other hand in his pocket and shift in that direction, trying to shorten himself and hide his natural size by leaning but really only making those of us sitting feel like nervous passengers in a little boat when some showoff starts rocking it and doesn't even know how quickly his weight and motion can turn the boat over. He tucked his chin deep inside his chest again and nailed his eyes to the floor. The hair on his arms looked like black netting and his ridged eyebrows made his face seem pronounced and as hard as a piece of oak.

And this is where the professor started—how his brow jutted out and his eyes were deep-set, primordial, and predatory. The professor compared his jaw to ancient and obsolete grinding stones and explained to the class the weight of his shoulders and their disposition for swinging stone tools. He pointed to the arms and legs that were of a single size and lacked the delicacies of wrists and ankles and all the fine movement needed for art or writing or dance. A body perfectly built to hunt and to hurt, the professor told us, and then said, "It's a living model of a Neanderthal," and I saw them for the first time, could see into them and could gauge them as his head lifted higher and higher, and their flecks began to gather the room's light with a sureness and fixity that was as old as water and as vital.

*Caroline Chavatel*

# Candy

His name was burden.

He said he was looking for his drone.
He invited them down the alley, tried
to bait them with sugar, technology.

He was holding a remote control

and he was holding a knife
and he was holding—

I think we stunt history by slipping
into our parents, that my father is only trying to
conjure his as each syllable descends on the table—

fricatives in his teeth, the ideas for teeth in those.

He said he was looking for his drone,
and then he stabbed her. And then he
stabbed her daughter's son in the shoulder.

My father's father used to sit in old hours
and edit The Sun with red pen. In the most ordinary
way he would say, too liberal. I sometimes think he was
afraid he'd be forgotten if he played along.

Then Aros lived up to his name,
and carried himself down Oakley.

In Latin, he is glowing white. Her
name is both the snake and wheel.

Some children found the drone
in a neighbor's yard.

Shannon Ratliff

# The Man on the Moon

### *Discovery*

The Moon will not be caught or lassoed, and this is the first lie children are told. When someone promises to pull the Moon down for you, do not believe them. It cannot be done.

Among wars, America pushes against her seams. Teenage boys sit in movie palace chairs so stiff their hips ache when they leave and watch John Wayne rise like Zeus from the screen. Horseback adventures, treasure to be taken, women to be had, golden suns setting across the West, guns slinging back inside holsters with smoke still moving from black powder barrels.

When Neil Armstrong was a boy, he saw a honey bee drown in its quarry and realized how deep the sticky pit of desire could be. He constructed wings from oak branches on a tree-lined Ohio street, he greased his new baseball mitt, baked it in the oven, laced up his sneakers.

He was too young to know that he would be magnificent, but he would be handsome yet. There are so few frontiers left for boy Neil, there is so little left that is unknown. But he knows differently—there is something heavy hanging over us, and some say that it tastes like cheese.

Later, an Eagle Scout at sixteen, Neil looks toward the sky. The fresh ink of an earned pilot's license dries surrounded by the billowing grass of an Ohio airfield, father smiling proudly on. The driver's license comes later.

I catch him in this moment, observe him, entranced in the transformation of boys absorbing dreams that sink into bone marrow for navigational purposes later in life, when bike tires become truck tires, when cotton shirts become United States Navy uniforms.

How do I tell him that I love him as he drifts so far from us toward the gravitational pull of the Moon? I hear him promising to bring the Moon home

with him, tug it from the stars, set it at my feet. To me, he smells like demolition, a street lined with hoisted pianos. One mechanical malfunction. A picnic on an anthill. Wet fire kindling. I want him, all of him, so much of this desire is cyclical. I could tell him now that he will gain the Moon, but what will he dream of then?

I am dreaming of him on a plane ride north, and when we touch down, the passengers fidget. The aircraft slows, taxis its way to the terminal where we all must wait for the doors to be secured before opening once again. Bags thunking from overhead compartments, fingertips picking the tops of seats, feet tapping in unsteady rhythms. This thick impatience fills me, and I stand with them. I wrap my scarf around my neck because there is snow on the ground, and I have forgotten what the icy winter feels like on my cheeks, untouched by frost in the months I have spent in the Southwest.

I move with this impatience because I will be trampled, left behind if I do not. But I turn—see Neil there, sitting where I was. Table tray down, scribbling out math equations on gridded paper in pencil, taking advantage of each lasting second. I am in love with him because I could once imagine myself like him, note-taking, speeding toward something looming and briny.

But the girlhood fascination left me two weeks ago when the beehives spilled over the highway and I watched the swarms fly out into the air, uncaged. The beekeepers ran, trying to collect the bees, hustle them into the overturned truck. But they were too late. There was too much ambition in the air; the honeybees were flying too quickly to be stopped.

Neil tugs at my wrist when it's time to move down the aisle of the plane toward winter. I still love him anyways.

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The stories of Edwards Air Force base swim around us as we step into the hallway and see the photographs. The first clamoring of space reaches Neil and the public, seems an impossibility. He applies to the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, the high-speed flight station, because he knows something that I do not.

He stands next to me in the hallway, points to a photo of the Joshua trees. He holds the longest X-15 flight in time and distance from the ground track. Returning from a practice flight, he swings too far, too fast, misses the landing. Over the radio, Neil tells the flight controller he wants to see the trees. He travels farther and farther until he is forty miles south. He turns back, lands on the far side of the base, does not strike a single Joshua tree in the field.

Neil phones the Armstrong home in 1962, tells his father of his selection one week before he is announced be a part of NASA's New Nine. The nine men who will take us to the Moon. He goes home each night to his wife, speaks unceremoniously of the particulars and excitedly of the shuttle. On the Moon, he knows, nothing is washed away. The rock does not fold back on itself.

He tells his wife: *Everything that touches the surface will stay.*

I still wait because I am still in love. My body is a hymn that Armstrong wasn't baptized to sing, a springboard for his words made heavy on mathematical terms. He speaks of John Wayne to himself at night when the kitchen light roars bright, pencil swinging between fingers like a black powder prop in dexterous hands, illuminating equations that can be no more than three-fifths of an inch wrong. He thinks that when it rains the sky is opening for him, for his catapulting out to the Sea of Tranquility.

He places his hands flat on the buttoned boards in the control room time and time again, waiting for his countdown. He feels the engines whirring into something that sounds like the harmonica openings of the Wayne Westerns—those old films he watched at the movie palace when he thought the highest he could ever go was the clouds, that there was nothing beyond there, and the thrill of the pilot's license meant more than driving a car on highways set like strips of duct tape across the landscape.

Everything I learned of survival, I learned from him. I adjust my body into the cool spots around the bed, I rub out the imprints of my clothing on my skin each night. I miss him, but I do not know why. I eat olives from the jar for breakfast and

let the salt burn my lips, my fingertips. I feel his gaze lingering too long at night when he begs me to turn off the light. I keep it on just a little longer than he asks. I cannot bear to do what he tells me, when he tells me. His irritation feels like lustful pins sticking into the nape of my neck, this desire is thick, slow, tastes like honey.

I ask Neil important questions like: in space do you think our bones would stay buried on the Moon? Will you leave something just to prove you were there? If you yell in space, does it reverberate forever? Will you abandon us all, Neil, when you return home?

My timeline on loving him is all wrong, weaving in and out of the myths he left behind. There is no order to this phantom feeling. I do not know exactly when I found him, except that maybe he was always there, waiting for me at the end of a farm road detour.

He speaks to everyone and no one; he will do this for the rest of his life. There is an excitement blooming, conversations behind closed doors deciding who will exit first, who will be the first man on the Moon. They tell him, *yes, it will be you, Mr. Armstrong*, and do not tell him why. His reluctance to be anything more than Neil Armstrong is palpable. Yet, he nods his head, agrees with his superiors.

He doesn't even have a master's, his thesis remained unfinished after he was elected to the New Nine. He feels costumed, like John Wayne. He talks to himself on the car rides home from the station and later, during his walks while in quarantine before the trip. He is conflicted—he believes in a higher power, but he does not know who.

How can I tell him that I hear him? That I know what he will leave behind there in that Texas summertime will stay to meet me. He is in a snow globe on my bedside, and I watch his future unfold. Would I tell him to turn back or charge forward? He will keep his humility, but lose his faith.

### *Americana*

What Neil left on the Moon:

Gas stations with metal art installations, dinosaurs on the roof. Pencil-drawn arrows in the margins of library books. Movie Palace seats. Holding Janet's hand. John Wayne, the smell of gunpowder. Newspaper route, blue bicycle. Winter air

in coal towns. Naval Aviator uniform, crisp, starched. Televisions in wood casings. Black coffee. Blonde girls, red striped swimsuits. Coney Island hot dogs. Football spinning on a college desk. How to field strip an M1 rifle. Stalks of corn strangling the clouds. Hawaii license plate on Ohio streets. Spaghetti dinners on TV trays. Dancing in the gym. Mud-soaked jeans, steel-toed boots. A Chevy without air bags, anti-lock brakes. Hank Williams in the doghouse. Whiskey and rye. Pink carnation, pickup truck. Servicemen with only one night of leave.

A field of Joshua trees, unstruck. Emergency evacuation plans. Cuban Missile Crisis. White paper gridded, blue lines. Calculations three-fifths of an inch wrong. Phantom scent of burnt flesh. Humming computers vibrating the desks. Antiseptic in doctor's office, dentist's chair. Bomb drill. Midnight diner dinner. Ballpoint pen click in the control room. Thick, hellish Texas summertime. Florida swamp, alligator on the roadside. One camera. Oak branches for airplane wings.

What I found:

John Wayne's leather vest at the Smithsonian. Pink skirt-suit, blood spattered, pillbox hat. Static electricity, blue sparks on blanket. Bathroom mirror, fogged. Single snow globe with spaceship inside. The levee was dry. Sequined cowboy boots, $973. Turquoise and yellow food trucks. Amity Island. Pink eraser shavings, stuck to denim. Jeep Wrangler, desert road. Song of the South. Willie Nelson's two braids, red bandana. Bloody Mary Morning. Crochet guitar strap. The marching band refused to yield. Gilded astronaut-shaped awards. Video killed the radio star. Buy the world a Coke. Glass table, credit card scrape, dollar bill roll. Ripped black tights. Red lipstick smeared over freckled lips. Dewy Grey Goose bottles. Dirk Diggler. Midnight Cowboy. Handlebar mustache.

If it keeps on raining, the levee's going to break. Rocky Mountain Way. Crushed beer can, splitting thumb. Banana-flavored condoms. Campfires at the reservoir. White cotton dress, wooden platform sandals. Sprained ankle, purple, blue. Saltwater crushing sandcastles. The Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost. Fruit flavored cigarette smoke. Budweiser swimsuit. They caught the last train for the

coast. Black liquid eyeliner, white pillowcases. Peach orchards. Busted lip. The White Horse. Marshmallow melting on fingertips, smeared across collarbones. Grow old with me. Broken glass bottles tossed over balconies.

American woman—
stay away from me.

### *Squandering*

He lived quietly, seamlessly in the shards of history. He needle-pricked a single spacesuit pocket, carried a Moon rock home with him, locked it in a desk drawer. He held it, licked it when he wanted to feel closer to dying.

Armstrong, have you forsaken me yet? School children know your name, cite the date of the landing from memory for credit on tests, and yet they do not know you. I can't remember you sans spacesuit, sans brilliant clip of the gray, pocked Moon. The Medal of Freedom, the Congressional Space Medal of Honor, honorary doctorates from uncountable universities graced the walls of your study. What is it that you learned?

I know your eyes turned to ember in 1986 as the Challenger burst, too full of ambition and more fresh hope than the atmosphere could handle. And again in 2003, when the Columbia never made it home. We dug thick graves in your name, Armstrong, but we did not attend your funeral. Do you forgive me? Could you? Buried at sea, in the Atlantic, I taste you every time my toes touch the surf.

A confession for you now, Neil. Of all the things I did in the summer you died, amidst all of the cowboys I slept next to or with or against, of all the cheap beer I spilled down white cotton dresses from stumbling down dark farm roads toward something looming and briny, of all these things, Neil, there is still the steaming August day in the house built the year you were born on the coast of the sea. I emptied the attic of the old top-floor apartment I rented because I promised the landlady I would because she was forgetting things, like where her own house was and the color of John Wayne's eyes and those eyes mattered to her at some point in her girlhood, Neil. Just like his dusty cowboy hat did to you.

I threw away everything like she asked: the old moth-eaten blankets, the empty yellowed wine bottles, the chocolate chip cookie recipes, the wooden crate file cabinets of papers, receipts, and old news that she thought would mean something one day. And that's where I found you, Neil, two days after you died. The headline so simple. *Man on the Moon*, the Centre County Times of State College, Pennsylvania, July 1969. Your name in smaller print toward the top of the page and I knew from then on you probably would not leave me.

When you disappeared into your cave of anonymity, when you stopped giving autographs because they were being sold, when you sued your barber for selling locks of your hair, Armstrong, the world could not understand what it was you were hiding from. But in your deep sleep after I turned out the light, I heard your voice rising above the darkness, over and over.

*I do not want to be responsible for the others.*

Perhaps it was because you, too, had forgotten the color of John Wayne's eyes or the kind of black powder prop he used when he was aiming to revenge his father. Every movie set, every vest with fringe, every nickel it cost you. You were an idol, too, Neil. Did you forget how much you once meant? Or did you never notice at all?

Sympathy is easy, Armstrong. The world knows how to peer downward. But you needed empathy, and that, the public decided, was too much to give. Eye-level with tragedy—but you could manage it. You saw the brutal Earth turn tender as you spun in Apollo 11. You could not reconcile the quiet blue with the red of spilled blood, the yellow of famine, the green of disease. You saw the edge of the knife blur, and as you spun back toward your home, you saw it sharpen again. I was waiting for favorable conditions to admit: maybe I was wrong in believing your faith would leave you, but what you learned as you spun around the distant blue marble, is that favorable conditions do not come. It is only us and the unbearable nothingness beyond.

Perhaps your quietest desire of all, Neil, was not where you went—but where you lay. The moon may not be caught or lassoed; it moves with the sea.

*Carrie Fountain*

# Masha Eventually

At first, I couldn't decide if I should call the bear *it*
or if I should call the bear *him*. At first, this distinction

was important to me, and because it was a problem
I could solve entirely within my own body, I worked on it

daily, like a chore, until everything inside me was arranged
in neat columns: pile of clean laundry, stack of clean dishes.

I'd gotten myself into this mess I could hear my grandmother
saying from her own reprehensible century. Now I'd pay the price

of my girlhood, as all women must. Okay, I thought, maybe
this is a rite of passage. I was, after all, a woman in the eyes

of the bear. And so in the eyes of the bear I tried to find
the moral of my story. But I never did. Too often I blacked out,

the pain and fear ripping through my woman's body,
exposing the girl's bones beneath, the girl's blood, upon which

the ships of this world had for so long been kept afloat. The sun
coming through the clean windows in the morning was still

sometimes enough to make me glow with happiness. But even that
became disgusting, eventually: that weakness in me, that beauty.

One evening I checked to see if the problem was solved, but found
I couldn't remember why I'd cared. The answer had slipped

from my grasp. One moment I was beating the rugs, coming to
a conclusion, the next I was washing the teapot, thinking of exactly

nothing. That's when I knew it didn't matter. The bear was an *it*—
a dumb thing with needs and teeth, a thing into the hand of which

I could climb and from which I could stay hidden if it didn't find me
and eat me first, bone and blood, hair and clothing. I liked imagining

the look of wonder on my grandmother's face as she opened
the door to see me there, returned. I took my chances.

*Nicholas Wong*

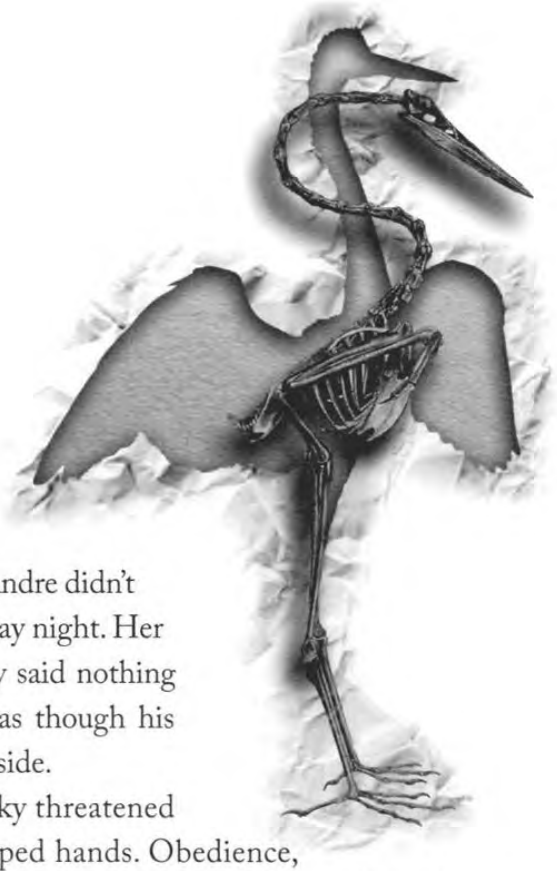
# That I Say Nationalism is a Tote Bag and I Carry it with Me is Neither a Hyperbole

nor a trend. Not that my scaphoid
will fracture or my fame will be down
in the drainage otherwise, but receipts
are calm territories. No refund guarantee.
Sometimes I find myself huddling
in the tote, as if to make space
for someone's expectation. Say hello
to stripes, modern chic and gothic cool.
She morphs. Her strap, capable
of strangers, is a source of friction.
Wear her cross-bodily in evening
scenarios that require two free hands:
dolphin planks at the gym, then entering
men, then into a realm in which doubts bloom
fast at last. Doubt because she sees
herself as high fashion. Because her ego
starts making holes to lose my keys
every time I join a march. At home,
we do not see each other much.
Reaching a certain age, she is gridlocked
between finding solutions and convincing
herself of the problem. The sight
of her repulses me. She wonders
why my heart has turned blade-sharp.
I wish to tell her street fashion feels

the grassroots, and my blade is good
at C-sectioning the paradox that *we live*
*together, but we live far apart.* Sleep
as the best way to not think of divided
spaces. There are nights I hear beads
falling between the walls. It is the dead
left wing, some say, flicking out marbles
in the safest distance. Then they stitch
what they knock out in our sleep.

*Jamel Brinkley*

# A Family



Curtis Smith watched from across the street as the boy argued with Lena Johnson in front of the movie theater. She had probably bought tickets for the wrong movie. Or maybe Andre didn't want to see any movie with his mother on a Friday night. Her expression went from pleading to irate. The boy said nothing more. With his head taking on weight, hung as though his neck couldn't hold it, he followed as she went inside.

It was a chilly evening in November, the sky threatened by rain. Curtis blew warm breath into his cupped hands. Obedience, he thought, he could talk to the boy about that. He'd been making a list of topics they could discuss. The question of obedience was right for a boy of fifteen, when the man he would become was beginning to erupt out of him like horns. Though sometimes it was important to *disobey*. Curtis had known this since he was younger than the boy was now. Twelve years in prison hadn't changed that, and so Curtis was here, doing what his mother had asked him that morning not to do anymore. He'd been seen watching Andre and Lena, and his mother's friends were gossiping about what they saw. Maybe Curtis still had a grudge against Lena, they said, or maybe he simply couldn't let go of the past. He didn't care what his mother or her friends said. A man decided his own way, and there came a time when a boy growing into his manhood had to as well. *Unless your balls haven't dropped yet.* Curtis could say that to the boy, teasing him the way he and the boy's father, Marvin Caldwell, used to tease each other when they were young. Marvin dreamed most vividly of everything he would do for his mother one day, but even he knew to disobey her.

Curtis took a last look at the names of the movies and tried to guess which one Andre might have wanted to see, which one Lena would have chosen instead. He counted his money. He'd only spent twelve of the forty dollars his mother had left for him, so he decided to get a bite to eat while he waited for the movie to end.

At the Downtown Bar and Grill, an old favorite, he ordered a hamburger and soda. Refills were no longer free, so Curtis kept asking for glasses of water. From where he sat he could still see the brilliance of the marquee.

The rain began before Andre and Lena came out of the theater, but they took a walk anyway. Curtis followed them. Lena opened an umbrella that was large enough for two, but as they strolled along the promenade Andre kept drifting away from her, exposing his body to the cold drizzle. Lena stopped at a bench and used a piece of newspaper to wipe it dry. Andre maintained a distance from her when they sat. Curtis stalled for a few moments, and then settled near the middle of the next bench. A large trashcan partially blocked his view of them, but he could hear their conversation.

"Your daddy liked to come out here," Lena was saying.

"You told me that before," Andre said. Curtis had been following them for weeks, but had rarely been this close. He'd never heard them talk about Marvin.

"Well, it's nice, isn't it? Look at that view."

Andre gestured at the rain. "I can't see nothing."

Curtis had been out on the promenade several times since he'd been released from prison. There was plenty to see, he thought. A great, unseen hand depressed the keys of the city, sounding notes held constant in the many windows, a thousand little squares of humming light. These seemed to float independently, since the tall buildings themselves, their outlines obscured, were indistinguishable from the black enamel seal of the sky. The night grew more thickly clouded by storm, but in the shifting bands of reflected light from the bridge and the city, Curtis could see the surface of the river alive and puckered like so many restless mouths. Given all the nights he'd spent here since getting out, it felt like a triumph that he no longer thought of feeding himself to the water.

"Why we out here, Ma?" Andre asked. "It's wet. I'm cold."

"It's not so bad under the umbrella."

"Can we go?"

"I just thought you'd like to stay out a while longer. Might as well enjoy it now. I need you to be at home tomorrow."

"For what?"

"You know how the girls from work go out to Temptations after our shift," Lena said. "Well, this time they finally invited me."

"Tomorrow's Saturday, Ma."

"I know what day it is. And I need to you be at home. For my peace of mind."

"While you out shaking your ass at the club."

"What'd you say, boy?"

"Nothing," Andre said. "I'm cold." He stood and started walking back the way they'd come.

Lena chased after him, sounding pathetic as she called his name.

Curtis didn't follow. After a while, he got up and strolled along the promenade in the direction of the Brooklyn Bridge. The only other person he saw was a man with an unsettling face. The man's bouts of muttering formed clouds that flowered like visible emblems of his secret language before being pulled apart by the wind. But it was the way this man's hands jumped within his dirty coat as he shuffled along that marked him as dangerous and insane. Curtis had been both of these things, in those months after Marvin died in the fire. Those months before Curtis went to prison. It was danger lurking in the man's left pocket, he suspected, and insanity leaping around in the right. He liked the feeling of their passing him by.

Curtis huffed the name of his long departed friend—*my dead friend*, he told himself soberly—so he could see the wind take it, imagining that it too, along with the words steaming from the man's mouth, drifted off and seeded the East River. The river was badly polluted, but he liked it anyway. It flowed in either direction, reaching both ways until it licked the sea. As the man prattled on, now some distance away, Curtis again said Marvin's name, which rose from his lips and hovered there for a moment, clean as an unstrung bone.

He might have also said the name of the dead woman, the one he had struck with his car, the one who intruded on his dreams. But his life was for other things now, he'd been desperately telling himself, beautiful and wondrous things.

The rain began turning to sleet, the sound of it an exhalation steadily hushing the world. Curtis indulged his sense of feeling contained but not

trapped. Under the capacious dome of sky he was free, but bounded, so his newly freed limbs wouldn't fly apart. As much as he wanted to stay there on the promenade—often he stayed until the spell of night began to break—the sleet was penetrating his slicker and the thin coat he wore underneath. His hands and feet were already numb. Curtis shivered. It wouldn't make any damn sense to get out of the clink just to turn around and catch his death of cold. He walked quickly to keep the chill from settling into his muscle and marrow.

The next night, Curtis walked along Atlantic Avenue, not far from the movie theater and the Downtown Bar and Grill. It was eleven o'clock and he was enjoying the bustle and breadth of the thoroughfare. He was still amazed at how much had changed: the number of fancy restaurants and wine stores now. Then again, many of the old bars remained. And the new nightclubs were just the old nightclubs with different names.

An empty bus made its way past, the driver lit against its dark frame like an insect stuck in amber. On the corner stood a white woman trying in vain to hail a medallion cab, and Curtis stood beside her, as though waiting to cross the street. She wasn't dressed for the weather, wearing only a trim jacket and a scarf over her short dress. Her uncovered head twitched, shaking her cropped hair from her lips; her legs were thin but shapely, the color of rich cream. She was what Marvin used to call a "slim goody." Curtis imagined how soft the inside of her thighs would be. He imagined her open mouth.

It had been a long time since he'd had sex with anyone but himself, with his own clutching hand. In those first years in prison, he kept an old black-and-white picture of the actress Marpessa Dawn taped to the wall. Following those first years of her smiling in the swimming pool came explicit pictures of women opening their shiny, hairless bodies to the camera. When he first got out of prison he bought a couple of magazines with centerfolds, but then he discovered how easily videos could be found on his mother's computer. He still liked that picture of the actress in the pool most of all.

The white woman's phone began ringing, and she greeted the caller, apparently her mother, the simple words strained by her tone of heavy familiarity. The second Curtis heard her speak, a feeling of exhaustion overcame him; she reminded him, for some reason, of the woman he had struck with his car. But if that woman had been white, Curtis knew, he would still be in prison, with many more years there ahead of him. To get away from the voice now whining into the phone, he jogged across the street.

In front of Temptations, three men were lined up behind a black velvet rope. The bouncer wore dark glasses and appeared to have no intention of letting the three in. Curtis took his place in line as the first man began to complain.

"Come on now, chief. We been waiting out here for a minute."

"Damn near a half hour," another said. "Say it straight."

"And the hawk is *out*, big man. Come on."

The bouncer said nothing. Another man got in line behind Curtis as a livery taxi pulled up. Three women got out and were followed by Lena Johnson, an afterthought. The bouncer wasted no time letting them in.

Waiting with the other men in line gave Curtis plenty of time to reconsider going in, even after Lena's arrival. In fact, he tried to change his mind, calling up reasons he should—images of the promenade, of the white woman on the corner—but it was Lena's nyloned legs emerging from the taxi that were lit up on the stage of his mind. Moving slowly in a sapphire dress, she trailed the other women. The shock of seeing her dolled up was slight, but after she vanished through the door, every scene that proceeded on the stage of his mind featured the nylons and the sapphire dress and ended in foolishness. He kept thinking about Andre imagining these scenes unfold or trying to decipher his mother's face tomorrow during the broadcasts of Sunday afternoon football. The boy needed to be spared his mother's small tragedies.

About fifteen minutes later, the bouncer announced to the men that it would be a ten-dollar cover to get in, speaking as if they had only just arrived. He examined Curtis's clothes doubtfully before admitting him. Curtis wore jeans, but they weren't that dirty; the real problem was that he had on work boots instead of what Marvin would have called "slippery earls." This outfit

wouldn't have gotten him into the places they used to frequent, back in the days when they used fake IDs.

"Good luck, playboy," the bouncer said. He stepped aside to let Curtis through the curtains. "Your broke ass gonna need it."

The nightclub had two floors. Curtis didn't spot Lena on the ground level, so he went down to the basement. He took a seat at the bar that gave him a good view of the room and recognized certain features: the low ceiling with its copper tiles, the four pillars that marked the boundary of the dance floor. He and Marvin had been here before, when there was only a basement level. The place used to be called Nelson's.

Curtis had extra money from an odd job helping his mother's neighbor move some boxes, plus what was left of yesterday's forty dollars. It was easier than he thought it would be to order a bourbon. The words didn't get stuck; the bartender didn't stare. The taste of the drink closed his eyes and warmed him from his throat to his navel.

The music blasting in the club sounded like pure racket, but this wasn't new. While he liked some of the rap other boys listened to when they were growing up, Curtis was always drawn to older music, songs from the sixties and seventies. *All right, old man.* Marvin had a great time teasing him about this. *Look at the old head tryna get his groove!* He'd mock Curtis by bending over and holding his lower back, two-stepping with an imaginary cane.

Lena and her friends were already out there shaking their bodies, each with a drink in hand. Some new dances must have caught on from the music videos. As he watched, Curtis felt he was a man true to better times. He returned to the problem of Andre, how he'd manage to talk to the boy and what his first words would be. After a while, a tall man in a suit came up behind Lena and began to whisper in her ear. She laughed. Soon she had backed herself into him and they were fused in body and time. She pursed her lips and slapped her thigh with her free hand as they danced. Although he and Lena were the same age, thirty-five, Curtis was upset to see her carrying on like this. Feeling sorry for the boy and, somehow, for Marvin, he wished he had just gone to the promenade. He ordered another bourbon.

Lena and the man in the suit talked for a while at a different side of the bar. He had bought her another drink, but the smile was gone from her eyes. She seemed much less engaged now that they weren't dancing. The man must have noticed this too. He tried to pull her back onto the dance floor, but she refused. The man tried a few more times and then his mouth turned cruel. He appeared to curse at Lena before he walked away.

She stood at the bar for a while, staring into her drink. Then she tossed it back, the entire pour, and drew from her purse a thin cigarette that looked cold in her brown fingers. She said something to one of the women she'd come in with and went past Curtis upstairs. For a moment it seemed that her gaze had fallen on him, but in places like this people's eyes darted everywhere. He followed her. From the entrance, he saw her smoking out near the curb. Her coat was still checked inside and with her purse pinned under her arm she held herself, trembling against the cold. She dropped her cigarette and watched it smolder and die on the ground. She could have been some kind of bird staring down from a high perch, wings pinched against her blue body, refusing to fly.

"Hey playboy," the bouncer said. "You leaving or what? It's in or out, my man."

As Lena took out another cigarette and began the drama of lighting it, Curtis walked back into the club. He stayed on the ground floor this time, where the music seemed not quite as loud. Sipping from his third bourbon, he thought about how easy it had been to go from his first to his third, and beyond, on the night the girl was struck by his car. Dismissing this, he wondered instead about what Andre was doing, if he too was taking advantage of his freedom or compounding the little tragedies of the night by sitting timidly at home. A boy his age should be in the world, seeing as much as he could claim or aspire to. He should be terrified by the new sensation of a girl's modest breasts in his hands, by the new sensation of her hands in his jeans, not by thoughts of his mother in a short dress playing at youth out here in the drunkenness of night. They were thirty-five, yes, but they were old. The boy was still young and he had his father's face. Curtis had gotten close enough to see that. His face was the same, but his fate wouldn't be.

Curtis smelled the tobacco on her breath before he felt her cold hand on his shoulder.

"You might as well come on," Lena said.

When he spun around on his barstool to look at her, she grabbed his drink and finished it in one swift motion. "Come on and dance with me," she said.

He allowed her to lead him to the dance floor, less crowded than the one downstairs. He bent his knees, searching for their bodies' fit—it turned out he hadn't forgotten this, how to accommodate the body of woman. They danced to old lovers' rock. Her breasts were crushed against his ribs, his leg planted between hers. She held his shoulder and rode his hip. He touched a hand to her back and found skin there, exposed and sweaty.

She was clearly drunk, and he, with the bourbon at work in his blood, had the impression that he was anonymous to her. He wished he could vanish on the spot and leave her to her phantom, but something begged him to stay. It didn't seem sexual—his body had yet to respond in that way to hers—so, he told himself, it had to be his obligation to the boy. But it felt like something more bewildering than an obligation. The yearning didn't belong to him, and it didn't belong to her either. It was beyond either of them, he felt, so it claimed them both. It was as though a bright delicate object they couldn't see, some filament, were held between them, along the length of her sapphire dress stretched taut by his thigh, the spark of it hot where he carried her on his hip, moving her in the rhythm of his stationary stride, and they had no choice but to pull each other close, to preserve the object between them, otherwise it would drift free and fall and lose its light. The exhilaration of her breathing and her slim clutching thighs and her hand pulling on his shoulder were the forces she exerted on him, and he carried her with his hip and his knees bent and his back dimly aching, but all that mattered was the fragile wire pressed between them, lit by something they could neither face nor abandon.

This feeling of being stuck persisted, and Curtis was horrified by it. When the long set of lovers' rock ended and released them, he averted his eyes from the sapphire dress going loose again between Lena's thighs. He knew of nothing else to do but go back to the bar and order another drink, and when she followed him there he ordered one for her as well. It was what anyone in the role of her phantom would do. Her drink was cooled by a sculpted sphere of ice that had the look of perfection and permanence, a little moon displayed in glass. When Lena drank she did so deeply, and the moon slid,

and it wet the tip of her nose. Curtis's drink had no ice. When he took it up he tilted it so the liquor fell just short of his lips and he could inhale its heat before drinking.

What did she see when she looked at him? Added weight had rounded his face, and a beard darkened it. His hair had receded above the temples so that a blunt arrow pointed down at his nose. What would Marvin look like now if he were alive?

Curtis avoided Lena's eyes, hoping the rest of their time together would pass like this—in silence. He tried to lose himself in the music that was playing, but it wouldn't permit him access; its borders were dense, its patterns impossible to predict.

"I know who you are," Lena said. "You."

Curtis was overcome with a feeling that by entering this place he had once known, he had also elected for so much more. He sat and was helpless. Everything around him—the music, the carnal laughter, the spinning stellar lights—all of it was a frenzy. He'd forgotten this basic truth, that freedom was a wilderness.

There was no place for them to go. He explained that he was living with his mother for a little while, listened as Lena said that her son was at home. Then she surprised Curtis by suggesting they get a room. Just for a couple of hours, she said. She was lonely. It wasn't all that late yet. The nightclub itself would be open until four, and her son knew not to expect her home until after that. He'd already be asleep anyway, and she'd still wake up before he did. "All that boy's worried about is having his breakfast ready in the morning," she said. She told him she made pancakes and bacon on Sundays.

Curtis hadn't expected the drinks to be so expensive, so only six dollars remained in his pocket. His dignity would have been one reason to tell Lena no. Andre was another, but he was a reason to say yes too. Getting mixed up in her night wasn't the best way to get closer to the boy, but it might be the only way.

"I spent all the money I had on me," he said.

"Don't worry," Lena said. "I got it."

Their motel was called The Galaxy Inn. A strange smell hung in the air of their room, which was nearly as small as his cell had been. A coat of silver paint

had been recently applied to the walls, but there was something else, an organic pungency. Little effort had been made to mask the presence of former occupants. There were useless dials on the walls, mysterious blinking lights. Curtis felt trapped in some television show from the sixties, a science fiction program he watched in syndication as a child.

Lena lay next to Curtis with her back to him. She was abruptly calm, abruptly still. He couldn't even hear the sound of her breathing. He'd been surprised by her wildness, which exceeded his. The rough sheet covered her to the waist, displaying her long neck and the slick coins of her spine. Curtis felt the urge to yank the spine out of her, to scatter those coins all over the bed and catch a true glimpse of her inner workings under the room's dimmed bulbs of winey light.

"I should go soon," Lena said. "See about my son."

"Tell me about him."

She sat up. "Andre?"

"That boy's asleep. You got time."

She studied his face. "What's in that head of yours?"

Curtis shrugged and made himself hold her hand. "Come on, tell me a little something."

Lena began hesitantly, but her initial vague description of her son eventually turned into a long complaint about her challenges with him, how easily she seemed to make him upset. He was a good child, she said, but their relationship was worsening and it was difficult to manage things on her own. "It's not just that he's a teenager," she said. "It's more than that."

"He's probably just girl-crazy," he said.

"Uh-uh, I don't think so," she said, and went on, speaking with more kindness about him now.

When she was done, Curtis insisted on giving his view of things. The question of obedience was on his mind, but nothing he said was profound. Still, Lena listened to everything he said and seemed thoughtful when he fell silent again.

"You know," she told him, "if it was my boy you were interested in, there were easier ways than sniffing after my behind. You could've just walked up to him on the street and told him who you were."

Curtis straightened against the headboard. To him that sounded like the most difficult thing in the world. "I was just looking out for Marvin's people, that's all." He felt embarrassed, a little angry. "I know it's not the usual way," he added.

Lena shook her head. "Look at you," she said. "I know you been gone, but you not invisible. People talk. I got eyes."

"How long have you known?"

"Long enough to think plenty on whether to do anything about it."

Curtis gestured at the blinking walls of the room, a tired old version of the future. He gestured down at the bed. "This what you decided to do about it?"

"Well, you were there, sniffing as usual," Lena said. "I had my notions, and you just happened to be the one. I knew you were safe. And I figured you'd go along with it."

He yanked off the sheet and exposed the full nakedness of his body. He sprang from the bed and glared down at her.

"I'm all done with that," she told him, "so you can put it away now."

"I'm not somebody you know," Curtis said. "I never was."

She rubbed the edge of the sheet between her fingers. "Look, I'm gonna go. You can stay the rest of the night if you want, if you don't want to sleep at your mama's house." She rose from the bed and watched him for a few moments, frowning. "You don't know me either," she said, and began to dress.

Curtis left not long after Lena did. No need to stay and stare at a dead end. Night was starting to drain from the edges of the sky, but he didn't go directly to his mother's house. Walking restored him when he was upset, helped him regain his focus, even before he went to prison, and now he savored it much more, despite the times he was harassed by cops. As adolescents he and Marvin would often stay out late, sometimes until dawn, romping all over Brooklyn. Marvin preferred walking or taking the bus to the half-blind underground careening of the subway. He liked taking different routes, preferring the slightest deviations or even dangerous blocks or neighborhoods to what he would have called the "same old, same old." But he did like the promenade.

When the two boys went there together and gazed out at the protruding jaw of the city, they spoke most openly of their desires. Marvin spoke as if the days and years to come were nothing but a cycle of restoration. "I'm gonna get my mother a house," he'd always say. This was his favorite thing. Not only would he pay off her considerable debts, he would do this too. The house he imagined buying for her was like a place he'd already been in, stepping past furniture bought from her catalogues and out to the little vegetable garden she'd keep. Looking up with her past the white slats to the blue roof where the birds would be rebuilding their nest. "She wouldn't want the birds there," he said once. "But I do. They do all the things I like."

Marvin spoke of girls as if he weren't a virgin, as if he knew a thing about the frightening business of female nudity and of sex, which Curtis understood was animal and floral: the odd nosing around, the smells and the sap, the near-violence of fingernails and coarse hair, the peeling back of language to a hard core, like the spiked stones of peaches the boys used to throw at stray dogs.

Then, for reasons Curtis never understood, Marvin got stuck on the idea of Lena Johnson. He talked about her constantly, and soon the boys' wanderings through the borough began to circle her old neighborhood, not far from where Curtis was walking now. There was the basketball court—still there, Curtis knew—where Marvin kept insisting they go, despite the busted rims.

One spring day they saw her there. She came from across the street and began to stroll the sidewalk along the length of the court, lifting her hand to take languid pulls from a cigarette. Marvin raced over with an odd look on his face, his hands in loose fists. He was carrying little rocks swelled and blanched by the sun, as though he wanted to roll them at her like gifts through the openings in the chain-link fence. Curtis followed, smelling the opportunity for mischief. The boys caught up and then kept pace with Lena on their side, daylight flickering in their faces, blinking madly through the diamonds of the fence. The flashing light did not transfigure Lena's appearance. She was still just a skinny girl with pointy elbows and spooky eyes, whose shirts and sweaters were always linted-up, whose flat ass made a pair of jeans droop and frown.

When Marvin greeted her, she blew out the smoke that had been held in her lungs. She was inhaling from a joint, they realized, not one of her usual cigarettes.

At school she was made fun of for having stale breath. Curtis laughed at these jokes, and Marvin used to laugh too.

"My mama told me not to talk to strange boys," she said without looking at either of them.

"What? It's me, Marvin Caldwell. From school."

"I know who you are. Don't mean you not strange."

"But you talking to me anyway."

"Do you always do what your mama says?"

And that was it. She kept going without another word and left Marvin standing with his long fingers clawed into the fence, exactly where Curtis was standing now. Marvin somehow turned what she'd said into a genuine mystery, one he considered, on that day and afterward, by wondering aloud about her life. Had anyone ever seen her mother at the school? Did they get along or did they argue all the time? Did they look alike? He let Curtis know how deeply he imagined her. As Lena became a real part of Marvin's life, he talked less often to Curtis about her. And when they became a couple, Marvin hardly talked to him at all.

Curtis got him to go on a walk, like they used to, one Sunday afternoon. When they were near Drummer's Grove in Prospect Park, he confronted him. "We supposed to be boys," he said.

"Then be happy for me," Marvin said.

"I can't even remember the last time we hung out."

The shaking of gourds decorated the sound of the drums. Marvin said, "You know how it is when people first get loved up."

"You don't even talk to me no more."

Marvin laughed. "It's not like that. You're my boy. Trust. We'll be good."

"So it's just a phase?"

"Oh, it's real. Be happy I'm happy."

"But what about me?" Curtis said. The drumming got more layered and complex.

"Okay, I see. You want it to be about you."

"I just can't believe you let a bitch get between us," Curtis said.

Marvin stopped walking. He narrowed his eyes in the direction of the music. The head of a dancing man bopped up and down. Sounds from a wind

instrument wove between those of the drums. "Don't ever come out your mouth like that," he said. "I'm serious."

"That's what you did though."

Marvin closed his hands into fists and then opened them. Curtis watched them close and open, close and open. Marvin approached him, got so near their noses almost touched. Curtis breathed through his mouth.

"I'm out, man," Marvin said, and gripped him in a strong lengthy hug.

Curtis let his arms hang limp at his sides, hands loose. As time passed, until the fire and the death, he kept his arms and hands that way, until he used them again to drink.

When Curtis came in, his mother was asleep in the easy chair again, the glow from the television in the living room bluing her form, the canned laughter a kind of murmured grace. He didn't switch off the old sitcom and he didn't wake her. Instead he listened to her dogged breathing. On the small table beside her were peanut skins on a paper towel, orange peels, a cup with the dregs of tea. When Curtis stayed out until seven or eight in the morning, his mother would be awake when he got in, looking tired as she sipped strong coffee and stretched her sore back at the kitchen table. Otherwise she'd be where she was now, floating on the merest shallows of sleep. When he told her not to wait up for him, she said this was nothing; she'd been waiting for him to come home for twelve years.

There was still a little time before sunrise. Curtis would often read in such circumstances; he'd become an avid reader of Walter Mosley's novels in prison. But he liked the feeling of being near his mother now—he liked her when she was asleep—so he sat with a tall glass of water and forced his gaze onto the television screen. The off-hour commercials for ridiculous products held his attention better than the show itself. Despite his efforts, his body slumped against an arm of the sofa and he fell asleep.

Curtis often slept during the day, even when he was in prison, so his dreams were full of light. At least, this was how he made sense of what happened. Each

dream was a city of houses and water and clear sparkling glass. Every inhabitant wore white, against which their brown skin was beautiful. People smiled and held the hands of their lovers, their children, and their friends. The strange thing about these light-filled dreams was that Marvin never appeared, not a piece of him in the fragments Curtis could gather upon waking. He told himself that the grandness of the dreams—the pristine landscapes and spacious houses, the variety and richness of color—was a symbol of Marvin's presence, or that the diffuse light, the kind you see in old paintings, was the gold of his friend's fantasies. But he knew his claims were suspect. He was stung by Marvin's disregard for his dream-life.

It was not yet morning now, however, so his dream had a different character. Aside from the darkness of waking life seeping into it, there was the dim, gray shadow of the woman he'd hit with his car all those years ago. The woman sprang into the dream the same way she'd sprung out onto the street, and as she'd been that night, she was faceless, voiceless, and pale, gesturing woodenly at the edge of his vision. As she had been in the last few moments of her life, she was barely a smudge, nothing more than a faint mote in the air before suddenly looming. That night she seemed to fall upon the car like a burden dropped from the sky, and in the dream she acted the same way, flying at him, shocking him out of sleep. He jerked awake, shaken and afraid, with a metallic taste on his tongue. The taste offended Curtis, reminding him of the pit his mouth had become after Marvin's death, in those months of heavy drinking.

In the kitchen Curtis's mother was spreading butter and cherry preserves on slices of toast. "Glad it's Sunday," she said. Her job at the hospital gave her Mondays and Tuesdays off, so she was on the cusp of her weekend. She pushed his breakfast plate across the table and got up to place more bread in the toaster and fork scrambled eggs from the pan on the stove. She was already dressed for work. A saltshaker pinned two folded twenty-dollar bills, the amount she'd leave for him a few times a week to eat lunch and get around as he searched for jobs. While waiting for the toast to pop up, his mother hummed old gospel songs, something she'd never done when Curtis was growing up. She must have learned them as a girl back in North Carolina, and now as she drew closer to her life's other edge, the songs must have come back to her again.

When she sat back down with her plate, she watched Curtis, nearly done with his eggs, toast, and sausage patties, before touching her own food.

"Want some more?" she said.

Curtis nodded and grunted yes.

His mother gave him one of her hot triangles of toast and began to scrape some of the eggs from her plate onto his. "Go on and eat it, Curtis," she said. "Shoot, I'm getting fat anyway. I need to start back with my exercises."

Remembering his private vow, that his life was now for wondrous things, he accepted what ended up being almost all of his mother's breakfast so he could see her lips closed and smiling and her eyebrows settle back down to a sensible height, so there would be the satisfaction of silence. It was true that she was getting round in the midsection, but he knew she would never return to her exercises, because she'd never started in the first place.

Curtis felt her watching him eat the second portion of food. She'd be late for work if she didn't leave right away. She was sixty and he wasn't surprised by how old she was starting to appear. The visits she'd made upstate to the prison each month revealed the rhythms of her decline, and in the intervals he guessed accurately where and when age would touch her next. Her brown skin was somehow darkening. She had a soft pouch under her chin, and at the cheeks and around the eyes the skull was beginning to show itself behind her face. She was nothing to write home about anymore, but a man her age wouldn't complain much. When she and Curtis's father decided their relationship just wasn't going to work, she was still a young woman, and quite pretty, but she made only halfhearted attempts at romance, as if she believed you got just one real try at it in life.

Those energies she used in doting on Curtis, fussing over him the way it seemed Lena fussed over Andre. As soon as Curtis set his fork down on his plate, his mother snatched them up, along with her own, then went to the sink and began washing them.

"I was telling Shirley what we talked about on Friday," she said. "She thought you were gonna give me lip, but I said *Oh no, my boy gets it.* Look, I know you loved Marvin. He was like kin to you. But following his people around ain't what's right for you. I know you know it. Can't look back. It's like the Bible says: *Let thine eyes*

*look right on, and let thine eyelids look straight before thee. Ponder the path of thy feet, and let all thy ways be established. Turn not to the right hand nor the left—"*

"Ma, don't you gotta go?" Curtis said.

She waved him off with a gloved hand, flashing yellow, flicking suds and drops of water across the kitchen. "My baby is home," she said. "Ain't no thing to put some soap and water to a couple dishes."

That's right, he thought. Your baby. Can't get a job, can't get my own place, can't open a goddamn bank account. You wouldn't even care if I pissed the bed.

His mother snapped off her rubber gloves and glanced up at the clock. She blinked slowly, keeping her eyes closed a beat or two longer than necessary, opening them as she took in a great draft of breath. Curtis steadied himself for what was coming. This had the look of one of her speeches, the ones that began, *Baby, you know the Lord has forgiven you. Now you just need to forgive yourself...* Curtis wasn't sure God had forgiven him. He wasn't sure God agreed that the accident couldn't have been avoided. He wasn't sure about God. If God was true and had forgiven him, then why did He keep sending the woman into his dreams at night? Curtis had to do it the other way. If he forgave himself first, maybe then God would follow.

He steadied himself, thinking of beautiful things and filling his head with their music: The words of the man on the promenade, grabbed by the wind. "The Payback." Freedom on his tongue like the taste of curry chicken and macaroni pie from Culpepper's. "Someday We'll All Be Free." A pretty woman opening her legs and arms for him. *Devil in a Blue Dress*. "Ruby." Marpessa Dawn taped to the wall. "A Felicidade." Marvin, his friend. Andre, who looked so much like his father. "They Reminisce Over You." "Little Ghetto Boy."

Curtis followed Lena into a bank one afternoon that week. He tried to make their encounter seem like a coincidence, but could tell she knew better. They talked uncomfortably for a few minutes, both averting their gazes. Then he apologized for the other night and told her he wanted to see her. After some hesitation that seemed to him like a ceremony, Lena gave him her phone number.

When they got a room together on weekdays, Lena would tell Andre she was working an extra shift, but they usually got rooms on Saturday afternoons. Curtis brought her home once, while his mother was at work. Lena told him it was fine, but he felt humiliated being with her on such a small bed, in a room filled with his childish things. He was morose after they slept together. Even the scent of their sex couldn't distract him from the pervasive smell of his mother. When Lena tried to comfort him, he asked her to tell him about the night Marvin died.

She flinched. "Y'all were like brothers," she said. "You know all about it."

"I wasn't there."

"I wasn't there either," she said. "You had to know that much."

"But tell me about the last time you saw him."

She was quiet for a while before she spoke. "I was waitressing back then too," she said finally, "the late night shift at a diner over by Coney Island. I like waitressing. You get to know folks and they get a kick out of you remembering them and they tip you good—well, as best they can."

"What about Marvin?"

"Like I said, I was working the third shift, and that started at midnight during the week. Marvin had already lost his construction job. Then he lost his side gig too. You know how hard things were for him."

"I didn't know."

"Well, he couldn't handle it. Poor thing was always beat from looking for jobs all day, every day, but he liked to stay up and watch me get ready for work. Tried to keep himself awake with a book of all things. Can you imagine? He *was* one to think reading in bed would keep a tired man awake."

"What was he reading that night?"

"I don't remember," she said.

"Did he like Easy Rawlins and Mouse?"

"I don't know."

"And the fire?"

She looked at him for a long time and then studied her hands. Her voice, when it came, was cold now: "You must've heard how it happened, Curtis. It was just like that."

"Tell me."

"I told him not to smoke in the bed, especially when I wasn't around. But the man was tired, always, and with every job telling him no, he was a bundle of nerves. I kept telling him to ask for help, but he had to do things all by himself. Too proud. He wanted life to be different for us, and for his mama. All that debt..." She shook her head. "He thought we deserved to be in a better place."

"I heard his spirits were low."

"Sometimes."

"You would know better than me." Curtis tried to say this with some tenderness, but she flinched again. For the first time she seemed genuinely pretty, even beautiful to him, like a woman grieving calmly in a painting. He pressed on: "Do you think he...?"

"What?"

Curtis looked at her.

"Took his own life? Is that what you mean?"

He nodded. He knew he was being cruel, but couldn't help himself. He wanted to hurt her.

"What, in his right mind he just lit a match and let it fall on the damn pillows? You asking me if he meant to destroy his own self? Why would you say such a thing? Why would you even think it?"

Curtis sometimes imagined that his friend would understand what it was like to feel that blue, but he knew Marvin had loved life too much to take his own. "Maybe you're right," he said. The faded Knicks poster on the far wall hung askew. "He wouldn't have done that with Andre on the way. He knew about the baby, right?"

Lena seemed baffled. "Whatever did or didn't happen, it wasn't because of what was growing inside of me."

Curtis nodded, but meant nothing by the gesture. "Tell me the last thing he said to you."

"I don't know," she said. "As far as we were concerned, it was just another day."

"Last time we saw each other, he gave me a hug."

Lena lay with her back pressed to him, her knees drawn up and touching the wall. "That's no surprise. I never heard him say a bad word about you," she said. "What in the world happened between you two?"

Curtis didn't reply. After that Sunday afternoon by Drummer's Cove, Marvin eventually reached out to reconcile, but Curtis ignored him. He met any attempt to talk or spend time together with silence. When they finally did talk, Marvin begged to borrow some money.

"I lost both my jobs, man," he said, "and nobody's trying to hire a brother. I can't catch a damn break."

On the phone, Curtis stayed quiet.

"I'm having a real hard time, man."

Before he hung up, Curtis said, "Well maybe that bitch you got can help you out."

He didn't tell Lena any of this, and it was obvious that she didn't know. He listened to her breathing now, the steady in and out, the deepening. He closed his eyes. In a while he was startled awake by his recurrent dream, and then startled again by a cold hand on his shoulder. Curtis saw it had taken a great effort for Lena to reach out to him, even though they had no space between them on his bed. Her reddened eyes, taut mouth, and fingers roughly scratching at the points of her elbows meant she knew she could never be loved by him—he had told her as much as they talked before falling asleep. Maybe she already knew she couldn't love him either. He held her, though, in the little bed, and then she held him too. As they lay there, he decided he would never bring her to his mother's house again.

Lena eventually got in the habit of inviting Curtis to the apartment, just for meals at first: dinners or late Sunday breakfasts where he got to see Andre. On Sundays, the pancakes were dense. Lena piled the bacon in the pan, so it always came out soggy. It was greasy and almost sweet on the tongue. As it slid down his throat, Curtis held his hand to his mouth and gave Andre a funny look, but the boy seemed to like the food. He didn't seem pleased with much else.

In the beginning, Lena told Andre the simple truth that Curtis was his father's good friend. "He's like your uncle," she said, but the boy rolled his eyes. When he called Curtis *uncle* he said it with a hint of derision. The two of

them got along well enough though. By the end of the fifth month, Curtis was frequently at their apartment; by the sixth, he and Lena stopped getting rooms. They both danced around the question in such a way that either of them could claim the other had asked about him moving in. When Curtis told his mother it was happening, she cried the way she did when he was sentenced to prison. He invited her to visit them, but she said she would need some time.

Curtis pretended Lena had never called him the boy's uncle, but Andre went on calling him that anyway, still with a mocking tone. He liked to say it in the mornings when Curtis emerged from Lena's bedroom, or right before he went in at night. "Morning, Unc," he'd say, or, "Have a good night, Uncle Curtis."

When they were in bed Lena would signal Curtis by rubbing her cold feet along his legs, and then there would be lovemaking. The first few times they slept together, he was surprised at how much pleasure her skinny body gave him. He wasn't gentle with her, and the things she whispered to him made it clear she didn't want him to be. But now he hated the little sounds she made, the words she said, loud enough that the boy would be able to hear. Sometimes, not quite meaning to, Curtis covered her mouth.

When summer arrived, Curtis took Andre to the basketball court in Lena's old neighborhood and watched him hang listlessly from the rims. They took long walks together, though Andre complained. "Why don't we just take the train?" he asked. They had macaroni pie at Culpepper's, but the boy said Lena's was better. Curtis told him about his time in prison. Andre seemed uninterested until Curtis began to exaggerate, and then the boy asked him if being locked up was the way they showed it in some movie Curtis had never even heard of. His reply was yes. Exactly like that.

One of Andre's favorite things to do, because it made him laugh so hard, was to ridicule his mother. It bothered Curtis afterward but he joined in anyway, making fun of his own mother too. He laughed with Andre at the promenade when the weather was nice, tears wetting his eyelashes. Curtis often fell silent and made a show of watching the young women walk by.

"What makes mothers the way they are?" Andre asked one day. It was the first time he posed a question like this to Curtis, that of a boy seeking the wisdom of a man.

"They lose themselves and get all kinds of ridiculous," Curtis said. "Ain't no mystery to it."

But Andre was quiet, and it was hard to tell if he was listening. Curtis fixed his gaze on a jogger in red shorts, and leaned forward to keep her in sight as long as he could. He pointed so that Andre would look too. Then the joke from the old song leaped into his mind. "Goddamn," he said. "Do fries go with that shake?"

Andre turned to look out at the harbor, his eyes a bit dulled. His taut lips shifted from side to side, as restless as the river.

Curtis kept up the banter about the jogger. "You like that, huh?"

"If you say so," Andre replied with a shrug.

"Well, she looks like a college girl to me anyway, young buck," Curtis said with a laugh. "Might be out of your league."

"Man, I'ma be so glad when I go off to college."

Curtis nodded and listened as Andre continued talking about his future, his life of success, of accumulation and bachelorhood. "There's one thing you gotta do, though," he told the boy. "A house. When you make it big like that, you gotta get your mother a house."

Andre seemed taken aback, and was quiet for a long time as he considered the idea. "Ain't you supposed to do that?" he said. "I mean, I can come visit and everything. But you gonna be with her, right? You can make that happen. She'd like that, wouldn't she?"

Curtis didn't say so, but he supposed she would.

"Hey," he said, "you never ask me anything about your daddy."

Andre shrugged again.

"I got a lot of good stories. Don't you want to hear them? You should get to know who he was."

"What for? He's still gonna be dead."

"Your father was a good man," Curtis said. "And—"

"I know, I know. You loved him like a brother."

"No," Curtis said. "That's what people keep on saying but it was more than that, a lot more." He was startled by the sound of his own voice, the force of it. He gazed down at his curled hands, unable to bear the gentle, curious way Andre was looking at him. He couldn't find the words to explain the affection he felt, still, for the boy's father, and in this moment he didn't want to be misunderstood. Another jogger went past but neither of them paid her any mind.

"What happened the night you killed that lady?" Andre said.

"I was drunk," Curtis said. "They said she had some drink in her too. She came out of nowhere and got in my way. That's all." He rubbed his palms against the knees of his pants. "I did something I shouldn't have done."

Since no one would hire Curtis for steady work, he was often free to spend time with Andre, when the boy allowed him to. Lena supported them, sometimes working extra shifts at the restaurant. She stood aside and let Curtis try to deepen his relationship with her son. She put a smile on her face when Curtis, and sometimes Andre too, made fun of her Sunday bacon, picking it up by one end and wriggling it in the air. She must have noticed the way they both looked at her when she reached for her cigarettes. Soon enough she stopped reaching for them, and then Curtis no longer saw them in the apartment at all. She didn't buy tickets for movies on Fridays, unless she going to the theater by herself. When the woman Curtis had struck with his car kept entering his dreams, Lena didn't put her hands on his shoulder. If she ever cried at night, she refused to be comforted by him. She still signaled him with her cold feet, however. She still made her little demands for intimacy, and sometimes he did too.

Before they slept, she lay beside him in bed and listened as he talked about Andre, unable to stop himself. "He seems happier, doesn't he?" Curtis asked one evening, and she agreed, as though he truly understood her son. It was true, Lena told him, and she called them her men, her two men, which she was in the habit of doing, as if they were all she had ever wanted. "I think Marvin would be glad," he said, but wondered. Lena agreed again and appeared pleased at the thought of all her contented men. Curtis forced a smile onto his face too. He kissed her cheek,

lightly, his lips barely making contact with her skin. He and Lena wouldn't love each other, but there was love they openly shared, and that would be enough, for now, to make a kind of family.

*Jayson P. Smith*

# Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

*after Deborah Kass*

**1.** no, because I am afraid to die, it does not matter what I become.

**2.** unbraided. never *is*. a document: un-teethed, abundant. of a sentence, but. ageless in acquiescence. besides, exploited. the general compulsions of form, without color. rhetorical shifts regarding lack. the strangeness of I, concurrent consummation. a system of wide ruin—

in another arrangement, I would know to resign. here, I'm encouraged (which means insatiable). see, I'm busy: accumulating points in skee ball. outweighing my names like a real nigga. (so I lose the will to live sometimes. there are occasions to clap on the two/four, & that's cool too). I pass the phrase *effort is beautiful* in an uber I can't afford. watch a man hang from my apartment building, contemplate the boundaries of my business. I know paradox is presence enough. nothing about honest is honest—they watch me wound while asking I be careful.

**3.** what is meant by subjunctive: if I, then you, you, you, you, you—

# In Translation

what it's almost
is regular in its
urgency. note:
I am twenty-four.
orchid-shaped.
sudden citizen
of the sentence
& altogether
afraid. a machine wakes,
punched-in &
bloodless & this is how
a world gets made.
in the small fist
of chronology
there's an aftermath.
in Crown Heights
it's easier to call me
thirsty—my bones
made for dim boundaries.
put another way, aperture:
aperture is a hole &
I am sometimes
as useful. another:
when he comes
& I come to, nothing ever
comes to mind.

# XIV

## de ***Da morte. Odes mínimas***

Porque é feita de pergunta
De poeira

Articulada, coesa
Persigo tua cara e carne
Imatéria.

Porque é disjunta
Rompida
Geometral se faz dupla
Persigo tua cara e carne
Resoluta.

Porque finge que franqueia
Vestíbulo, espaço e casa
Se sobrepondo de cascas
Gaiolas, grades

Máscara tripla
Persigo tua cara e carne.

Comigo serrote e faca.

TRANSLATED FROM THE PORTUGUESE BY LAURA CESARCO EGLIN

*Hilda Hilst*

# XIV

## from ***Of Death. Minimal Odes***

Because it's made of question
of dust

articulate, cohesive
I pursue your face and flesh
immaterial.

Because it's disjointed
broken
geometrical it becomes double
I pursue your face and flesh
determined.

Because it fakes being frank
entrance, space and house
with overlapping shells
cages, railings

triple mask
I pursue your face and flesh.

With me, saw and knife.

# XV

## de *Da morte. Odes mínimas*

Como se tu coubesses
Na crista
No topo
No anverso do osso

Tento prender teu corpo
Tua montanha, teu reverso.

Como se a boca buscasse
Seus avessos
Assim te busco
Torsão de todas as funduras.

Persecutória te sigo
Amarras, músculo.
E sempre te assemelhas
A tudo que desliza, tempo,
Correnteza.

Na minha boca. Nos ocos.
No chanfrado nariz.
Rio abaixo deslizas, limo
Toco, em direção a mim.

*Hilda Hilst*

**TRANSLATED FROM THE PORTUGUESE BY LAURA CESARCO EGLIN**

# XV

## from ***Of Death. Minimal Odes***

As if you fit
on the crest
on the peak
on obverse of the bone

I try to capture your body
your mountain, your reverse.

As if the mouth looked for
the converse of itself
that's how I look for you
torsion of all depths.

Persecuting, I follow you
tether, muscle.
And you always resemble
everything that runs, time,
the current.

In my mouth. In the voids.
In the crooked nose.
Down river you run, silt
stump, towards me.

# XVI

## de *Da morte. Odes mínimas*

Cavalo, búfalo, cavalinha
Te amo, amiga, morte minha,
Se te aproximas, salto
Como quem quer e não quer
Ver a colina, o prado, o outeiro
De outro lado, como quem quer
E não ousa
Tocar teu pêlo, o ouro

O coruscante vermelho do teu couro
Como quem não quer.

*Hilda Hilst*

**TRANSLATED FROM THE PORTUGUESE BY LAURA CESARCO EGLIN**

# XVI

## from ***Of Death. Minimal Odes***

Horse, buffalo, mackerel
I love you, friend, my death,
if you approach, I jump
as one who wants and doesn't want
to see the hill, the meadow, the mound
on the other side, as one who wants
and doesn't dare
touch your fur—gold

the bright red of your skin
as one who doesn't want.

*Rosemary Kitchen*

# Key to the Fresh Water Fishes of Maryland

## KEY TO FAMILIES

A. We get off the bus, our tracksuit bottoms
*Swickswickswicking* down the hill to the boathouse
where freshwater fish float
in basins of ice and formaldehyde,
waiting to be identified.
The shimmering bodies weigh slimy and cold
against our open palms, our fingers fumbling
between the accordion folds of pelvic fins
to count spines and soft rays.

B. Sophomore boys snicker as they feel
for the fleshy oviducal sheath
around the anal fin
in the female mudminnow.
From across the boathouse
I see a boy named Kyle mouth
*Show me on the model*
*where she let you—*

**Family: Catostomidae**
**See Suckers**

## KEY TO THE SUCKERS

**A. Genus: *Carpiodes***

Park rangers dressed
in reflective vests hand out flimsy
clipboards with dichotomous keys.
I tick the boxes next to each
characteristic like performing
an autopsy on my chances
with a boy like Kyle: *mouth inferior,*
*relatively small, lips fleshy, body naked*
*except for minute prickles, belly*
*round and keel-like.*

**A'. *Carpiodes cyprinus*, quillback**
Through the boathouse windows
we watch the sunrise blush across the sky.
The wind chops foamy crests
into the still surface of Lake Habeeb.
Outside, tire tracks in mud
mark all the places
cars have idled on the bank,
tangled pairs of teenagers inside.

**B. Genus: *Moxostoma***
Sometimes, Danny,
who drives down after class
at community college
to teach us marimba—
who makes me put down newspaper
on his new leather seats—
will let me sit with a hand inside
his pants for a whole sunset, or
all of that Eagles song,
Hole in the World.

**B'. *Moxostoma erythrurum*, golden redhorse**

In the boathouse, Kyle is mouthing
*Show me on the minnow*
*where you want to be touched.*
If anyone had asked me,
I might have hooked a finger
through the specimen's
open gill, past the pink petal
of the gas-bladder, past
the capillaries
and the bulbous arteriosus, down
to the velvet ventricle
of a tiny heart,
*In here, in here.*

*Sarah M. C. Baugh*

# Half Dark

It's half dark,
and we're up too late in the interest of picking
the still-tender
yellow crookneck squash and blue lake beans
before they get fat and woody
and blueberries still a
violent red-purple not really sweet,
before the birds taste them all.

It's not a real night.
It's the stuff of dream
and misrememberance
and what we all wish childhood was. But I'm sitting
on the wooden swing, with my real
eyes, listening to the buzz of cicadas and night frogs and crickets that
are just on the edge of
too loud.

My daughters are wearing orange,
both of them.
One is 9 and the other 2, and please
let me get that down, so I can know this.
They are spinning in a circle, wild and
laughing and nearly knocking each other down,
in the one patch of soft
grass that grows in this Georgia yard.

My elder daughter is all
sharpness,

all paleness and teeth and bones and ephemera.
She is in the half dark
of childhood too, and I know how
numbered this is.

I sit afraid
because this isn't
real, it's not possible that they're catching
fireflies, that Adeline is turning to Vera with such
softness to show her the glowing insect,
to put it in her hand.

But it is real,
and I'm sitting on the swing and my clothes
are sticking to me because it's
summer in Georgia,
and nothing fits right.

And then my baby child
is climbing on the swing, and her
yellow sandals are shiny and stiff, and she lays her head
on my lap and looks up
at the half dark.
And I touch her cheeks, and run my fingers
up her temple to the sweat
in the tight curls at her hairline.
And this is mine,
this mortal dread,
this butter grip on the dark.

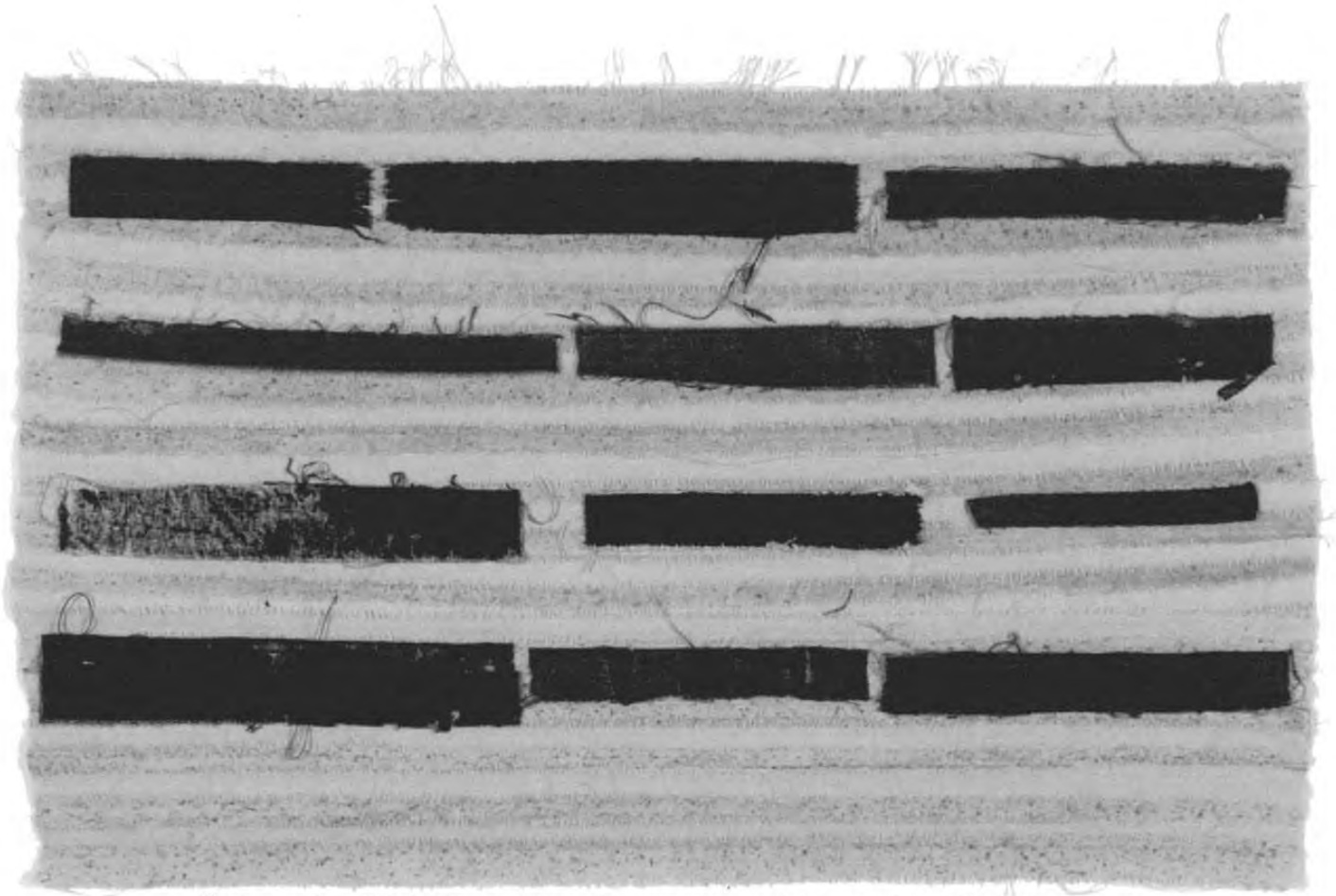


**Fig. 1.** Jamal Cyrus, ***Redacted List_1***, 2016. Wax and ink on canvas. 20 x 29-1/2 inches, 24-1/2 x 34-3/8 inches framed. Courtesy of the Artist and Inman Gallery.

# Blues and the Archives of the Revolution

*Garry Reece*

"There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution and its interpretation."[i]

From the very beginning we should have seen this coming. By we, I mean those of us used to the moist soil on our ears, comfortable with the arrangement of the tea leaves at the bottom of the pot, unnerved by the capricious breezes and the smells that fall in their wake. Things once thought unimaginable have now started to settle, burrow down into a tenuous yet normalized inevitability. The blowhard in the Brooks Brothers suit, that reeks of *Eau de Goldwater* and gestures like Christ the Redeemer in one of those old Byzantine mosaics, is next up as Commander-in-Chief.

[i] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, Chicago/London, The University of Chicago Press

Many in those marginalized communities that he has pilloried over the course of this election season are making plans to weather whatever may come their way. The disabled and special needs communities, immigrants, refugees, Muslims, Blacks, LGBT, Mexicans, women, are all presented with the unreality of what the next four years might bring. There are some things that are certain. Voices and actions surrounding tribalism, stirred up from the bottom of the American cesspool, will grow louder, more brazen. Unprovoked acts of violence will become even more unbridled and widespread. 'Place,' one of the stalwarts of American society, will now be planted in novel and organic rows to yield the same end results; further stratification and divisiveness. And the press, guardians of First Amendment rights, will continue to be browbeaten and reduced to the tattletale status of a bratty second cousin. This, of course, will further the erosion of objective truth, long under siege, jettisoning it further down into the whirlpool of unsupported facts, trolling and shout-you-down half-truths.

The primary archive of the new millennium, the Internet, will for better or worse solidify itself further in the coming years as the archive of choice. As such, a different type of agency then must be employed for explicating the information there and for balancing the various types of memory—historical memory, which is dependent on material provided by reproductive technologies, and private memory, rooted in the body, whose integrity has already been reduced to somewhat of a public spectacle, as well as the DNA of our intuitive makeup. All this must be then filtered through an algorithmic sifting that acknowledges the powerful yet often innocuously dismissed influences of tradition, environment, and personality on awareness and the subsequent outcome of a decision.

In the opening section of *Archive Fever*, Derrida examines "archive," from *Arkhē,* and the two principles surrounding it, that of *commencement* (nature, history, where things begin) and the *commandment* (authority, social order, the law). The primary meaning of the archive is rendered through the Greek, *arkheion*, a dwelling or address of a superior magistrate, the *archons*. As the first guardians of the documents, they had the power to interpret the archive. As such, the documents within their care speak, reflect, and impose the law. So naturally the locus where the law and singularity intersect is at the corner of privilege.

This extraordinary right assigned to the archons gave them the right to identify, classify, and unify the gathering together of signs, in other words, the power of consignation. It is from this perspective that I will talk about the work of Jamal Cyrus and his exhibition *STANDARDZENBLŪZ*.

Jamal Cyrus in his most recent show at the Inman Gallery—*STANDARDZENBLŪZ*—issues various statements in regard to the reclamation of the Black Revolutionary archive. It is an exhibition that is informed by the need to remember within the confines of Black culture that music along with the Black Vernacular are the elements that connect us.

### *quilting*

somewhere in the unknown world
a yellow eyed woman
sits with her daughter
quilting.

some other where
alchemists mumble over pots.
their chemistry stirs
into science. their science
freezes into stone.

in the unknown world
the woman
threading together her need
and her needle
nods toward the smiling girl
remember
*this will keep us warm.*

How does this poem end?
do the daughters' daughters quilt?
do the alchemists practice their tables?
do the worlds continue spinning
away from each other forever?

Lucille Clifton

*There were usually five or six women. They would sit around all day and work on the quilt. The woman's house where they were working was responsible for feeding them. It was an all-day endeavor. It would take about four days to finish a quilt, putting in the cotton and sewing the patterns on the back. The lady whose house they were visiting already had the front of the quilt done. The frame then went to the next woman's house on the list. The talk was about their world, what was going on in the community.*

Told to Garry Reece by his mother Dorothy Reece, 87

The seeds of the revolution are stored in airtight mason jars to be sown later in the fertile minds of the young that will be turned and turned and turned and turned over. Repetition is the anima that ignites the imagination. And so the rhetoric that Cyrus' quilts seems to be kneading is the same rhetoric that Toni Morrison applies to memory. Audacious, uppity, and self-assured, as it stands toe to toe with the Philistine memory of the hegemony, armed with the smooth stones of private or 'emotive memory.' Cyrus has shifted their utility to the symbolic. His quilts are these articles of codified warmth which emanate from histories that fall outside the realm of 'the known'; whose credence and credibility rely on the oral transfer of memory.

"Girl, do you remember when they shot that boy from on top of that church house."

"No honey, they did not have a search warrant. They came in like a thief in the night and took Fred's life."

*Beneath the Obelisk* (2016) seems to make the claim that the African (meaning sub-Saharan Africans) has been ostensibly left out of history and subsequently memory. Cyrus issues a salvo that acknowledges that Egyptian culture drew a great deal from the continent as well as from the Mediterranean basin. Such an assertion forces the personage of the African into the discussion of world culture and more specifically into the talk about the African's presence in the creation of European culture.

The same premise of construction goes into *Untitled Threads* (2016) and *Redacted List_1,* (2016). Yet these two pieces, with the torn canvas strips placed horizontal as opposed to vertical, resemble song sheets where sections have been blotted out. It is in those sections Cyrus implies the necessity of knowing the melody. Of understanding that there will be items never fully explained or comprehended. That repression remains a fluid and organic instrument, charming and stealth, constant in suppressing Black consciousness. Yet one must continue the engaged, careful investigation of the past, *threading* that long and widening road. For the scraps of material, of information, become the spiritual sustenance of survival/pride and act as a catalyst of warmth, of knowing certain things in spite of living in another reality.

Even having said all of this, these quilts are very much a reach for me. If I am to take them as they have been designated, as possessing sculptural elements within a two-dimensional space, I hesitate to acquiesce to a complete acceptance of the idea. It is true, they occupy space in a way that is a bit different from a painting, and there is an interaction between positive/negative space, and, yes, they evoke, if ever so slightly, a certain volume as well as dredge up certain emotions through their textures and colors. But I do not feel they disperse enough ground within the space of their existence to merit such a classification. The conceptual lifts the heavy weight in Cyrus' 'quilts.'

Cyrus' *Book sleeve prototype for W.E.B. Du Bois' Encyclopedia Africana* (2016) delivers on the exhibition's claim to "purse a series of metaphysical encounters." Between 1909 to his death in 1963, W.E.B Du Bois, the Harvard-trained man of letters, dreamed of editing an "Encyclopedia Africana." He longed for an encyclopedia that would resonate with the same fervor that Diderot's *Encyclopedie* had with the Europeans during the Age of Enlightenment. Du

Bois saw its realization as an opportunity to unify the fragmented world of African diaspora as well as utilized it as a tool against racism. His posture on the reclamation of the African and his descendents' humanity was similar to that of Fred Douglass (with the new technology of his time, photography). It centered around assuaging the 'Cult of Man' in the one language that he never refutes, science, of fact, of objectivity, and thus persuading, convincing them that the African and his descendants were actually worthy of inclusion into the family of man. In equal parts, both placed a great deal of faith in man's goodness, inarched to the revelation of objective truth. Both were terribly naïve.

The drum was the one instrument diametrically suppressed by the slaveholders and unlike Gil Scott-Heron's humorous adage, not everyone was *comfortable* speaking drum. Common among slaves from the Congo and other non-Muslim regions of Africa, it was banned by white slaveholders who felt threatened by their inability to decipher its meaning and the magnetic allure it had to inspire large gatherings of slaves. So Cyrus' taut and bound *assemblage* gives ear to a collective history obfuscated and etiolated in favor of Mr. Charlie's. Outwardly informed by the music, it symbolizes the daunting and never realized dream of forging a history of the African people, by the most brilliant and staunch Pan-Africanist of the last century. It lays witness to his travails, defeats, betrayals, and small triumphs in a part of 'his' archive that rarely gets examined.

When I first approached the *Pride Record Findings–Tokyo* (2016) stand in the North Gallery, a number of voices started talking, each trying to shout the others down. Melvin Van Peebles, Oscar Brown, The Lomaxes, The Last Poets, Gil, all the ex-slave recordings funded by the WPA (especially those of my homebody John Henry Faulk). Yet Pride Records was born out of the upheaval that was the Detroit Riots in 1967. It grew out of a need for healing, cultural uplift, cultural retention, and a continued push of Black activism.

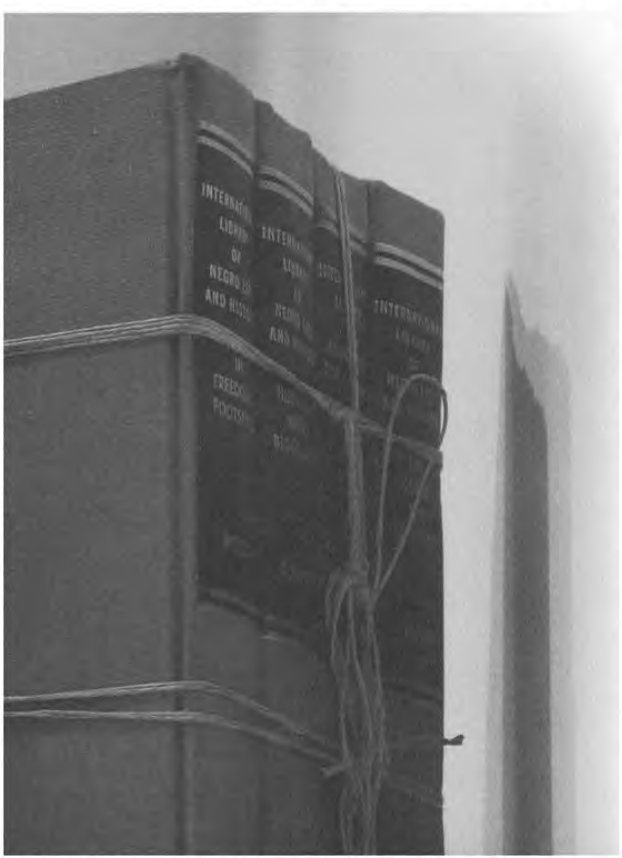


**Fig. 2.** Jamal Cyrus, ***Book sleeve prototype for W. E. B. Du Bois' Encyclopedia Africana***, 2016. Drum skin, books, twine. 11 x 4-3/4 x 8-5/8 inches. Image Courtesy of the Artist and Inman Gallery

Why else would *The Dowling Street Martyr Brigade* long *Towards a Walk in the Sun*, or that *DMFD* wants to make sure you understand that it's *6 Minutes Till Nation Time!!!?* Titles such as *Uhuru Splatter: The Visions of African Mystics* (2005), *Sharhonda & The Black Stone Queens—Me, My Shining Prince and The Deep Black Sea* (2009), and my favorite, *Shaniqua Hameed—Shaniqua Hameed Sings the ABC's of Revolution* (2006), all substantiate black humanity, black beauty, black culture, black love, and become a cathartic process of healing, reclamation, and preparedness. Much of the culture, Cyrus seems to be saying, will undergo an even further rendering of a 'diaspora' as collectors will have to journey *'to the east, my brother, to the east'* (Tokyo) to retrieve those vestiges of 'blackness.' Very reminiscent of those students of Humanism that journeyed to the library at Alexandria to retrieve the classics of Ancient Greek and Roman culture at the advent of the Renaissance.

What, then, is music's chief role within the black community? Cyrus' answer: It must be used for the affirmation and rehabilitation of the stifled memory of black identity.

As in previous bodies of work, Cyrus has highlighted the role the American surveillance community (FBI, CIA, DEA, Homeland Security) has played in undermining the sustainment of a progressive Black activism. The FBI's hostility against black leaders can be traced back to the 1940s and '50s as part of a larger continuum often played out under the guise of monitoring anti-communist activities. This speaks volumes about the deeply rooted cultural fear on the part of the FBI and, to a great degree, much of American society had (and continues to have) toward Black activism and the growth of any left ideology. The poster man for both those ideals resided in the majestic personage of Paul Robeson. The primary threat that Robeson posed was his radical embrace of the American ideal. His image of America was based upon his repertoire, the types of songs he sang and the commentary that


**Fig. 3.** Jamal Cyrus, ***Pride Record findings—Tokyo*** (detail), 2005–2016. Collage on paper, wood paneling, wood shelving, plastic bags, 99 1/2 x 99 1/2 x 4 1/2 inches. Image Courtesy of the Artist and Inman Gallery

accompanied his performances. He pushed the idea that America was a land made up of poor people and slaves from all the countries of the world; the indentured English, Welsh, and Irish, the slaves from Africa, the eastern Europeans, and Chinese who came as desperately poor workers; WE all built America. Yet that culture was not fully recorded, *scratch, scratch, scratch, redacted*, because of the culture of the elites. Thus he sang folk songs from all the countries that made up America, in their *native tongues*, to emphasize that this was a nation of minorities, of poor people who came here and achieved freedom on their own terms. Culturally he was saying that this was the real America, and WE have to make it politically and economically the real America. *Duet* (2016), a laser-cut sheet of papyrus of an FBI file on him, informs the viewer of the fragile and ephemeral nature of his legacy. The delicate nature of the papyrus lays witness to the vulnerable nature of 'ancient history.' Marian Anderson, a dear friend and monumental artist in her right, whose first name is etched on the papyrus, hints at the scrutiny and collateral damage that anyone associated with Robeson could expect to sustain.

Standing at the threshold of The South Gallery, I had the feeling of entering a small private chapel. *The Black Messiah, Recorded Live at the Troubadour* (2016), a non-descript print made from ink toner, loomed on the left wall. I have a copy of the Cannonball Adderley album whose name Cyrus appropriated for this piece. It was on the bar in my studio when my daughter Irene visited one day. She picked it up, at which point I began to talk about the album, how it was this *mélange* of fusion, soul jazz, rock, Chicago blues, and straight-ahead jazz; so very different from Adderley's hard bop stuff which I love. The longer I talked, the sweeter, the more condescending, grew the look on her face. Finally she looked up from her iPhone, held up a finger (very much Christ the Redeemer-like), then proceeded to play a track from D'Angelo's 2014 album, *The Black Messiah*. At that moment, my archive grew larger as I earmarked another item for consignment. The transcendent here is informed by the reclamation of Jesus of Nazareth as a brown-skinned Palestinian Jew. I see the Christ in you, Black! No passive participants in this revolution for *this* Messiah, a beryl-skinned Marxist, championed the cause of the marginalized, the downtrodden, *les*

*misérables*, the truth, and he forever questioned your need not to do the same. And of course the necessary *melisma* to ignite such a transcendental experience takes place first in the jewel buried on the left side of your chest.

*The mind of a child is where the revolution begins.*
*So if the solution has never been to look at yourself,*
*How is it that you expect to find it anywhere else?*

*Caught in A Hustle*
Immortal Technique

**Fig. 4.** Jamal Cyrus, ***Pride Record Findings—Tokyo***, 2005-2016. Collage on paper, wood paneling, wood shelving, plastic bags. 99 1/2 x 99 1/2 x 4 1/2 inches. Image Courtesy of the Artist and Inman Gallery.

To celebrate the 75th anniversary of its Cartography Center, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has released a number of albums of declassified maps. The CIA, on its website, clarifies that the Center's "chief objectives are to analyze geospatial information, extract intelligence-related geodata, and present the information visually in creative and effective ways for maximum understanding by intelligence consumers."

There are maps, and then there are *maps*.

The questions that beg to be asked revolve around those maps that were not presented but which we know reside somewhere in 'the archive'—the blueprints to the Audubon Ballroom and Fred Hampton's residence at 2337 West Monroe, those of *La Moneda*, the Presidential Palace in Santiago where Allende committed suicide, the route that Guzmán walked to the Mexican Embassy after his resignation in Guatemala City, the layout of Mossadegh House in Ahmedabad and his subsequent crypt carved out beneath his dining room floor, the route taken by the operatives as they drove around Elizabethville, waiting for an opportune time to dismember, dissolve (with sulfuric acid), and then ground up Lumumba's bones.

Maps are imperative to the archive. They are one of the major substrates resonating back to the beginning and the law. *X-Plane* (2016) harkens back to a time when tapestries chronicled important events in the story of a people. Yet Cyrus allows the "polyvocality" of the piece to generate a litany of possibilities—prayer rug, tapestry, treasure map, satellite rendering, a *Veve*-littered sketch of a sacred rite, step patterns for a dance around the truth—subversively turning on its alliterative head the need for pat answers.

*In African stories, where the past is retold as if it is the present, there is at times a certain chaos that disturbs Western minds—but we find ourselves right at home.*

Amadou Hampâté Bâ[ii]

[ii] "Caractéristiques de las mémoire africaine," *Histoire de l'Afrique*, vol. I (Jeune Afrique)

In *Transformative_Green* (2016) and *BPPGG* (2016), Cyrus is working through existing 'signs,' acknowledging their power as vehicles of collective and individual agency. The former, a reference to Al Green's harrowing incident with a mentally unsound girlfriend and a pot of hot grits, is a much retrieved chapter in the archive, yet hardly a new story. Here Cyrus splatters the signifier with blackened grits, re-searing within our collective and individual memory the retelling of Green's transformative episode. Out of the skin grafts and contemplative ash heap was raised a new signifier appendaged to the existing sign—The Reverend Al 'Grits' Green.

Then there is the placement of the most arresting 'sign' of the entire exhibition. *BPPGG*, a 'found' black leather jacket shrouded behind a shimmering cornflower-colored drape, commands the south wall and mimics the feel of a retinue line as you venture from the North to the South Gallery. It is an enormous repository of black masculinity, resolve, and style. Yet if one were to peruse 'the archive,' one would be hard-pressed to find the 'democratization' referred to earlier, extended in the direction of its 1960s black signifier as the whole history of this garment is laid open.

The first bad boy calling card donned by the likes of German WWI pilots, American WWII pilots, Young Marlon as Johnny Strabler, James Dean, the Beatles, The Fonz, Sid Vicious and Johnny Rotten, David Bowie, the Ramones, Bruce Springsteen but... No Eldridge, No Huey, No Rap, No Stokely, No Fred Hampton, No Geronimo Pratt? It seems that its Black Panther chapter is *sous rature*.

Cyrus seems to understand this divestment. As such we are told he transforms "the most mundane

**Fig. 5.** Jamal Cyrus, ***BPPGG***, 2016. Found leather jacket, leather pouches with unspecified contents, polyester fabric. Metal curtain rod, wooden hanger, metal hook. 72 x 48 x 2 inches. Image Courtesy of the Artist and Inman Gallery

**Fig. 6.** View of Main and South Galleries at Inman Gallery *(installation view)*. Image Courtesy of the Artist and Inman Gallery.

materials and objects into rich, densely packed networks of meaning and purpose." These objects, stuffed in the jacket's pockets, reflect his faith in the plebeians, the lumpen proletariat, and are informed along the same quiet, day-in-day-out, faith-filled lines that big Fyodor had in the Russian peasantry. So what talismans does Cyrus hold in high regard? I, for one, cannot imagine any tobies, goober dust, black cat bones, rabbit foots, stick pins and horseshoes turned upward, John the Conqueror Roots, keys and dried blackeyed peas to be found anywhere on this garment. Perhaps his 'postmodern' education disallows the consignation of such items. I, for one, will not extend speculation in any direction, yet I suspect the contents of its pockets to be more cross-cultural, global, and futuristic than its predecessors.

Cyrus' exhibition makes a compelling case for the creation and reclamation of 'other' archives. With the advancement of teletechnical culture, it becomes imperative for all groups, especially those whose histories speak of past marginalization, to initiate the process of, if they have not already, their own


**Fig. 7.** Jamal Cyrus, *STANDARDZENBLŪZ (installation view)*, 2016. Image Courtesy of the Artist and Inman Gallery.

consignation. By revisiting archives of people and events that have been forgotten, that are under the constant erasure of memory, Cyrus is inciting a new way of transferring and retaining knowledge as well as paying homage to those people who have been killed, died in exile, lived defamed and destitute all for the uplift of the faces at the bottom of the well.

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*This essay was written on the occasion of Jamal Cyrus' solo exhibition* STANDARDZENBLŪZ *at Inman Gallery, October 28–December 30, 2016.*

# The Artwork of Jamal Cyrus

Courtesy of the Artist and Inman Gallery.

**p. 209. *Book sleeve prototype for W. E. B. Du Bois' Encyclopedia Africana*, 2016.**
Drum skin, books, twine.
11 x 4¾ x 8⅝ inches.

**p. 210. *Transformation_Green*, 2016.**
Graphite, wax, vinyl records, grits, and gel medium on dyed canvas mounted on styrene.
54 x 59 inches.

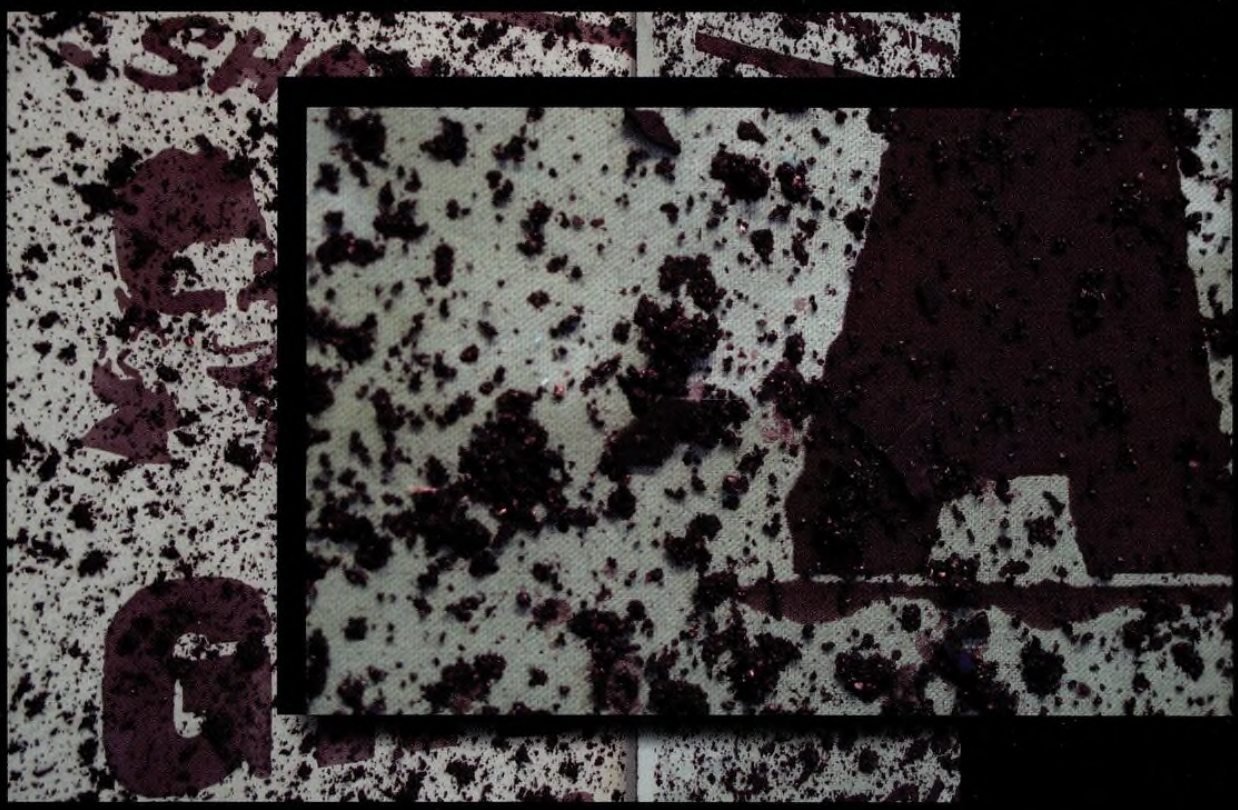
**p. 211. *BPPGG*, 2016.**
Found leather jacket, leather pouches with unspecified contents, polyester fabric, metal curtain rod, wooden hanger, metal hook.
72 x 48 x 2 inches.

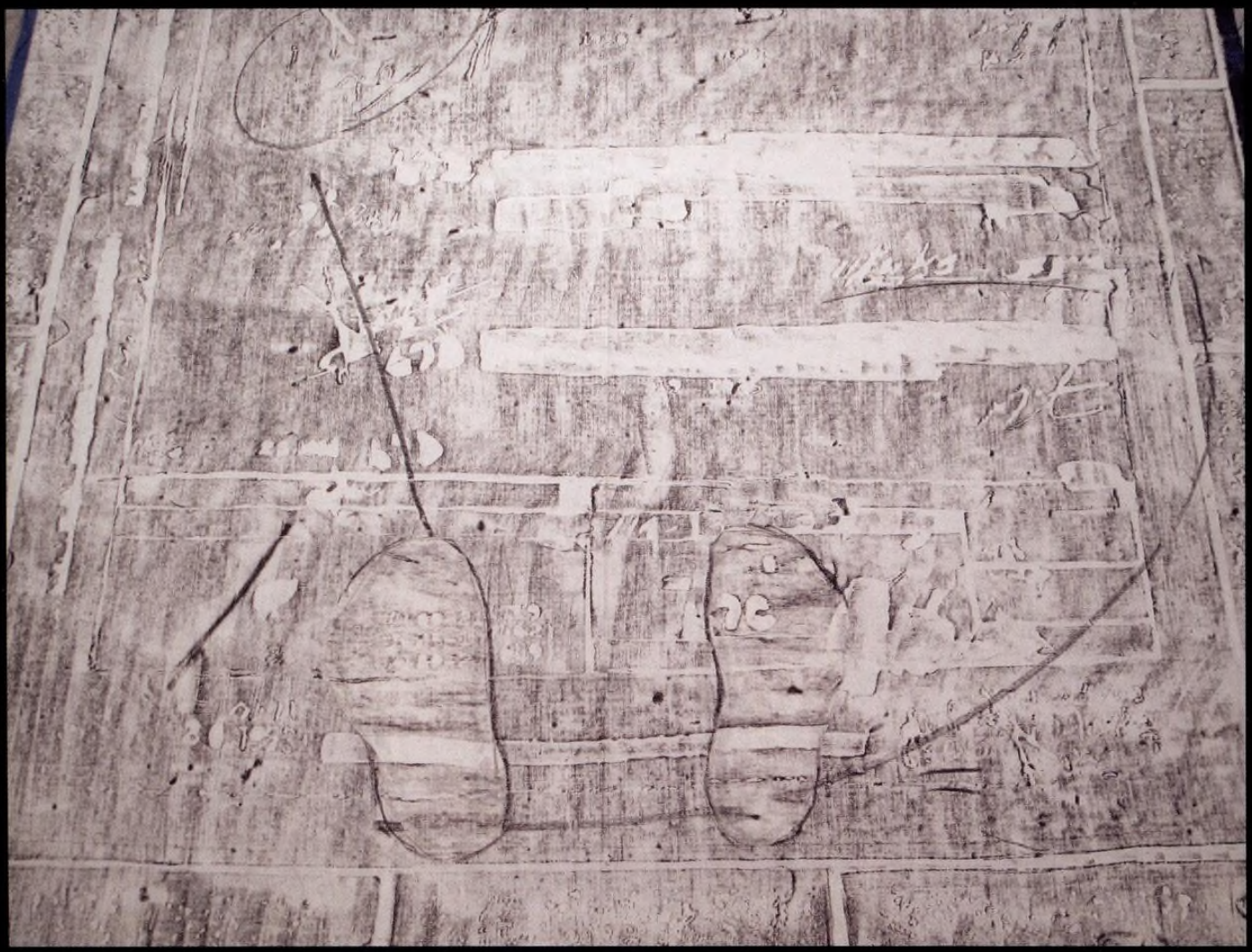
**p. 212. *X-plane*, 2016.**
Wax, muslin, dyed canvas, and polyester fringe.
70 x 46 inches.

**p. 213. *Duet*, 2016.**
Laser-cut Egyptian papyrus backed with Egyptian papyrus, unique.
38 x 25½ inches, 41 x 30½ inches framed.

**p. 214-216. *Pride Record findings—Tokyo* (detail), 2005–2016.**
Collage on paper, wood paneling, wood shelving, plastic bags.
99½ x 99½ x 4½ inches.


CASTLE PALACE
BALLROOM
SUN.
APR. 14
SHOW AND DANCE
"JACK OF TRAIN"
GREEN
ORCHESTRA



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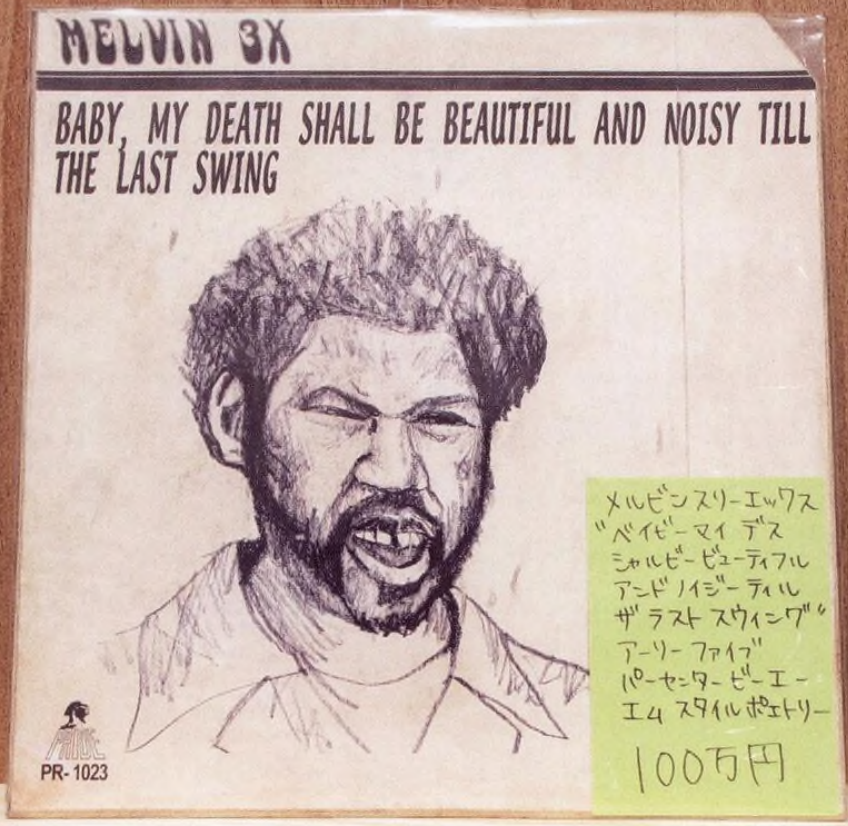


メルビンスリーエックス
"ベイビーマイ デス
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アンドノイジーティル
ザラスト スウィング"
アーリーファイブ
パーセンタービーエー
エム スタイルポエトリー
100万円

# UHURU SPLATTER

## THE VISIONS OF AFRICAN MYSTICS

ウフル スプラッター
"ザ ビジョンズ オブ
アフリカン ミスティックズ"
アラースタイル ニュー
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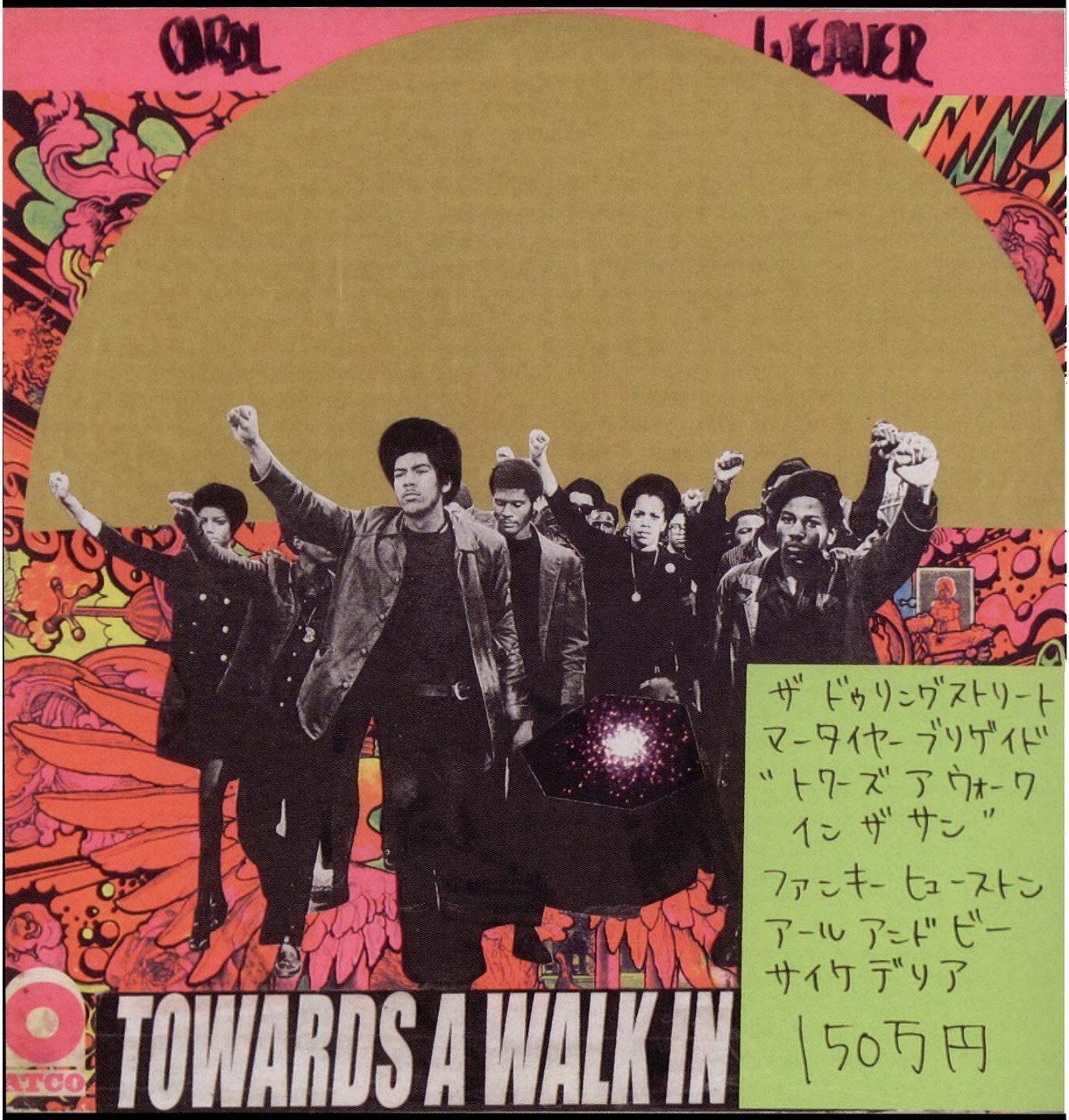


ザ ドゥリングストリート
マータイヤー ブリゲイド
"トワーズ アウォーク
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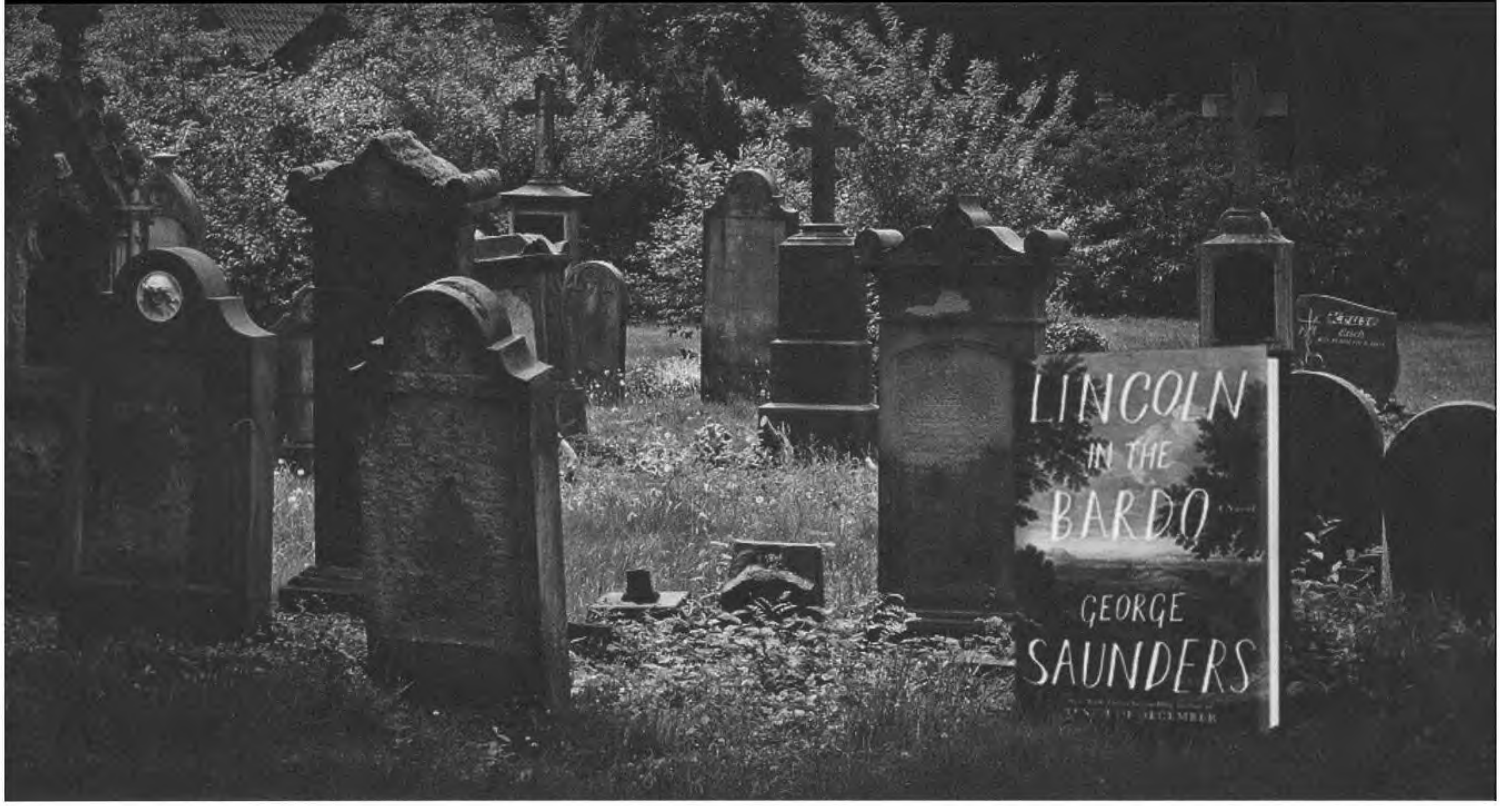


# On Lincoln, Truth, and Higher Ground: An Interview with George Saunders

*Jonathan Meyer*

*More than twenty years into a distinguished writing career, celebrated author George Saunders is publishing his first novel,* Lincoln in the Bardo *(Random House, out February 14). "Bardo" is a concept originating from Tibetan Buddhism, referring to a "transitional state" between life and what comes after, which is where much of the novel's action takes place.*

*The novel pivots on a profoundly moving image: as the Civil War rages on and his popularity plummets, President Abraham Lincoln visits his dead son, Willie, in a graveyard, alone, and holds his body once more before saying goodbye—a purportedly true event which captivated the Saunders' imagination. Around this history, Saunders spins an arresting story about fate, love, and the basic struggle to do the right thing. There are ghosts in it, dozens of different narrators, and many quoted historical documents—some real, some not—which provide background context. Befitting the author's celebrated penchant for blending pathos with giddy absurdity, it's also frequently hilarious.*

*Over a phone call, Saunders and I discussed his new novel, theatricality in fiction, the challenges of formal invention, and why Donald Trump would make a terrible Buddhist.*

**Jonathan Meyer:** Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me today. I am a huge fan of your work, as is everyone here at *Gulf Coast,* so this is quite the honor. I have to mention on a personal note that I love teaching your story "Sea Oak" in my creative writing classes. It always gets a tremendous response from students.

**George Saunders:** Thanks, that one must be a shocker for them. I'm trying to write a TV pilot based on that story now, and, boy, it's so interesting to go back and go, "God, who thought this shit up?" It's so dark. But then you have to double down and make up new stuff that's in the same mode, so it's been kind of fun.

**JM:** As you know, *Gulf Coast* is published in Texas. Being a Texan myself, I was delighted to learn that you were born in Amarillo before growing up in Chicago. Do you have any distinct memories about that pre-Chicago time in your life that may have influenced your writing?

**GS:** Oh, for sure. We used to go to Amarillo every summer for two weeks to visit my mother's family, and it was just this wonderful, sacred pilgrimage we'd make every year. There was one thing that happened. I had forgotten about this until recently, but in Amarillo in the '70s there was this outdoor shopping mall that was called Las Tiendas, and it was one of the first themed malls that I'd ever seen. It had kind of an Old Mexico theme. And I think that place had a lot to do with those later theme park stories that I wrote. There was something magical about being in that altered environment.

**"I'M TRYING TO WRITE A TV PILOT BASED ON ["SEA OAK"] NOW, AND, BOY, IT'S SO INTERESTING TO GO BACK AND GO, 'GOD, WHO THOUGHT THIS SHIT UP?'"**

I remember having a revelation: I was wandering around there—I was maybe thirteen or something—and I was trying to figure out the rest of my life. Before that, I had always wanted to be a baseball player. I remember kind of working through it logically, thinking, "Well, if I did something artistic I could do it until

I was ninety. If I'm a baseball player, I'm done at twenty-eight!" So there's this pathetic kid wandering around that mall, planning out his life in that way.

There are so many Texas influences and Texas memories because I also lived in Amarillo for most of my twenties on and off, coming there from college, and coming there after having been overseas. So that place is deep in my heart.

**JM:** That's wonderful to hear. I love what you said about those self-contained "altered environments." You see a lot of that in your work, so it's interesting to trace back.

Your new novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, takes place in a similarly distinctive environment. It is, in part, about Willie Lincoln transitioning from life to death (or the afterlife). It's also about Abraham Lincoln transitioning from grief to action, to leadership. You, too, are making a transition, from—if you'll excuse the reductive labels—short story writer to novelist. How has the public rollout of this project differed from that of your previous works?

**GS:** It feels a little bigger. I can't quite explain it. I once asked a writer-friend, who was great at both novels and stories, what the difference was, and he said it was about a four-to-one ratio in terms of the amount of attention you'd get. And that seems to be holding up.

Honestly, the writing process didn't feel that different to me. Once I got past a certain set of superstitions—wherein you think everything should be different and it should be a whole different mindset—it was actually very similar to writing a book of stories. I actually don't know yet [about the public response]. I know there's been a lot of interest. And it feels like a lot more pre-interest than ever before.

**"HONESTLY, THE WRITING PROCESS DIDN'T FEEL THAT DIFFERENT TO ME. ONCE I GOT PAST A CERTAIN SET OF SUPERSTITIONS..."**

**JM:** That's probably to do with the scope of the project. It's a big historical novel that plays with the form and goes to strange places, so people are curious. I've also read in interviews with you that you'd never considered yourself *specifically* a short story writer in the first place, that you were always working in service of the story itself. And that's very moving, and a good piece of advice for emerging writers.

**GS:** That's right. And that was also a mantra on this one. I kept thinking, Maybe this is a novel? And I kept countering that idea by saying, Only if it needs to be. So let's not let it get bloated up, let's not get all excited and do this sort of auto-expansion that at least I tend to do. So I was always trying to hold the book to the same standards as the stories, which are, one, you're here to serve emotionality. You're here to make a connection with the reader. And two, don't put anything in the book that doesn't serve that purpose.

**"THAT'S KIND OF WHERE THE STRANGE FORM OF THE BOOK CAME OUT OF: THIS DESIRE TO TELL THIS VERY EMOTIONAL STORY IN THE MOST HONEST WAY I COULD..."**

That's kind of where the strange form of the book came out of: this desire to tell this very emotional story in the most honest way I could, and at the same time, avert a lot of familiar historical novel tropes. Because I felt that those would undercut the emotional power of the book. So all that amounts to say that this book was an attempt to be a useful experiment, to do whatever I had to do to serve the heart of the book, even if that meant doing some odd, quasi-experimental things.

**JM:** I know you've dabbled in some dramatic adaptions of your own stories. In the interview that concludes the galley of *Lincoln in the Bardo*, you mention that you first tried, unsuccessfully, to use this premise in a play. After reading the book, with its single setting, its chorus of narrators, and its farcical episodes, I can't help but describe it as gleefully theatrical.

**GS:** [laughs] I like that. We should put that on the cover.

**JM:** I'm wondering, though, what was the impetus in utilizing this kind of theatricality for your first novel?

**GS:** It's funny because I did try to write a play, and it was such a lame-ass play. I think it's because there's something in my mind that kicks in when I tell myself, "Okay, now you're writing a PLAY." You know, capital letters: a PLAY. And then I start invoking this kind of phony-baloney thespian tonality. But as soon as I turned the switch and said, "No, you're not writing a PLAY, you're writing a novel," the language got more interesting. And then paradoxically, as you pointed out, it does become quite dramatic.

It becomes play-like. So that's a trick. I have the same problem with poems. If I say, "I'm writing a POEM," then I write a POEM, you know? But if I just think, I'm trying to communicate something urgently, I can sometimes write a poem that's actually poetic.

So that's one thing. The other thing is I really just stumbled on this form by trying to avoid other forms that it felt would be lame. My thing is, with art, originality sometimes means declining to suck in familiar ways. You think about writing a novel about Lincoln, and instantly, these historical novel tropes present: "On that dark evening, Abraham Lincoln entered the graveyard with some trepidation..." And it's your own revulsion at that familiarity that makes you think, No, I've gotta try something else.

**"MY THING IS, WITH ART, ORIGINALITY SOMETIMES MEANS DECLINING TO SUCK IN FAMILIAR WAYS."**

Again, my watchword was heart. I want the reader to feel somewhat like this actually happened to [Lincoln] or that he witnessed this. Part of that is that there are all these tropes; you know, there are ghosts in the book. So again, you don't want to write, "A gauzy figure drifted in over Abraham Lincoln's shoulder..." That doesn't do it for me. So, you're thinking, Well, I can't do that, I can't do that, and I can't do that. What other ways are there to get at this material that won't shut down the machine at the beginning? Because if I'm reading a book and someone says that line about the gauzy ghost, I feel a lot of resistance. And the resistance, one, makes me not want to go on. And two, in a certain way, that sentence has typecast the ghosts so that they're reduced to being movie ghosts. If you come at it another way, there might be a time in the book when the reader is going, "What is this? Who are these beings?" Which is exactly how the reader should feel. If one of these beings showed up in your bedroom, it wouldn't be wearing a white sheet. It would be an emanation that would have a personality and be really off-putting. So essentially, the form came out of trying to make the material strange enough to feel new.

**JM:** They certainly don't think of themselves as ghosts.

**GS:** Right. I don't think that word is even in the book.

**JM:** No, I don't believe it is, either. *Spirit, ghoul, specter*—none of that is in there.

**GS:** They're just people. They're people who have gotten a little lost, and they can't get back to their full selves. Which I think is what it would feel like. If my heart stopped right now and I dropped to the floor and there was some part of me remaining, I don't think I would I go, "Wow, I'm a ghost!" You'd be so frantically trying to figure out what you were. And I think one of the background premises of the book is that, whatever the afterlife is, it has a lot to do with this moment right now. Your thought-energy and your thought-habits are very powerful, and, possibly, that's what will continue to exist after the body goes away.

"IF MY HEART STOPPED RIGHT NOW AND I DROPPED TO THE FLOOR AND THERE WAS SOME PART OF ME REMAINING, I DON'T THINK I WOULD GO, 'WOW, I'M A GHOST!'"

**JM:** That's a really interesting notion. You see it in the book. The "spirit" characters seem to live in this state of perpetuity, or even a state of denial, where they're unwilling to accept their fate. That's why they're sort of stuck in this place. It's such a resonant theme, because it applies to the struggle Abraham Lincoln himself is going through at the same time.

**GS:** That's exactly right. There's even one more thing, which is, in order to continue to stay there, they have to actively keep denying. Which is why they keep telling their stories over and over again.

**JM:** Right, and that's how the book opens, with Vollman restating his familiar story up to the moment of death, and Bevins filling him in on words and details he's forgetting. On the one hand, it's extremely funny; on the other hand, it's extremely moving to think about that level of denial.

**GS:** It's a little bit like people who have known each other for a long time. You see that person telling the same stories over and over again, and it might become clear that those stories are the essence of who they are. You'll notice, with people who are very old, sometimes their personalities get reduced to four or five familiar stories that they're kind of auto-telling. But they're also telling them to remind themselves of who they are, which is very moving and sad, but it also gets to this question of what personality really is, when you get right down to it.

**JM:** Piggybacking off that theatrical quality, I've heard that for public readings of *Lincoln in the Bardo*, you're enlisting a group of actors to "perform" the various narrators' voices on stage with you. Can you say a little bit about that process?

**GS:** We're still figuring it out because we're doing twenty cities in twenty-three days, so that's a lot of organization. So what I've done so far is I've picked out a certain part of the book that is dramatic, and also requires maybe four or five people, and can be done passably well, even by non-professionals. But in Houston, we're going to have some wonderful actors actually doing it.

I'm not sure there is something I can read from the book on a standalone basis that would really go over. I'm going to have to find something. Ideally, the dream would be: each city we go to, we get four or five volunteers to go up there and read to give a taste of what the book is like. We did a test run in Key West and I was really happy with it. The main thing I want to do is to prepare the reader for this weirdness of the first thirty pages, and as much as I can, ease the way in a little bit.

**JM:** It's certainly a book that teaches you how to read it as you go along, and it can be jarring at first. But I've heard you read in other contexts and you're switching voices between levels of consciousness and you're switching voices between characters. I can't imagine what a burden that would put on you to have to do that with this book.

**GS:** [laughs] Well, it's interesting because in some of the stories I have, I can do two or three voices. I think I make two, maybe three distinct-sounding and distinct-looking voices on the page. And I can sometimes even do those two or three, although my total roster of voices is about four, so I'd have some trouble.

But with this book, I learned something from reading Tolstoy, and this is my theory: if you want to create a large cast of voices, you can't rely on them all sounding different from one another, because you can't distinguish on the page more than some finite number of voices. But what Tolstoy does is he distinguishes them by their interests and

**"IF YOU WANT TO CREATE A LARGE CAST OF VOICES, YOU CAN'T RELY ON THEM ALL SOUNDING DIFFERENT FROM ONE ANOTHER..."**

their habits—sometimes just one little habit they have, or one habit of speech, or one inclination. So in a certain way, the less variety there is in the surface of the voice, the more individuals you can make that are somehow distinguished from each other.

In this book, I wouldn't know how to do most of these voices because I wasn't really thinking of them as performative, distinct voices the way I would in a story. I was doing a lot of things like, I wonder if I could come up with some slight typographic signature for this character. Or in every case, trying to make them distinct from one another by what they're obsessed with. So that was interesting. It took a long time to realize that—that I wasn't going to be able to be as flamboyant in the voice-creation as I could be in a short story.

**JM:** There's also the question: are they even audibly speaking to each other? Or is it more of a metaphysical communication, or something like that? When I was reading the book, many of those typographic features and predilections came through and at a certain point, I didn't need to read the tag at the end of a block of text to know who was speaking.

**GS:** I'm glad you say that. I asked my editor early on about his reading habit, was he stopping to read those [attributions] and he said, "No. I'm glancing at them to confirm that it is who I think it is and moving on." So that was interesting, because if you read it aloud, as we did in the audiobook, those attributions are sort of there. Whereas if you're scanning it, I think they're less there.

But that's kind of cool: to allow yourself to think about your reader's actual process of reading as you're making the form, it's kind of exciting. I'm banking on the fact that most people aren't reading those. You know, you have that little voice that's reading in your head. I think there's actually a change in the way that voice operates during the text and during the attribution. So to take that into account is kind of cool, especially if you consider that, as we try to be original as writers, really what that's about is learning to exploit the landscape of a page of prose in new ways. In a format like this, I found myself thinking a lot about how I'm able approach that

**"BUT THAT'S KIND OF COOL: TO ALLOW YOURSELF TO THINK ABOUT YOUR READER'S ACTUAL PROCESS OF READING AS YOU'RE MAKING THE FORM."**

form, and if there are any little niches of power or meaningfulness that I could exploit that might not even be present in a more conventional page of prose.

**JM:** Even at first glance, you can tell that is not your typical historical novel. At first, it reads almost like a Ken Burns documentary on the page, with all these voices and their attributions. But then after a while, it becomes its own entire thing.

**GS:** It was funny to be working on this and then suddenly—I think I was about almost done—and I said, "Oh yeah, this is like the Ken Burns thing." I felt like this book taught me a lot about really throwing down in an attempt to be emotional, which is to say it felt to me like any time I could move the book in a direction of something that might be somewhat familiar, I wanted to do it. I didn't want to exclude anybody. So if I had that realization that this was mimicking a documentary, I was like, Good. Let's give as much grounding as we can. For example, when I decided to use the actual historical texts, I had a little resistance to that at first because it wasn't quote-unquote *real writing*. And then I thought, No, actually, if anything makes this have more direct access to the reader's heart, I'm all for that.

**"I HAD A LITTLE RESISTANCE TO THAT AT FIRST BECAUSE IT WASN'T QUOTE-UNQUOTE *REAL WRITING*."**

**JM:** There's a good deal of quoted historical documents in the novel. Some, like Margaret Leech and Doris Kearns Goodwin, appear authentic. Others, not so much. Can you talk a bit about how you worked through this process, particularly with regards to the arranging, assembling, and collating of these blocks of text?

**GS:** The idea came about because I really sensed in early drafts the need for some kind of factual spine, almost to counteract the whimsicality of the ghosts. And also, because when I asked myself why I was writing this book, it was always because I found that central image so moving—of Lincoln going into the crypt. But over the years as I researched that, there was a whole bunch of background information that I learned that made that image even more moving. For example, there's the famous party that happens just before Willie dies, and there's the fact that Lincoln was so unpopular. All that stuff was very much part of my internal narrative about this

thing; I knew I had to get that stuff somehow into the book if the reader was going to be as moved as I was by this incident. Then the question becomes: Well, how do you do that? As we talked about earlier there are many standard ways to do it, but those seemed inefficient. For me to write a twenty-page retelling of this party scene in a kind of conventional prose form just seemed to me like a buzzkill. So then, I found myself one day asking, How do *you* know this stuff? Well, I read it. And that part of myself went, Well yeah, duh. So just put it in there!

**"FOR ME TO WRITE A TWENTY-PAGE RETELLING OF THIS PARTY SCENE IN A KIND OF CONVENTIONAL PROSE FORM JUST SEEMED TO ME LIKE A BUZZKILL."**

Really what I did was I typed up all those relevant sections from the seven or eight main references. I typed them up and started cutting them up with scissors on the floor of my study, just rearranging and rearranging. And that process was kind of heartening, because I could see the cutting and the editing and the rearranging actually produced wildly diverse texts. Some were boring, some were electrifying. That gave me the courage to say, "Yeah, this actually is a form of writing. It's like curation, or curation-writing." Then I thought, Am I a curator? And part of me said, "Well, if you want to move the reader you're going to have to be."

At one point, I had a pretty good version of that party scene. As I read through, I just noted, dimly, that the version I had curated was less than the version that was in my mind. I had told myself that story and imagined it so many times that I supplied a bunch of details that weren't strictly speaking in the historical record. I had novelized in my mind, essentially. Then I thought, Well, maybe then you just add some supporting stuff. You make up entries in order to make the version the reader's going to receive most resemble the one that exists in your mind. And that was a big door flying open, like, Oh God, I can invent historical texts! Which I'd actually done before. In that book called *In Persuasion Nation* there are these headings for each section of the book that I just totally made up and then attributed to a made-up writer.

**JM:** Yes, we've certainly seen you play with found forms before, with letters and press releases and so forth. This seems like a natural extension of that.

**GS:** The funny thing is, too, in the early versions of those [texts], those were always the funniest, wildest, most flamboyant entries. They stuck out like a series of egotistical sore thumbs. I had to go in and bring those down to the level of the actual texts, so they wouldn't draw attention to themselves. The fact that people are saying to me, "I can't tell which is real and which is made up," that makes me very happy. That was the intention. Again, that was another kind of curational energy, where I'm like, Oh wait, I'm not somebody who would normally suppress my verbal energy in writing. But in this case, because it served the greater purpose, that's what had to be done.

**JM:** I have just one more question for you. At the end of 2016, Merriam-Webster's announced that its word of the year was "surreal." Oxford christened "post-truth" as its word of the year. This novel paints Abraham Lincoln as a grief-stricken, even tortured, man, desperate to do the right thing as his son lies dead and the Civil War grows bloodier. I can't help but ask how you think Lincoln's deep thoughtfulness might compare to that of our current administration (or if such a comparison can even exist). I'm thinking of your essay "The Braindead Megaphone" here.

**GS:** [laughs] So am I. If you look at a human being long enough, you can kind of see what their simple mantra is. You can see what really motivates them. And with Lincoln, I think he was an incredible, one-in-a-billion spiritual being, who started out just a disadvantaged kid in Indiana, but had some quality that made him constantly moving up. He got more intelligent; he got more worldly; he got more ambitious. And then, in the moment of truth, which is the period I'm narrating here, you can feel him turning the corner from someone who's essentially political to someone who's essentially spiritual. You know, he's always described as being very, very sad, and very kind. And he has this quality of getting into a situation where a normal human being would find himself fighting for his point of view or trying to maintain power. But Lincoln's move was always to do whatever would be most beneficial in that moment, even if it meant an embarrassment for him, or a kind of sucking-up of his pride, or the embracing of an enemy, or telling a

**"AND WITH LINCOLN, I THINK HE WAS AN INCREDIBLE, ONE-IN-A-BILLION SPIRITUAL BEING, WHO STARTED OUT JUST A DISADVANTAGED KID IN INDIANA..."**

dirty joke sometimes. He really had what in Buddhism would be called a bodhisattva characteristic, which is trying to make things turn out well for everybody in every situation. I think that's why we love him so much, because even at the end of his life, he was still growing. Even at the last few days of his life, he was still growing. So at the heart of that man's existence was a love for others. That's the best way to be: to have a genuine love for other people—every other person—not just for people like yourself.

So I think with Trump, it would seem to me, as far as I can tell, that he's somebody whose main interest is in self-aggrandizement. I don't even mean that pejoratively. He just wants to be more known and more correct and more famous and more powerful. So I guess the question is, under the weight of the office, will that convert? And I think in some ways, you could say that the process of being on the road and doing all those rallies, I think it did make him more sympathetic to the people in his crowd. You could see that happening at the rallies. He was really touched by these people's loyalty. And I'm guessing, that this guy who's a billionaire—pretty isolated, very famous—did have his understanding expanded by this process of campaigning. He did actually become more alert to this group of people's concerns. So that's the hope. But, my feeling is he's done so much damage with the percussiveness and the aggression of his campaign that I don't see much hope. The main difference between Lincoln and Trump is that with Lincoln, you're hard-pressed to find him after a certain point in his life ever saying a harsh thing about anybody. That's a huge difference, to have the wherewithal and the self-possession to be publicly kind all the time, and to really work actively to try to expand the range of his affection.

**"THE MAIN DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LINCOLN AND TRUMP IS THAT...YOU'RE HARD-PRESSED TO FIND [LINCOLN] AFTER A CERTAIN POINT IN HIS LIFE EVER SAYING A HARSH THING ABOUT ANYBODY."**

**JM:** I apologize for the loaded question. Perhaps there is no comparison.

**GS:** Well, they both had two legs, you know? But here's another truth: Lincoln took a lot of grief in his life. There were a lot of people piling on him early, too. So it's a loaded question, but it's one everybody is thinking about: What are we to think about this new

political time? The other thing about Lincoln is that he was big on truths. He would tell the truth no matter what it cost him, because he saw the truth as a way to get to higher ground. In a given situation, if you just tell it like it is, it might be painful, it might set you back a little bit, but ultimately it's going to put you on the road to a higher ground. The current administration seems to have a different feeling about truth, and that maybe is the thing that is most alarming to me.

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*George Saunders read in Houston on Monday, March 6 at 7:30 PM at the Alley Theatre as part of the Inprint Margarett Root Brown Reading Series.*

*Mitchell Jacobs*

# Mutant

Coaxing a fruit fly larva from its vial with a sterile brush, I think
of that self-portrait
in which you hover between woman and man,
of the paintbrush stroking you as it rendered you: ashen face unsmiling
in an environment of ash, gaze
tilting away, in your hair red petals like a hot
aortic bloom.

—And I jolt from routine, recalling pain,
how this pale bundle is wild
with nerves and still-moving mouthparts
and suffers soundless in colorless blood as I
extract its heart,
examine its vitals on a microscope slide.

Your palette knife dipped into the crimson;
you applied a nauseous stroke to the canvas.
Your oeuvre of oils is worked in neutrals, grays or browns,
the shades of burned things, or those
yet to burn.
This flower is a rare vulnerability,
a tender, exposed, fiery activity.

Like your cigarette's tip amid blasé smoke.

I realize I have swollen with affection
for the maggots I pull apart from either end
with forceps. The innards empty in unison from the tube of skin,
a cluster of imaginal discs,

the proto-organs,
transparent and intricate
with possibility.
One disc has been altered to express
a green fluorescent protein,

a glow seen only in the dark.

I have watched small wonders grow suspensefully
into maturity. The *bithorax* mutant fly
has a double-segmented chest
that flares into a double pair of able wings.
I dream of even more:
of golden flies with spiral wings,
of rainbow-painted abdomens,
of pupal shells the scent
of cinnamon.

Beyond love for any one of them,
I tighten the ribbons of their genome
while my dish of ethanol, the fly morgue,
fills.
You rinsed your brush. The water clouded red.

When you showed me, I did not recognize the paint as you.
I assumed the pallid face had donned the wound
for an accessory.
I could have reached
and brushed your shoulder then.

Were you beside me in the darkroom,
I would offer you my microscope's view:

an insect, its interior,
its kindled, hidden hue.

When I nudge the focus, it blurs
as if watercolor:
you are tying a flower made of ribbon, green,
into your charcoal hair.

*Philip Metres*

# Matryoshka Memories

Once, at a bus stop in Kaliningrad around rush hour, I found myself in line behind a group of Russians ready to climb an already-full bus, to head hither or thither. A one-legged older man, in a long coat and hat, crutch under his right armpit, hauled himself onto the first step of the bus and balanced for just a moment before the jostling crowd ejected him. Instinctively, I grabbed his shoulder as he fell. He turned to me and said, thanks.

"It was nothing," I said.

We stood there, both of us shifting uncomfortably, waiting to see if there'd be another bus, as the light began to fail all around us.

When it was completely dark, I decided to walk the rest of the way, and as I walked, I felt my body trembling a little, still shaken by what had happened. Then I remembered how my mother spooned red Jell-O into my grandfather's mouth. He was propped up in a nursing home bed near his home in Rhode Island, suffering from some form of inexplicable dementia. We were visiting from Chicago, and my mother hadn't seen him in some time, and she was shocked to see how much he'd declined. He'd suddenly lost his ability to speak, this noble white-haired man, an introverted engineer who always used words so sparingly and so efficiently. I sat next to my mother, unsure of what to do.

She told him that we'd walked down to the Atlantic, and recalled to him how much she loved sailing with him when she was growing up. He stared for a meaningful moment, his eyes wide, and then wept like a child, huge sobs shuddering from his shrunken self. And then, an hour later, in the rental car in the parking lot, my mother burst into tears, leaning her head into my shoulder, as if I were her mother.

But now I was on the road back to an apartment where I lived, in the dark outskirts of Moscow. I can't remember now where I'd been that day, but I knew that I needed to get back home—or rather, back to the apartment where I'd been living, with a kindly

Russian family who cared for me as if I were their missing son, the one who I'd met at college the year before. It wasn't anything like home, and I wasn't anything like their son, but we were trying to act like family, to pretend that we weren't dragging around the pain of absent loved ones.

I passed a bouquet of flowers nailed to a wooden wall. It was so strange, seeing that bouquet there, and a note that read: Olya, we remember you. Perhaps someone had died there in a car accident, as the wall was splintered at the base. Every time I'd passed, a new bouquet would be nailed there, as if the grief would not give way to dying flowers.

I passed a pond, darkened by evening, some recently-fallen leaves floating like orange toy boats along the surface, not yet drowned. It gave me comfort to see the dark sky reflected on the water, reflected differently as I walked, and the water's face, and the leaves there, suspended, surrendered, totally themselves.

I'd read somewhere in the paper that a local mailman had been caught dumping letters in the pond, and that, when the police inspected further, they'd discovered years and years of correspondence, bags and bags of letters, at the murky bottom. So many letters that never made it to their intended destination. A watery dead letter office, where no Bartleby would ever work.

And then I remembered how, after my grandfather's death, I had to learn the code to enter and leave the locked doors of the nursing home where I volunteered. I'd begun helping out there precisely because my grandfather had needed the care and comfort of others, and as I spent time with the elderly there, I felt nauseated by the smell of sadness in the place—that mix of urine and bleach, soured flesh and diapers, baby powder and mothballs, as if it were a nursery and nursing home all at once—even as I knew these decrepit, half-living creatures were in all likelihood someone's grandparent, someone like me.

The need for the multiple locked doors was due to the fact that some of the residents were always trying to leave; they may have lost their memory and most of their marbles, but they had the wisdom to want to escape. One woman kept walking in squares, as if she could master geometry if she just got that square correct. There was a nervous ferocity to her movements, a repetition compulsion that no repetition would release her from. A man, probably the age and with the same brain plaque as my

grandfather, would approach surreptitiously and whisper to me that he had to get out of this place, that they were keeping him hostage here, and he needed to get home. The look of terror on his face, not knowing where he was.

As each memory visited me, like a series of matryoshki—wooden dolls nesting inside increasingly larger dolls—I fell into a sort of walking and waking dream, no longer in this desolate place—this place of suffering and inhumanity and indifference and cruelty and also of caring and human gentleness and kindness, but in all places where cruelty and suffering is met by kindness and gentleness.

In the darkness, I kept walking, there and not-there, carrying this warm light in my skull, in my body, warmed by the long walk and by memory's fire—heading to a home that wasn't my home, but was where I laid my head and feet, at least for now.

Yet in all this willed and unwilled exertion of consciousness, something was changing. I was changing. The I that I knew and that held me in these memories, these dreams, was disappearing, and I swam against the riptide of the present to hold onto the buoy of the past.

On the train, tired of correspondences, I opened Primo Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved*—a book that had brought me solace despite Levi's traumatic past in Auschwitz—to this profound, troubling meditation on memory and its cunning: "Certain practice keeps memories fresh and alive in the same manner in which a muscle often used remains efficient, but it is also true that a memory evoked too often, and expressed in the form of a story, tends to become fixed in a stereotype, in a form tested by experience, crystallized, perfected, adorned, installing itself in the place of the raw memory and growing at its expense."

Is that why I keep returning—in writing, and sometimes by flight—that I'm still there somehow, and that by walking on Chekhov Street behind Pushkin Square, I can return to myself, the self I was as I stopped at 15 Chekhov to pick up my mail at RCMI, the American courier that bypassed the byzantine Russian mail service? And by layering this memory on top of that memory, it might last me another ten years, not crystallized as Primo Levi had feared, but quicksilver, slippery, fugitive, homeless?

Osiris in Moscow

Your memories could save you for the first days
only. Then, you fell into others' photos
in parks strewn with heads of rubbled statues,
deserted city streets, crowded metros.

You ache for strangers as if they'd save you.
As if a word would be a sculpting hand,
would hold you like a crumbling balcony
over an unknowable city. Wind

wheezes its constant inhalation
before speech. Torn apart, you now sink
in the quicksand of your mind, and die there.

Where is your mouth—there, at the riverbank?
A mottled cur noses a rusted can.
What fur caps you gave back still hold your hair?

Russia refused to be a blank stage for my interior drama, my far orbiting and then returning to myself. At times, I felt as if I were disappearing entirely. Even grammar conspired against me, the me who was capable and striking and, well, memorable. I'd read in my grammar text that morning a note that explained: "there is no subject in this sentence. It is understood, but there is no need for it to be expressed since it is unimportant who performed the action. This sort of sentence is very common in Russia." It was not about me. Because this is true, this must be an account against the primacy of self, an account of the self broken beyond words, the self torn to pieces, scattered through a city bigger than the present, bigger than all its inhabitants.

*Frances Park*

# Serving God, Meat, and Intercourse in an Amish Diner

Ziggy Stardust and Southern Boogie dominated the FM airwaves the era I lived on greasy tacos from Jack-In-The-Box, ditched high school cap and gown for the beach, wrote poetry and drank vodka-laced Tab, and was in love with two boys who were best friends, all the while struttin' around with an ego I'd slap today. I was at an age when you think Life is more than it is and every hour is journal-worthy. I had dreams, you know, and they weren't to grow up and be a mere whistle in the woods.

Now I'm in an Amish-owned restaurant off a country road in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, with my eighty-two-year-old Korean mother.

The vibes were good here, though. Quiet. We stumbled in at an off-hour for an early dinner as we were already out and about and I was anxious to get back to our hotel room and call it a day. Our road trip every autumn is sacred on a plane where more, many more, lie ahead on our horizon, but, funny thing, I'm a poor traveler, no sense of direction, easily frazzled, and sometimes so busy measuring the earth's bitch-o-meter I forget to live. My mom survived the Korean War and doesn't give a damn.

"Someone don't like me, I say, *Puh, I don't like you!*"

After a greeting, a hostess takes us to a table by a window. A sunny waitress hands us menus. Grayish-blonde gals, if they don't like us, they don't show it. Like every baby boomer, I think I look young for my age, but maybe the real world, or at least rural Pennsylvania, sees us as two aging Orientals.

"Welcome, ladies. What can I get you to drink?"

For the record, I'm no frumpy Aunt Bee in big pants or Korean *halmoni* with a bad perm, aggressively steering a grocery cart in Lotte. I still look good in jeans

and write my heart out like it'll beat forever. Once in a blue moon, even dot on sparkly eye stuff and wanna go dancing even when there's nowhere to go. I'm no granny in any language.

That said, walking on the wild side means coffee after three o'clock these days.

"Coffee and water, please," I say.

To me, not the waitress, my mom orders, "Same thing."

She's always been a funny bird, but, lately, curious little changes mark our days.

Like her crooked pictures. Last fall we visited Shepherdstown, a village of zombies, though maybe the normal people stayed indoors that day—a bust if not for the backdrop of West Virginia. When my mom snapped a pic of me leaning against our balcony in the Bavarian Inn, she captured it like a stoned flamingo: the Potomac River Bend, the mountainside, a sweeping bridge—just not my head. *Headless in Hickville*, the postcard would read.

And her vanishing acts. At check-out lines in Safeway or H-Mart, while we're loading coffee and oatmeal or seaweed sheets and Asian pears onto the conveyer belt, she'll inevitably rethink her shopping list and disappear down an aisle. Mom?

The waitress sets down our beverages, too spirited to be Amish, in my opinion, but if she doesn't come from a long line of moonshiners, I'll eat my hat. Or bonnet.

"You ladies ready to order?"

A lifetime ago after a breakup so bad I needed every molecule in me changed and re-arranged, I gave up meat. Men and liquor, too, but that didn't last.

"I'll have a garden salad, coleslaw, and green beans," I reply. "And a biscuit."

Her expression says it all. *Where's the beef?*

"Meat loaf with that?" she asks.

The scene about to unfold amuses my mom, her face comically decapitating. *I'm a barbarian*, she loves to gloat, just to get my goat. Yup, a carnivore to the core, vegetarians kind of irk her, even when they're good daughters innocently cobbling together a meal from a meat-on-meat menu.

"No..." I reply.

"Chicken pot pie? Baked ham?"

"No..."

"Giblet gravy over the biscuit?"

"No..."

God, no!

Growing up, sometimes I found myself trying not to think about the dead thing on my plate, the braised Korean short rib or barbequed chicken wing that couldn't be mistaken for anything other than something that could fly off the plate. Boned-in things. Fish sticks, hotdogs, and hamburgers weren't usually a problem, but rows of fine blond hairs on drumsticks about to hit the grill, illuminated in sunlight, could kill any illusion.

"Are those *hairs*, Dad?"

He could always cook up a simple, good response. "Not if you don't look at them, Fran."

Giving up on me, the waitress turns to my mom, chicken-less these days since her acupuncturist Dr. Kang says certain foods like fowl and apples and oranges can affect her balance and we don't need no stinking drumstick messing with her yin and yang. Turning to me, she licks her chops and orders.

"Fried fish platter, Miss!"

Nursing her coffee, my mom takes in the pastoral décor and wonders: "What Amish food, exactly?"

Beats me. "Old-fashioned and fresh is my guess."

She murmurs while I glance out the window.

Holy trinity.

Under threatening skies is a vision straight out of a Coen brothers film: mounted on tall poles sticking out of grassy grounds like movie props are three larger-than-life billboards.

Billboard #1, in the image of an open Bible: *Believe only the Lord JESUS CHRIST and Thou Shalt Be Saved. Acts 16:31*

Billboard #2: *Award-winning Meats Since 1954. Stoltzfus Meats. Home of the Famous Stoltzfus Country Sausage. Intercourse, PA. Three Miles Ahead on Right.*

Billboard #3: *Stoltzfus Farm Restaurant. All You Can Eat For One Price!*

God, all the meat you can eat, and an Amish town named Intercourse. To my unabashed snicker, my mom peers out as if decrypting code.

"What so funny?"

Bless her Korean heart. Daughter of missionaries, now a grandma cast in hour-long prayers every night—lips moving, no sound—not to mention lover of Costco's pepperoni pizza, the view doesn't amuse her, though a certain double entendre likely goes over her head. I happen to believe every woman should leave a trail of lovers behind; my God, even Dorothy from *The Golden Girls* had at least four lovers during its run. But a once-virgin bride who still thinks and dreams in Korean might miss the humor, much less the saying about two Amish towns: *The road to Paradise passes through Intercourse.* An hour ago, while driving the stretch of Lancaster County, we stopped in Intercourse, and everything was charming, tame as an Amish orgasm, except for me and the smirk on my face. We walked around and posed for pics. Her in front of Pappy's Kettle Korn Shoppe, me in front of Kitchen Kettle.

"Higher, Mom! Point the camera higher!" I was yelling to heaven, because a camera in her hands means only one thing: a requiem for my beheading.

"Up, up!"

Click!

On second thought, maybe her lack of frame and aim isn't an age thing. Maybe it's the way she's always seen the world. Somewhat skewed.

A half-century ago, my globetrotting parents took him-and-her snapshots of each other posing on some magnificently marbled plaza in Europe, probably Rome or Athens. Back in the US, the developed film came back from People's Drugstore revealing a funny if not futuristic composition: his picture of her was perfectly centered, while hers of him was as tilted as the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Half his head was missing, too.

Considering the off-on drizzle, the day turned out a success, if you ask me. Eight hours earlier I had my doubts when our horse and buggy tour was cancelled due to morning rain, and I was, oh God, oh God. My mom didn't come to Pennsylvania Dutch Country without seeing what it's all about.

Disappointed, she'd plopped on the hotel bed and with that I recalled something she once uttered under her breath in a tone so guttural, so tribal, it sounded like someone else, or the part of her buried beneath her bones, unearthed only in the most broken moment of widowhood. *Daddy gone so long, I don't remember have husband.* In the early years after our loss, I would drive over after work to share supper and talk brave while I hardened like a corpse, only to go home half-drunk on jug wine, half-praying a drunker driver would hit me head-on. *Smash me into a million windshield scattered bits* is what I scribbled in my journal one late night in 1980. I wouldn't go to Hell for such thoughts, because I lacked the DNA to believe in Hell, then, now, and even when I was a twelve-year-old know-it-all writing a letter to Reverend Billy Graham. After watching one of his televised crusades, here was my burning question: How can someone repent for sins they don't even remember committing? You're asking me to do that, right? Fake repent? Well, forget it! His disciples wrote me back a letter that ended: *We'll pray for you, Frances.*

Did they really pray for me? And if so, for how long? A minute, at most? And it must've been a hollow prayer fanned out to the masses, dismissive as dust, because their God, imagined or otherwise, took away the only person I would've sold my soul for.

January, 1978. I begged him not to, but he got up at four a.m. the morning my girlfriends Robin and Kim were moving from the quiet DC suburbs to the Big Apple. *New York, New York*, Sinatra would sing the following year. I was hungry to make a name for myself in the East Village as, what else, a boho poet. The East Village sounded like a cool place, and I bet I could rock the look: black glitter tees, skin-tight jeans. I could live and die in that look.

Unlike Robin's dear dad, a big rugged trucker of a man, mine was a diminutive scholar, and I didn't want him hauling furniture into a van—he wasn't made for that. I didn't want to say good-bye, because sometimes a good-bye feels like a prelude to death. But there he was, there he is, we're driving off, and he's standing in the twinkling blackness like the only soul in the universe, not part of the moving party but wishing he was, forever crowned by stars as one arm shot up like a missile, *Good-bye, Fran*. Robin's dad would live well into the new millennium, but mine would celebrate only one more New Year's.

The East Village of that era was hell on earth. Godless. To this day the smell of new paint, not any paint but some cheap industrial paint used to recoat underground parking garages, brings me back to that $300 a month railroad apartment on East 5th Street where the floors were mud-packed, the fixtures grimy, and cockroaches fell from the ceiling. I can still hear Kim, rudely awoken in the middle of the night by a critter crawling on her face, her screaming, *I just want a warm body next to me! I just want someone to fuck me! I hate it here!*

Not exactly my scene, either.

Outside our door was a nightmare of so many punk rockers you'd think we were the freaks. At the entrance to our walk-up, brash Puerto Rican boys blew dope smoke in our faces for kicks like we were virgins from the sticks. In a way we were, because we'd never seen parading transvestites before. Granted, Ukrainian peasants milled quietly about in the background minding their own business, and on the corner was The Binibon, an all-night café that I came to see as candlelight in rubble, a sanctuary for a civilized cup of coffee, though a couple of years later it would become the infamous spot where Norman Mailer's protégé prisoner pal murdered a waiter.

I tried to stick it out, but I don't remember a single moment of sunshine, just steel, suicidal skies. Boho poets have to pay the rent, but anything I hoped for, thought was mine, fell through.

My hometown friend Jack called to see if he could come visit. I told him:

"Sure, just bring your truck."

For a guy who looked like Warren Beatty, he was an innocent. Way too sweet for New York. When the Puerto Rican boys wrote GO HOME on his grit-covered truck, he just shrugged and said:

"Life in the big city, huh?"

That weekend we all partied, went to The Binibon, ran through Washington Square at three in the morning, and saw the Statue of Liberty. Monday morning, I said:

"Pack my shit, Jack. I'm going back with you."

Once home, I did what we all do more than once, like it or not: replaced one life with another. With two other girlfriends, Carol and Penni, I rented an apartment in a section of Arlington, Virginia, known as Rosslyn, just before the Key Bridge. The unit had panoramic views of water and bridges and monuments that cancelled out the unrenovated kitchen, the occasional cockroach and nightly false fire alarms. One look and my dad's spirits sank for me, the twenty-two-year-old daughter he wished was married by now and deep into a novel that would change the world. *This is how my Fran lives?* One night after work, hoping to spruce up the apartment, he showed up at the door balancing a grand oval mirror nearly as tall as him. On our dingy walls, it was a jewel among junk. My dad wanted more for me; not a palace, just an idyllic little cottage with a desk that overlooked a garden of azaleas where I could write in peace.

Not long ago, I revised what God, if there is a God, was trying to tell me during my East Village disaster of '78: *Your father is going to die soon. Go home and take care of your mother.*

"Day ruined," my mom moaned. No Amish adventure? "What we are to do?"

No, no, no, the day is not ruined. No heart procedure or broken hip surgery could keep us down for long, and now a little rain ain't gonna rain on our Amish parade. Through the years, my love-life luminous or dull, in ways I've taken on the

role of her husband—shopping partner, dining out partner, road trip partner—and the chances of me leaving her are about as likely as me running off with an Elvis impersonator. Besides, we still have more road trips ahead of us. Many more.

Hallelujah! A hotel pamphlet in the room advertised ninety-minute bus tours departing from the Visitors Center, a stone's throw from the hotel. If not for the rain and my mom's hip, we could walk.

The center was run by two retired farmer types eager to assist anyone who came through the door. Bless their hearts. They weren't strangers who stared or rednecks who glared, they were a different form of life than Miss H who had wished I was dead or at least not a student in her second grade classroom. "Your bus leaves in twenty minutes, young ladies."

"Complimentary coffee right over there."

I could wait here forever. I could call this home. Comfy sofa. Huge rural mural painted in warm colors of orange and green. Gents in overalls and a coffee station to boot. Hostile temp, zero.

On a Plexiglas plate, my mom's fried fish platter arrives with all the fixings. Hushpuppies, coleslaw, sauces galore in tiny tin cups. Moon-sized onion rings. My plate arrives as an afterthought. I can almost hear my brother-in-law, who seems to think I live on bowls of oats, seeds, and sprouts, quip:

*Now that's a meal any bird would be proud to eat!*

In a husky voice that, like her prayers, is part of her daily declaration, my mom begs me to, "Eat meat!"

My sad little wilted garden of a meal makes no sense to someone who's known war and starvation. Meat will always remain a delicacy, even if we're talking about tacos from Jack-In-The-Box.

She digs in, I dig in. The thought of dead animals in my digestive tract (much less an all-you-can-eat meat buffet) will always make me ill, but watching her feast is a high-fiver. For so long after her hip surgery, she looked grave ready. Pain meds, you know. Murdered her appetite.

The night before both her operations, I prayed to anyone listening. It takes balls to say you don't believe in God, so I won't even though the ghost of me knows.

I'm guessing my dad had his doubts but kept them hushed between the pages of books about the afterlife and prophesy, some hokey, some not, an odd collection on his bookshelves considering his more intellectual tastes. Books by Bishop James Pike, Jeane Dixon, etc. I remember paging through them, along with his scrawls in the margins. I'd call his questioning more open-minded than faithless.

I'm glad my mom has her faith intact, not just in her darkest hour but all hours. It serves her well, and I bow to that. Though I do wince when Facebook posts like this pop-up: *Heaven is a place where all the dogs you ever loved come to greet you.* Really? Seriously? Like Hell, Heaven's a hard place for me to fathom. No coffee, I take it. No wine or chocolate, either, I'm sure. But dogs, you say? I've loved three in my lifetime, and, sure as menopause ain't no keg party, no doggies will be waiting for me in heaven. Not even my dad will be there. And, believe me, he would if he could.

My younger siblings Sam and Ginger were in their teens, just babies, too young, too young, the night a relative gathered us in my parents' rec room to break the news: en route to Seoul with my mom, in the Hyatt Regency Waikiki, our dad died in his sleep. Closed his eyes and did what he did not, did not, did not, want to do: leave us. A horribly Disneyesque scene followed—my little brother and sister turned to stone, statues that would crack in time, while I grabbed my brother's waist and screamed like there was no tomorrow, and, in a way, there wasn't.

Looking back, I was not a big sister that night. I could only think of my loss, not theirs, not even my mother's as she withered on the ninth floor of a hotel room in Honolulu.

Our tour bus guide was cut from the same cloth as the sweet old dudes in the Visitors Center, if not slightly frayed at the edges. He was on a schedule,

after all, and the group, mostly middle-aged couples from the heartland, was moving like cattle on Quaaludes.

"Come on, come on, folks, the land of the Amish is waiting," he said, ushering everyone onto the bus. When he spotted my mom, the elder, his face softened. Twinkled is a better word. "You take your time, ma'am."

We took our seats, and I couldn't be happier. Blissful. For ninety whole minutes someone else would be in charge.

The guide was giving it his all. *It* being a labor of love as he drove us through farmland in a spotty rain and explained the Amish way of life, though I was only half-listening because I was only half-interested—my bad, but I tend to lump Amish, Mennonites, Mormons, Muslims, Puritans, and Hindus together in a religious stew of people who can never drink wine with dinner. I can't help it. My mom, on the other hand, was straining to make out every word the guide said, soaking up garbled syllables through lousy acoustics. Rain and a shoddy microphone.

Apparently an Amish insider, the guide was up-to-date on all the current events around these parts; health, welfare, weddings, even what went on behind closed farmhouse doors. Yes, gossip exists in Goody-Two-Shoes Land.

"Even Amish husbands lose their way, folks," he said, offering up a couple of vague details. "Broke up that household."

So they *do* have intercourse in Intercourse. Moments in the dark, too.

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We've all been in the darkness where suddenly, atomically, the room shifts, and who you are in the light of day—the Gidget or Gilligan in you, grinning on the elevator—flies out the window. But this, this is the real you, breathing like some wild animal in wait, stripped down to nothing and everything.

Room One. I was so mad for a boy named R, I thought I'd lost my mind and gladly, like I feared you couldn't be a free spirit forever. He wasn't my first lover, but, compared to R, the others were squirts. Forgive the pun—as with him, I couldn't resist. He was of course a bad boy not for the faint of heart and wickedly good at

holding a palette or a girl in his bed in a garden apartment. Watching him over me doing his thing as moonlight and moving headlights slipped through the Venetian blinds was sheer cinema. What a show, with me perfectly content to play the voyeur, mentally taking notes, filming. His hair was a mane and when he tossed his head back like a sweet, hungry beast singing "Golden Lady," I knew I'd have this reel forever, something to lust over when I was a dried-up old lady.

Room Two. Many years later I was someone else, going through that period when I gave up meat, men, and liquor. You could put Colin Firth's Mr. Darcy in front of me, and nothing would register. I was that half-dead. Sparkless. The thought of a man in my arms was as far removed as the moon over R's bedroom so long ago. That girl never existed. Not in this realm. One night, alone in bed, I heard the sounds of a couple making love in a nearby apartment coming through the walls. They amplified the room to a feverish pitch. For what seemed like hours when it was probably minutes, the woman moaned. I never felt so hollow. Everyone was alive but me.

Late October, harvest season over, few signs of Amish life dotted the fields and farms, a man on a tractor here, a woman tending a garden there, and I felt a bit like a voyeur, again, staring out.

"Before we head back, we'll stop at an Amish country store. Fifteen minutes tops, folks. Please show these wonderful people how much you appreciate their hospitality. They opened up their land and lives to you, so be good sports and open up your wallets to them."

The size of a 7-Eleven, the store was jammed with freshly baked breads and pound cakes, glassware, pottery, Christmas candles, etc. With her usual enchantment, my mom wandered up and down aisles where everything was a novelty including the lovely bonneted girls who worked there. Polite but Amish to the bone, they shunned any down-to-earth exchange.

Last in line, my mom purchased two loaves of sourdough bread and two quilted potholders with royal blue trim. In no hurry, she began second-guessing

herself. Did she want the salt and pepper shakers? Exchange the potholders for the oven mitts? She rarely walks out of a store in a straight line, but I could hear the tour bus, its motor running. Another bus rolling in meant our time was up. I took her arm.

"Let's go."

As our bus began to move, my mom glanced back at the country store, already growing nostalgic for all the Amish knickknacks she left behind.

There's a bigger story here, raw and poignant, about how she lost everything in the war including the mother and home she left behind in what is now North Korea. So when a line began to form outside a pretzel booth window, she blinked. Nearly panicked.

"Why they are there?"

"To buy something, that's all, Mom."

She squinted. "What they are buying?"

"Hot pretzels. Just like the ones in the mall. No big deal."

Oh, but it was a big deal. These weren't mall pretzels, and even if they tasted exactly like mall pretzels, it didn't matter.

"Mister! Listen, Mister, stop bus!"

And he did.

The bus waited while my mom took her time coaxing her pretzel out of its waxy bag. Just the top. Just a bite. Her face swooned like it was chocolate or something.

"Taste, Frances. *Authentic* Amish pretzel."

Amish Schmamish, a pretzel was a pretzel. But if it meant getting this show on the road, I'd swallow it whole.

My bite, more a nibble, was still warm and buttery and better than any mall pretzel, sprinkled with grains of salt so perfectly placed the poet in me wants to say God lent a hand.

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So the waitress is probably a bingo-playing grandma who's aware we're barely the same species but, hey, we're all women of a certain unsexy age, and we're all

in the same boat, just trying to live our lives. Within the confines of this Amish-owned diner, she's been good, giving us our space even as she clears the table.

"Anything else, ladies? Dessert? More coffee?"

"Just the check," I say, "thank you."

"Thank you," my mom repeats.

Her meal, she remarks to me, was delicious, though her rating is based on a Pennsylvania Dutch Country scale. Naturally, she'd rather eat Asian any day of the week, but she was here for the Amish experience.

My meal was so-so but my view? Unscripted and glorious. I had dreams, you know, back when every hour was journal-worthy. But today a billboard trilogy under atmospheric skies will have to do. I take a pic, imagining the wacky photograph my mom might snap—of headless poles sticking out of God's earth.

*Brandi George*

# Obey Orchestral Orgasm

Oedipus orgasm obligatory orgasm
Ocean orgasm omnipotent orgasm
Orpheus orgasm oxygen orphan
Ornament overkill oyster
Origin outerspace origin outlier origin
Overseas origin overwrought ovum
Outrage ornate outrage online outrage
Obituary obscene occult octagon
Omega opera orchard
Original orgy OMGIH [i]
Original order OMGIH
Original opposite orifice
Orbital organic one one oblivion
One origin one opus one ozone
One other one obsolete
Off on off on October ovary
Old optician old oregano
Occupy ocher occupy ohm
Occupy olive occupy organ
Occupy Orion orthodox
Osmosis ossify o! owl ossify
O! Ox ossify o! oyster
Ossify o! obsessive o! orthorexia
O! orthopedic obsessive
Opioid obsessive o! ontology

[i] Oh my god in heaven, oh my god in hell, odd myopic glow inside hornets, omega involution huntress

*Jee Leong Koh*

# Selections from *Does grass sweat: Translations of an insignificant Japanese poet* by Jee Leong Koh (2016), with commentary by Sam Fujimoto-Mayer (2066)

Translator's Note

In February 2011, when I moved into my Upper West Side apartment, not far from 80 Riverside Drive, where Yone Noguchi boarded for a time, I found a sheaf of haiku in the bedroom closet, almost as if it had been left for me. To my surprise, the poet made numerous references to people and places that I knew from living in New York City. I was thus compelled to translate the poems from the Japanese. As I worked on these exhilarating, enigmatic pieces, I found myself searching out the street corner, the tree, and even the bird that had so enraptured our poet. In this manner I traced the route taken through Central Park—entering at 86th Street on the west side, then running south of the reservoir, or else strolling north of the Great Lawn by the Arthur Ross pinetum, and finally exiting on the east side at either 84th or 85th Street. Slowly I was beginning to live the life glimpsed through these haiku. I now walk in the poet's footsteps every day to where I teach school. The manuscript had a title, "Unsettled," which has been crossed out firmly with two pencil strokes. I take the deletion as the author's intention, and so I have given this book a title by quoting one of the poet's haiku instead. He or she signed off as "an insignificant Japanese poet."

Jee Leong Koh
New York City
August 13, 2016

Preface

Many volumes of commentary on the poems have been published since the first appearance of *Does grass sweat*. On its 50th anniversary, I humbly offer my commentary, a labor of love over the course of a long solitary life. I was thirteen years old when it first appeared, and I still remember the shock of recognition it afforded me as I perused its contents as a sixteen-year-old with vague poetic pretensions. The revelation had the force of the first experience of sex, the fumble of understanding, the sweet intuitions. The thin book, with covers that were yellow, first by design, and then by age, has kept me company from Miami Township, in Ohio, to Stanford University, and then to New York City, which has been my home in the past 40 odd years.

New York City has undergone great changes during that time. The author of *Does grass sweat* will not recognize his beloved Central Park. Because of chronic water shortages, watchtowers with oscillating guns now guard the reservoir against the tenements in mid and lower Manhattan. The less adaptable flora, including the poet's favorite forsythia, have given up their ghosts to rising temperatures. Harlem is now occupied by Wall Street. The not-so-new civil rights movement has succeeded in catapulting selected queer and colored persons over the walls and keeping the huddled masses out. I can see Central Park where I live on Fifth Avenue, but I can no longer enter it. This commentary is offered as a way of preserving the park as a public commons, if not in actuality, then in the imagination.

Poems appearing in the commentary without a translator's name appended to them are my original translations.

Sam Fujimoto-Mayer
New York City
August 15, 2066

A dropped napkin
dabs at the corner
of the field

It is impossible to speak of the history of the Japanese haiku in America and not speak of the history of the Japanese people in America. And it is impossible to speak of the history of the Japanese people in America and not speak of the history of their incarceration by their own government in concentration camps during World War II. This macabre haiku tells of the disorienting experience of having one's land seized and swallowed illegally. The Issei was forbidden by law to own land, and so they went around the prohibition by buying land in the name of their America-born offspring. As Michi Weglyn tells it in her groundbreaking report *Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps (1976)*, the Issei bought up land nobody wanted: barren deserts, swamplands, and lands dangerously close to high-tension wires, dams, and railroad tracks; and turned them into lush growing fields. Fierce economic competition caused West Coast groups to cry foul and push for the evacuation of the Japanese from their homes, so that they could take over the now-lucrative real estate. When some Nisei resisted the draft because they wanted

clarification of their citizenship status first, they received support from the Issei who had based their lifework on their children's American citizenship. The napkin is an oblique reference to Michi Weglyn, who was a costume designer. After her incarceration at Gila Relocation Center in Arizona, where she contracted tuberculosis, she designed costumes for "The Perry Como Show," a 1950s variety show on network TV.

After keeping indoors for two days to
nurse a cold, I venture out to the park
newly opened since the snowstorm.
Walking on snow is like walking on a
beach, with the difference that I have
too much clothes on.

Sand so white
it has given up the ghost
of a sea

The preamble deliberately misdirects the reader, a deceptive tactic advocated by Sun Tzu's *Art of War.* What first appears to be an individual illness is really a symptom of race sickness. The word "white" gives the color game away. After their internment in government-sanctioned concentration camps in World War Two, the Nisei (or second-generation Japanese Americans) assimilated into the dominant white culture and gave up the "sea" of their island heritage, their splendid isolation. The camps were not just about imprisonment, they were also about behavior modification. They converted what appeared to be recalcitrant cultural separatism into the

homogeneity of the main culture. To be reckoned to be Americans, the Nisei had to forget they were Japanese. The irony was that the Sansei (or third-generation Japanese Americans) should despise their parents' submission to the unconstitutional incarceration. They blamed their parents' weakness on traditional Japanese culture, which, to their minds, counseled Confucian obedience. The Sansei did not know of the Nisei who resisted the unfair draft of Japanese into the American war effort. They did not know of the Fair Play Committee at Heart Mountain Camp, because the only version of history they knew was the version put out by the assimilationist Japanese American Citizens League. So Japanese culture was doubly abandoned. This is the irony so well expressed by Frank Chin's impassioned essay "Come All Ye Asian American Writers," which is anthologized in *The Big Aiiieeeee!*.

*Roberta Iannamico*

# Dije chau

de ***Tendal***

Dije chau
y me fui a vivir a las lechugas
con esas sábanas
el camisón
no vale la pena
suave
rugosa
la lechuga
tierna
fresca
es un hogar
ideal para el verano
verde claro
con transparencias
permite que pase
la luz del sol.

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY ALEXIS ALMEIDA

*Roberta Iannamico*

# I Said Goodbye

## from ***Wreckage***

I said goodbye
and went to live among the lettuces
with those sheets
the nightgown
isn't worth it
soft
coarse
the lettuce
tender
fresh
it's a home
ideal for summertime
clear green
with transparencies
it allows
for the passage of sunlight

# Verdulería

## de *Tendal*

Digo cualquier verdura
papa cebolla tomate
si estoy en ama de casa
lechuga mandarina
si es verano
si me quiero refrescar
alcaucil repollo
si me ataca el instinto de madre
madreselva
si estoy con la autoestima
por las nubes
brócoli colifor
para jugar
salir a juntar ramos
chaucha
economía
kiwi
una fruta
que parece un animal
manzanas rojas
me quiero entregar al lujo
manzanas verdes
me entrego a lo frugal
pomelo rosado
un tesoro para las nenas

*Roberta Iannamico*
**TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY ALEXIS ALMEIDA**

# Vegetable Stand

## from ***Wreckage***

I say vegetables
potato onion tomato
if I'm playing the housewife
lettuce tangerine
if it's summer
if I want to be refreshed
artichoke cabbage
if the mother instinct overtakes me
honeysuckle
if I have self-esteem
to the clouds
broccoli cauliflower
just for fun
I go make bouquets
green beans
economy
kiwi
a fruit
that looks like an animal
red apples
I want to give myself over to luxury
green apples
I give myself over to frugality
pink grapefruit
a treasure for girls

el azúcar puede ser la puntilla
algo masculino
los rábanos los nabos
los dientes de ajo
el apio el limón
un zapallo de calabaza
para despertarme
con la luz de la mañana.

*Roberta Iannamico*
**TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY ALEXIS ALMEIDA**

the sugar can be the lace
something masculine
the radishes the turnips
the garlic cloves
the celery the lemon
a pumpkin squash
to wake me up
with the morning light.

*Celia Bland*

# Cherokee Hogscape

*We think of the key, each in his prison.*
*Thinking of the key, each confirms his prison.*
T.S. Eliot

Pops wd say, *hogs'll knock you*
*down and chaw yr eyeballs*
*out of the socket. I seen 'em.*

Pops collected slops from the poolroom
café making you carry
plastic buckets – don't
slop yr sneakers
w/ hamburger scraps, dollops
of cream corn, loaf heels or cabbage
cores, boy. Tip 'em into that trough as
the hogs shoulder like nimble
church-goers to a pew, jaws
scooping
pulp, tensile snouts like chestnut halves, snuf-
fling.
When gravy slops your sneaks Pops
hollers Peel me a switch! and flexes his
ochre arm.
You can read
switches, calibrate heft to pain, welts
testifying tensile swish
to bloodied shins or merely
blistered.

You like to choose wood
that bled,
flexing yr own red
arm to snap a limb
from some mud-spattered
de-barked aspen in the hog pen, a bottom
barren of grass, leaf or bush. Hogpack
flanked you, 350pds
of rippling sides, bristling eyes.
You heard 'em snuffling at night through the raw
plywood walls of the room
off the horse barn
where you and Pops
under a chenille counterpane in the chill of 4 am
heard pigeons flutter
above yr plywood ceiling,
coo-cooing.

In prison, it struck you:

it wasn't Pop's hogs you hated
but his chickens.
Those scores scratching sawdust with
spurred claws
sequins pinned for eyes. Not like
lash-lined &
irised hog-eyes watching
as you shit
between roots
of oak, then
waded into the creek to sluice off
chicken creosote.

*Prison Mess* is the scratch and caw
of Pops' roosters
at the feeders. And
here you are, slopping
potato goop into troughs.
Again.

They say a cock
crowed when Peter
denied our Saviour, a cock
comb like chawed meat,
a skull full of beans.

But even Jesus knew:
chickens gotta doodle-doo.

*Jill McDonough*

# Late Leeks

Linda arrives with the leeks to end all leeks,
direct from her garden, practically hydroponic,
flawless, already creamy, pale
and perfect in an enormous bundle, sturdy
as a homecoming bouquet, held in one arm
like a sheaf of wheat, a dozen dozen roses, their
size and heft amazing, even for leeks.
I slice them open, flick them like pages
in a book with my thumb—dirt-free,
blank pages, ready for any recipe you want,
vichyssoise, potato leek, any gratin, braise or stew
but we make creamed leeks for Thanksgiving;
Thank you, Linda. We're thanking Linda for the leeks.

**Fig. 1.** Pauline Oliveros has left the planet but her sound lessons will always remain. Credit: Courtesy of Nameless Sound

# How Can We Remember the Trailblazing Electronic Music Composer, Pauline Oliveros (1932-2016)? Listen

*Steve Jansen*

No matter what you're doing—intently reading this piece, scrolling through the journal or flipping between tabs on a web browser, eating, talking to a friend, sitting, walking, breathing—there's a concert of sound, just for you, going on. There always is. If you're willing to really listen.

To Pauline Oliveros, sound, no matter how simple or complex, traditional or strange, was a conduit for listening and a path to a more grounded understanding of everything. Instead of fighting against environmental sounds, Oliveros would incorporate all of the background stuff into her performances.

The listening literally went deeper for Oliveros. With the help of Stuart Dempster and Panaiotis, the trio dropped fourteen feet underground, recorded inside of an abandoned cistern, and released the album *Deep Listening* in 1989. It became her life's philosophy that she disseminated to the folks who took part in the multiple branches of her Deep Listening Institute.

"My concern is to expand my consciousness through my listening. My music comes out of my listening, keeps me fascinated with sounds and places," wrote Oliveros in a December 2011 artist statement about the way she attuned her senses to the so-called everyday sounds in the background—for instance, not just one variation of white noise but all of the frequencies and nuances of white noise.

Oliveros, the Houston-born musician, composer, and educator, passed away in her sleep in her home in Kingston, New York, on November 24, 2016. She was eighty-four.

Oliveros, born on May 30, 1932, became fascinated with the noises all around her as a child growing up in Houston, including the sounds she coaxed out of the accordion, which she picked up at age nine. With an interest in concert music, improvisation, and electro-acoustic music, Oliveros studied composition at the University of Houston's Moores School of Music and completed her bachelor's studies at San Francisco State University.

She eventually became an original freethinking member, along with Terry Riley and Steve Reich, of the Morton Subotnick- and Ramón Sender-founded San Francisco Tape Music Center, a cultural organization that dove deep into the tape-music medium. Oliveros became the institute's first director when it moved to Mills College in 1967; the organization eventually evolved into its current incarnation, the Center for Contemporary Music at Mills.

To many, she's best known for the Pauline Oliveros Foundation, which would later be called the Deep Listening Institute. The education outlet that presents workshops, lectures, and concerts was formed in Kingston, New York,

and includes centers in the Bay Area and Houston. (The Houston version became Nameless Sound in 2006.)

Oliveros, an open lesbian and karate black belt, taught all of her life, establishing herself as a pillar in the music schools at the University of California, San Diego, Oberlin Conservatory of Music, and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. She received four honorary doctorates as well as numerous awards, including the 2009 William Schuman Award for Lifetime Achievement from Columbia University and the 2012 John Cage Award from the Foundation of Contemporary Arts in New York City.

Along with her work as a musician and composer that included collaborations with Ellen Fullman, Connie Crothers, Roscoe Mitchell, and Zeena Parkins, Oliveros had a gift for taking complicated topics and breaking them into digestible bits that anyone can grasp and apply.

An example, in a 2011 interview with the *Houston Press*: "Anything we do has got latency. We are made out of latency. We even have latency between our ears."

Or, during a TedX Talk in Indianapolis in 2015: "Sounds carry intelligence. If you are too narrow in your awareness of sounds, you are likely to be disconnected from your environment."

Or, perhaps most succinctly: "Deep Listening is my life practice."

Now, as you near the end of this piece, before your eyes potentially dart to the kicker and the final punctuation mark, listen. What do you hear? Something different or perhaps deeper?

If the sound has changed or, at the very least, your awareness of sound has shifted, you're preserving Pauline Oliveros' lifework.

**Fig. 1.** ***Rock My Religion*** (still, detail), 1983–84. Dan Graham (American, born 1942). Video (black and white and color, sound); 55:27 min. Courtesy of Dan Graham.

# Dan Graham—Design for Showing Rock Videos (2014)

*A. Will Brown*

Rock music, better known as Rock and Roll, from its genesis in the 1950s to the present, has remained a dynamic cultural force. For many throughout world history, Dan Graham included, music holds powerful spiritual qualities that extend experience well beyond the mundanity of the everyday, offering temporary sonic transcendence. From his work in performance and video to his own involvement writing about and touring with rock bands in the 1970s, Dan Graham is deeply committed to a nuanced exploration of sound, architecture, musical composition and performance.

The Cleveland Museum of Art's recently closed exhibition *Dan Graham/ Rocks* presented a range of works from the 1960s to 2014, which chart Graham's commitment and interest in rock music as a genre and a fluid creative form. The focal points of *Dan Graham/Rocks* were two-fold, his video essay *Rock My Religion* (1983-84) and *Design for Showing Rock Videos* (2014), which is one of his now well-known two-way glass and steel pavilions.

Graham's *Design for Showing Rock Videos* is configured using the artist's method of juxtaposing arching and flat panels of reflective glass and thin steel mesh that are set within stainless steel frames. As a rather large pavilion *Design for Showing Rock Videos* stands about seven feet tall and marks a footprint of nearly 20 x 20 feet at its outer edges. Located directly within and around the edges of the structure were five viewing stations. Meant for watching a scrolling selection of homemade and professional rock and roll music videos, each station comprised two gray vinyl cushions resting directly on the gallery's polished cement floor, a flat panel monitor mounted on a gray plinth, and a set of wireless headphones.

Dan Graham has been making these pavilions for nearly forty years in a wide range of public and private iterations—indoor, outdoor, temporary and permanent. While varying in location, scale, and particularity, each pavilion offers visitors an opportunity to encounter themselves and those around them in a uniquely reflective manner. Here one can see oneself being seen or see oneself seeing another, an extraordinary visual, psychological, and architectural experience.

Each pavilion acts as a blank slate, a receptacle that mirrors each viewer's experience of the context around her. One becomes an insider, and an outsider, but most importantly and profoundly, you see yourself at both seemingly opposite poles simultaneously.

While stepping into Graham's pavilion is experience enough, the selection of videos in *Design for Showing Rock Videos* present an array of performers and rock music styles that include scenes from the US, Germany, and the UK. The videos include bands, concerts, and songs that are not readily familiar for a non-expert audience member—a gesture that not only alludes to Graham's expert knowledge of and interest in unearthing esoteric rock music, but heightens one's awareness of just how unpopular much of the more challenging and provocative rock music is and has been. In demarcating the isolation of non-popular rock musicians, Graham

speaks to the ways in which provocative and challenging visual and fine art have had to fight for their place in the history and narrative of Art History, and culture at large.

The *Design for Showing Rock Videos* pavilion is surrounded by images of 1950s and 1960s postwar America that hang on the walls—a tame, cold, and infinitely reproducible fantasy of American suburbia—the identically sized houses and lots on perfect, boring clean streets standing in stark contrast to the rock music he chooses to present.

While navigating around *Design for Showing Rock Videos* and viewing oneself in the arced mirrored glass, one is implicated as a participant in the anti-rock-music culture that suburbia represents. But, sitting and watching video after video, one hears performers spout thoughtful and creative lyrics such as the singer in one video who says: "Don't want to be a victim. Pick the fleas, mister, eat yourself fitter. Eat each other, eat yourself fitter," we realize how embracing cultural critique through music is a choice that is often made of necessity. The choice to live outside of the constraints of an unremarkable and flat culture is one of survival for many.

*Design for Showing Rock Videos*, like much of Graham's work, reveals us to ourselves, mining our own cultural upbringing and bringing it into focus in new ways. This work unmasks the transcendent power of music to present new avenues of performing, seeing, and feeling, and the dangers of ignoring the inherent value of creative, at times religious and performative, expression.

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Dan Graham/Rocks *was organized by the Cleveland Museum of Art and presented at Transformer Station from August 13–December 4, 2016. Brought together by Associate Curator, Beau Rutland, in collaboration with the artist.*

# Roundtable: Trans and Genderqueer Poetics

*Ching-In Chen*

*This is a roundtable on trans and genderqueer poetics curated by Ching-In Chen in conversation with Ryka Aoki, Kai M. Green, L.G. Parker, and Trish Salah. In this discussion, the writers also address pedagogical concerns around trans and genderqueer poetics as well as their cultural production.*

**Ching-In Chen:** Could you introduce yourselves and what identities are important for you to name and acknowledge in this space? What lineages do you come from (as writers/poets, teachers, cultural workers, community organizers, or whatever other lineages you embrace)?

**Ryka Aoki:** I'm Ryka Aoki. I do have a lot of different identities. Queer, trans, writer, POC, musician, professor...but in some spaces, I think I just want to be Ryka. This is that sort of place. I am answering from the heart, sometimes in a very direct way, so rather than speaking for a group or a community, I really would like to be simply acknowledged as a genuine human being. I do not mean this as a shortcut, but a foundation upon which everything else must rest. Before we start any personal discussions about art or vision or creativity—we need to understand that this is a peer-to-peer, equal-to-equal discussion. It is not for one group to understand another, to be an ally—to learn about the "second menu" at the POC restaurant. This is about mutual growth. It must start from "I am a human being, and so are you." I say this as softly and gently, but as insistently as possible: we are all human. If you want to learn more, get to know me (www.rykaryka.com), but please also prepare to share.

**L.G. Parker:** With a looming Trump presidency, I just want to be named and acknowledged here first as human, and then as a writer, poet, and very new organizer. I'm also a human who happens to be Black, AFAB, and non-binary.

**RA:** Gosh. Especially now. It is sad that it has come to this, but we do need to assert humanity in no uncertain terms.

**Kai M. Green:** I believe I am a product of my ancestor's prayers, resilience, and creative brilliance. I am a queer Black Transgender Man. Those categories only tell you a little, because once we start to press those categories, we see the idea of their coherence begins to unravel. My Blackness is West Coast, Bay Area, Deep East Oakland to be exact (but when I was home last month, I saw a white woman walking her dog on my mother's block—colonization is happening now). My Blackness is Baptist, Non-denominational, and COGIC church, anointed oil, speaking in tongues and prayer closets. My Blackness is meditation in the morning, astrological readings of the signs, and tarot cards. My Blackness is the skin that I am in, and it informs my freedom-dreaming consciousness, a desire to get more free—so free that what my Black is and what it ain't doesn't have to always be "in spite" of global structures of anti-blackness. I am a filmmaker, a poet, a writer, a teacher, a person who thinks and creates. But most of all what I value most in life are my relationships with other people—I aspire daily to be a great friend to myself and others.

**Trish Salah:** I grew up in Nova Scotia, in Mi'kma'ki, which is traditional territory of the Mi'kmaq people. My mother's people are mainly Irish. My father was born in Lebanon. My imagination took shape in the '70s and '80s—I was mixed, Arab, Maronite, light skinned, in Halifax, which was basically a really big small town, a fairly old settler town, one pretty starkly divided upon racial and class lines. There were certainly poor white folks, but there were Black areas of town. When I was quite young, we were middle class; after my father died, we were not. I was introduced to socialism, anti-imperialism, and feminism by my eighth-grade social sciences teacher. When I think of what a teacher can be, her unabashedly radical teaching, no less than her friendship at a time when my own life seemed unlivable, stands out.

**"MY IMAGINATION TOOK SHAPE IN THE '70S AND '80S—I WAS MIXED, ARAB, MARONITE, LIGHT SKINNED, IN HALIFAX"**

I moved to Montreal when I was eighteen, because I thought it would be easier to transition away from my family, and because I wanted to be a writer and needed a place that was more open than where I came from.

**CIC:** L.G., can you talk a bit more about what you're organizing? Also, since Trish and Kai invoked geography, where do you consider yourself from? Is that important to your identity/writing? Trish, I'd love to hear more about your experience of Montreal as a writer.

**LGP:** Sure! I'm organizing a quarterly poetry reading series called *Run Tell That* here in Richmond, Virginia, where I live and am from. It emerges from the usual lack of these spaces, lack of writers coming to town who reflect any number of communities that have come through to the readings so far. I can best explain *Run Tell That* through answering your question about how Richmond is important to my identity/writing.

I was not aware of how deeply Richmond shapes or should shape my writing until this past summer. I was trying, as always, to write about gender and its role in public and private kinships (e.g. when a black man reads me as a younger black dude and nods at me, that's a public kinship influenced by his perception of my person; if a non-black woman clenches her purse when she sees me, she's investing in her kinship with everyone else who feels they must be distanced from people like me to be safe), and I realized that I could not write about gender broadly or my own transitioning without dealing with the politics of race and gender (which are never divorced) that legally necessitated my adoption, which are also the politics of race and gender that construct Richmond, Virginia, where I still live and write. In looking into my own history, I saw how Richmond more broadly continues to obstruct collective memory and regional identity through the reproduction of public space. The prettiest places in Richmond brought in cargo I call kin. The prettiest places in Richmond shut out and erase people I call kin. My goals with the series were simply to bring in artists that realistically reflect contemporary American letters and to hold space for their work in a place that was accessible. *Run Tell That* emerges from my belief that if you are living and writing in America, your life is shaped by the role that the South played in the earliest efforts of constructing American identity. One iteration of that is the literary canon. So I wanted us to speak for ourselves in this place where in eight-blocks, a "new-urbanist neighborhood" called Shockoe Bottom, constituted the sale of 300-000 to 700,000 people alone.

**"THE PRETTIEST PLACES IN RICHMOND BROUGHT IN CARGO I CALL KIN. THE PRETTIEST PLACES IN RICHMOND SHUT OUT AND ERASE PEOPLE I CALL KIN."**

I was adopted because my mother's family was not going to allow "black blood"—as they called it—to soil their Confederate lineage. Of course, that's ahistorical. There's no way I was the first black person to exist in the bloodline, but that was their stance, so they hid my mother away from all of her folks for the duration of her pregnancy, held court dates out of my father's reach, and this was all done in service of protecting her and her future, which, in turn, she framed as her protecting me. I don't feel unloved because I'm adopted, but I feel a familiar ache at the growing realization that my very coming into this world was shaped by this very historical refusal of kinship which echoes the way that Richmond as a whole, which is where her family is from, denies its black kin.

**"I WAS ADOPTED BECAUSE MY MOTHER'S FAMILY WAS NOT GOING TO ALLOW 'BLACK BLOOD'—AS THEY CALLED IT—TO SOIL THEIR CONFEDERATE LINEAGE."**

When Xandria and Taylor were here for the first reading of the series, we went to the Richmond Slave Trail, which is adjacent to the Sugar Pad. The Sugar Pad is a dock where all enslaved persons who came to, or travelled through, Richmond first arrived. What separates the Slave Trail and the Sugar Pad is the James River, which facilitated Richmond's key role in the slave market. Knowing the life of water during the Atlantic Slave Trade, it can be understood that likely there were enslaved people who managed to hide out in those woods for any period of time, seeking their kin who they anticipated would come or return to Richmond. Given the history, we know that people died there, that bodies likely punctuate the bottom of the river. Nothing on the plaques throughout the trail acknowledge this. Over the past few years the city has been developing a riverfront park to replace the Sugar Pad.

Quiet at the Slave Trail; we were each affected and effected. So where the mission statement of *Run Tell That* says that the series, which I understand to be a living and collective thing, "understands all American letters to be necessarily shaped by the South's public/private, individual/collective I's," I'm speaking to and attempting to account for the fact that I think that each person, especially those who are attempting to write and account for our present political moment, has in some way been shaped by the South. And I don't mean that in a bad way either, 'cause there is a lot to celebrate about the South. *Run Tell That* emerges from the belief that if you are living and writing in America, your life is in some way shaped or touched by the role that the South played in the earliest efforts at constructing an American identity. One iteration of that is the literary canon.

**TS:** Moving to a city and province in which language was heavily and openly contested certainly had its impact. Unlike most Canadian provinces, which are formally bilingual, the official (and majority) language of Quebec is French, and for many Quebecois, there was, and to an extent still is, a strong sense of Quebec as its own nation, one that should be sovereign. Living in Montreal, it seemed that the conflict between colonial French and English cultures often functioned to preempt or obscure consideration of racism, racialized peoples' realities, and, in a fundamental way, Indigenous peoples' presence. Despite the fact that I didn't speak much French, I think I felt at home in Montreal at least in part because it was in significant ways a Levantine city—Arab, obviously, but also Latin, Jewish, North African. Or it could have to do with the fact that Montreal was also, for various reasons that came down to how cheap it was to live there, a bohemian city, a city where lots of people made art, worked in the paid economy as little as necessary to pay rent. And as Viviane Namaste has written, it is a city with a longstanding, internationally famous red light district, one in which trans women have had an important role, as artists, entertainers, and sex workers. So through my years in college, if an evening started at a spoken word event, it often ended at les Foufounes Électriques, the avant-garde punk bar, or at the drag shows at Cabaret Café Cleopatra, a working girls' bar around the corner.

**"I THINK I FELT AT HOME IN MONTREAL AT LEAST IN PART BECAUSE IT WAS IN SIGNIFICANT WAYS A LEVANTINE CITY—ARAB, OBVIOUSLY, BUT ALSO LATIN, JEWISH, NORTH AFRICAN."**

In any case, during the time I was studying creative writing at Concordia, I was also finding my way through different, often disconnected, milieus. My teachers were largely from an older Anglo-centric literary scene, but some also pointed me toward a feminist experimental context, centered around the bilingual journal, *Tessera*, which was one of the sites of a Quebecois and Canadian conversation around questions of écriture féminine, new narrative, queer, and postcolonial writing. Though they were not all *Tessera* writers, Gail Scott, Gerry Shikatani, Robert Majzels, Erin Mouré, Nicole Brossard were major influences. My own cohort was busy with our own experiments and genre crossings, little magazines, small presses, spoken word cabarets. There were overlaps with and crossings in and out of French, but the scenes were pretty distinct. While I knew queer and PoC writers in those milieus, often

getting lots of things done—I'm thinking for instance of *ribsauce: A CD/Anthology of Words by Women* edited by Taien Ng-Chan, Alex Boutros, and Kaarla Sundström, and the long standing work of the Black Theatre Workshop—my experience of the writing scenes was they were pretty straight and mostly white.

**CIC:** Do you consider yourself to write from a trans and/or genderqueer aesthetic? If you do, how would you describe that aesthetic? If you don't, do you think there isn't such an aesthetic? Do you think there is an expected aesthetic (or narrative) which you don't fall into or intentionally try to subvert?

**RA:** I really hope there isn't such an aesthetic! I would run from it quickly. What I mean is that trans and genderqueer identities are so diverse, sort of like "Asian," which to outsiders seems monolithic—but to those of us who are Asian—we know better. I think to have a nameable aesthetic opens us up to being essentialized, co-opted, and exocitized. Think of how cringy "I just love the Asian aesthetic" coming from the mouth of a non-Asian is! I wouldn't wish that upon trans artists. If someone classifies me, so be it, but I really am not going to worry about it too much.

**"...TRANS AND GENDERQUEER IDENTITIES ARE SO DIVERSE, SORT OF LIKE "ASIAN," WHICH TO OUTSIDERS SEEMS MONOLITHIC—BUT TO THOSE OF US WHO ARE ASIAN—WE KNOW BETTER."**

**CIC:** In terms of classification, do you think there is anything useful about organizing as trans writers, poets, cultural organizers together? For instance, I think that it was helpful for me as a poet and writer to see the gathering of voices which appeared in *Troubling the Line* and how varied they were, or in the Writing Trans Genres conferences Trish organized. Or do you think organizing along these affiliations or identities is ultimately more unproductive or harmful?

**RA:** Now, along political or social lines, it can be enjoyable, beneficial, even cathartic to find other trans writers. I have made some amazing friendships. However, this is a thing apart from finding one's own voice. I worry sometimes that the isolation we can feel as trans people might make it more difficult to do the "alone work" a writer

needs to write. It is good to find each other. But it is not good to let what we have found limit us going forward—either in how we create our work, or how we frame its impact. "Safe space" and impactful writing are strange bedfellows; there should be little that is safe about great literature.

"'SAFE SPACE' AND IMPACTFUL WRITING ARE STRANGE BEDFELLOWS; THERE SHOULD BE LITTLE THAT IS SAFE ABOUT GREAT LITERATURE."

To other trans poets, go do what you do and resist the urge to self-label. Perhaps a school will form around you, perhaps not, but I am far more interested in the work you create, not where to put it on my bookshelf. Be hard to define; be annoying to the gender scholars. Challenge your readers.

**KMG:** When the question of a trans aesthetic is presented to me, I am forced to reckon with the fact that it requires a coherent trans body? But what I know is that coherent and trans are in many ways at odds. Trans names a type of instability that coherence cannot afford to hold. Do all transgender bodies by default produce a trans aesthetic? I would like that trans aesthetic held the potential for the disseminations of a radical consciousness that opens us up to new world order possibilities. So, is there a trans aesthetic? Is there something that we can say generally about trans experience that might help us understand the structures of the world? Or is the question about a particular kind of consciousness? Perhaps a trans aesthetic is not as interesting to me as the possibility of a trans* consciousness that holds at its core the radical potential of undoing and (re)doing differently everything—this is another way to name change. Perhaps the trans* consciousness or politic that we should collectively be trying to cultivate is one of change. A politic that is open to change and constant reassessment of political strategy. Our allegiance should always be to our values. The categories that we use to identify ourselves as racial and gendered subjects play a role in shaping our values, but our identities are not themselves alone our values. We still have to do the work of naming our collective values. We cannot assume that our shared identities secure our shared values or visions. We have to do the work of getting to know one another. We must share what it is that scares us the most. We cannot afford to make assumptions. Communication is going to be key as we enter this Trump era.

**LGP:** As far as a trans aesthetic, I agree with Kai that trans "names a type of instability that coherence cannot afford to hold," and, along those lines, I think there are patterns of questions and observations that make up what could be called a trans aesthetic, but I don't think that a singular way of writing about or while trans exists.

Your comments on time/temporality call to mind two things.

***1.*** The fact and trouble of an archive of trans poetics. Trace Peterson's "Becoming a Trans Poet" troubles that with particular regard to the poetry of Samuel Ace, Max Wolf Valerio, and kari edwards. I'm wondering to what degree an urgent need to archive our work is and must be a part of a trans aesthetic.

***2.*** This summer I read a lot of psychiatric reports on "gender dysphoria," which of course is most often used by us to approximate a temporal discomfort, but psychiatrists use it as synonymous with being trans. By that logic, we live in a disruptive state where "real life," and therefore real time, is a constant violation and assault on the person which makes impossible, I guess, what you mean by a coherent body. The next question would be coherent to whom?

**"BY THAT LOGIC, WE LIVE IN A DISRUPTIVE STATE WHERE 'REAL LIFE,' AND THEREFORE REAL TIME, IS A CONSTANT VIOLATION AND ASSAULT ON THE PERSON..."**

I'm thinking of how being trans and genderqueer is relegated to an Internet fad, which positions trans subjectivities on the outside of time and physicality, therefore social life. Always elsewhere and otherwise.

**TS:** How can one write otherwise to/against how one has been written? This has been a question for women, queers, many racialized groups of people. How can one write from experiences that are marked as unintelligible, or unspeakable? Again, this is not a new problem. However, I do think that, as L.G. suggests, there is a way in which trans erasure, and trans figuration as an always/elsewhere/impossible kind of becoming, both do give a certain urgency to archiving, and publicizing trans and gender non-conforming peoples' cultural work. For my part, at least, I can say that there is an ongoing history of writing that makes use of trans figures which I've felt I needed to contend with. I don't think I'm alone in that.

My first book's aesthetic influences are varied—diasporic, Arab, postcolonial, Creole, feminist, queer, postmodern. But reading within those traditions and influences my own

identifications sometimes foundered on problems raised by the way non-trans writers made use of trans figures. Is undoing phobic representation an aesthetic? Maybe not, but the undoing/working of such problems ends up being an aesthetic as well as theoretical concern that my poetry and fiction struggle with. I think that it shares that with some early trans genre essays and performance by folks like Sandy Stone, Susan Stryker, as well as with folks who didn't necessarily identify as trans but were contending with crossing gender, genre in variously queer ways.

And there is also that other movement, of trying to make things sayable and thinkable within languages that preclude their existence. In this sense, I would argue less for a trans or genderqueer aesthetic, than for a discursive situation in which trans genre writing sometimes operates as minor literature, as a mode of interference with the implicit rules of the game.

**CIC:** Can you point to some trans genre writing which you think is doing this, or is this more of a desire for a writing which you don't think is currently happening?

**TS:** Sure, but perhaps what is subversive, what interferes with what's dominant, shifts all the time. I think a great deal of work by trans and genderqueer authors does this work, though in different ways. Part of the impetus for organizing the Writing Trans Genres conference, and the Decolonizing and Decriminalizing Trans Genres symposium that you alluded to earlier, was to create spaces where trans writers, critics, cultural workers could take stock of what we were doing, and what we might want to be doing. But for some specific examples of deterritorializing/reterritorializing modes of inscription, I would point to your own work with *recombinant* and *The Heart's Traffic*, micha cárdenas' Transborder Immigrant Tool and her writing around the transreal...At the Trans* Studies conference in September, I heard a very good paper that looked at Sybil Lamb's zines in these terms of well. And *Drunken Boat* recently published a conversation between Gabriel Ojeda-Sague and Jai Arun Ravine, which turned, in part, on how one might experience being "adjacent to" self, being, experience. In their conversation, adjacency marks identity as proximal, relational and abyssal, as in Ravine's *The Romance of Siam*, which among

**"BUT PERHAPS WHAT IS SUBVERSIVE, WHAT INTERFERES WITH WHAT'S DOMINANT, SHIFTS ALL THE TIME."**

other things inhabits and satirically reads Orientalist renderings of Thailand and Thai identity. Beyond satire, Ravine's text enacts and undoes ambivalently affected longing within/toward imperial maps and orientalist figures. Rather than producing an oppositional authenticity, its "adjacency" simultaneously doubles as and dissembles whiteness's fantasy of Thai otherness. Or consider these lines from Cameron Awkward-Rich's "Essay on the Appearance of Ghosts" in *Sympathetic Little Monster*:

> What is an alphabet but a way to give sounds little
> bodies? What is writing but the preservation of
> ghosts?
>
> When *The Ring* came out, the little girl on film
> shared a name with the little girl in my phone.
> One letter difference. One little black body.

**LGP:** The major questions and patterns that I see within work by queer and trans folks concern the body in public space, different (mis)readings of the body that aren't necessarily gendered, contemplations on public and private space, the person's movement therein, and how geography effects/affects these things. I also see a toying with the medicalized language that's weaponized against us. I could say pretty much all of these same things about literature written by black people. Even the questions folks are asking here about the idea of a trans aesthetic can be asked of a black aesthetic, especially Trish's question of "how can one write from experiences that are marked as unintelligible, or unspeakable?" That question calls to mind a lot of the questions that Saidiya Hartman asks of narrative. I think it illuminates the fact that you cannot discuss trans without discussing blackness despite the popular imaginary constituting trans and black as inherently oppositional.

**"I THINK IT ILLUMINATES THE FACT THAT YOU CANNOT DISCUSS TRANS WITHOUT DISCUSSING BLACKNESS DESPITE THE POPULAR IMAGINARY CONSTITUTING TRANS AND BLACK AS INHERENTLY OPPOSITIONAL."**

Blackness in America does necessitate an inherent gender deviance in the sense that black women and men, in line with the binary, are not ever "allowed" to be men

and women in the ways that whiteness and its agents construct these subjectivities. However, I'm not of the mind that this sort of deviance is synonymous with or can approximate being black and ____ [insert genderqueer, trans, asexual, so on and so forth]. There are particular ways that cis black people can and often do weaponize their efforts at manhood and womanhood against those of us considered to be other. We see this weaponized in the rhetoric of blackness as inherently oppositional to trans. That lie is a major vehicle for the joke of transracial, which doubles as commentary on the absurdity of transgender and transracial indexing gender as a racial project.

**"THERE ARE PARTICULAR WAYS THAT CIS BLACK PEOPLE CAN AND OFTEN DO WEAPONIZE THEIR EFFORTS AT MANHOOD AND WOMANHOOD AGAINST THOSE OF US CONSIDERED TO BE OTHER."**

**CIC:** I've been thinking a lot about pedagogy of trans and genderqueer poetry and poetics (and cultural production, in general). In both community workshops and poetry workshops in more formal schooling, none of my teachers ever asked me to read work by trans and/or genderqueer poets. So I taught myself by searching and reading trans and genderqueer poetry and poetics on my own. Do you write in conversation with other trans and/or genderqueer poets and/or cultural workers? Are you writing for a trans and/or genderqueer audience? How did you come to learn/understand what a trans and genderqueer poetics is? How did you find other trans and genderqueer poets (or did you)? Were you taught in school? Self-taught? In community-based institutions? Which writers/teachers were important to you (in the physical classroom, on the page/stage)?

**RA:** Most of my conversations with other writers tend to be very social. And sort of a "wow, I really dug your book!" thing. I never really looked for other trans writers. I just wrote. I was lucky to come from an MFA program, but that also meant I was in a bubble. When I emerged, I just wrote. I read. I held readings. Honestly, I hate workshops. But I love talking shop. I like listening to other writers because suddenly my own weird little world makes sense. I held queer readings. I created Trans/Giving, the first trans arts festival in Los Angeles.

**CIC:** Would love to hear more about what is was like to create Trans/Giving. Any lessons? Challenges?

**RA:** In Trans/Giving, the main things I learned were that if you came with the proposition of giving, people were surprised. They had so often thought of trans people as needful, not as generous. Flipping the script, showing that we were not merely capable of surviving, but of contributing our creativity, our music, our art. We changed a lot of hearts, I think. It made me even more sure that art is unequaled as a humanizing force in our community. And it made me realize that art and writing and music—these things in and of themselves—had value on their own. There was no higher cause they needed to serve. Art and writing and music and film—these things are not merely the byproduct of a vital culture. They help define it. When I left Trans/Giving, I sort of did my own thing, and the people who liked it, stayed. My resolve to work through my writing was stronger than ever. I know not everyone feels the way I do. But it works for me.

**"FLIPPING THE SCRIPT, SHOWING THAT WE WERE NOT MERELY CAPABLE OF SURVIVING, BUT OF CONTRIBUTING OUR CREATIVITY, OUR MUSIC, OUR ART."**

I write for myself and the one person I have never met who needs my book. I don't know who this person is, where this person is, why this person needs to read my work. I just know I am writing for them.

The writing instructors that taught me the most were not queer. They were very good writers, despite this. They taught me to believe in myself as a writer and to respect my craft. However, that is not to say I have not had queer mentors. Of those, the one I respect and think of the most is Leslie Feinberg. Oh. My. God. I was so intimidated the first time we met. But Les was the kindest, most supportive voice. From Les, I learned what it meant to stay true to one's ideals, to look for deeper meanings, to go beyond labels, and to identify areas of true inequality and need. Seriously, Leslie Feinberg. What a brilliant and wise soul.

**LGP:** I'm not sure if I'm consciously writing in conversation, but I am always interested in the questions people are asking, their (de) constructions of gender ~~and everything else~~. I don't ever want to waste space in a poem or paper explaining or trying to normalize trans or genderqueer subjectivities for a reader, so I guess in that way I write for us, whoever we are.

Brave New Voices was really where I met and learned about more trans and genderqueer poets. Sam sax led a workshop on queer poetics where we read Jericho Brown's "Derrick Anything But," which confused and excited me. He refused to just give the reader the poem—I liked the work I had to do as a reader, especially then as an even younger poet. I know this is about trans and genderqueer and not cis gay poetics, but I couldn't have really desired to push the language farther, to insist upon my own being without beginning there with those poems. Just the same with Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich, you know—cis lesbians who ushered me into a desire to do this. For a while before I knew that there were trans men and masculine-of-center AFAB folks whose work I could be reading, I was very interested in a lot of work by black gay men. A mentor at the time told me I was obsessed, and I carried that with me for a while. In hindsight, I think that was my developing effort towards recognizing or constructing a sort of black transmasculine or masculine AFAB poetics, but even more than that, just seeking a language to use in my life but in all actuality the only thing I could relate to in those poems was the church.

Aside from Brave New Voices, Tumblr actually played a big role. The site gets a lot of flack, but I learned a lot there that I've not learned elsewhere, which I think can be said of a lot of younger black queer thinkers. People were always posting articles, even PDFs of entire books, and there was and definitely is an active body of folks there who, if they were in an institution, would be called scholars. It's difficult for me to hear critiques and minimizations about Tumblr, especially insofar as queer theory is often disregarded as "that Tumblr shit" without considering the extent to which Tumblr is a site where trans and genderqueer folks seek and acquire resources to live (e.g. crowdfunding, sharing resources, the queer housing pages). I don't mean to suggest that nothing absurd happens, but where doesn't it?

**"[TUMBLR] GETS A LOT OF FLACK, BUT I LEARNED A LOT THERE THAT I'VE NOT LEARNED ELSEWHERE, WHICH I THINK CAN BE SAID OF A LOT OF YOUNGER BLACK QUEER THINKERS."**

The folks whose work I am always thinking about are David Marriott, Saidiya Hartman, Zakiyyah Jackson, Ashon Crawley, Hilton Als, Phillip B. Williams, Lucille Clifton, Maggie Nelson, Richard Siken.

I know that it is a very false binary but I tend to trust myself more in the space of an essay than a poem when it comes to exploring gender, because I feel an essay gives

me more space to question things. All of the poets I admire say that you know a poem is done when you say something that you didn't know you knew, but I think for that to work in the poem, you have to have some sort of control, you know? You do have to have, I think, some idea of where you're going, which I realize, as I'm writing this, is a function and value of poetic form—those restrictions service and work you.

The most important poetry instructor I've had in a classroom setting was Vievee Francis at *Callaloo*. Working with her made me a better, smarter reader, and that changed the whole game for me.

Poets and writers who have been invaluable teachers and friends beyond the classroom are Chancellor China, Shaan Michael Wade, Shermaine Jones, L. Lamar Wilson, Bettina Judd, and Joy Priest.

**TS:** In university I was introduced to many traditions—to the work of Indigenous, Chicana, and Black feminist creative writers (books like Paula Gunn Allen's *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Dionne Brand's *No Language is Neutral*), experimental writing by French and Quebec feminists (Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères*, Gail Scott's *Heroine* were particularly important to me), and early queer and postcolonial theory (Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Édouard Glissant, Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, Leo Bersani). But though there were some queer folks in the creative writing workshops I took in university, in terms of trans and genderqueer writers and writing, not so much. I learned a great deal from my fellow students and teachers, but I had to look elsewhere for that, and it took a while to find. For that matter, it also was a long while before I got to know other Arab writers, to have a sense of diasporic Arab literature.

**"I LEARNED A GREAT DEAL FROM MY FELLOW STUDENTS AND TEACHERS, BUT I HAD TO LOOK ELSEWHERE FOR [TRANS AND GENDERQUEER WRITERS AND WRITING], AND IT TOOK A WHILE TO FIND."**

**CIC:** Many of you are teachers. Do you bring trans and genderqueer poetry (or more broadly, cultural production) into your classroom? How do you approach the teaching of trans cultural production?

**KMG:** I teach courses about race, gender, sexuality, and freedom. In my "Theorizing Blackness: Freedom Dreams, Afro-Futures, and Visionary Fictions" classroom, I ask questions that require imaginative labor, the willingness to play in the dark, and to sit with the unknown. Sitting with the unknown can be uncomfortable because we all don't simply want to know, we want to know that we know. Many of my students enter my classes ready to read and criticize. This is how they have learned to demonstrate their intellectual talents—through deconstruction. My students come to me knowing how to break things down, to point out all the holes in almost every article, book, or film, but when asked to create, when asked to partake in the work of producing a new thing, I am often met with confusion and frustration because "I ask too many questions" and I ask my students to imagine a world of answers that they themselves provide—my classroom cultivates self-direction and self-awareness. Suddenly the task of creating a new world becomes more daunting, when the power to envision is put in the hands of the students. They learn a difficult yet essential lesson: we can't simply abolish what we have without considering what to put in its place.

**"THEY LEARN A DIFFICULT YET ESSENTIAL LESSON: WE CAN'T SIMPLY ABOLISH WHAT WE HAVE WITHOUT CONSIDERING WHAT TO PUT IN ITS PLACE."**

Abolition remains solely destructive if it is not coupled with ideas to be put into action and to birth new things/beings into the world. In my "Theorizing Blackness" course, we examine the various ways Black scholars, artists, and writers use science fiction and visionary fiction to imagine freedom and new world orders.

**CIC:** Which science fiction and visionary fiction writers do you read?

**KMG:** There are so many things to read, especially if we expand our definitions of science fiction. I always say that we can examine all Black American literatures in a way as a type of science fiction or visionary fiction. I sometimes describe this course as a history of the Black radical imagination—a history of dreaming and doing. Imagine being a thing, an object to be exchanged, like a table or a couch—now if our tables and couches started talking to us, we'd think it kind of eerie and otherworldly. In a way, Black people writing and talking and thinking and dreaming of other

ways of being in the world that aren't exploitative is an essential component of what theorist Cedric Robinson would call the Black Radical Tradition.

Of course Octavia Butler—I actually like to have my class read *Mind of My Mind* which is the second in the Patternmaster series. This book is great because it challenges students to really grapple with freedom—is freedom about an individual's will to be independent or is it about figuring out how we collectively relate to one another and perhaps need to feel and make ourselves more bonded?

**"...IS FREEDOM ABOUT AN INDIVIDUAL'S WILL TO BE INDEPENDENT OR IS IT ABOUT FIGURING OUT HOW WE COLLECTIVELY RELATE TO ONE ANOTHER...?"**

Here's the book/film list for the course:

Texts:
*Mind of my Mind*, Octavia Butler
*Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Robin D.G. Kelley
*Yabo,* Alexis De Veaux
*Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown, eds.
*Agenda to Build Black Futures*, BYP100
*Treasure*, Anna Martine Whitehead

Films:
*The Last Angel of History*, John Akomfrah (1996)
*Black is, Black Ain't*, Marlon Riggs (1995)
*Wattstax*, Mel Stuart (1973)
*The Boondocks*, "Return of the King," Kalvin Lee, Aaron McGruder (2006)
*Born in Flames*, Lizzie Borden (1983)
*Dreams are Colder Than Death*, Arthur Jafa (2014)

In this course, we focus on the role of history, particularly slavery, in the Black radical imagination. Freedom is the keyword throughout the course. We grapple with the various and sometimes conflicting meanings and uses of freedom as it relates to blackness, gender, sexuality, class, and ability. We explore multiple forms of scholarship and cultural

productions which include: film, music, novels, short stories, art, poetry, and other academic texts. All students are asked to discover and develop their writerly voices through various critical, creative, experimental, and performative assignments. This course requires active participation (show up!). In this course we deal with complex and sometimes personal topics; therefore, it is key that we create and maintain a brave atmosphere.

Now how does this all relate to trans* pedagogies—well, if the goal is to create consciousness-raising environments, we must push people to take leaps, sometimes really big leaps, and transition their worldviews. Representation is important, yes, it is important that we include GNC and trans writers and doers in our classrooms, but not simply to say we have a trans writer on the syllabus—that is inclusion—rather it is more important to me that I present my students with literatures that would help them to know the world beyond binaries and carceral imaginaries. I don't think that an author's identity necessarily means their work will be useful for consciousness raising. There are plenty of Transgender people, Black people, who maintain systems and ideologies that keep people like themselves oppressed. I can't just assume that including certain people will actually do the work of radically undoing certain systems of oppression that are both internalized and reinforced through curriculum.

**"...RATHER IT IS MORE IMPORTANT TO ME THAT I PRESENT MY STUDENTS WITH LITERATURES THAT WOULD HELP THEM TO KNOW THE WORLD BEYOND BINARIES AND CARCERAL IMAGINARIES."**

**RA:** I teach trans as another facet of postcolonialism. It is a battle for control over one's own narrative, one's own signifiers. I come from it via a postcolonial, rather than a feminist route, because I want to steer away from essentializing sex and gender—there is already enough work being done on those fronts.

To me, it is as important to read as trans as it is to write as trans. Canonical texts, even those such as *Macbeth* or *Old Man and the Sea* or *Gulliver's Travels* or *Sula*, can be read through a trans lens. In these texts, and we can find areas of exclusion, areas of assumed context, points of contradiction, subversion—things I do with postcolonial theory. I do not want to see another margin being created—even if it is gilded, a fence is still a fence. I want to make sure that queer lit is not something "those people do over there," but as a type of criticism that yields insights to the greater body of literature.

There is never going to be another book by Zora Neale Hurston. As scholars, then, should we not work to extract the most brilliance we can from the works we have? This requires including thoughts and approaches that may not be intuitive, or even comprehensible to you. But isn't that the point? Working together, we create a body of knowledge that is far more expansive than any of us can hold. These really help—even cis people see the value of trans and genderqueer art, culture, and thought.

**CIC:** Perhaps another way to get at the question above would be—what do you wish your teachers had brought into the classroom? If your teachers had taught trans cultural production and/or trans and genderqueer poetry, what and how do you wish they would have taught?

**TS:** Though university classrooms did not introduce me to that work, I was fortunate to take a community-based class, offered by Mirha-Soleil Ross, which introduced me to transsexual and transgender political discourses, debates about demedicalization and disability rights frames for thinking about how we access health care, sex workers' rights, as well as transphobia within the lesbian and gay community. Her coursepack of photocopied readings included a lot of then-marginal forms of cultural production, like a letter from Lofofora Contreraz about what it was like, as a First Nations transsexual lesbian, to be doing time at Pelican Bay and about the work done by trans prisoners to help one another survive abusive conditions in the prison system, or an article by Jason Cromwell on what he dubbed "The Billy Tipton Phenomenon," the erasure of trans peoples' lives in media coverage, obituaries, and death notices that imposed pre-transition names and assigned sex. We read poems by Xanthra Phillipa that meditated on being TS and butch and on being TS and epileptic.

Around that time Mirha-Soleil also organized a festival of transsexual film and video, spoken word, performance art. Reading at that festival, Counting Past 2, made plain to me that I had not had a trans and genderqueer audience or peers before that time, and that I had deeply missed them without knowing it. Particularly important to me, then

**"READING AT THAT FESTIVAL...MADE PLAIN TO ME THAT I HAD NOT HAD A TRANS AND GENDERQUEER AUDIENCE OR PEERS BEFORE THAT TIME, AND THAT I HAD DEEPLY MISSED THEM WITHOUT KNOWING IT."**

and since, have been the creative and critical work of a community of trans people, that includes activists, sex workers, artists, and intellectuals like Mirha-Soleil Ross, Viviane Namaste, Max Valerio, Monica Forrester, Xanthra MacKay, Alec Butler, Rupert Raj, Aiyyana Maracle, and Syrus Ware.

That was in the late '90s, so I felt pretty fortunate to have been introduced to that material before there were published anthologies of trans people's writing, let alone collections of trans writers' work that were intersectional, liberatory, anti-racist, etc.

**LG:** I don't think the onus should be on trans and queer students to imagine for an educator how they might be respected and represented within the classroom.

**CIC:** If I were to ask you to "teach" the work of a particular trans or genderqueer poet who has been important to you as a writer, which texts would you choose?

**RA:** At this point, I would ask my students to find work. Things are developing so quickly, I am unsure I know what is out there. My goal is to help them read work—not necessarily to tell them what to read.

**CIC:** Could you say more about the process of how you help them to read work, perhaps by walking us through a specific example?

**RA:** I try to get them to ease up. To confidently read the work three or four times. To keep a vocabulary list. To skim a piece properly for major plot points. To have questions in mind as they read—to read between the lines, look for irony. Technical skills, that I can do. But it's a big world out there!

So, I would suggest they do their own research and give me their insight. I would help them if they seemed lost, but ultimately, we are in an exciting time in trans literature. Teachers, I believe, should not be so quick to form a canon. Let it instead be a cannon, firing somewhere we may not be able to see.

**"TEACHERS, I BELIEVE, SHOULD NOT BE SO QUICK TO FORM A CANON. LET IT INSTEAD BE A CANNON, FIRING SOMEWHERE WE MAY NOT BE ABLE TO SEE."**

**CIC:** Fair enough. But I imagine if you ask your students to undertake this kind of research, you might need to suggest places to research or look (or at least that's true for my students). Are there specific resources you would suggest to them as starting points, perhaps not individual poets, but places to begin? One of the reasons I'm asking this question is to help others who are not as familiar gather suggestions of resources you might recommend (beyond just a simple Google search, etc.).

**RA:** They can even start with an anthology. But I would ask them to also locate zines or even a simple Google search. Why? You see, "knowing" who to find limits the pool. In the past, I've been on the receiving end of this. They said their teachers would rattle off white queer writers, and, well, a lot of the same names kept coming up. A lot of readers said they found me through, believe it or not, independent searching. Google. I've heard similar experiences from other writers—often writers of color, often writers who simply hadn't yet been noticed by the queer academy. So, sure, I can name trans poets, but I would rather people find work that speaks to them. Once I make recommendations, as a professor, I imbue those names with a bit more canonical mojo than I would like.

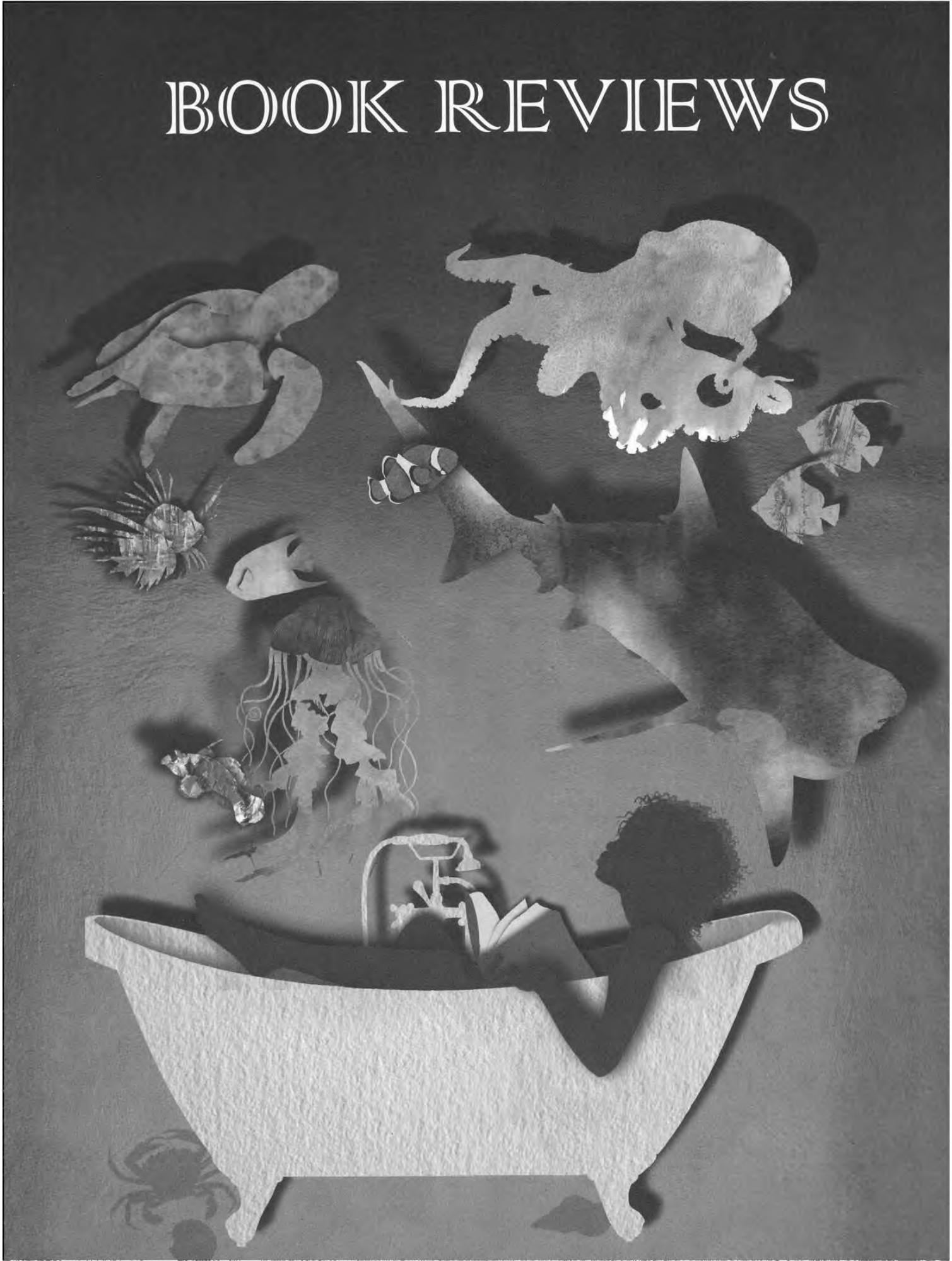
**"SO, SURE, I CAN NAME TRANS POETS, BUT I WOULD RATHER PEOPLE FIND WORK THAT SPEAKS TO THEM."**

**LG:** This is an exciting question to answer because there's so much to want to teach: Stacey Waite's *The Lake Has No Saint*; Kavi Ade's "IT" and more recent work; Taylor Johnson's "The Transkid Explains Gentrification, Explains Themselves," "From the Never"; Oliver Bendorf's *The Spectral Wilderness*, his recent zine about top surgery (especially if I'm working with queer youth) and essay "After I Came Out As A Transgender Man, I Was Asked If It Felt Like I Had Died," with special attention given to his meditation on the language of "passing"; pair passages from *This Bridge Called My Back* with bklyn boihood's *Outside the XY*; Dr. Kortney Ryan Ziegler's *STILL BLACK: A Portrait of Black Trans Men*.

**TS:** I've been fortunate in that I've had the opportunity to teach a fair bit of trans, two spirit, and genderqueer creative writing. Between the first trans cultural production class I taught in 2004 and now the landscape has changed so dramatically. I'm grateful

for the work I had access to early on, even as I'm so excited by the proliferation of work that has taken place. Before about 2004, the only other out trans poet I knew who was actively publishing was kari edwards, and encountering kari's work was a revelation. Nathanaël, whose work is bilingual and inter-genre, had a number of books, and had recently published a book that brought out the genderqueerness of that inter-genre, cross-lingual work, *All Boy*, which I taught, along with edwards' book *iduna*, and a few poems by Xanthra Phillipa and myself. Since then, I've been able to teach incredible memoirs by Max Valerio, Janet Mock, Alexandra Highcrest, books of poetry by Trace Peterson, Ching-In Chen, Qwo-Li Driskill, novels and short story collections by Casey Plett, Jia Qing Wilson-Yang, Ivan Coyote, Billy Martin (whose early books are under the name Poppy Z. Brite), Rachel Pollack, Tom Cho, Imogen Binnie, Alicia E. Goranson, theatrical/performance work like *The Fully Functional Cabaret* and *Yapping Out Loud: Contagious Thoughts of an Unrepentant Whore*. Teaching shorter works from zines, journals, anthologies, collections like *The Collection*, *Pinned Down by Pronouns*, *Gender Outlaws*, *Writing the Walls Down*, and *Troubling the Line* has made it possible to introduce students to work in multiple genres by Ryka Aoki, Patrick Califia, Eli Clare, Aiyyana Maracle, Joy Ladin, Imani Henry, S. Bear Bergman, Ahimsa Timoteo Bodhrán, Dawn Lundy Martin, TC Tolbert, Amir Rabiyah, and many others. At the moment, I'm redesigning a course on trans literature and politics for this winter, and I'm really looking forward to teaching poetry collections by Cam Awkward-Rich and Gwen Benaway for the first time. I'm listing so many names so that people will look them up, because all of their work should be known. For me at least, having peers has been an enormous gift.

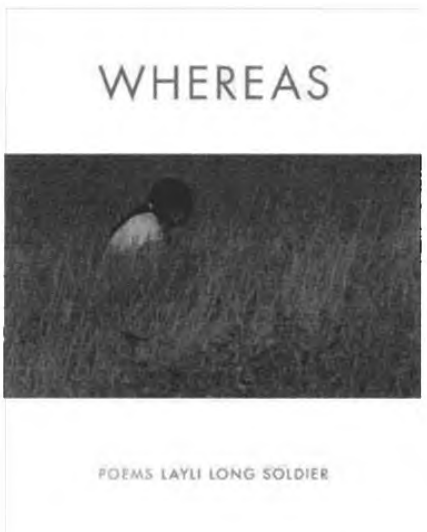
# BOOK REVIEWS



*Conor Bracken*

# Make Room in The Mouth: A Review of Layli Long Soldier's *WHEREAS*

Layli Long Soldier, *WHEREAS*
Graywolf Press, 2017. Paperback, 120 p, $16.00




Not long into Layli Long Soldier's debut, *WHEREAS*, the speaker of a poem entitled "Wahpánica" (to be poor, in Dakota) stops using commas and starts saying "comma." As in "I stare at a black-and-white photo of you comma my husband in a velvet shirt comma your hair tied back." It's a strange and almost awkward move, and it doesn't occur anywhere else in the collection. At first blush, it seems like more a distraction from than a boon to the harrowing, unwincing report of what destitution looks and feels like on a Native American reservation. Until near the end of the poem, when the speaker asserts "I intend the comma to mean what we do possess," it grows clear that what the speaker means isn't necessarily that the comma somehow represents a particular set of objects, but that it functions as a means of reorienting perception—to re-see what has been there all along instead of looking past or through it. It's an elegantly simple move, and one of dozens of subtle technical flourishes Long Soldier uses to remind us of the proud and difficult (though more often difficult) aspects of Native American life and history in the US that are often, if not always, overlooked. Her

wide array of formal experiments is anything but restless or impatient. It is evidence of a fresh poetic brilliance, as well as the long and arduous contemplation of losses too enormous for one generation to comprehend. *WHEREAS* is the light-footed, full-throated result of someone who has had to "learn to write around it, the meat, in wide circles to be heard."

The "it" she writes around is manifold—a pregnancy, jobs, material comfort, land—but the largest is what incites the long poem that gives this book its title: a Congressional apology expressing a kind of bureaucratic regret at the dispossession and slow-burning genocide of the Native Americans by European migrants, which never quite got delivered to any Native American. Not only was it not delivered (or even written with any heartfelt sincerity or remorse), but, because it exists now, people like a rangy "string-bean blue-eyed man [who] leans back into a swig of beer work-weary," can now say that "*at least* there was an/Apology"—as if its very existence abrogates any possibility of dissatisfaction with the apology or its delivery. Not only does this collection invoke the continued dislocation and dispossession of native peoples from their lands and traditions, but it also invokes the compounded pain of being dispossessed of the anger that goes along with dispossession itself. We are enjoined to remember how shitty it is to stab someone in the back then hush them whenever you twist the knife.

But though Long Soldier writes from a defensive position of loss, reclaiming histories both national ("38," a master class in declarative understatement, recounts the brutal suppression of the Sioux uprising, which culminated in thirty-eight Dakota men being hanged) and personal (in "Tókhah'anj" the speaker confesses an inability to respond to the emailed photo of a friend who was beaten with a tire iron), there isn't so much anger running through this collection as an aggrieved nobility, the kind of elegance that surrounds a state funeral. And, as if to prove this, Long Soldier turns one of the bloodless resolutions from the Congressional apology into a hammer-shaped calligram, representing both the dullness of the apology, as well as her weapon of choice: bland language artfully arranged.

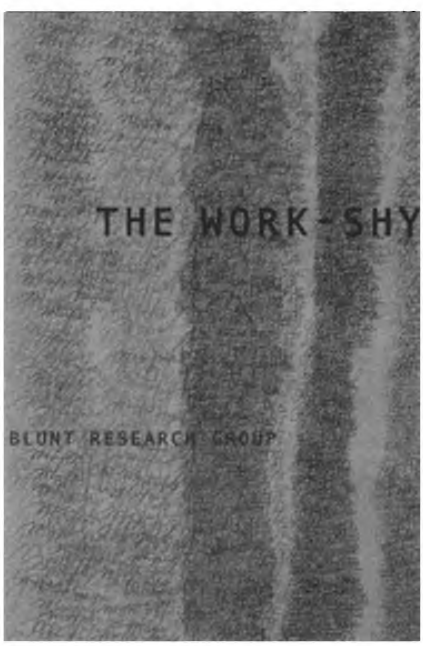
If there's anything that Long Soldier doesn't quite pull off, it's the semi-frequent self-identifications as a capital-p-Poet. It's hard to forget this fact, especially since she's found a way to make, for instance, self-conscious references

to grammar emotive. Her chops are evident enough that any reference to writing about poems—aside from the self-deprecating "A poem about writing, *bo-ring*" she vouchsafes in the manifesto-like "Vaporative"—overdoes a meal that already delicately balances both raw and cooked elements. And who needs proof that this voice is as poetic and American as it gets, when the book both begins and ends with "grassesgrassesgrasses"—a trebled nod to what both hid and revealed Dickinson's narrow fellow, as well as what Whitman thought of as, among other things, the hair of the dead. And now, whenever grass pops up in a poem, it will also be Long Soldier's grass: grass that sings and grass that calms and grass that fills the mouths of those who are starving and those upon whom the starving sometimes wreak their revenge.

Christian Bancroft

# *Someone Was Looking for Me*: A Review of BLUNT RESEARCH GROUP's *The Work-Shy*

BLUNT RESEARCH GROUP, *The Work-Shy*
Weslyan Poetry, 2016. Hardcover, 160 p, $24.95




The BLUNT RESEARCH GROUP descended upon the literary community in the summer of 2015, veiled with mystery, intrigue, and profundity. In their author bio, it states that they are "a nameless constellation of poets, artists, and scholars from diverse backgrounds." A year and a half later, we are presented with *The Work-Shy*, a collection of poems that reassembles, restructures, reconstructs, and recreates documents, statements, and phrases from case files of early youth prisons in California. The book is sectioned into three parts: "Lost Privilege Company," "The Book of Listening," and "Creedmoorblanca," which touch upon the various contact zones around the youth penal systems (or "orphan asylums" as the book notes), psychiatric clinics and centers, workhouses, training schools for girls, as well as a couple of "colonies." The information that materializes from these poems brings up harrowing facts about the U.S.'s and Germany's involvement with eugenics, "sterilization mills," complex, disturbing histories around race, gender, and people living with mental health conditions. BRG informs us in "Lost Privilege Company" that the "diagnostic models and sterilization policies developed in California were enthusiastically received by

eugenics 'researchers' in Europe," and that "social engineers of Nazi Germany drew directly on the California model."

It's tempting to relegate *The Work-Shy* to the list of documentary poetry (or docupoetry), which, as of late, includes work by Robin Coste Lewis and Solmaz Sharif. One could also describe this kind of work as archival poetry (Lewis describes *The Voyage of the Sable Venus* as "an experiment in archive"). But all of these definitions are too easy. Like most terms used to describe a particular genre, so too does documentary or archival poetry fail. The writers' projects are too singular, and are too personal to the author as well as to the audience (an argument might even be made to refer to these projects as translations). Ultimately, however, any umbrella-term describing their work neglects the differences and onlepihead between them.

In "Lost Privilege Company," each poem centers around one of the children who were sent to the Lost Privilege Company—an isolation unit at the Whittier State School "where youthful offenders could be sentenced under harsh conditions for misconduct." The poems consist of fragments, phrases, or statements from archives and files. Through their accumulation in each poem, they mobilize in a multitudinous web of units that unite into not so much of anecdotal phrases or statements, but into an argument that feeds into the collection's larger purposes. These arguments, forty-one in "Lost Privilege Company" alone, accrease the agency that each child ultimately has against the youth prison systems in California. They form a collective, a choir of voices that once, sealed from the public, are now able to intone the tragedies that befell them.

BRG is able to accomplish this difficult task via a kind of contrapuntal arrangement between text and image. Archival photographs and files integrate sporadically throughout the book, each with subtext describing them. Some of these photographs are of children with separate poems titled after them, but not every photograph or archival image is assigned a correlative poem. There is a photograph, for example, of Matilda B, but there isn't any poem entitled "Matilda." Quand même, there is both a photograph and poem of Victor R in the book, though the two aren't situated en face: the photograph precedes the poem by several pages, which creates a Sebaldian relationship between image and text in that the image helps design the book's movement cataloguing the children, but it also—because of the placement of the image several pages before its corresponding poem—serves as an authorial intrusion

into this movement. This ellipsis between paired text and image is haunting; we see this image of Victor, a sweet-faced boy next to a mirror (the reflection only adds to the ghostly layers of Victor's memory), and then we read his eponymous poem several pages later. The effect produces a spectral echo, reasserting Victor's presence and the grave misfortunes that occurred to him.

Unlike Sebald, however, one gets the sense that BRG isn't doing this for play nor to try and bring a fictional plot that much closer to reality. As readers, we don't doubt the disturbing realities that these children encountered. The veridical images in *The Work-Shy* operate contrapuntally: even though every image isn't assigned a corresponding poem, acting as relatively independent "melodies," they accompany one another as they're sounded together, playing in this chorus of voices that seeks, among many things, to enter into public discourse. *The Work-Shy* is replete with music, however difficult it is to listen to some of the lyrics.

But, as BRG reminds us, we must seek "permission to listen to voices that have never been heard," and the question posed to us is *how*? Among the tripartite structure of *The Work-Shy*, the second part of the collection, "The Book of Listening," is the only section that would not be classified as found poetry; it also serves as the backbone of the project, and is largely concerned with the ethos of writing *The Work-Shy*. "Seeking permission," BRG writes, "to listen begins by acknowledging the submerged will or disposition of voices that have been silenced." The questions and answers posed in this section are those that writers using sensitive "found" information consider: questions about appropriation, permission, fidelity, and betrayal.

These difficult questions become compounded when publishing the work. It's a different matter when the writer gathers these materials and reconstructs them for their own pleasure, but when published, the issue of theatricality becomes involved, as BRG concludes: "Perhaps the ethics of close listening can only be fulfilled by speaking to no one—to oneself—as a circuit, a procedure, for hearing voices." This kind of writing should be for the self, not for others. The purpose of which assumes a number of reasons: socio-political, cultural, therapeutic, affinity, intrigue...the list is exhaustive, and singular to the authors themselves. "The Book of Listening," though, explores conversations central to works like *The Work-Shy*, and its placement in the collection pivots between the two sections, "Lost Privilege Company" and "Creedmoorblanca."

The book's final series, "Creedmoorblanca," complexifies everything previously examined, drawing our attention to the Psychiatric Clinic in Heidelberg, Germany, whose "repository of art and writings of the insane [was] confiscated by the Nazis in 1933; the Breitenau Workhouse; the New York State Training School for Girls; the Farm Colony of the Brooklyn State Hospital; and the Pacific Colony for the Feebleminded." Like "Lost Privilege Company," the preface to "Creedmoorblanca" scaffolds the series of poems with useful information that not only frames the poems but also provides some critical insight, citing Susan Howe, Ernst Bloch, Avery Gordon, and Ines Schaber. BRG notes that the strict constraint for this group of poems is that it "renders solely the voices of inmates...every word of these poems is borrowed or begged from obstinate texts, from the writings of individuals held in asylum." They also make a point to clarify that the "names are real."

While the children's identities and voices from "Lost Privilege Company" struggle to surface amidst a tempest of hierarchies and systems of power, "Creedmoorblanca" represents an unfailingly intimate glimpse into these children's lives at these institutions. The archival images do something similar, while also displaying a much more visceral import. Take, for example, Agnes Richter's hand-embroidered asylum jacket: it's a beautiful and painful vestige from Heidelberg that amplifies the poem of Agnes's that follows:

my jacket is
me

my jacket is

I am not

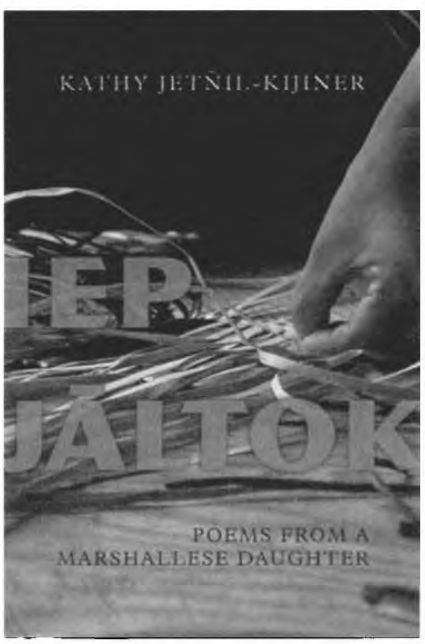
I am not going home

"Creedmoorblanca" is rife with examples like this. But we do have moments of closure, or at least, morsels of hope. In a later poem about Agnes, she says, "brother freedom / tiny cherries," and there's something almost heartwarming in these eight syllables despite the rest of the atrocities mentioned in The Work-Shy—urging us to tell Agnes: *thank you for allowing us to listen; you always have a home in us, with us.*

*Aza Pace*

# *Writing the Tide: A Review of Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's Iep Jāltok*

Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, *Iep Jāltok*
University of Arizona Press, 2017. Paperback, 120 p, $14.95




Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner bookends her remarkable new poetry collection, *Iep Jāltok: Poems from a Marshallese Daughter*, with two concrete poems entitled "Basket" that mirror the strands of poetic exploration and social activism woven throughout the work. These poems allude to the collection's title, which denotes an open basket and, metaphorically, female children in matrilineal Marshallese society. With *Iep Jāltok*, Jetñil-Kijiner delivers a musical, formally inventive reflection on Marshallese heritage, womanhood, the threat of climate change, and the traumas of racism and colonialism. Her poems speak to one another throughout the collection, weaving a poetic basket that holds everything from mythic origin-stories to details of everyday life.

The collection opens with several gorgeously incantatory prose poems that read like holy texts. They are origin stories. "Liwātuonmour" tells of the sisters Liwātuonmour and Lidepdepju: "Mothers who shaped the sounds of midday and dusk. 7. They found the words inside their blood inside their pulse inside the stars and waves. 8. Some say they were goddesses." Yet even as Jetñil-Kijiner explores a deep connection with Marshallese heritage, she also grapples with the difficulty of connecting to it. In "Lidepdepju," the speaker sees the goddess standing firmly in the

waves, but in a later poem, when her mother points to Lidepdepju in the water, all the speaker can see "is a rock on the reef." The poems maintain a continuous conversation with one another, shifting and expanding as the speaker grows and learns.

*Iep Jāltok*'s dynamic speaker is one of the collection's most intriguing structural features. The poems span the speaker's life, beginning with childhood in a section called "History Project." In the following sections, "Lessons From Hawai'i" and "Tell Them," the speaker deepens her understanding of herself and the world and moves toward a vigorous activism that the reader is inspired to take up as well.

In the earlier sections of the collection, Jetñil-Kijiner reflects on American nuclear testing on the Marshall Islands. The poem, "History Project" presents the devastating effects of radiation poisoning on the Marshallese people, and, with an expert shift to italics, decries the hypocritical pity that Americans felt for animal test subjects:

> *Goats and pigs were left on naval ships as test subjects.*
> *Thousands*
> *of letters flew from america*
> *protesting*
>
> *animal abuse.*

From the history of American nuclear testing to racism endured in Hawaii and the impact of climate change on island nations, these poems confront injustice wherever it lurks. "Tell Them," for example, advocates for awareness of the dangers that rising sea levels pose to island communities and urges the reader to tell others "what it's like / to see the entire ocean___level___with the land." The rising sea reappears in the deftly lyrical poem, "Two Degrees," in which Jetñil-Kijiner contemplates the impact of global warming through the lens of her daughter's fever. Though the doctor tells her 100.4 degrees is a fever, the speaker can feel her child's sickness at 99.8. She considers how important just two degrees can be: "for my islands 2 degrees / is a gamble / at 2 degrees my islands / will already be under water." The bleak beauty of this poem, and the entire collection, shifts toward an active kind of hope at the end as the author thinks about her own writing:

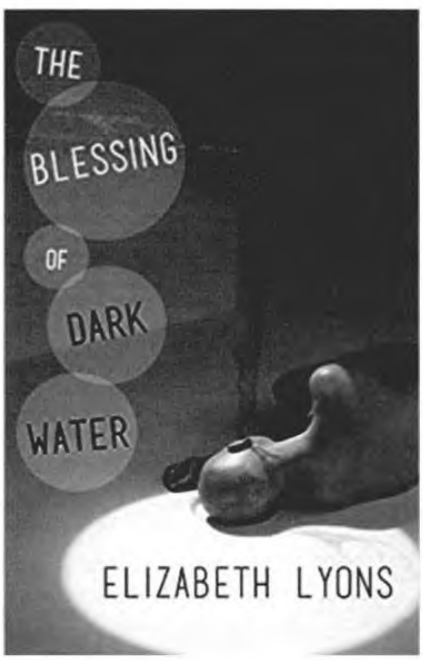
Maybe I'm
writing the tide towards
an equilibrium
willing the world
to find its balance.

Jetñil-Kijiner's voice swings expertly between intense musicality and brisk conversational speech; her poems reward rereading and reading aloud. *Iep Jāltok* is a masterful debut collection that inspires activism, awareness, and hope. As the first Marshallese author to publish a book of poetry, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner is a powerful voice for change.

Caroline M. Mar

# A Body Can Revise: A Review of Elizabeth Lyons's *The Blessing of Dark Water*

Elizabeth Lyons, *The Blessing of Dark Water*
Alice James Books, 2017. Paperback, 120 p, $15.95




Elizabeth Lyons's debut collection, *The Blessing of Dark Water*, is an intense exploration of love, art, and mental illness. The book takes as its primary narrative the life of painter Walter Anderson. From the opening epigraph, Lyons draws attention to Walter's idea that humans are always part-animal, "beast or bird," while juxtaposing the perspective of his wife, Agnes, who wants desperately for him to be "entirely well." Lyons pursues the impossibility of the idea of being *entirely* anything throughout the book—especially in the face of being torn apart by illness.

The collection acts as a kind of drama, introducing first its major characters and setting the scene very much like a play. Before the table of contents, the reader is presented with "Blessing the Waters: A Beginning," which consists of three (or perhaps six) act-like sections. Each act has two versions—one for Walter, one for Lyons—recounting their hospitalizations and the implications of their illnesses, as well as the places they lived and who their families are. In these beginning poems, authorial point of view is quite clear: "I" is Lyons, in the present; "he" is Walter, in the past.

This clear distinction between the "I" and the other dissolves as the book continues. By the second poem, "Let's Pretend," there is already enough ambiguity that the speaker could be either Lyons *or* Walter, wrapped in the difficulty of their respective illnesses, needing to "label / all my bones: *Property of Walter I. Anderson.*" This might be Walter labeling his own bones, but it could also be argued that Lyons herself belongs to Walter's story, and has immersed herself in him (thereby making the bones her own). By the poem's end, it doesn't matter exactly who is speaking, just that they are both speaking with the pain of an illness others continue to try to remedy, lamenting to someone (a love? a doctor? society?), "Sorry. I can't behave for you" and "Take out what you think / makes me walk into the ocean every night."

With so many characters in the drama, allowing the poems to speak from first-person authority immerses them in the immediacy of each poem's particular story, while also perpetuating both ambiguity and plurality. In other words, sometimes it is clear that the poet-speaker only addresses Walter, but at other times the speaker *is* Walter, or *is* Agnes. The reader can imagine a version of this book in which each poem identifies its speaker, explicitly naming the various subject-positions of the collection. For Lyons, however, the power of Anderson's story is in its layers—the reader can't experience Walter's struggles without hearing in each poem the echoes of Agnes, or even Lyons seventy years later, and without sometimes wondering who, exactly, recounts the story this time around.

Successful poetry allows the reader to understand the experience of another, and through that understanding, the reader may realize something about her own life. Lyons takes this poetic experience and layers it—the reader may understand something of the Lyons, Walter, and Agnes of the poems, or perhaps of Lyons coming to understand herself better by understanding Walter's story. It can get complicated, and sometimes slows the reader down, but when it works best, such as in "In Which Recalling Love Stories, We Write a Kinder History," or "Let's Say a Storm is a Type of Confession," the reader is able to hold all of these experiences at once. This plurality is not out of place in a story that is so much about schizophrenia. How easy, how difficult, to lose the notion of self-hood in the throes of severe mental illness.

Because the book begins in a place of wild illness, and much of Walter Anderson's fascination (and art) revolved around animals, Lyons infuses the book with the

beastly and the wild. Alligators hunt, and are hunted, in the swamps of Louisiana, "The sweetest word I know?—*Atchafalaya*." Lyons returns again and again to animals, terrifying and beautiful, as in "We Were Twenty and Lean and Hungry":

> I have seen gators grab a boar,
> drag it down until it drowns.
> Then the death roll:
> snap of a jaw, wild spin
> until the head separates from body.
> The blessing of dark water.
> But beauty too:
> the creature
> sliding through the swamp.
> Blending into tallow and fern.

There is great violence in this book—the hunting of and by animals, Walter's attacks against Agnes, the seizures caused by one of the medications administered in an effort to treat Walter's schizophrenia, and the self-harm caused in moments of psychosis. Lyons presents all this violence to the reader with sometimes-jarring responses. Agnes, on being first attacked by Walter, reacts with a dissociative rationalization:

> You push me to the floor
> and all I think is:
> I shouldn't wear linen.
> It tears too easily.

The killing of a boar referenced above, the gushing blood of its decapitation, is what creates the eponymous "blessing of dark water." Lyons doesn't shy from this violence, but asks for it, whether signified by Walter's pleas, "just give me a knife / I will show you," or Elizabeth confessing in the book's final poem, "Walter, I begged a gator: / take me to the bottom of a lake."

Lyons's return to the alligators is a move she makes repeatedly in the book—echoing earlier words and images, connecting the thoughts and images of one speaker to those of another. This echoing ties together poems that might seem, on their surface, wildly different. "Education" is a poem about traveling to see the prehistoric cave paintings of Les Eyzies, France. Lyons writes, "I wanted to be a rib of something bigger," which recalls how early in the book, the bones were "*Property of Walter I. Anderson*," how "My typewriter-ribs begin to clack their own / little story." She also writes "there must be a way to marry the human / and the other"—a clear echo of Walter's insistence that he is part animal. In its closing line, "let the sharks gut me," the poem also harkens forward to "Death Roll," the book's closing poem, where Elizabeth will beg that gator to drown her, where she will command someone, "Gut me." Poems like "Education" and "Death Roll" can stand alone to tell their own stories, certainly, but in this book each poem also webs itself to the stories of other poems.

gc

**Alexis Almeida** grew up in Chicago. Her poems and translations have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Brooklyn Rail, Prelude, Dusie, Flag + Void, Action Yes*, and elsewhere. She is an assistant editor at *Asymptote* and a contributing editor at *The Elephants*. Her chapbook of poems, *Half-Shine*, is recently out from Dancing Girl Press, her translation of Florencia Castellano's *Propiedades vigiladas* [*Monitored Properties*] is recently out from Ugly Duckling Presse, and her translation of Roberta Iannamico's *Tendal* is forthcoming from Toad Press. She is the recipient of a residency from Yaddo. She recently spent the year living in Buenos Aires on a Fulbright research grant, where she has been compiling and co-translating an anthology of contemporary female poets living in Argentina.

**Ryka Aoki** is the author of *Seasonal Velocities, He Mele a Hilo (A Hilo Song)* and *Why Dust Shall Never Settle Upon This Soul*. Ryka was named as one of "11 Trans Artists of Color You Should Know" by *The Huffington Post*. She has also done work with the American Association of Hiroshima Nagasaki A-Bomb Survivors, and two of her compositions were adopted as the organization's official "songs of peace."

**Christian Bancroft** is the recipient of a Michener Fellowship. His work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in *Callaloo, The Missouri Review, Make it New*, and *Asymptote*, among others. He is a PhD candidate in literature at University of Houston, where he is working on a book of poetry and a dissertation on queering translation.

**Sarah M. C. Baugh** is a writer and photographer, born and raised in Upstate New York. She makes her home in Athens, Georgia, with her husband and two daughters.

**Celia Bland**'s new collection of poetry, *Cherokee Road Kill*, will be published by Dr. Cicero's Books in 2017 with drawings by Kyoko Miyabe. Her book *Soft Box* (CavanKerry) won *ForeWord* magazine's Silver Medal and was shortlisted for the Wiliam Carlos Williams Award, and *Madonna Comix* (William James f8 editions), a word & image collaboration with artist Dianne Kornberg, was featured in *Drunken Boat* and exhibited at the University of Washington, Bard College, and the Lesley Heller Gallery in NYC.

**Conor Bracken**'s poems appear or are forthcoming in the *Adroit Journal, Forklift OH, Muzzle, The New Yorker*, and *THRUSH*, among others. His chapbook, *Henry Kissinger, Mon Amour*, was selected by Diane Seuss as the winner of the 2017 Frost Place Chapbook Competition, and will be published by Bull City Press in late 2017. A graduate of Virginia Tech, a former poetry editor for *Gulf Coast*, and the assistant director of a university writing center, he received his MFA from the University of Houston, where he and his wife currently live.

**Catherine Bresner**'s poetry has appeared in *The Offing, Heavy Feather Review, Passages North, Ink Brick, The Pinch, H_NGM_N, Cream City Review, Burntdistrict, Handsome, Yemessee*, and elsewhere. Her work has been nominated for Best of The Net by *Passages North*. Currently, she is the managing editor for BOAAT Press and a freelance publicity assistant for Wave Books.

**Jamel Brinkley** was raised in Brooklyn and the Bronx, New York. He is a Kimbilio Fellow and is an alum of the *Callaloo* Creative Writing Workshop. He has been awarded scholarships from the Napa Valley Writers' Conference, the *Tin House* Writers' Workshop, and the Bread Loaf Writers's Conference. He graduated from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, was a Provost's Visiting Writer at the

University of Iowa, and the 2016-17 Carol Houck Smith Fiction Fellow at the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing. His short stories have appeared in *A Public Space*, and his debut collection is forthcoming in 2018 from Graywolf Press.

**A. Will Brown** is the Assistant Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Cleveland. Brown earned an MA in Curatorial Practice from California College of the Arts and a BA in Psychology and Art History from Goucher College. Brown is a regular contributor to *Daily Serving*, *Hyperallergic*, *Studio International*, and *Art Practical*. His curatorial work includes exhibitions, screenings, events, and performances for the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, RISD Museum, Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, Penn Institute for Urban Research, Kadist Art Foundation, Oakland Museum of California, Aspen Art Museum, Alter Space Gallery, Triple Base Gallery, and The Luggage Store Gallery. Recent exhibitions include: *Jeremy Deller: Video Works; Monument Lab: Creative Speculations for Philadelphia*; and *Steffani Jemison: Maniac Chase.*

**Mahogany L. Browne**, the Cave Canem, Poets House & Serenbe Focus alum, is the author of several books including *Redbone* (nominated for NAACP Outstanding Literary Works), *Dear Twitter: Love Letters Hashed Out On-line*, recommended by Small Press Distribution & About.com Best Poetry Books of 2010. Mahogany bridges the gap between lyrical poets and literary emcee. Browne has toured Germany, Amsterdam, England, Canada, and recently Australia as one third of the cultural arts exchange project, Global Poetics. Her journalism work has been published in magazines *Uptown*, *KING*, *XXL*, *The Source*, Canada's *The Word*, and UK's *MOBO*. Her poetry has been published in literary journals *Pluck*, *Manhattanville Review*, *Muzzle*, *Union Station Mag*, *Literary Bohemian*, *Bestiary*, *Joint*, and *The Feminist Wire*. She is the co-editor of forthcoming anthology *The Break Beat Poets: Black Girl Magic* and chapbook collection *Kissing Caskets* (Yes Yes Books, 2017). She is an Urban Word NYC Artistic Director (as seen on HBO's *Brave New Voices*), founder of Women Writers of Color Reading Room, Director of BLM@ Pratt Programming, and she facilitates performance poetry and writing workshops throughout the country. Browne is also the publisher of Penmanship Books, curator of the Nuyorican Poets Café Friday Night Slam, and a recent graduate from Pratt Institute MFA Writing & Activism program.

**Laura Cesarco Eglin** is the author of three collections of poetry, *Llamar al agua por su nombre* (Mouthfeel Press, 2010), *Sastrería* (Yaugurú, 2011), and *Los brazos del saguaro* (Yaugurú, 2015). A bilingual edition of her first book, translated by Scott Spanbauer, was published as *Calling Water by Its Name* (Mouthfeel Press, 2016). A selection of poems from Sastería was translated collaboratively into English with Teresa Williams, and subsequently published as the chapbook *Tailor Shop: Threads* (Finishing Line Press, 2013). Cesarco Eglin also published the chapbook *Occasions to Call Miracles Appropriate* (Lunamopolis, The Lune series, 2015). She has translated works of Colombian, Mexican, Uruguayan, Galician, and Brazilian authors into English. Her poems and translations have appeared in journals in the US, UK, Spain, Mexico, and Uruguay. Cesarco Eglin is the co-founding editor and publisher of Veliz Books.

**Caroline Chavatel** is a Baltimore native and is currently a MFA candidate at New Mexico State University. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Fugue*, *So to Speak*, *Slipstream*, *Potomac Review*, and *Sugar House Review*, among others. Her poem, "The Given, These Bodies," was selected by Phillip B. Williams for *The Cossack Review*'s first annual October Prize for Poetry. She lives in Las Cruces, New Mexico.

**Leila Chatti** is a Tunisian-American poet. She is the recipient of the 2017-2018 Ron Wallace Poetry Fellowship at The Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, a writing fellowship from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, scholarships from the *Tin House* Writers' Workshop and Dickinson House, and prizes from *Ploughshares*' Emerging Writer's Contest, *Narrative Magazine*'s 30 Below Contest, and the Academy of American Poets. Her poems appear in *Best New Poets, Ploughshares, Tin House, New England Review, The Georgia Review, West Branch, Narrative, The Rumpus*, and elsewhere.

**Ching-In Chen** is the author of *The Heart's Traffic* (Arktoi Books/Red Hen Press) and *recombinant* (forthcoming from Kelsey Street Press) as well as co-editor of *The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Intimate Violence Within Activist Communities* (South End Press, AK Press). A Kundiman, Lambda, *Callaloo*, and *The Watering Hole* Fellow, they are part of the Macondo and Voices of Our Nations Arts Foundation writing communities. They have also been awarded fellowships from Can Serrat, Millay Colony for the Arts, the Norman Mailer Center, and Imagining America. Their work has appeared in *The Best American Experimental Writing*, *The &NOW Awards 3: The Best Innovative Writing*, and *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics*. They are a senior editor of *The Conversant* and Poetry Editor of *Texas Review*. They currently teach creative writing and world literature at Sam Houston State University and can be found at www.chinginchen.com.

**Jamal Cyrus** (born 1973, Houston, Texas) received his BFA from the University of Houston and his MFA from the University of Pennsylvania. Cyrus is the recipient of a number of awards and residencies including: Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Artpace San Antonio, Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award, Artadia Award, and the Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship. His work has been presented in national and international exhibitions, including *The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965–Now*, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; *Arresting Patterns*, ArtSpace, New Haven, Connecticut; *Day for Night*, Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art, as well exhibitions at the Studio Museum, Harlem; the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston; the New Museum, New York; The Kitchen, New York; the Museum of London Docklands, London; and The Office Baroque Gallery, Antwerp.

**Kyle G. Dargan** is the author of four collections of poetry, most recently *Honest Engine*. For his work, he has received the Cave Canem Poetry Prize, the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, and grants from the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities. His books have also been finalists for the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award and the Eric Hoffer Awards Grand Prize. He is currently an associate professor of literature and director of creative writing at American University, as well as the founder and editor of *POST NO ILLS magazine*.

**Andrew Finegold** received his BA from the University of Houston and his PhD from Columbia University. Having held Visiting Assistant Professorships at Skidmore College and Wake Forest University, as well as a Postdoctoral Fellowship at NYU's Institute of Fine Arts, he is currently Assistant Professor of Art History at the University of Illinois-Chicago. He is co-editor of a recently published volume, *Visual Culture of the Ancient Americas: Contemporary Perspectives* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2017), and his current book project investigates the real and symbolic values ascribed to holes, cavities, and voids across a variety of media in Mesoamerica. In addition to his primary specialization in the visual and material culture of the ancient Americas, he maintains an ongoing engagement with both contemporary art and critical theory.

**Carrie Fountain**'s poems have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Poetry*, and *Tin House*, among others. She is the author of the collections *Burn Lake* (Penguin, 2010) and *Instant Winner* (Penguin, 2014), and a recipient of the National Poetry Series Award. A former fellow at the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas, she is now writer-in-residence at St. Edward's University. Her first novel, *I'm Not Missing*, is forthcoming from Flatiron Books.

**Brandi George**'s first collection of poetry, *Gog* (Black Lawrence Press, 2015), won the gold medal in the 2015 Florida Book Awards. Her poems have appeared in such journals as *The Iowa Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Ninth Letter*, and *Prairie Schooner*, also winning first place in the Dana Awards and the *Zone 3* Poetry Awards. Brandi has been awarded residencies at Hambidge Center for the Arts, the Hill House, and the Time & Place Award in France. She is currently a visiting assistant professor at the University of Southern Mississippi.

**John Gosslee**'s latest little book is *Analog* (Unicorn Press, 2017), and a full-length art book, *Out of Context* (Press Otherwise, 2017), is also in the world. Another little book, *My Body is a System of Enlightenment* (Nomadic Press, 2017), will appear this fall.

**Kai M. Green** is a shape-shifting Black Queer nerd Boi; An Afro-Future, freedom-dreaming, rhyme slinging dragon slayer in search of a new world. A scholar, poet, and filmmaker, Dr. Green earned his PhD from the Department of American Studies and Ethnicity with specializations in Gender Studies and Visual Anthropology at the University of Southern California. He joined the faculty of Feminist Studies at UC Santa Barbara as Assistant Professor of Queer Theory in Fall 2016. Exploring questions of black sexual minority agency, health, creativity, and resilience in the context of state and social violence, Dr. Green employs black feminist theory, queer of color critique, critical race theory, performance studies, media studies, and trans studies to investigate forms of self-representation and communal political mobilization. A former postdoctoral fellow in Sexuality Studies and African American Studies at Northwestern University and winner of the Ford Foundation Pre-Doctoral Fellowship and the Ford Foundation Diversity Fellowship Dissertation Award, Dr. Green has published in numerous scholarly journals including *GLQ*, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, *Black Camera*, and *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*. He is currently at work editing, along with C. Riley Snorton and Treva Ellison, a special issue of *TSQ* on Black Studies/Trans* Studies, and, as sole editor, a book collection entitled *Black Trans Love is Black Wealth*.

**Matt Grimes** lives in Portland Oregon where he is currently earning his BFA in Art: Practices at Portland State University. He primarily works in acrylic paint and is interested in representing his own experiences with transgender identity, mental illness, and bodily trauma. This is often done by depicting figures as altered or stripped of naturalistic qualities, entering in the realm of abstraction without taking away context from the viewer. With the rising political climate promoting the discrimination of marginalized communities including LGBT folks, Grimes seeks to represent his trans-identity through his art practice to add to the archive of transgender history, which is more often than not erased. To find more of his work, his Instagram handle is @mattgrimes_pdx.

**Hilda Hilst**, Brazilian poet, playwright, and novelist, was born in 1930 and died in 2004. Literary critics consider her to be one of the most important and controversial writers in the Portuguese language in the twentieth century. She has been awarded many literary prizes. In her thirties, Hilst decided

to leave the city of São Paulo in order to keep away from social life and concentrate on literature. She went to Campinas, and lived in her house Casa do Sol until her death. Because of her strong personality, beauty, intelligence, and her eccentricities, and because Hilst consistently questioned and went against norms and traditions, the myth surrounding Hilst's image has often overshadowed the importance of her work and the critical analysis of it.

**Michael Holladay** was born and raised in Kentucky and currently lives in Arizona where he lives and teaches. He holds an MFA from Arizona State University. His fiction has appeared in *North American Review*, *New World Writing*, *The Saint Ann's Review*, *Paper Darts*, and *Fiction Southeast*.

**Marya Hornbacher** is an award-winning essayist, journalist, and *The New York Times* bestselling author of five books. Her sixth book, a work of long-form journalism, will be published in early 2018; her seventh, a collection of essays, will appear the following year. Hornbacher is an assistant professor at Rowan University.

**Roberta Iannamico** has published various books of poetry, including *El zorro gris, el zorro blanco, el zorro colorado* (Vox, Bahía Blanca, 1997), *Mamushkas* (Vox, 1999), *Tendal* (del Diego, Buenos Aires, 2000), *El collar de fideos* (Vox, 2001), *Celeste perfecto* (Crudo, Buenos Aires, 2005), *Dantesco* (Vox, 2006), *Muchos poemas* (Voy a salir y si me hiere un rayo, Buenos Aires, 2008), *Un día nuevo* (edición de autora, 2013) *Nomeolvides* (Vox, 2015) Qué lindo (Zindo & Gafuri 2015); she has also published various children's books and textbooks. She is a singer-songwriter, and conducts poetry workshops as well as song composition workshops for children and adults.

**Mitchell Jacobs** is a poet and comics artist from Minnesota. He is an MFA candidate at Purdue University and managing editor of *Sycamore Review*. His work appears in *Lumina* and *Pinball*.

**Steve Jansen** is a Texas-based investigative reporter and arts writer who has won and been nominated for state, regional, and national awards, including the Best of the West, Maggies: The Magazine Awards of Western Publishing, and National Association of Black Journalists Awards. In 2013, his investigation into two crumbling dams in Houston was awarded first place in the top category of Best Print News/Feature Story in the Texas statewide Lone Star Awards competition. He's a former staff writer for the *Phoenix New Times* and *Houston Press* who's a freelancer for various state and national publications, including *The New York Times*, *Houston Press*, *Houstonia*, and *San Antonio Current*. He also plays in a variety of musical groups, ranging from solo noise and electro-acoustic improvisation to funeral-doom metal and depression-wave punk.

**Rosemary Kitchen:** Currently a PhD student at the University of Tennessee, Rosemary holds an MFA in creative writing from Warren Wilson College. Her poems have been published in several print and online publications, including *Hunger Mountain* and *Tinderbox*. She serves as a poetry editor for *Grist Journal*.

**Jee Leong Koh** is the author of *Steep Tea* (Carcanet), named a Best Book of 2015 by *Financial Times*, and a Finalist by *Lambda Literary*. He has authored three other books of poems and a book of zuihitsu. His work has been shortlisted for the Singapore Literature Prize and translated into Japanese, Chinese, Russian, and Latvian. Originally from Singapore, he lives in New York City, where he edits the arts blog *Singapore Poetry* and runs the biennial Singapore Literature Festival in New York City.

**Keagan LeJeune** is Professor of Folklore and English at McNeese State University in Lake Charles, Louisiana. He has written two nonfictions books, *Always for the Underdog: Leather Britches Smith and the Grabow War* (University of North Texas Press, 2010) and *Legendary Louisiana Outlaws: The Villains and Heroes of Folk Justice* (LSU Press, 2016), which won the 2016 Brian McConnell Book Award presented by the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research. He holds a MFA in creative writing from McNeese State University. His poems have appeared in several journals. This is his first story.

**Carmen Maria Machado**'s debut short story collection, *Her Body and Other Parties*, is forthcoming from Graywolf Press. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Granta*, *Guernica*, *Electric Literature*, *Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy*, *Best Horror of the Year*, and *Year's Best Weird Fiction*, *NPR*, and *Tin House*. Her short story "The Husband Stitch" was nominated for the Shirley Jackson and Nebula Awards, awarded a Pushcart Prize Special Mention, and longlisted for the Tiptree Award. She holds an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and has been awarded fellowships and residencies from the Elizabeth George Foundation, the CINTAS Foundation, and the Yaddo Corporation. She is the Artist in Residence at the University of Pennsylvania and lives in Philadelphia with her wife.

American artist **Jill Magid**'s work is deeply ingrained in her lived experience, exploring and blurring the boundaries between art and life. Magid explores the emotional, philosophical, and legal tensions between the individual and 'protective' institutions, such as intelligence agencies or the police. Magid has had solo exhibitions at institutions around the world including Tate Modern, London; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Berkeley Museum of Art, California; Tate Liverpool; the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam; Yvon Lambert, Paris and New York; Gagosian Gallery, New York; and the Security and Intelligence Agency of the Netherlands. She has received awards from the Fonds Voor Beeldende Kunsten and the Netherland-American Foundation Fulbright Fellowship. Magid has participated in the Liverpool, Bucharest, Singapore, Incheon, Gothenburg, and Performa Biennials. She is an Associate of the Art, Design, and the Public Domain program at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University, and a 2013-2015 fellow at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics. An adjunct teacher at Cooper Union, Magid is the author of four novellas. Her works are included in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, Fundacion Jumex, and the Walker Art Center, among others.

**Caroline M. Mar** lives, writes, and teaches in her hometown of San Francisco. An alumna of the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College and VONA, her work has most recently appeared in *As/Us*, *Four Way Review*, *Nimrod*, *The Collagist*, and *The Volta*.

**Liz McCarthy** is a Chicago-based cross-disciplinary artist, currently completing her MFA at the University of Illinois Chicago. She has shown her work at ACRE Projects, Heaven Gallery, Comfort Station, Columbia College Arcade Gallery, Harold Washington College Gallery, Roots and Culture, and Threewalls. She has participated as a resident artist at Atlantic Center for the Arts, ACRE, High Concept Laboratories, and Banff Centre. Her dual-person exhibition *Ladies Night in Lascaux* will be on view this spring at Roots and Culture in Chicago, and ExGirlfriend in Berlin.

**Jill McDonough**: The winner of a 2014 Lannan Literary Fellowship and three Pushcart prizes, Jill McDonough is the author of *Habeas Corpus* (Salt, 2008), *Oh, James!* (Seven Kitchens, 2012), *Where You Live* (Salt, 2012), and *Reaper* (Alice James, 2017). The recipient of fellowships from the National

Endowment for the Arts, the Fine Arts Work Center, the New York Public Library, the Library of Congress, and Stanford's Stegner program, she taught incarcerated college students through Boston University's Prison Education Program for thirteen years. Her work has appeared in *Poetry, Slate, The Nation, The Threepenny Review*, and *Best American Poetry*. She teaches in the MFA program at UMass-Boston and directs 24PearlStreet, the Fine Arts Work Center online. Her fifth poetry collection, *Here All Night*, is forthcoming from Alice James Books.

**Mary McMyne**'s debut poetry chapbook, *Wolf Skin* (Dancing Girl Press, 2014), won the Elgin Chapbook Award. Her fiction has won the Faulkner Prize for a Novel in Progress and a grant from the Sustainable Arts Foundation. Her poems, stories, and essays have appeared widely in venues like *Southern Humanities Review, Chattahoochee Review, Ninth Letter, Painted Bride Quarterly*, and *Los Angeles Review*. She teaches creative writing at Lake Superior State University, where she co-edits the journal *Border Crossing*. Learn more at marymcmyne.com.

**Philip Metres** is the author of *Pictures at an Exhibition* (University Of Akron Press, 2016), *Sand Opera* (Alice James Books, 2015), *I Burned at the Feast: Selected Poems of Arseny Tarkovsky* (Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 2015), *To See the Earth* (Cleveland State U Poetry Center, 2008), etc. His work has garnered a Lannan Fellowship, two NEAs, the Hunt Prize for Excellence in Journalism, Arts & Letters, two Arab American Book Awards, and the Cleveland Arts Prize. He is a professor of English at John Carroll University in Cleveland.

**Andrew Mitchell**'s fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Ploughshares, Sycamore Review, Southern Indiana Review, Tin House*'s *The Open Bar, The Saturday Evening Post*, and elsewhere. He lives in Dover, New Hampshire, and serves as the editor-in-chief of *Outlook Springs*.

**Hieu Minh Nguyen** is the author of *This Way to the Sugar* (Write Bloody Press, 2014). Hieu is a Kundiman fellow, a poetry editor for *Muzzle Magazine*, and an MFA candidate at Warren Wilson College. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Poetry Magazine, BuzzFeed, Guernica, Gulf Coast, Ninth Letter*, and elsewhere. His second collection of poetry, *Not Here*, is forthcoming from Coffee House Press in 2018. He lives in Minneapolis.

**Lauren O'Connell** is a curator and writer focusing on modern and contemporary art, architecture, and design. Formerly, she worked at the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA) where she focused on the development of new exhibitions, including the inaugural exhibition *Architecture of Life* (2016), *Andy Warhol: Still Lifes and Portraits* (2016), *AMERICA AMERICA: Art for Human Rights* (2017), and the performance-based exhibition *Asher Hartman and Cliff Hengst / MATRIX 264* (2017). She co-curated the exhibition *Many Places at Once* (2014) at the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts and was the co-editor of its publication. She received a MA in curatorial practice from the California College of the Arts, San Francisco, and a BA in Classics and Art History from the University of Arizona, Tucson.

**Aza Pace** is a Poetry MFA student at the University of Houston, where she serves as Assistant Poetry Editor for *Gulf Coast*. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Southern Review, American Chordata*, and *Feminine Inquiry*, and her reviews appear in *Gulf Coast*. She is the winner of a 2017 Inprint Donald Barthelme Prize in Poetry

**Frances Park** is an award-winning author of ten books, including the novel *When My Sister Was Cleopatra Moon* (Hyperion, 2001), the memoir *Chocolate Chocolate: The True Story of Two Sisters, Tons of Treats and the Little Shop That Could* (St. Martin's Press, 2011), and *Good-bye, 382 Shin Dang Dong* (National Geographic Books, 2002). Her short stories and personal essays have appeared in *The London Magazine, The Massachusetts Review, The Hawaii Review, OZY, Entropy,* and many others. For her work, she's been interviewed on *NPR's Weekend Sunday Edition, The Diane Rehm Show, Radio Free Asia,* and *Voice of America.*

**L.G. Parker** is a student and writer living in Richmond, Virginia, where they curate the quarterly poetry reading series *Run Tell That.* Recently, their work appears in *Callaloo.*

**Reyes Ramirez** is a Houstonian, educator, and writer. In addition to having an MFA in Fiction, Reyes received the 2014 *riverSedge* Poetry Prize, the 2012 Sylvan Karchmer Fiction Prize, and has poems, stories, essays, and reviews in *The Acentos Review, Cimarron Review, riverSedge: A Journal of Art and Literature, Front Porch Journal,* the anthology *Pariahs: Writing From Outside the Margins* from SFASU Press, and elsewhere. He works with several non-profits, teaches creative writing workshops with Barrio Writers and Writers in the Schools and copy edits for Arte Público Press. You can check out more of his work at reyesvramirez.com.

**Shannon Ratliff** is an essayist living in Texas. Her work is forthcoming in *Seneca Review* and *Hotel Amerika.*

**Garry Reece** is a writer who lives in Houston with his wife, three kids, eight cats, and one dog. His work has appeared over the years in *Muleteeth, American Short Fiction, Arts Houston, The Texas Observer, Extensions, GlassTire,* and *Art Lies.*

**Molly Reid**'s stories have appeared or are forthcoming on NPR and in the journals *TriQuarterly, Crazyhorse, The Pinch,* and *The Normal School,* among others. She is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Cincinnati, at work on a novel about taxidermy and ghosts.

**Wesley Rothman**: After receiving an MFA from Emerson College, Wesley Rothman taught writing and cultural literatures in Boston. Author of *SUBWOOFER* (New Issues), his poems and criticism have appeared or are forthcoming in *Boston Review, Callaloo, Crazyhorse, Day One, Harvard Review, New England Review, Prairie Schooner, Publishers Weekly, Southern Humanities Review,* and *The Golden Shovel Anthology,* among other venues. Recipient of a Vermont Studio Center Fellowship, he lives, studies, and teaches in Washington, DC.

Born in Halifax, **Trish Salah** is the author of the Lambda Award-winning *Wanting in Arabic* (TSAR Publications, 2002) and of *Lyric Sexology, Vol. 1* (Roof Books, 2014). She is a member of the editorial boards of *TSQ* and *TOPIA.* and the co-editor of a special issue of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly,* on Transgender Cultural Production. At the University of Winnipeg she organized the conferences, Writing Trans Genres and Decolonizing and Decriminalizing Trans Genres. She is currently Assistant Professor of Gender Studies at Queen's University. You can find her on Twitter @anasemia.

**sam sax** is the author of *Madness* (Penguin, 2017), winner of The National Poetry Series, selected by Terrance Hayes. His second book *'Bury It'* will be out from Wesleyan University Press in 2018. He's

received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, Lambda Literary, and The Michener Center where he served as the Editor-in-chief of *Bat City Review*. He's the two-time Bay Area Grand Slam Champion and author of four chapbooks. Winner of the 2016 Iowa Review Award, he has poems forthcoming in *American Poetry Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry Magazine*, and other journals.

**Natalie Scenters-Zapico** is the author of *The Verging Cities* (Center for Literary Publishing, 2015), winner of the PEN American/Joyce Osterweil Award, the GLCA Award, and a National Association of Chicano/a Studies Book Award. Her second book is forthcoming in 2019 from Copper Canyon Press. She will be teaching at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln starting in Fall 2017.

**Carina del Valle Schorske** is a Puerto Rican translator, poet, and essayist at large in New York City. She has published translations in *Washington Square*, *Waxwing*, *Berfrois*, and *sx salon*, and her own poetry has recently appeared at *The Offing*, *Phantom Books*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *The Awl*, and *No Tokens* among other venues. Essays have found homes with *Lit Hub*, *Boston Review*, *The Point*, and *Dissent*. She is the happy recipient of fellowships from CantoMundo, the MacDowell Colony (2014 and 2017), and Bread Loaf, as well as Columbia University, where she is a PhD student in Comparative Literature, studying psychoanalysis and other forms of psychic inquiry in the Americas.

**Jayson P. Smith** is a freelance writer, editor, educator, and curator. Their poems and interviews appear in journals such as *Nepantla*, *Vinyl*, *fields magazine*, *The Offing*, and *boundary2*. Jayson has received support from *The Conversation*, Millay Colony for the Arts, *Callaloo*, and The New Harmony Writers Workshop. Jayson lives and works in Brooklyn as the Workshop Coordinator for Cave Canem and Creative Director for The Other Black Girl Collective.

**Corey Van Landingham** is is the author of *Antidote*, winner of the 2012 Ohio State University Press/ The Journal Award in Poetry. A recipient of a 2017 National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship and a Wallace Stegner Fellowship from Stanford University, her work has appeared in *Best American Poetry 2014*, *Boston Review*, and *The New Yorker*, among many other places. She is currently a doctoral student in English Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Cincinnati.

**C. McAllister Williams** wrote *Neon Augury* (Fact-Simile Editions, 2011) and *WILLIAM SHATNER* (alice blue books, 2010). His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Copper Nickel*, *Sonora Review*, *ILK*, *Pinwheel*, and elsewhere. He lives in Milwaukee.

**Nicholas Wong** is the author of *Crevasse* (Kaya Press, 2015), the winner of the 28th Lambda Literary Award in Gay Poetry. His recent works can be found in *Copper Nickel*, *The Missouri Review Online*, and *Wasafiri* (UK). He is the Vice President of PEN Hong Kong.

POETRY BY SARAH M. C. BAUGH, CELIA BLAND, CATHERINE BRESNER, MAHOGANY L. BROWNE, LEILA CHATTI, CAROLINE CHAVATEL, KYLE G. DARGAN, CARRIE FOUNTAIN, BRANDI GEORGE, JOHN GOSSLEE, HILDA HILST, ROBERTA IANNAMICO, MITCHELL JACOBS, ROSEMARY KITCHEN, JEE LEONG KOH, JILL MCDONOUGH, MARY MCMYNE, HIEU MINH NGUYEN, MARIGLORIA PALMA, REYES RAMIREZ, WESLEY ROTHMAN, SAM SAX, NATALIE SCENTERS-ZAPICO, CARINA DEL VALLE SCHORSKE, JAYSON SMITH, C. MCALLISTER WILLIAMS, & NICHOLAS WONG.

FICTION BY JAMEL BRINKLEY, MICHAEL HOLLADAY, KEAGAN LEJEUNE, & CARMEN MARIA MACHADO.

NONFICTION BY PHILIP METRES, FRANCES PARK, SHANNON RATLIFF, & COREY VAN LANDINGHAM.

ART AND ART WRITING BY A. WILL BROWN, JAMAL CYRUS, ANDREW FINEGOLD, STEVE JANSEN, JILL MAGID, LIZ MCCARTHY, LAUREN R. O'CONNELL, & GARRY REECE.

TRANSLATIONS BY ALEXIS ALMEIDA & LAURA CESCARCO EGLIN

REVIEWS BY CHRISTIAN BANCROFT OF BLUNT RESEARCH GROUP, CONOR BRACKEN OF LAYLI LONG SOLDIER, CAROLINE M. MAR OF ELIZABETH LYONS, & AZA PACE OF KATHY JETNIL-KIJINER.

PLUS! THE 2016 BARTHELME PRIZE WINNER ANDREW MITCHELL AND HONORABLE MENTIONS MARYA HORNBACHER & MOLLY REID. AND WINNER OF THE 2016 GULF COAST PRIZE IN TRANSLATION, CARINA DEL VALLE SCHORSKE.

ALSO! SPECIAL FEATURES: JONATHAN MEYER INTERVIEWS GEORGE SAUNDERS. AND! CHING-IN CHEN IN CONVERSATION WITH RYKA AOKI, KAI M. GREEN, L.G. PARKER, & TRISH SALAH.

COVER ARTWORK BY MATT GRIMES.

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