

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS

# GULF COAST





A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS

# GULF COAST

СТРАНИЦ ДИД ЭУТАТАТИГ ЈО ЈАНУОИ А

# БРАСОТ

# gulf coast

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS VOLUME 30, ISSUE 2

## **Editor**

Luisa Muradyan-Tannahill

## **Managing Editor**

Michele Nereim

## **Digital Editor**

Georgia Pearle

## **Business Manager**

Laura Balcacer-Grimaldi

## **Fiction Editors**

Rachel Ballenger

JP Gritton

Alex McElroy

## **Nonfiction Editors**

Josie Mitchell

Alex Naumann

## **Poetry Editors**

Dan Chu

Chelsea B. DesAutels

Aza Pace

## **Books Editor**

Christian Bancroft

## **Faculty Editor**

Nick Flynn

## **Guest Art Lies Editor**

Rachel Cook

## **Assistant Art Lies Editor**

Maria Luisa Minjares

## **Reviews & Interviews Editor**

Christian Bancroft

## **Graphic Designer**

Derek Witucki

## **Online Editors**

Joshua Gottlieb-Miller (NF)

Carolann Madden (P)

Joshua Foster (F)

## **Assistant Editors**

Laura Biagi (F)

Michelle Burk (P)

Lee Ann Carlson (NF)

Barbara Drumheller (F)

Robert Howell (NF)

Justin Jannise (P)

Matthew Krajniak (F)

Michele Orsi (P)

Paige Quiñones (P)

Jenny Staff Johnson (F)

Kaj Tanaka (NF)

Samantha Thilén (P)

Lani Yu (NF)

## **Readers**

David Nikityn (F)

Brendan Stephens (F)

Richard Thompson (P)

Liza Watkins (P)

## **Interns**

Taylor Cooper

Vittoria La Matta

Tom Santos

Alia Siddiqui

**Gulf Coast: A Journal of Literature and Fine Arts** is largely funded by The Brown Foundation, Inc.; the City of Houston through Houston Arts Alliance; Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts; Houston Endowment, Inc.; Inprint, Inc.; the National Endowment for the Arts; Poets & Writers, Inc.; Texas Commission on the Arts; the University of Houston English Department; and the support of individual donors.

**ARTWORK:** Cover art (front) by ruby onyinyechi amanze: *kindred*, 2014; graphite, ink, pigment, enamel, photo transfers, glitter on paper. Cover art (back) is Paisley Floral Pattern by vaibhav, #71132704, licensed from stock.adobe.com. Cover design by Michele Nereim. The images on p. 13, 73, 113, 132, 180, 181, 208, 217, and 234 were created by Michele Nereim. The images on p. 53 and 163 were created by Derek Witucki. Source materials, unless otherwise noted, are licensed under Creative Commons and are in the public domain; details are as follows. Page 10: "Technology line vector," by monsitj, #69774538, licensed from stock.adobe.com. Page 13: "Vector panorama of Cuba," by Save Jungle, #143988423; "Trinidad and Tobago national symbols," by a7880ss, #120193797; both licensed from stock.adobe.com. Page 20-21 & 43: "Welcome to chile," by caribia, #13769385; "panorama of Chile," by Save Jungle, # 11298359; both licensed from stock.adobe.com. Page 53: "Windows on train compartment," by SNEHIT, #137967928, licensed from stock.adobe.com. Page 73: "8 door icons," by nikiteev, #8449376; "Feather icons," by sdp\_creations, # 71534449; both licensed from stock.adobe.com. Page 104: "Sandstone," by Song\_mi, #167871366, licensed from stock.adobe.com. Page 113: "Abstract women," by bignozie, #16300864; "Geometric Mountain," by rainticity, #121406082; "Hand-drawn black woman," by Moschiorini, #18868832; all licensed from stock.adobe.com. Page 132: "Origami swallow," by Bastetamon, # 6080464; "Nude," by yadviga, #100154494; both licensed from stock.adobe.com. Page 180-181: "Seamless floral border," by citradora, #82296889; "honey flying bee," by coveta, #11187956; both licensed from stock.adobe.com. Page 202: "Round frame of red poppy flowers," by sabelskaya, #191013425, licensed from stock.adobe.com. Page 203: "Green branches and leaves," by orhideia, #115698985, licensed from stock.adobe.com. Page 208: "Lace borders," by prikhnenko, #61409085; "Fat cloud," by kirasolly, #138607942; licensed from stock.adobe.com. Page 217: "Realistic smoke from aroma," by cgrterminal, #138168665; "Blurred street lights," by Sylveararts, #190750439; both licensed from stock.adobe.com. Page 234: "Illustration of champagne glasses," by zeimus, OCAL, through Freestockphotos.biz, CC0; "Floral Pattern Background 448," from PublicDomainPictures.net, CC0. Page 289: "Vintage labels," by standa\_art, #29124713; licensed from stock.adobe.com.

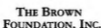
**OUR THANKS TO:** Alex Parsons, Giuseppe Taurino, Kevin Pruffer, Roberto Tejada, Mar Johnson, & the Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston; Wyman Herendeen, Carol Barr, Judy Calvez, Julie Kofford, Andre Cobb, George Barr, Rachel Weisz, & the Department of English at the University of Houston; Antonio Tillis, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Houston; Renu Khator, President of the University of Houston; Rex Koontz and the Department of Art at the University of Houston; Dean German, Kristine Grieve, Jesse Sharpe, Christian Kelleher, & Julie Grob of the U.H. Library & Special Collections; CLMP; Audrey Colombe, Matthew Salesses, & the staff of *Glass Mountain*; Rich Levy, Marilyn Jones, Kristi Beer, Lee Herrick, and Krupa Parikh of Inprint, Inc.; Sicardi Gallery & MKG Art Management; Poison Pen Reading Series; Rudyard's British Pub; Brazos Bookstore; Bob Camp, Jeff Fort, and Lillie Robertson; Craig Stone & Texas Accountants and Lawyers for the Arts; Sasha Jamal of Weil Gotshal & Manges LLP; Barry Jacobs & Monty Ward of Jones Day.

**Published twice yearly.** Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the editors. Send queries to *Gulf Coast*, Department of English, University of Houston, Houston, TX 77204-3013. Include a self-addressed, stamped envelope. For postal submission guidelines, or to submit your work online, visit [www.gulfcoastmag.org/submit](http://www.gulfcoastmag.org/submit). Response time is 4 to 6 months. *Gulf Coast* is open to submissions from September 1 to March 1.

Subscribe online at **WWW.GULFCOASTMAG.ORG** or send subscription requests to *Gulf Coast*, Department of English, University of Houston, Houston, TX 77204-3013.

**a two-year print subscription is \$38 / a one-year print subscription is \$20  
current issues are \$12 / back issues are \$8**

*Gulf Coast* is printed by McNaughton & Gunn, 960 Woodland Drive Saline, MI 48176, (734) 429-5411



# Executive Board

**President**

Misty Matin

**Vice President**

Katharine Barthelme

**Treasurer**

Melissa McDonnell Luján

**Secretary**

Alison de Lima Greene

**Members**

Laura Calaway

Andrew Campbell

Mary S. Dawson

Amber Dermont

Samantha Edussuriya

Gwendolyn Goffe

Lynn Goode

John Guess

Manuel Gutiérrez

Carolyn Roch Henneman

Janet Hobby

Paige Kempner

Victoria Ludwin

Evelyn Nolen

Judy Nyquist

Adrienne Perry

José Ramón Ruisánchez Serra

Hinda Simon

Cynthia Toles

Mark Wawro

**Advisory Council**

Kathleen Cambor

Bettie Carrell

Dean Daderko

Ryan N. Dennis

Mark Doty

Allen Gee

Amy Hertz

Cecily Horton

Terrell James

Karl Kilian

Kristin Kiser

Rex Koontz

Rich Levy

Victoria Lightman

Betty Moody

Kevin Prufer

Benjamin Rybeck

Roberto Tejada

Rebecca Wadlinger

Hunter Wakefield

Michelle White

Sasha West

Adam Zagajewski

# Donors

*Gulf Coast would like to thank the following people  
who have generously contributed to the journal:*

## **Underwriter**

Jeff Beauchamp

## **Benefactors**

Leslie & Brad Bucher  
Jeff Fort  
Misty & Surena Martin  
Lillie Robertson

## **Sponsors**

Chinhui & Eddie Allen  
Jereann Chaney  
Beckham Dossett  
Lynn Goode & Harrison Williams  
Melanie Gray & Mark Wawro  
John Guess

Carolyn Roch Henneman  
& Matt Henneman  
Amy Hertz  
Janet Hobby  
Sis Johnson  
Betty Moody

Evelyn & Roy Nolen  
Judy Nyquist  
Hinda Simon  
Scott Sparvero  
Nina & Michael Zilkha

## **Friends**

Bettie Cartwright  
Susie & Sanford Criner  
Karen Farber  
Marc Grossberg  
Manuel Gutiérrez  
Alison Jefferies

Rex Koontz  
Tracy & Glen Lerner  
Victoria & Marshall Lightman  
Victoria Ludwin  
Stephanie & Bradley Mitchell  
Cali & Peter Pettigrew

Kevin Prufer  
Barbara & Louis Sklar  
Roberto Tejada  
Cynthia Toles  
Payson Tucker  
Wallace Wilson

## **Supporters**

Sara Cain  
Bettie & Rick Carrell  
Cece & Mack Fowler  
Illa Gaunt

Gwendolyn Goffe  
Beverly & Wayne Gilbert  
Kate Hawk  
Cecily Horton

Marilyn Jones  
Rich Levy  
Michael Mandola  
Judd Swanson

# Contents: *vol. 30, issue 2*

EDITORS' NOTE .....	11
---------------------	----

## 2017 BARTHELME PRIZE

<b>DJ Thielke</b> .....	Pedro .....	14
<small>WINNER</small>		
<b>Lishani Ramanayake</b> .....	The Things We Could Not Say .....	16
<small>HONORABLE MENTION</small>		
<b>Eric Schlich</b> .....	Sunscreen .....	18
<small>HONORABLE MENTION</small>		

## 2017 TRANSLATION PRIZE

<b>Camila Reimers</b> .....	from <i>Time to Be</i> .....	22
<small>TRANSLATED BY LISA CARTER</small>		

## FICTION

<b>Cara Blue Adams</b> .....	Paper .....	53
<b>Porochista Khakpour</b> .....	When the Tide of Misfortune Hits, Even Jelly Will Break Your Teeth .....	73
<b>Debbie Urbanski</b> .....	The Island .....	113
<b>Tyler Barton</b> .....	Stay and Go .....	132
<b>Kristen Arnett</b> .....	Setting Up Your Voicemail Greeting .....	234

## NONFICTION

<b>Renee Gladman</b> .....	Slowly We Have the Feeling .....	62
<b>Joshua Wheeler</b> .....	Parachutes. ....	163
<b>Jeff Wasserboehr</b> .....	Lynn, Lynn, the City of Sin .....	217

## POETRY

<b>Lara Rüter</b> .....	dear poem .....	44
<small>TRANSLATED BY MAXIMILIANE DONICHT</small>		
<b>Rebecca Dunham</b> .....	Tensile .....	46
<b>Abigail Chabitnoy</b> .....	from <i>How to Dress a Fish</i> .....	47
<b>Yuki Tanaka</b> .....	Prognosis at Midnight .....	55

<b>Chad Bennett</b> . . . . .	The Noise of Time Is Not Sad . . . . .	56
<b>Marieke Lucas Rijneveld</b> . . . . .	Ways of Emerging . . . . .	58
<small>TRANSLATED BY SARAH THIBER HARVEY</small>		
<b>Jenny Molberg</b> . . . . .	Epistle from the Hospital for Text Messaging . . . . .	60
<b>Nadia Anjuman</b> . . . . .	The Most Faded Word (ghazal) . . . . .	102
<small>TRANSLATED BY DIANA ARIZIAN &amp; MARINA OMAR</small>		
<b>Rebecca Hazelton</b> . . . . .	Group Sex . . . . .	127
<b>Anja Snellman</b> . . . . .	Maaru Tang for "The Mycelium" . . . . .	128
<small>TRANSLATED BY MAISA HÄRINEN</small>		
<b>Mark Neely</b> . . . . .	Subvocal (Hadley) . . . . .	130
<b>Adeeba Talukder</b> . . . . .	God-shaped Woman . . . . .	138
<b>Megan Falley</b> . . . . .	Holy Thank You for Not . . . . .	177
<b>Mike Soto</b> . . . . .	[To say I love you put a bird on a wire] . . . . .	201
<b>Jennifer Metsker</b> . . . . .	Dark Helicopter . . . . .	232
<b>Marina Yuszczuk</b> . . . . .	Single Mother . . . . .	246
<small>TRANSLATED BY ALEXIS ALMEIDA</small>		
<b>Shane Seely</b> . . . . .	On a Pond that the Edge of the Wood . . . . .	248
<b>Christopher Citro</b> . . . . .	If We Had a Lemon We'd Throw It and Call That the Sun . . . . .	256
<b>Gyrðir Eliasson</b> . . . . .	In Hoffeldsdalur . . . . .	258
<small>TRANSLATED BY NED MATCH</small>		
<b>BJ Love</b> . . . . .	This Year I Turned 38. . . . .	260
<b>Jeremy Radin</b> . . . . .	There's No Wrong Way to Eat a Reese's . . . . .	285
<b>Paige Lewis</b> . . . . .	On the Train a Man Snatches My Book, Reads . . . . .	287

## CREATIVE & CRITICAL ART WRITING

<b>Kemi Adeyemi</b> . . . . .	Conversants: An Interview with taisha paggett . . . . .	88
<b>M. Barrett</b> . . . . .	Symptoms of Misunderstanding: Poetry & Art in the New Millennium . . . . .	140
<b>Wendy Vogel</b> . . . . .	Shock Value: Kathy Acker's larger-than-life personal condensed to human proportions . . . . .	250
<b>Laura August</b> . . . . .	Mud Canción . . . . .	262

## INAUGURAL BEAUCHAMP ART PRIZE

<b>Brandon Brown</b> .....	Dust Balls .....	204
----------------------------	------------------	-----

## FEATURED ART

<b>taisha paggett</b> .....	Featured Works .....	104 & 208
<b>Mike Kelley</b> .....	Featured Works .....	208

## SPECIAL FEATURES

Roundtable .....	Instigating the Future: Cross-pollinations of Race and Translation .....	180
------------------	--	-----

## BOOK REVIEWS

<b>Conor Bracken</b> .....	Touched in Some Way by Flight: Five Books of Contemporary Poetry .....	290
<b>Christian Bancroft</b> .....	Four Titles from New Directions .....	296
<b>Lani Yu</b> .....	"Not a fine light flickering": Dara Wier's <i>In the Still of the Night</i> .....	300
<b>CONTRIBUTORS</b> .....		301

# GULF COAST ONLINE EXCLUSIVES

## FICTION

- |                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| Dylan Brown      | <i>A-Side, B-Side</i>   |
| Callie Collins   | <i>The Lord's Earth</i>   |
| Dinah Cox        | <i>Shoobie</i>  |
| Caitlyn GD       | <i>Spread</i>   |
| Maureen Langloss | <i>Wheels and Bubbings</i>                                      |
| Claire Luchette  | <i>Judith Gap</i>   |
| Ander Monson     | <i>It is Hard Not to Love<br/>the Starvationist's Assistant</i> |
| Carmen Petaccio  | <i>Two Transactions</i>   |
| Mark Wagenaar    | <i>Little Relic</i>   |

## POETRY

- |                      |  |
|----------------------|--|
| Andres Cerpa         | <i>Seasonal Without Spring: Summer</i>               |
| Stevie Edwards       | <i>Drunk Bitch...</i>                                |
| JP Grasser           | <i>[SPRING: MOSAIC:]</i>                             |
| Jessica Hincapie     | <i>Girl as Tautology</i>                             |
| Nafiza Islam         | <i>Three Found Poems: Virginia Woolf</i>             |
| Doug Ramspeck        | <i>Ghost Fire</i>                                    |
| Natalie Wee          | <i>Asians &amp; Simple Math</i>                      |
| Liu Xia, tr. Ming Di | <i>No More Magpies on My Windows:<br/>Four Poems</i> |

## NONFICTION

- |                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| Jennifer Bullis    | <i>Feathers</i>   |
| Elizabeth Marilla  | <i>Night Moves</i>  |
| Katherine Mitchell | <i>Compartmentalization, or,<br/>Some Thoughts on Boxes</i> |
| Kerry Beth Neville | <i>Playing Kong</i>   |
| Nadia Owusu        | <i>The Heart of Dar es Salaam</i>                           |
| Marcela Sulak      | <i>Potatoes</i>   |

*Do you know where you are at this point in time and space, and in reality and in existence, when you can look out the window and you're looking at the most beautiful star in the heavens—the most beautiful because it's the one we understand and we know, it's home, it's people, family, love, life—and besides that it is beautiful. You can see from pole to pole and across oceans and continents and you can watch it turn and there's no strings holding it up, and it's moving in a blackness that is almost beyond conception.*

— Apollo 17 commander, Eugene Cernan

*If the moon smiled, she would resemble you. You leave the same impression Of something beautiful, but annihilating.*

— Sylvia Plath

Dear Readers,

Ancient cultures envisioned Earth as a floating disc and the firmament as a dome beset with the stars, sun, and moon, until Pythagoras formed a theory of a spherical Earth out of the moon's shadows. In 1972, the first full photograph of our planet was taken from space. The Apollo 17 mission launched from Cape Canaveral at night under a nearly full moon to achieve this rare vantage point. The result was the famous "Blue Marble" photograph. The picture gave human beings all around the world a moon's view of our world, of us. Uncanny, sublime.

So many of our culture's models—maps, timelines, books of human lives and history—are discrete objects, with centers and margins, beginnings and ends, implied hierarchies. But, more and more, we're finding that what we've written as edges are actually seams, overlapping and contested space, navigable in-betweens. However, even if they're ultimately imaginary, these "edges" can be lonely places, and their inhabitants are often left with the tough work of stitching themselves to the world. Language and art are important tools of connection, our "beasts of burden," and perhaps no other symbol has carried so much yearning, hope, and banality as the Moon.

Paige Lewis evokes the moon as a place of anxious peril, tinged with yearning: "I feel / as if I'm on the moon listening to the air hiss / out of my spacesuit, and I can't find the rip..." The last image in Debbie Urbanski's *The Island* focuses on a single reflection of the moon broken by an umbilical cord-like thread that either connects or chains characters together.

With stories like *The Island*, we are seeing a proliferation of work that folds horror and sci-fi into literary fiction. Categories are breaking down as we catapult from the largeness of


space to the micro bodies of insects, simultaneously facing grandeur and smallness. As the speaker of *The Island* explains, "There is a certain pleasure that comes from loving something so far away," and perhaps a despair in facing something so close as Nadia Anjuman writes, "The burnt wings of a moth, can't brighten/ Don't give me hope for spring." Throughout the issue writers vacillate between hyper visibility and invisibility, "I am the most faded word in the book of life/ written in a small and crooked script that can't be read." Anja Snellman shrinks her narrator to nothingness: "In the vessel of your holy house / I was a wisp, a desiccated mouse. / I was a living thing and a pygmy tree / I was an ear and a cavity."

Mike Kelley's photograph series, *Dust Balls*, renders the "small [and] insignificant" "sublime," according to Brandon Brown, winner of the inaugural Toni Beauchamp Prize in Critical Art Writing. The prize is dedicated to the memory of Toni Beauchamp, whom Rex Koontz (Professor of Art History at the University of Houston) remembers as "committed to a strong discourse around contemporary art in Houston. The Beauchamp Prize is a wonderful way to celebrate her passion, at the same time create tighter bonds between those at UH, and beyond, who would continue that passion and legacy." We at Gulf Coast hope this prize is able to create support for early and mid-career art writers who exemplify literary excellence and professional promise.

We hope to further blur the boundaries between the literary and fine arts. In her art essay, M. Barrett extols the fertile creative ground between poetry and visual art, their collaboration. Kemi Adeyemi and taisha paggett traverse language and dance, navigate between movement, race, queerness, and the body. "Uprightness not being a panacea for knowing," says paggett, describing spatial degrees "as a way to think about the spatial registers through which blackness becomes intelligible."

We, the 2016-2018 senior editorial team, are approaching the end of our tenure at Gulf Coast, ready to hand off the journal to an impressive new team. In our two years, we were privileged with an extraordinary vantage point, working with writers established and new, publishing luminous international pieces, providing in our pages a glimpse into innovative art exhibitions (ones that transformed ashes to diamonds, clay to flesh, and suffering to monuments of human dignity). As our mission nears an end, as we sit writing this letter, we look back on the work we did with gratitude and pride. We look forward to watching so many stars continue to rise and burn bright, shedding a little more light on this world.

# 2017 BARTHELME PRIZE



## WINNER: "PEDRO" BY DJ THIELKE

"Pedro" is one of those stories that beautifully exemplifies what flash fiction is at its best—an intimate and intricate exploration of a moment that is also so much more. From the incredible first line to the evocative last, this is a story about mothers and daughters, coming of age, what it means to be a woman, and the exquisite tension of the softness of pleasure before the sharpness of pain.

— Judge, Roxane Gay



EACH PRIZE SUBMISSION REQUIRES A \$23 READING FEE AND INCLUDES A ONE-YEAR SUBSCRIPTION TO GULF COAST.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, AND TO SUBMIT ONLINE, PLEASE VISIT [GULFCOASTMAG.ORG](http://GULFCOASTMAG.ORG)

## Pedro

My mother told me I was going to love sex and need a lot of it.

I was thirteen and lying on the couch, my head propped awkwardly on an armrest, while she towered over me, viciously stirring a small plastic pot with a popsicle stick.

"It's the testosterone," she went on, frowning at her work. "You have a little more of it than usual, that's why."

She raised the stick and let something honey gold and pearlescent drip off. She spun a glob of the wax, studied it, then set back to stirring.

Normally I would have been squeamish at the mention of sex, something I understood without being interested, but this time I just bunched my shorts in my fists. I wondered if this was something I could say to the other girls at the pool, who had decided that morning that I had a moustache, that my moustache needed a name, and that that name should be Pedro. I tried to laugh along as they came over and asked to feel it. "Oh, Pedro," they said. "Can Pedro be my boyfriend?" I made it home before I started crying, but my mother just rolled her eyes and dug the wax out from the cabinet under her sink.

"Runs in the family," my mother said. "Dark hair, light skin, and big tits."

I wondered if maybe I could tell the other girls this, too—that I was going to love sex and need a lot of it with my huge boobs. I had just thought to ask my mother if she, too, had more testosterone—if she, too, loved sex and needed a lot of it—when she said "OK," and dipped closer to me, the popsicle stick swooping beneath my line of vision.

I'm not sure what I was expecting, but I wasn't expecting something so great. The wax was wonderful, warm and silky, as she slid it across my upper lip. I tried to stifle a smile, feeling it dip into the divot at the corner of my mouth. Over this my mother laid a strip of paper and smoothed it with her thumb in short, repetitive bursts like stroking the forehead of a cat.

"OK," my mother said again. With one hand, she flattened my cheek, stretching the skin level. I could feel the pressure of the inside of my mouth against my molars,



**THE 2017 BARTHELME PRIZE**  
THIS YEAR'S WINNER IS DJ THIELKE

a strange feeling, intimate but alien. I had the sudden certainty that this would be what sex was like: that soon, I would be something golden and pearlescent, warm and silky, stretched and smoothed out over a landscape of skin.

"OK," she said once more, and maybe this was the only way she knew how to prepare me for the pain.

## The Things We Could Not Say

In Sinhala we say baaldiya. It is a quiet, banal word. Not one that I have ever thought twice about. Still, one afternoon in July 1983, when Colombo was burning, they say they heard the word cried out a thousand times, flung into the night like a prayer. They say the soot choked the air, that men with kitchen knives and cricket bats and flaming torches stood in their sarongs on the road and stopped cars coming in, to Maradana, to Wellawatte, to Fort. They say they made them say baaldiya. They say that if you were Tamil, your tongue would trip on the diya. That this was the quickest way to tell apart the Sinhalese from the rest—the others. They say 400 Tamils were killed that night. Others say the number is closer to 3,000. All on the back of this one word. Baaldiya.

Where I come from, language is more than just words. We say baaldiya but the word was drilled into me in English. Baaldiya, which is to say *bucket*. Or *buck-it*, the way I imagined the little white girls in my Enid Blyton books said it. Not *buck-cat* which is how Amma says it. English never fit comfortably in her mouth. She calls it broken, her English, and so she enrolled me in elocution class where they made *buck-it* out of baaldiya. No more the soft exhale, the unassuming release of baaldiya. Only the crisp, hard edge of the English word, sharp enough to cut. Still, when my mother says buck-cat, I find myself correcting her.

This summer, three decades after 1983, Amma tells me her uncle was killed by the Tigers. He was a conductor on the night bus to Jaffna. The Tiger cadres made the whole bus dismount and sing a Tamil song. Her uncle did not speak Tamil. Only knew to say *theriyada*. *I don't understand*. They let him go, told him to run. Halfway down the road, they gunned him down. Amma is not angry, is not crying. Just quiet. I do not know how to respond, how to tell her I could never understand loss like that but I will be there for her anyway. I do not know what to make of my mother opening up to me, the space between us heavy with promise. The only words that come to me are in English. When I grieve, it is in English. It is one of the many things about me my mother does not understand.



THE 2017 BARTHELME PRIZE  
THIS YEAR'S HONORABLE MENTION IS LISHANI RAMANAYAKE

So instead, I tell her, *I'm sorry*. Only, there is no word for that in Sinhala. Instead we say *samavenne*. Which is to say, Amma, forgive me.

Baaldiya. *Buck-it*. *Buck-cat*. A neighbor's betrayal. The smell of smoke across a city on fire. Daughter correcting mother in a language that is alien to us both. This making a *buck-it* out of *baaldiya*. And the shame in every syllable, still.

## Sunscreen

On the morning Amelia's husband killed himself—a shotgun, in the garage, he'd laid down towels—his daughter was being watched by Mrs. McClure across the lane. They were in the front yard filling a kiddie pool with the garden hose as they did every morning. It was hot that summer, record highs through June, and Fiona, six, had taken to wearing the same pink and purple two-piece swimsuit every day so that she could spend as much time in the water as possible. She preferred this to the neighborhood swimming pool, where our own children spent most of the summer.

We were used to seeing her soaking there, waving at us while we retrieved the newspaper from the front stoop or jogged past on the sidewalk. We watched the filling ritual from our front windows, in terrycloth robes, sipping coffee, our houses in identical states of quiet, a precarious calm that lasted only as long as the kids slept in.

Mrs. McClure always let Fiona hold the end of the hose while she operated the spigot. When the shot went off, a *crack!* like a car backfire, they both jumped. Fiona looked up from the cartoon fishes painted on the bottom of the blue plastic. She was Casper-faced where her father had not rubbed the sunscreen into her skin well enough. "What *was* that?" she asked with the insatiable, bug-eyed curiosity we so love and dread in our kids. Mrs. McClure said she didn't know. "Fireworks, maybe?" Neighborhood boys tend to get fuse-happy in the weeks before the Fourth. We searched our children, confiscating cherry bombs and silver salutes.

It was the detail about the sunscreen that got to us. Mrs. McClure shared this information at the Fourth of July potluck. She said she'd known something was wrong the instant she saw how disheveled Fiona had looked that morning.

"Disheveled how?" somebody asked.

That's when she told about the hair tangles, the missing towel, the sunscreen. We couldn't help imagining his hands then. He had the most beautiful hands. Sometimes we joked that Amelia had married him for those hands. They were the hands of a firefighter, a shipbuilder, a blacksmith. Not a lawyer. Not a man who spent his days filing briefs.



**THE 2017 BARTHELEME PRIZE**  
THIS YEAR'S HONORABLE MENTION IS ERIC SCHLICH

We thought of those too-big hands handling his daughter, the tips of his fingers moving in circles over her cheeks and forehead, rubbing in sunscreen, and doing a poor job of it—leaving bits of lotion shining in the clefts of her nose, beneath the ridge of her eyebrows, on the tips of her ears and chin. We think about this every time our husbands rub our own children down in lounge chairs on the side of the pool, lifting the straps of our daughters' suits to get at the shoulders, streaks of white disappearing into skin, but what we are really thinking of is our own fathers, and what they did to themselves, and if they ever touched us like that.

**2017**

**TRANSLATION**

**PRIZE**





## **INTRODUCTION BY JUDGE, JOHN KEENE**

*Tiempo de ser*, Chilean-Canadian author Camila Reimers' compelling 2017 novel, explores the experiences of two Chileans, Andrés and Gabriel, as they come to terms with being gay in their conservative Catholic society. While Gabriel stays in Chile, Andrés heads to Canada for graduate study, a journey that brings his understanding of his sexuality to the fore. One core element of the novel's approach to storytelling is Reimers' inclusion of narration by Andrés' grandmother, Rosario, a visual artist, who introduces each character in the novel in word and image. As she speaks, she is figuratively—in the words the reader sees and the persona they create—and literally—on a canvas—drawing them, and this translation excerpt vividly and fully captures her voice and the worlds and cultures to which she belongs. In particular, the translator deftly conveys in English the slight shifting of Spanish registers between Rosario and her grandson, Andrés, and between her voice as the narrator and the stories embedded within the larger story, while also carrying over into the English the casual polish of Reimers' Spanish. As superb as many of the submissions were, this one stood out just that little bit more.

## de *Tiempo de ser*

### Primera Parte

#### Rosario

La historia del cuadro comienza el día que fui al aeropuerto a despedir a mi nieto Andrés. Crear va más allá de la singamia y los gametos. El color y la forma en las cuevas de Altamira han sobrevivido a las inclemencias de la naturaleza. Un libro no se desvanece, las esculturas de Miguel Ángel son inmortales; las olas del mar nos recuerdan a Mozart. A estas alturas de mi vida no me interesa vender mis cuadros, solo deseo entregarle a mi nieto lo que me ha pedido, sin importarme las horas que pasaré en el estudio, encerrada con mis pinceles, sintiendo cómo se va la vida en cada gota de pintura y, al mismo tiempo, nace el mensaje que deseo entregar.

Tal vez en este mismo instante, alguien empieza un libro para contar lo que yo estoy haciendo. Tal vez el cuadro ya existe y solo espera que la mano de un artista se pose sobre él.

En el aeropuerto, sabiendo que mi nieto me dejaba, sentí una mezcla de rabia y al mismo tiempo aceptación de lo inevitable. En muchos momentos me encontré mascullando: "No sé qué mierda hago aquí". Lo dije para desahogarme por las tantas despedidas sufridas en ese mismo terminal. Durante la época del golpe yo tenía treinta años menos y me quedaba la esperanza de que alguna vez volvería a ver a mis amigos; si ellos no regresaban yo podía viajar a visitarlos. Pero ahora la edad no me daba para esos quehaceres. Además, este era otro tipo de despedida. Antes arrancábamos de las metralletas, ahora mi nieto deseaba escapar de la sociedad que lo había visto crecer.

Traté de distraer mis penas mientras observaba a una familia canadiense. El padre, la madre y los dos hijos conversaban en una mezcla de inglés y francés: "Combien d'heures sont vol? Twelve I think". Ese detalle me reconfortó y pensé que salir de Chile le haría bien a Andrés. Es por eso que cuando me contó que le habían ofrecido hacer una maestría en la Universidad de British Columbia yo insistí en que debía aceptarla.



## from *Time to Be*

### Part One

#### Rosario

The story of the painting began on the day I went to the airport to say goodbye to my grandson Andrés. Creation is more than what comes from coitus, fertilization, and gametes. Color and shape have survived in the Cave of Altamira despite nature's storms. Books never fade away. Michelangelo's sculptures are immortal. We are reminded of Mozart in the sound of a wave. At this point in life, I couldn't care less about selling my work. All I want is to give my grandson what he asked of me, no matter how many hours I might spend in my studio, shut away with my brushes, feeling life dwindle with every drop of paint, as the message I wish to send emerges.

Maybe right at this very minute, someone is starting to tell my story in a book. Maybe the painting already exists, is just waiting for an artist's hand to pose above the canvas.

At the airport, knowing my grandson was leaving, I felt a mixture of anger and acceptance. Quite often I found myself grumbling: "What the hell am I doing here?" It was a way to vent. I had already suffered through so many goodbyes in that exact same terminal. During the dictatorship, I had been thirty years younger and held on to the hope that I would see my friends again someday. If they didn't return, I could go visit them. But not at my age anymore. Besides, this was a different kind of goodbye. Back then, we were running from machine guns; today, my nephew was running from the society he had grown up in.

I tried to forget my sorrow by watching a Canadian family. The father, mother, and two children were speaking a mixture of English and French: "*Combien d'heures de vol?*" "Twelve, I think." I found this detail comforting. I knew it would do Andrés good to leave Chile. It's why I insisted he go when he told me he'd been accepted into the master's program at the University of British Columbia.

One day at lunch, out of the blue, he says: "I'm going to Vancouver, *gordita*. What do you think about that?"

Un día a la hora de almuerzo, como si nada, Andrés me dice: “Gordita, me voy a Vancouver, ¿qué te parece?”.

¿Qué me parecía? Un horror, por supuesto. A su partida nadie vendría a visitarme ni a conversar conmigo mientras yo pintaba. Pero no podía interferir: “Quédese, *mijito*, así va a estar cerca cuando yo pare las chalupas”. Respondí como abuela bien parida: “Me alegro mucho, querido, eso te abrirá puertas”.

“Los pasajeros de *Air Canada* vuelo 093, sírvanse pasar por la puerta de embarque número veinte”, volvió a repetir la voz del parlante mientras Andrés me abrazaba y susurraba al oído:

—Abuela, píntame un cuadro.

Cuando chiquillo me pedía lo mismo: “Pintemos, abuela, ¿cómo mezclas los colores?”. Entonces yo tomaba un lienzo en blanco donde, sin usar pinceles, plasmábamos nuestras manos cubiertas de pintura. Pensé que aún debía de tener algunos de estos bocetos en mi estudio, y que al volver a casa los buscaría para llenar las murallas de recuerdos.

—De los pingüinos a los oso polares en viaje directo —bromeé para hacer la despedida más llevadera.

—Abuela, tú no cambias —rio Andrés.

Sin proponérselo, cuando niña papá me había preparado para practicar el concepto budista de la temporalidad. “Putas, cómo nos cambia la vida” (decía mi papá, no Buda). Desde que sentí esa conexión con mi nieto, siempre había dado por hecho que Andrés se quedaría a mi lado hasta que “la pelá” me llamara, lo que no quiere decir muchos años más, pues ya tengo ochenta y tres y, de acuerdo con este asunto de los genes, mi familia no es de tan largo vivir. Lo de los genes me lo explicó mi nieto, pues ese es el tema que Andrés va a estudiar en Canadá.

Al volver a mi estudio sentí el vacío de su presencia. Quise empezar el cuadro de inmediato, pero tuve miedo; no por falta de inspiración, sino porque tenía la idea demasiado clara y me asustaba enfrentarla. Quién era yo para abrir una caja de Pandora que Andrés no estaba preparado para compartir. Por otro lado tenía una excusa para aplazar el pedido de mi nieto, pues debía terminar un trabajo encargado por el Museo Kampa en Praga, y tenía la posibilidad de vender otro al MACBA en Barcelona. Afortunadamente en este asunto de las

What did I think? It was tragic, of course. Once he was gone, no one would visit me, no one would chat with me while I painted. But it wasn't my place to interfere. "Stay, mijito, so you'll be here when I kick the bucket." I responded the way any good grandmother should: "I'm so happy, dear. This will open doors for you."

"Passengers on Air Canada flight 093, please board now at gate number twenty," the loudspeaker voice repeated. Andrés hugged me and whispered in my ear:

"Paint me a picture, *Abuela*."

He used to say something similar when he was little: "Let's paint, *Abuela*. Show me how you mix the colors." I would take a blank canvas and we would stamp our handprints all over it. I thought I must still have some of those in my studio; I'd pull them out when I got home and plaster the wall with memories.

"Nonstop from penguins to polar bears," I joked to ease our goodbye.

"Oh, *Abuela*, you never change," Andrés laughed.

Without intending to, my father actually prepared me to practice the Buddhist concept of temporality. "Goddamn, life's unpredictable." (My father said, not Buddha.) From the moment I felt a connection to my grandson, I just assumed he would always be by my side, until "*la peld*" called me home—which shouldn't be long now. I'm already eighty-three, and according to this gene thing, my family isn't known for particularly long lifespans. It was Andrés who explained genes to me; that's what he's studying in Canada.

Back at my studio, I felt the vacuum of his absence. I wanted to start his painting right away but was afraid. It's not that I lacked inspiration; in fact, the concept was all too clear, so clear I was scared to face it. Who was I to open a Pandora's box if Andrés wasn't ready to look into it? Besides, I had a good excuse to put it off: I had to finish a piece commissioned by the Museum Kampa in Prague, and there was the possibility of another for MACBA in Barcelona. Fortunately, that wholesales thing isn't my responsibility. My curator, Alicia—who is also my daughter—takes care of all that.

I worked on the Prague gallery piece for a few months, but apathy won out over good intentions, and I always found a way to avoid signing it and calling Alicia. Knowing me, she showed up one day with a suitcase in hand and threatened to stay until I was done. Wanting to get rid of her was all the impetus I needed to deliver the finished piece two days later.

ventas yo no tenía nada que hacer, de eso se encargaba Alicia, la curadora que es también mi hija.

Trabajé algunos meses en la obra para el museo de Praga, pero la desidia era más fuerte que la intención y siempre buscaba algún subterfugio para no poner mi firma y llamar a Alicia. Conociéndome, un día mi hija llegó arrastrando una maleta y amenazó con no partir hasta que yo lo hubiese terminado. Deshacerme de ella fue suficiente razón para entregárselo en dos días.

Ahora no me quedaba otra que empezar lo que Andrés me había pedido. Al sentarme frente a la tela vacía me sentí como un aprendiz y me pregunté si tal vez sería más fácil escribir una novela; de esa manera podría incluir el suspenso de manera lenta, párrafo por párrafo, capítulo a capítulo. “No te distraigas, una promesa es una promesa”, sentí que el cuadro me decía. Miré extrañada hacia la tela en blanco y di las primeras pinceladas sobre un lienzo de más de un metro de altura.

Al tocar la tela, un cataclismo cósmico empujó las galaxias, que, repelidas por la fuerza explosiva de los sentimientos, comenzaron a separarse. Me regocijé y al mismo tiempo tuve miedo; todo sucedía casi sin darme cuenta y poco a poco fui perdiendo la consciencia del tiempo y del espacio.

Siguiendo el precepto de pintar siempre graso sobre magro, manché la tela con tonos aguarraados, indicando el lugar de los elementos que luego cubriría con óleo, pues eso me daba la posibilidad de colorear, borrar y empezar una y otra vez hasta lograr el efecto deseado.

Tenía dos conceptos claros: el primero era mostrar el conflicto que yo sospechaba que mi nieto enfrentaba en ese momento; el segundo, establecer una conexión entre Andrés y el Chile que había dejado. Es por eso que la idea de los kopiwes, nuestra flor nacional, se me vino a la cabeza. Recordé una leyenda que me había contado mi padre:

“Hace muchos años, cuando en Chile la tierra de Arauco era habitada por pehuenches y mapuches, vivía una hermosa princesa mapuche llamada Hues, y un vigoroso príncipe pehuenche cuyo nombre era Copih. Como en todas las historias de amor que merezcan la pena, al igual que Romeo y Julieta y a pesar de que sus tribus estaban enemistadas a muerte, Copih y Hues se conocieron y se enamoraron. Cuando los padres se enteraron, enfurecidos, llegaron hasta la laguna donde ambos

Now I had no choice but to begin what Andrés had asked of me. Sitting down in front of the blank canvas, I felt like a novice and wondered whether it might not be easier to write a book. At least there I could let the suspense unfold slowly, paragraph by paragraph, chapter by chapter. "Focus. A promise is a promise," the canvas said to me. I stared at it in surprise, then placed the first brushstrokes on the meter-high canvas.

At the moment of contact, a cosmic cataclysm occurred, the explosive force of emotions propelling the galaxies back, separating and expanding them. I was overjoyed yet afraid; everything seemed to just happen without me, and I began to lose track of time and space.

Following the rule of thick on thin, I began with a diluted layer, outlining the elements I would later cover with oil paint, allowing me to maintain purity of colour, to paint over and over until I achieved the desired effect.

Two concepts were clear to me: the first was to show the conflict I suspected my grandson was wrestling with; the second was to establish a connection between Andrés and the Chile he had left behind. That's where the idea of the kopiwes came from; they're our national flower, the Chilean bellflower. I recalled the tale my father had told me:

"A long time ago, when Araucanía was inhabited by the Pehuenche and Mapuche peoples, there lived a strong young Pehuenche prince whose name was Kopi and a beautiful Mapuche princess by the name of Wes. As with any good love story, like Romeo and Juliet, though their two tribes were mortal enemies, Kopi y Wes met and fell in love. Their parents were furious when they found out, following them to the lake where the young couple would meet and killing them both. The two tribes cried for many moons. After a year had passed, the Pehuenches and Mapuches met at the lake to remember their children. Night fell, and they slept along the shore.

"At dawn, they awoke to see two crossed lances rising up from the depths of the lake. A vine bound the lances together, and two elongated flowers hung down: one as red as blood and the other as white as snow.

"The warring tribes understood the message they had been given. They made peace and called the flower kopiwes."

enamorados se encontraban y mataron a sus hijos. Las dos tribus lloraron por mucho tiempo. Cuando pasó un año, los pehuenches y los mapuches se reunieron en la laguna para recordarlos. Llegaron de noche y durmieron en la orilla.

Al amanecer vieron que del fondo de las aguas surgían dos lanzas entrecruzadas. Una enredadera las enlazaba, y de ella colgaban dos grandes flores de forma alargada: una roja como la sangre y la otra blanca como la nieve.

Así, las tribus enemistadas comprendieron el mensaje. Se reconciliaron y decidieron llamar a la flor *copihue* o *kopiwe*".

Para mi cuadro elegí tres *kopiwes* blancos; cada uno de ellos transmutaría en una persona escondida en la flor. Supe que el primer *kopiwe* representaba a Andrés, mientras que los otros dos solo sospechas e inseguridades que tomarían forma a medida que fueran llegando a mi mente.

### Primer *kopiwe*

—¿Andrew?

—No, Andrés —respondí, sorprendido, al escuchar mi nombre con acento gringo. El oficial de la Policía Internacional ni siquiera esbozó una sonrisa y procedió a estampar mi pasaporte.

Mi primera parada en Canadá había sido en Calgary, donde antes de continuar viaje a Vancouver tuve que pasar por aduanas y comprobar que la visa de estudiante se encontraba en orden. Una vez en la ciudad de destino tomé un taxi para ir a las residencias universitarias, donde me habían asignado un departamento de una habitación. El trayecto entre el aeropuerto y el campus de Point Gray removió las dudas que tenía con respecto a vivir en esa ciudad. En medio del océano Pacífico y las montañas me sentí *home, sweet home*.

País nuevo, vida nueva. Había llegado el momento de dejar atrás el aislamiento y los temores en que había crecido. Por supuesto también me atraían los estudios, pero mi partida no había sido exclusivamente porque quisiera sacar el título de una maestría.

Tuve la suerte de llegar en uno de los pocos días de sol que tiene Vancouver. Como era aún temprano, dejé las maletas en mi nuevo departamento y salí a caminar para estirar las piernas después de diez horas de vuelo. Quise ir a la playa y me orienté hacia el océano; me llamó la atención que, en vez de sentir el olor salado de las algas,

For my painting, I chose three white kopiwes, each of which would hide a person inside. I knew the first represented Andrés, but had only the vaguest suspicion and sense of insecurity when I thought of the other two.

### The First Kopiwe

“Andrew?”

“No, Andrés,” I replied, startled to hear my name spoken with a gringo accent. The customs official’s face remained blank and he stamped my passport.

My first stop in Canada was Calgary, where I went through customs and had to show my student visa before continuing on to Vancouver. Once at my final destination, I took a taxi to the university residence building where I had been assigned a one-bedroom apartment. The trip from the airport to the Point Grey Campus was all it took to allay any fears I had about moving to this new city. Caught between the Pacific Ocean and the mountains, I felt home, sweet home.

New country, new life. The time had come to leave isolation and mounting fear behind. I was looking forward to my studies, too, of course, but they weren’t the only reason I left Chile.

I was lucky enough to have arrived on one of the few sunny days Vancouver gets. It was still early, so I dropped my bags and headed out for a walk, needing to stretch my legs after fifteen hours of travel. I wanted to go to the beach and headed toward the ocean. Instead of the salty smell of algae, I perceived the sweet smell of flowers. Before long, I found myself in the middle of a rose garden, roses every color in the rainbow. I walked over to a group of students and asked directions. I crossed the street and started down a set of wooden stairs so deep I had to hold onto the rail to keep my balance. Halfway down, the scenery suddenly changed, and I was surrounded by Douglas firs and cedars. I immediately thought of my grandmother, who would have loved to watch how the light played on water, boulders, and trees.

Near the bottom of the cliff, a sign read “Clothing optional.” I couldn’t quite grasp where I’d arrived once I reached the beach. A naked woman selling watermelon slices greeted me with a smile, offering her wares. She turned when I declined and called to the sunbathers nearby: “Another textile coming.”

olía un dulzón aroma de flores. Al avanzar me encontré en medio de un jardín de rosas de todos los colores del arcoíris. Había algunos estudiantes y me acerqué a ellos para que me indicaran el camino. Crucé la calle y empecé a bajar escalones de madera, tan anchos que para mantener el equilibrio tuve que afirmarme en la barandilla. El cambio de paisaje me sorprendió en pleno sendero circundado de abetos y cedros. Al observar la naturaleza que me rodeaba no pude evitar pensar en mi abuela, que se habría maravillado al ver cómo la luz del día jugaba con el agua, las rocas y la madera.

Casi al final del acantilado encontré un letrero que me llamó la atención: “El uso de ropa es opcional”. En un principio no comprendí dónde estaba, hasta llegar a la playa. Una mujer desnuda que vendía torrijas de sandía me saludó amablemente, ofreciendo su mercancía. Al no comprarle, me dio la espalda y avisó a los bañistas cercanos: “Another textile coming”.

Pensando que me encontraba en una playa privada, mi primer impulso fue disculparme, pero al leer algunos de los avisos que me rodeaban me tomó poco tiempo darme cuenta de que era un lugar público:

“Quiera su playa llevándose sus desechos y un poco más.

Deje sus huellas y risa.

Deje las botellas de vidrio en casa, el vidrio y los pies pelados no se mezclan”.

Los bañistas disfrutaban del escaso sol en el lluvioso clima de la ciudad. Una pareja de mujeres tendidas en la arena rocosa se solazaba esparciendo bronceador sobre piernas y brazos; luego tomaron turnos y con movimientos rítmicos y lentos una de ellas lo aplicaba en la espalda de la otra. Por no querer pecar de impertinente desvié la mirada simulando medir la intensidad de las olas, pero mis ojos tenían vida propia y volvieron a los largos dedos de la rubia hundiéndose en la piel de su amiga. La chica que recibía el masaje empezó a ronronear mientras aplastaba la cara en la toalla, bajo su cuerpo.

Más allá, un hombre desnudo, apoyado sobre un tronco de árbol, levantaba sus dorados glúteos al sol. Mis ojos escanearon el paisaje buscando otro árbol que me sirviera de apoyo; la idea de bañarme en el océano sin ninguna barrera, solo mi propia piel, más aún, sin escuchar las críticas de nadie, me hizo sonreír. Empecé

Thinking I might be on a private beach, my first impulse was to apologize, but after reading several other signs around me I realized it was public.

“Love your beach: take your garbage and some extra.  
Leave nothing behind but footprints and laughter.  
No bottles. Glass and bare feet don’t mix.”

Everyone seemed to be enjoying this rare bit of sunshine in an otherwise rainy climate. A couple of women lay on the rocks, rubbing sunscreen over arms and legs, then took turns applying it to one another’s backs with slow, rhythmic strokes. Not wanting to be rude, I looked away as if to gauge the strength of the surf, but my eyes had a life of their own and wandered back to the blonde’s long fingers as they delved into her friend’s skin. The woman receiving the massage began to purr, her face pressing into the towel beneath her.

Farther down the beach, a nude man leaned against a trunk and raised his glutes to the sun. I scanned the horizon, searching for a tree to rest on. The thought of swimming in the ocean without the barrier of cloth, in nothing but my skin—and, more importantly, without anyone to criticize—brought a smile to my face. I pulled off my pants, then my shirt, and set them on a piece of driftwood. I raced into the sea, diving into the cold Pacific waves. Once I was out, I called to the watermelon vendor and bought three pieces. I let the juice run down my body as I ate, then plunged back into the waves.

That day at Wreck Beach was the first of my new life. There were going to be some unexpected advantages to this Molecular and Cellular Engineering program.

### Rosario

I cut a slice of thousand-layer cake, boiled the water for yerba mate and headed into my studio. Andrés had called the night before and sounded happy: he liked his apartment, loved his classes.

“It’s incredible, Abuela. Science has come so far that I’m hopeful for a better future.”

“It might have advanced for some, but poverty and hunger still kill millions every day.”

por sacarme los pantalones, luego la camisa, que deposité en uno de los troncos; corrí hacia el mar y me lancé a las frías olas del Pacífico. Al volver, llamé a la mujer que vendía sandía y le pedí tres torrejitas; las comí dejando que el jugo chorreará mi cuerpo, que volvería a sumergir en las olas.

Wreck Beach marcaba el comienzo de mi nueva vida; la maestría en Ingeniería Molecular y Celular llegaba con algunas ventajas inesperadas.

### Rosario

Corté un pedazo de torta de mil hojas, herví el agua para el mate y me encerré en el estudio. La noche anterior Andrés había llamado por teléfono y su voz sonaba alegre; le gustaba su apartamento y estaba fascinado con las clases.

—Es increíble, abuela. La ciencia ha avanzado tanto que me da esperanzas para un futuro mejor.

—Tal vez ha avanzado para algunos, pero igual la pobreza y el hambre siguen matando a millones de personas.

—¡Ay!, Gordita, no empecemos con eso. Es verdad que vivimos en un mundo de injusticias, pero también vivimos en un mundo lleno de oportunidades.

Me llamó la atención sentir a mi nieto tan optimista y no quise agriar el momento, así es que aproveché para contarle acerca del cuadro:

—¿Qué piensas, querido? Ya empecé el trabajo que me pediste al partir.

—Fantástico, abuela. ¿Qué vas a hacer?

—Voy a pintar tres kopiwes transformados en figuras humanas. Uno de los kopiwes muestra a una mujer de pelo rojo.

—¿En quién te inspiras para ese personaje?

—Nadie, nadie. Solo que ese color transmite pasión. Este kopiwe será el primero en línea y el pelo rojo se enredará en todos los recovecos, desde el cielo tormentoso a los cristalinos guijarros en la tierra.

—Suena interesante, viejita. Ahora debo partir, te llamo la próxima semana, un beso.

No me arrepentí de haberle mentido a mi nieto, pues no podía decirle que me sentía identificada con el kopiwe de cabello rojo. Mi pelo cubierto de canas y las arrugas en la cara no se encontraban en el cuadro, pero sí mi voluntad y la fuerza

"Ay, Gordita, don't start. It's true, we live in an unjust world, but it's also a world full of opportunity."

It was something to hear my grandson so optimistic. Not wanting to ruin the moment, I began to tell him about my work.

"So, my dear, I started the painting you asked for when you left."

"That's fantastic, Abuela. What's it going to be?"

"I'm painting three kopiwes that transform into human figures. One of them is a woman with red hair."

"And who's the inspiration behind that?"

"No one, no one. It's just that red conveys passion. That'll be the first kopiwe, and the color red will run through the entire scene, from stormy sky to translucent pebbles on the ground."

"Sounds interesting, Gordita. I've gotta run now, but I'll call you next week. Big kiss!"

I wasn't sorry I'd lied to my grandson; I couldn't tell him I identified with the redheaded kopiwe. My gray hair and wrinkles were nowhere in the picture, but my will and strength in the face of adversity were. Plus, on the day he called, I had no idea the person in the painting would turn out to be an unexpected reality. I took the last bite of cake and, with the taste of yerba mate on my tongue, began to outline the kopiwes. First I dabbed the canvas with blues, crimson, and yellows, then used blue to outline the human figure I planned to paint white.

### **The Red-Headed Kopiwe**

He left without so much as a peck on the cheek, as if I didn't exist, as if I were nobody. Not surprising; I knew that already. Andrés never once expressed any interest other than in helping me with my math, and then only because Susana asked him to.

When we moved into the neighborhood of Las Condes in Santiago, Mama was in heaven. We had been living in Ñuñoa, but once Papa's business began doing well, my mother decided we had to move and that I should be enrolled in an English-speaking school. It was important to be bilingual.

"Natalia, just because we're earning a little more doesn't mean we can be extravagant," my father complained.

para enfrentar desafíos. Por otro lado, el día de la llamada nunca imaginé que ese personaje del cuadro terminaría mostrando una realidad insospechada. Mordí el último pedazo de torta y con el sabor del mate en la boca empecé a delinear los kopiwes. Primero manché la tela con azules, carmesí y amarillos, luego borroneé en azul la forma humana de las flores que planeaba pintar de blanco.

### **Kopiwe de pelo carmesí**

Partió sin siquiera darme un beso de despedida en la mejilla, como si yo no existiera, como si yo fuera un simple cero a la izquierda. Bien merecido lo tengo, pues ya lo sabía. Andrés nunca demostró otro interés que el de ayudarme con mis clases de matemáticas, y eso porque se lo pidió Susana.

Al mudarnos al barrio Las Condes en Santiago, mamá se sentía en el paraíso. Vivíamos en Ñuñoa, pero cuando papá empezó a hacer algo más de dinero en su negocio mi madre decidió que también teníamos que cambiarnos de barrio y yo debía atender a una escuela inglesa, pues en la vida era importante ser bilingüe.

—Natalia, el que tengamos unos pesos más no significa que podamos darnos estos gustos —reclamaba mi padre.

—Es por la niña, Ramón, ¿no te das cuenta de que si le damos esta oportunidad va a conocer chicos que serán buenos maridos?

—Niñitos bien.

—Sí, y qué. Deseo lo mejor para nuestra hija, no quiero que pase barrabasadas como yo.

Como siempre, mamá se salió con la suya y, mordiéndome las uñas, partí a mi primer día de clases. No conocía a nadie, mientras que los otros estudiantes venían juntos desde kindergarten, habían compartido alegrías y frustraciones, prácticas de música para la banda del colegio y clases de gimnasia con Mr. White. Lo de “Mr.” es porque era un colegio de inmersión en inglés.

Recuerdo cuando entré a la sala sin saber dónde poner mis libros ni qué pupitre me correspondía. Una chica sentada en la última hilera de bancos me gritó:

—¡Oye, tú!, sí, la colorina, ven a sentarte a mi lado.

Cuando nos hicimos amigas le pregunté por qué me había invitado, y la respuesta de Susana fue simple: le gustaba mi pelo rojo. Creo que desde ese

"It's for our daughter, Ramón. Don't you see that if we give her this, she'll be able to meet eligible boys?"

"Rich boys."

"Yes, and? I want the best for our little girl. I don't want her to go through what I had to."

As always, Mama got her way, and, biting my nails, I set off for my first day at this new school. I didn't know a single person. Everyone there had come up together from kindergarten, shared the same joys and frustrations, band practice and gym class with Mr. White. (We actually called our teachers "Mr." or "Mrs.," this being an immersion school and all.)

I remember walking into the classroom, no clue where to put my books, which desk was mine. A girl in the back row called out:

"Hey, you! Yeah, ginger, come sit next to me."

After we'd become friends, I asked Susana why she had invited me to sit with her, and her answer was simple: she liked my red hair. I think that's when I started to take even better care of it, and it's probably why I chose Vespa, one of the most expensive salons in the neighborhood. Wanting to rub elbows with the sort of people that went to places like that, Mama agreed to let me go.

Once Susana and I discovered we lived just three blocks apart, we began walking to school together every day. The first time I went to pick her up, this guy with dark hair (which would have looked better if it were longer) and tight jeans opened the door.

"Are you Julia?" he asked as if he had been waiting for me. "My sister'll just be a minute."

Susana hurried down the stairs—we were running late—and gave him a kiss goodbye.

"That's my brother, Andrés," she explained. "He's studying engineering at the Universidad de Chile."

In math class later on, I started to write a poem: Andrés of the Sunset Eyes. I kept writing it in English class and throughout the rest of the day. I couldn't get his image out of my head and kept asking Susana questions. Yes, he was in the fourth year of his bachelor's degree and he was a good student, their father wanted him to study

momento empecé a cuidar mi cabello más que de costumbre y probablemente eso me llevó a elegir Vespa, una de las peluquerías más caras del barrio, que mamá aceptó pagar pues ella también estaba interesada en mezclarse con clientes que atendían a estos lugares.

Cuando Susana y yo descubrimos que vivíamos a tres cuadras de distancia, el caminar juntas a clases se transformó en nuestra rutina. La primera vez que pasé a buscarla me abrió la puerta un muchacho metido en unos *jeans* apretados y de pelo oscuro, que yo hubiese preferido dejar crecer en vez de cortarlo como marinero.

—¿Eres Julia? —preguntó como si hubiera estado esperando mi llegada—. Mi hermana ya viene.

Susana bajó las escaleras aprisa, pues íbamos atrasadas, y luego se despidió del joven con un beso.

—Es mi hermano Andrés —explicó—, estudia Ingeniería en la Chile.

Durante la clase de Matemáticas empecé un poema: *Andrés de ojos pardos como el atardecer*. Lo continué escribiendo durante la clase de Inglés y así se me fue el día. La imagen de Andrés me perseguía e insistí en interrogar a Susana. Sí, su hermano iba en cuarto de Ingeniería y era buen estudiante, su padre hubiese preferido que entrara a la Escuela de Medicina, pero al final aceptó que Ingeniería era también una profesión decente. No, que ella supiera Andrés no tenía novia, salía con chicas cuando estaban de vacaciones en la casa de la playa, pero nada serio, amores de verano.

Al volver a casa seguía pensando en él; de ojos inquisidores y cara desconfiada, era mucho más alto que los chicos de mi colegio. Todo en él me gustaba, bueno, no todo, yo lo hubiera preferido de pelo más largo, pero mal que mal, el pelo crece. Quise dibujarlo, aunque de artista nada, así es que continué escribiendo. Luego me puse a hojear el libro *Origen y significado de los nombres propios*. Andrés venía del griego, valiente y varonil.

Nunca me había gustado ir a la escuela, me aburría, pero desde el día del encuentro tuve un incentivo para no faltar a clases, siempre con la esperanza de que al pasar a buscar a Susana él abriría la puerta. Mi amiga no tardó en darse cuenta de que yo andaba medio chiflada por su hermanito y tramamos un plan. A ninguna de las dos nos iba muy bien en Matemáticas, y Susana le pediría a Andrés que nos ayudara.

—Estás loca, Susana, no tengo tiempo de dar clases particulares a dos niñitas perezosas.

medicine but finally agreed that engineering was still a decent profession. No, she didn't think he had a girlfriend; he might date a girl or two over the summer when they were at their beach house, but nothing serious, you know, holiday romances.

I still couldn't stop thinking about him even when I got home. Inquisitive eyes and wary face. He was much taller than the boys at school. I liked everything about him, or, well, not everything; as I say, I would have liked his hair longer, but whatever, hair grows. I felt like sketching him, but I'm no artist so I kept writing about him. Later on, I looked him up in *The Origin and Meaning of Names*. Andrés, from the Greek: brave, manly.

I had never particularly loved school, found it boring, but there was now an incentive to go every day, hoping he just might open the door when I went to pick up Susana. My friend soon realized the extent of my crush on her brother, and we hatched a plan. Neither of us was very good at math, so Susana would ask Andrés to help us.

"Don't be ridiculous, Susana. I don't have time to tutor two apathetic teens."

"OK. If we fail, I'll tell Papa it was all your fault."

"One hour a week. Now stop being a pest."

"Two hours. One's not enough."

I passed my exam—just barely, but at least I didn't have to take summer school. My parents were thrilled, especially Mama, who said engineers make good husbands. I must admit, I exaggerated a bit when I told them about the tutoring. Truth be told, I never really paid attention. The only reason I didn't fail were the extra hours I spent studying at home every night after I'd spent a while with whatever book I was reading.

Math was hard mostly because I had very few class hours a week. I had chosen to specialize in the arts: history, literature, and philosophy, those were my forte. I had always loved to read and write stories. I wanted to be an author, and would submit to as many writing contests as I could. I won a few times, and that spurred me on, even though Mama was never keen on the idea.

"Darling, there's no future for you in Chile unless your name is Pablo Neruda, Gabriel García Márquez, or Miguel de Cervantes. It's much better to find a good husband."

—Si repetimos curso te acuso a papá y le digo que fue por tu culpa.

—Una hora a la semana y déjate de molestar.

—Dos horas, una no es nada.

Al final pasé el examen con la nota mínima pero suficiente para no volver a tomar Matemáticas durante las vacaciones de verano. Mis padres estaban encantados, especialmente mamá, que decía que los ingenieros eran buenos maridos. Debo reconocer que al contarles lo de las clases exageré un poco, porque de verdad, verdad, yo no ponía mucha atención, y si no reprobé fue porque en las noches, después de avanzar mi lectura en el libro de turno, estudiaba Matemáticas en casa.

Lo de ser mala para las Matemáticas se debía primordialmente a que tenía muy pocas horas de clases a la semana, pues había elegido especializarme en letras. Historia, Literatura y Filosofía eran mis fuertes. Siempre había preferido leer y escribir cuentos, quería ser escritora y participaba en todos los concursos literarios que podía; varias veces gané premios y eso me motivaba a continuar, aunque a mamá no le gustaba la idea.

—Niña, si en Chile no te llamas Neruda, Gabriel García Márquez o Cervantes, no tienes porvenir. Mejor búscate un marido que valga la pena.

Por mi parte yo pensaba que si a lo que decía mi madre le sumabas el ser mujer, las posibilidades de ser aceptada como escritora, en la escala de uno a diez, eran de menos cinco.

—En Chile todos quieren ser escritores —continuaba mamá—, mejor busque algo más práctico.

—Te refieres a un marido rico.

—¿Por qué no?

Lo de práctico tenía sentido, era muy difícil ganarse la vida como escritora, especialmente si no pertenecías al grupo de intelectuales que se consideraba con derecho de autorizar o no a quién se le puede llamar escritor. Según ellos, Gabriela Mistral había ganado el Premio Nobel de Literatura por chiripa, y les tomó seis años darse cuenta de que si no le daban el Premio Nacional el asunto rayaba en lo absurdo. El día que descubrí que Gabriela no era solo la mujer que lloraba por los piecitos azulosos de frío de los niños pobres, sino la mujer apasionada que erizaba los pelos de los brazos —“Yo te enseñé a besar: los besos fríos / son de impasible corazón de roca, / yo te enseñé a besar con

Personally, I thought that if you added being female to what my mother said, the chances of being accepted as a writer—on a scale of one to ten—was negative five.

"In Chile, everyone wants to be a writer," Mama continued. "Find something more practical."

"You mean find a rich husband."

"Why not?"

It made sense to do something practical. It was hard to earn a living as a writer, especially if you weren't part of the intellectual elite that felt entitled to say who could and couldn't call themselves a writer. According to them, it was a fluke that Gabriela Mistral won the Nobel Prize in Literature. It took six years before they realized it would be absolutely absurd not to grant her the National Prize for Literature. The day I discovered that Gabriela was not only a woman who cried over a child's tiny feet, blue, blue with cold, but a woman of such passion it made the hair on your arms stand on end ("I taught you how to kiss: cold kisses / from an indifferent heart of stone, / I taught you to kiss with my kisses / invented by me, for your mouth"), that was the day I decided the Ministry of Education curriculum had cheated us most foully.

Still, I kept writing. I was already up to ten volumes of my diary, which I locked and kept under my bed to keep Mama from learning certain things that would have unnerved her.

It was through literature that I got to know Andrés better. He loved Federico García Lorca and, since I had never read the Spaniard before, I borrowed a few of his plays and books of poetry from the library. What a discovery! His work excited me so—I couldn't believe the library didn't ban his books. The absolute best was his play, *Yerma*. When I read that, a liquid warmth tickled between my legs, and as it spread up my spine, the actress in me came out: "I know girls who've trembled and wept before they climbed into bed with their husbands. Did I cry the first time I slept with you? Didn't I sing as I turned back the fine linen? Didn't I say: 'What a scent of apples these sheets hold?'"

I couldn't very well act this out at Susana's house, much less play with myself in front of Andrés, so I chose a poem that, to be honest, I didn't entirely understand.

besos míos / inventados por mí, para tu boca”—, decidí que el currículo del Ministerio de Educación nos había engañado suciamente.

Igual, yo seguía escribiendo. Llegué a diez volúmenes en mi diario de vida, que mantenía escondido con llave debajo de la cama para que mamá no se enterase de algunos detalles que la pondrían nerviosa.

La literatura es lo que me permitió conocer mejor a Andrés; él era un fanático de Federico García Lorca y, como yo no lo había leído, saqué de la biblioteca algunas de sus obras de teatro y poemas. ¡Qué descubrimiento! Su lectura me provocaba tal efecto que me sorprendió que la bibliotecaria no hubiera bloqueado los libros al salir. Sin lugar a dudas, lo mejor fue la obra de teatro, *Yerma*. Cuando leía, un líquido calentito entre las piernas me empezaba a cosquillar y, mientras subía por el coxis, no encontré nada mejor que dárme las de actriz: “Yo conozco muchachas que han temblado y lloraron antes de entrar en la cama con sus maridos. ¿Lloré yo la primera vez que me acosté contigo? ¿No cantaba al levantar los embozos de Holanda? ¿Y no te dije: ‘¿Cómo huelen a manzana estas ropas!’?”

Como no podía hacer una interpretación teatral en la casa de Susana, ni mucho menos empezar a toquetearme frente a Andrés, terminé eligiendo un poema que, para ser sincera, no comprendí bien. Con Susana planeamos un ataque de diarrea para que ella corriera al baño mientras yo leía el poema a su hermano.

Cuando mi amiga empezó a fingir los retorcijones de guata, mientras ella corría al inodoro yo saqué el libro que llevaba en el bolsón escolar y en un tono casual pregunté:

—¿Te gusta Federico García Lorca?

—Me encanta —respondió con cara curiosa.

—Entonces escucha:

Aquel rubio de Albacete / vino, madre, y me miró. / ¡No lo puedo mirar yo! /  
Aquel rubio de los trigos, / hijo de la verde aurora, / alto, solo y sin amigos, / pisó  
mi calle a deshora. / La noche se tiñe y dora / de un delicado fulgor. / ¡No lo puedo  
mirar yo! / Aquel lindo de cintura / sentí galán sin...

—Lees muy bien, Julia —dijo, interrumpiéndome en un tono nervioso.

Sin comprender por qué no me había dejado terminar, respondí:

—Ahora es tu turno.

Susana and I planned it all out: she would be struck by a sudden case of diarrhea and run to the bathroom, while I recited the poem to her brother.

When my friend feigned stomach cramps and raced out of the room, I pulled the book out of my school bag and casually asked:

"Do you like Lorca?"

"I love him," Andrés said, a questioning look on his face.

"Listen to this:

"That blond young man from Albacete / came, mother, and looked at me. / Oh, but I cannot look at him! / That wheat blond, / son of the green aurora, / tall, alone, and friendless, / walked past at the wrong time. / Night stained gold, / by a delicate glow. / Oh, but I cannot look at him! / That handsome waist / appeared heroic and yet—"

"You read well, Julia," he interrupted, sounding nervous.

Unsure why he had cut me off, I said:

"Your turn."

He looked at me, unsure how to justify being so rude if he had liked my recitation, then carried on and recited by heart:

"... 'planted his yellow jasmine / in my dark night, / such his love for me and mine for him / that he stole my eyes. / Oh, but I cannot look at him! / That young man from La Mancha / came, mother, and looked at me. / Oh, but I cannot look at him!'"

Though I didn't understand it at the time, I could sense his desperation and wished I knew what tormented him.

Susana came back in, and with a single glance I told her to leave again.

"Oh! Another cramp. Sorry. Back to the bathroom."

"Let's wrap things up for today since you're sick."

"No, no. Carry on with Julia. She's fine."

"No, that's enough for tonight. See you next week before the exam."

I left and the uncertainty plagued me for years. I think that may have been the first sign of the real Andrés: not the young man who hid behind his engineering studies, but the lover of art and poetry who held tight to his secrets. What's worse, I also realized my love for him had no future. It didn't matter how much I dolled

Me miró dudoso, sin saber cómo justificar la interrupción, especialmente si pensaba que yo leía bien. Luego continuó de memoria:

... sembró por mi noche oscura / su amarillo jazminero / tanto me quiere y le quiero / que mis ojos se llevó. / ¡No lo puedo mirar yo! / Aquel joven de La Mancha / vino, madre, y me miró. / ¡No lo puedo mirar yo!

En ese momento no supe comprenderlo, pero me pareció percibir desesperación y quise descubrir qué lo atormentaba.

Susana entró a la habitación y con una sola mirada le di a entender que debía volver a salir.

—¡Ay!, me vino el retorcijón otra vez, lo siento, Andrés, debo volver al baño.

—Si sigues enferma creo que es mejor dar la clase por terminada.

—No, no, puedes continuar con Julia, ella se siente bien.

—Mejor terminemos, chicas. Nos vemos la próxima semana antes del examen.

Partí arrastrando la duda que me persiguió por muchos años. Creo que fue entonces cuando tuve el primer indicio de quién era el verdadero Andrés: no el hombre que se escondía detrás de sus estudios de Ingeniería, sino el amante de la poesía y del arte que no deseaba compartir secretos. Lo peor es que también me di cuenta de que mi enamoramiento no tenía futuro, pues por más que yo me acicalara en cada uno de nuestros encuentros, él ni siquiera me miraba el escote con un poquito de lujuria.

—Nos ve como cabras chicas —reía Susana.

myself up before each tutoring session, not once did he even glance at my neckline with the slightest whisper of desire.

“He looks at us like we’re still just kids,” Susana laughed.



## liebes gedicht

2

rochen, umarm mich. atme weiter, rochen.  
dein brennen, dein feuern zieht mir striche

über die brust, ah, was knarzt das. warzt sich fest  
als methode. geb mich deinen radikalen, deinen

radien hin. pi. schmiege mich in deinen umhang,  
rochen, bis wir schlurfen über boden, in samt, wir schlürfen.

wie gern wir schlürfen. weichen hieben aus, die  
flächen stoßen. also: wellen gleich: unberührten rissen

in welchem boden, an dem dein schatten sein nest  
platziert. oder mir. richte die methode neu, richte dich auf.

letztlich fällt gesprächsführung unter „physisches dunkel“, nein,  
unter „psychischer funkel“. ich schwebe, oje. pi lacht nie.

# dear poem

2

stingray, embrace me. breathe on, stingray.  
your burning, your firing draws streaks

across my chest, ah, how it creaks. bridles itself tight, cleaves  
as method. i surrender to your radicals, your

radii. pi. i nuzzle into your cape,  
stingray, 'til we shuffle across ground, velvety scuffle.

how gladly we scuffle, evade punches that  
thump surfaces. so: akin to waves: untouched cracks

in withered ground, on which your shadow positions  
its nest. or for me. straighten the method anew, straighten yourself

up. ultimately leading a conversation falls under "physical dark," no,  
under "psychic spark." i'm floating, oh my. pi never lies.

## Tensile

If he can throw it, you can take it.

Spatula clatter on Formica. Plate slivers like confetti. Like when you're at a party and the lights flick on and shout and your eyes can't catch up to the bright clamor and it can take a minute—*Can I have just a minute?*—to recognize the walls the floor the coffee stain in the shape of your eternal savior's face.

You can take a slap, starfish red, red as his boot treads clogged with Virginia clay. You can sweep and bandage and dump the evidence in the bin and when he asks the next day you can smile and say *all boxed up* and he'll give you a kiss.

The ground tips and troughs in flashes. Green air spins electric. Vibrates over the stagger and hum of your stolid white fridge. You know all about last legs. You know how to measure the tension in a man's face to the precise pound per square inch, how to predict weather with a single glance and you might as well swipe that coffee stain clean. Might as well shut your ears.

You don't need anyone to tell you your fortune.

## from *How to Dress a Fish*

### CARLISLE INDIAN INDUSTRIAL SCHOOL DESCRIPTIVE AND HISTORICAL RECORD OF STUDENT

**Degree of Indian Blood:** Full

Well developed.

Normal.

Normal.

Normal.

**Father.** Dead. *Yes.* Traumatized.

**Mother.** Dead. *Yes.* Heart Trouble. (*bad heart.*)

**Brother.** Dead. *I.* Whooping Cough.

**Sister.** Dead. *I.* ?

(Aunt.)

*Titiani.*

Unga,

Alaska.

**Living.** ? **Condition of Health.** ?

There wasn't an aunt.

There wasn't an aunt  
until five years later. *March 16, 1907.*

(At which point)

*Michael Chabitnoy.*

Tribe, *Alaskan*. Tribe, *Aleut*. Agency, *Baptist Orphanage, Wood Island*.  
(otherwise listed *Michael Shepednoy*. Nation, *Aleut*.)

was readmitted.

*Michael Shepednoy*. Nation, *Aleut*.

returned to school without permission. *June 21, 1905.*

**Conduct.** *very good.*

*April 10, 1909.*


Student. *Michael Chabitnoy*. Nation, *Aleut*.  
went on an outing and did not return.



Boy, bear, bird? Shark? Fox? I can see something wild – Michael – a body  
poised to run. The only natural thing – is defiant  
forward or back? – under scrutiny. *What's behind your back? What was in you(r)*  
*hands?* feathers, fur or teeth? – how soft the deer mouth, low  
the ground wherein a grave meets the second born

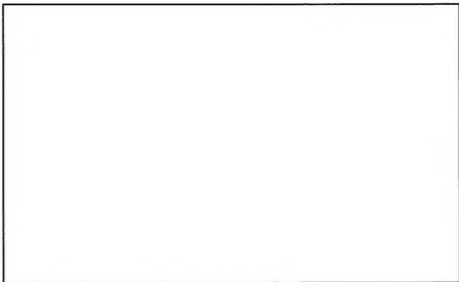
*how did we come here*  
*Michael*  
*where (do) we go?*

Did your mouth grow soft with age? Could you still chew the *kiimak* –  
the little bones – Can you hear them breaking down – *You can't spit a fish*  
*in the water and expect it still*

*to swim –* 

**OBSERVE THE INDIAN AS SUBJECT.**

*Another described the legacy as a blank space. A space that unlike a slate can not be written. A moth-eaten hole.*




*Native scholars<sup>1</sup> call it a soul wound, but my book isn't clear if these are Native American men (and women) who have become scholars, or white men with pipes and elbow patches who study Natives from arm chairs. I used to adore them, the stories they'd tell. Did you ever feel such wind again, or did it move right through you? Was your coat already full of holes before you took your first step east?*

---

<sup>1</sup> a wound is a wound is a mouth is a wound.

*I am afraid to put my face under  
water afraid of filling these lungs  
until the strain on my line  
pulls me under*

 *mouth open*



It was winter and I was sweating  
The heat uncomfortable expecting snow  
I get cold so easy my body forgets  
I thought of you yesterday again in the wind  
Going nowhere beside my self  
What was the wind on Wood Island like?  
Could you walk the other way  
Umnak or Unalaska bound  
Did it ever blow you right  
Where [did] the world begin(s)

*Tell me Michael where the world ends –  
did you ever feel such wind again?*

*April 10, 1909.*  
Student. *Michael Chabitnoy.*  
went on an outing and did not return.





## Paper

*Cara Blue Adams*

Paper is in short supply. It is used for wrapping, for covering, for protection, in place of cloth and plastic and wood. It is what the world is made of. The girl's parents wear green garments made of rough, felt-like paper. The paper from which their garments are made resembles egg carton.

The girl has gotten a C on an assignment. She brings home the paper, with the red letter grease-penciled in the center, slick and shiny. Her punishment has to do with paper, but she doesn't understand the nature of the punishment. First she is given some paper, and then her parents yell at her for how she uses it. There is confusion. She doesn't understand the rules. Each day, she is given a different type of paper, and less. Finally, her parents give her a huge paper towel, as big as a blanket. She spreads it on the dirt, sits and cries, slowly ripping pieces from the edge to wipe her eyes. Her grief makes her eat the paper, though her grief is only for the paper's demise. She knows if she could stop being sad, she could fold the paper neatly and keep it with her always, but she can't. When the

paper is gone, that will be all.

In daylight, a sleeper train pulls up. She knows there are men inside who will disembark to spend the night—where, she doesn't know—but she never sees them. The train's windows are dusty and darkened, like a spotted antique mirror. No, darker, she decides. She can't see herself in the windows, and she can't see through. Perhaps they are not even glass.

She walks along the train tracks, veers onto a wooded path. The sky is overcast. It is autumn and the trees have dropped their leaves, which clot the ground. The clumped leaves are sticky and wet. They radiate the peculiar yellow of a banana slug. She gets farther and farther from any landmark she can identify. She passes a river, thinks the water opens into a cove ringed by a private beach, but she peers over the path's edge and can see nothing through the trees. Just the same thin trickle of water, ribboning away from her. The land unwinds at the wrong speed, like a DVD on fast-forward. The passage is smooth, but disorienting. She misses whole parts without knowing. She can't tell what's stitched together and what's whole.

Then, night has fallen. She has come back to the sleeper train. She is all alone. On the train, a single lit window glows, private and foreboding. The tracks are dark. She will never know who is on that train.

## Prognosis at Midnight

I listen to the moon but it doesn't say much about my life.

Quiet night is for my cockatoo. He keeps chattering until my neighbor comes over to complain. Then I read a local newspaper: no murder, no robbery, one grandmother fell down the stairs and broke her hip. I lick my inky fingers and order my imaginary chauffeur to get ready—I'll visit her and comfort her. I'd say, I read about you, I'm terribly sorry, this is my cockatoo, he's twelve and loves carrots.

We'd share her hospital dinner and be happy.

Other sick people gather around us, admiring my cockatoo, who looks proud in his cage, unfurling his light-pink wings like stage curtains, and I'm his assistant. Grandma, worried that I've become silent, tells me how tired I look.

"I had a series of nightmares," I say, "my boss returned from the grave and fired me, bats attacked me like slow bullets but bigger, I was bleeding." She says: "When I'm alone,

I paint eyes on a pear and whisper, I'm watching over you."

That makes her stronger. Back home, my body thin and healthy, cooling my feet on a crystal ball like a psychic out of business, I look out the window: I don't know which leaves will fall first or why. There aren't many trees left. Not much is left of this little town.

## The Noise of Time is Not Sad

Something I'll call *rev.*  
A chirp, natural  
or mechanical:  
not clear. The flush  
of cars that we  
only hear. Wattage.  
And that noise (rare)  
when the weather slips  
heavy and bright  
into lilac and  
out. To attend  
to the world. To be  
"needed by things."  
On the phone lately  
how you get me  
off by talking  
about past men—  
like echo, a sort  
of reflection, some  
familiar space we  
awaken like day  
locked in its forgetful  
pivot releases  
the queer shapes each shape  
can make: the broken  
chair, open book, cup's  
rim, empty shirt. I'm  
all ears: smear, rustle,  
kiss, fizz. Those sounds

were yesterday.  
So far today: a mess  
of wind. Hinges.

## Vormen van openbreken

Voordat het ontpoppen zou plaatsvinden, wees je mij op de onzijdigheid van een rups die pas als vlinder een mannelijk of vrouwelijk kleurenpatroon kreeg met een bedenktijd van hoogstens tien maanden, maakte je van je armen een cocon en ik ertussen, twee vormen van openbreken fluisterde je liet daarbij je kin op mijn hoofd rusten, na een paar minuten leek er een kuiltje in mijn schedel te komen waar een balletje in stilgelegd kon worden, het in een plastic golfpinnetje veranderde en de jouwe het schot dat mijn gaten op zou vullen hoe moeilijk de richting en het schatten ook zouden worden. Dat mijn lippen vervellen is een teken, hoeveel huid moet de mens in de loop der jaren kwijt raken om te kunnen zeggen dat dit een gaver versie is dan de vorige? Je armen knellen en je hart bonkt tegen mijn rug, twee tellen tussen iedere klopping, als ik het met bliksem en donder moet vergelijken ben je nu dichterbij dan ooit maar niets in mij weet hoe om te gaan met het kraken in mijn ruggengraat als inslag in een boom.

We zijn veel van elkaar maar te weinig om geliefde te zeggen hoe naakt we soms ook zijn en naar plaatsen wijzen waar onderhuids een verandering is begonnen, het lichaam aan elkaar tonen als een kijkdoos, we hebben methodes ontwikkeld om hormonen te bestrijden door alles wat in beweging komt stil te zetten zoals we een keer een verpopte rups openkrabden, steeds opnieuw en hij onze hele jeugd een larve was gebleven, hoe we hem op een regenachtige dag waarvan we later konden zeggen dat we de regen erbij bedacht hadden voor het dramatische effect, in een luciferdoosje schoven, beloofden dat we anders zouden worden.

## Ways of Emerging

Before the reveal could happen, you pointed out to me the neutrality of a caterpillar that only as a butterfly receives its male or female color palette and with it a reflection period of ten months at most, you made of your arms a cocoon and I crept inside, two ways of emerging you whispered letting your chin rest upon my head, after a few minutes a little hollow appeared in my skull inside of which a tiny ball could be stopped. This became a plastic golf tee and yours was the stroke that could fill up my holes however difficult the orientation and calculation might become. My peeling lips are a sign; how much skin must a person lose through the years in order to say that this is a more complete version than those that precede it? Your arms tighten and your heart bangs against my back, two counts between each beat, if I must compare it with lightning and thunder you are now closer than ever but nothing in me knows how to handle the cracking that enters my spine like lightning through a tree. We mean much to each other but too little to say lovers however naked we sometimes are, pointing at places where secretly, a change has begun, revealing our bodies to each other like shoebox dioramas, we have developed methods of combatting hormones by halting everything that begins to move the way that we once scratched open a pupating caterpillar, again and again and he remained a larva for the entirety of our youth, how we, on a rainy day (of which we would later say we had made up for dramatic effect) bundled him into a matchbox, vowed that we would be different.

## Epistle from the Hospital for Text Messaging

I have made of myself a rabbit.  
I can no longer speak. Language

is only the *click click click* of my heart  
ticking faster now.

I stepped out of my dress.  
I autofilled myself. I slipped

the grey skins over my head.  
I know you love to watch the animal

of me, my fast-pounding brain.  
How I enter the garden

to pluck berries with my teeth,  
then the (...) (...) (...) of my leaving.

I know you love to watch the end  
of me. I vanish beyond the field

whose borders I built  
with your thousand barbed unsaids.

I vanish into the sky.  
I vanish into the moon,

this lemon slice of dead volcano.  
Here I wait, my fingerless ears

poised as satellites, projecting my rabbit-  
shaped silence on space's blank walls.

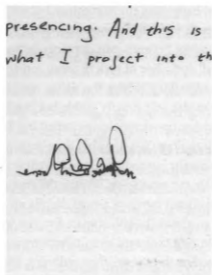
Something I don't understand about myself  
makes people want to hurt me.

## Slowly We Have the Feeling #9

I'd added a kind of writing to drawing that now needed to be thought about, that called for an additional layer of writing because at present you had this new kind of writing sitting adjacent to drawing and threads were extended out of each—the drawing and the writing—sort of blowing in a slight breeze, showing all their potential for connection yet not being connected: I was to connect them through thinking and making gestures, where on an occasion I could talk about the new letters I added to the English language, though they were letters added not for the purpose of being pronounced or of supplying new objects to our libraries but were imagined to supply holes, ladders, antechambers to the words that were already there. But when you shaped these new letters and made a block of text out of them—these letters in combination with some semblance of customary lettering (making a legible e, a g; many words containing ds and ps were prominent)—when you mixed these new letters with the old familiar ones somehow you made a drawing. I have said this already, many times, over and over again, I have said, “I am doing a kind of writing that keeps ending in drawings,” and lowered my voice and scratched my head in a pantomime of perplexedness: the page was changing before my eyes; I was not arriving where I was going. It was like waking up in another country that does everything opposite from your home country, everything upside down, inverted: the things you saw were the same size, took up the same space, but they looked and operated precisely opposite of how you'd expect. I woke up in a paragraph that was a drawing, and sometimes the drawing was made with pen and sometimes pencil. But, I had already written about this, and still wasn't done trying to say what I saw, because it was more than the fact that I was doing a kind of writing that was also drawing, which was something I still found remarkable, worth twenty books, books that needed only to say there was drawing within writing; it was more than this that I needed to say. After writing about the perplexedness of these acts of making narrative with my hand, with energy from my pencil, I then wanted to talk about the shapes themselves. They made everything in me go silent, in that way you feel walking into a cool cavernous space, a cathedral, a palace, some

structure whose walls are marble, whose windows are at the height of giants; and the ones that made me most quiet were the slight ones I'd drawn in my notebooks. The shapes made everything go silent, but also remained on the page, and shone there. They were small and often looked like notes, and were things I did in the middle of something else, like sitting in a lecture or riding a train. I'd open my notebook and not want to describe what I was seeing, what the landscape looked like, what the speaker was saying, yet would want to make a gesture among the notes I'd written prior to that moment; those notes were essential to the marks I subsequently made, they led to the marks, even though in themselves they said things like, "I want to wander through your letters" and "I see the grid approaching," and this was not particularly what I wanted to engage at that moment, but was the breath before engagement, a place to sit. You wrote into the space of the notebook because you were in time, but the time dictated your silence, your attention, that you remain seated. You opened the book to be in space, to deposit your thinking somewhere, so you opened the book, and it was a book where every day you went to say something about living: what it feels like to live, to write, to see. I'd wake and write in this book and often would leave a space on the page, not because I had the foresight that later I would come back and put something else there, but left the space because I had finished writing for that day. I had said what I wanted to say about what I was seeing or eating or how I wanted to love or be a better love and how I wanted to understand what it meant to go on writing when I had written so much. I wrote as much as I could and then was done and often the second half of the page would be blank or a third of it, and I'd close the book, get up, do something. But then there would be a reading or a lecture and I'd take the book with me, I knew I might want to say something about where I was or who I saw, and I did do this type of recording, but then there were other moments where I didn't feel the need to document my life but felt the need to write but not to write reflectively or confessionally, rather to write in some kind of present unfolding outside of language. I didn't want to write fiction in that moment but I wanted to flow like fiction often does. And I wanted to shape letters, but not words that you could read, words that would make you forget the page, that would remove me from time. So, these letters became my drawing, which I'd already been doing outside the book on single sheets of paper, "paper for pens" the sheets were called, and were smooth and mostly 9x12 in size. I

had been making larger, looser versions of these letters and putting them together in a kind of denseness, an aliveness, that looked like prose but wasn't prose. I called them prose architectures because they were themselves but also something else that didn't have a name but suggested a city or many cities sitting on top of one another. I drew and drew these city-letters and put numbers to them, but I have said this already, too many times now—I numbered the drawings sequentially I kept saying—I drew and something was happening to my mind and to my ideas about how narrative formed. Narrative came out of the hand and was a loop and then a short flat line then a longer line moving vertically away then over and down but not returning to that first plane, now below itself, spiraling, releasing air, building up darkness (ink gathers, smears) and goes up and moves out on a plane in a line, a short burst, then a mark that diagonally connects to the line above, something I'd made a second ago or days ago, waiting to become something, a written body, a wall, and narrative plunged and unraveled and grew tight all over this sheet of paper, white, made of cotton, but thicker than the paper I used for writing, special in a way prose hadn't been special when I was typing. The line moved through something I'd made a second ago and the one got absorbed into the other; you were looking at them, they were as if one body, all the up and through suspended, and now a shape, a picture of energy. But, in the notebook the picture was small and often sat next to other pictures composed of actual words you could read that talked about "presencing" or Mauricio's concert: the one sat next to the other, and this was when I saw the threads emerge. The pictures sat on top of one another, like layers of epidermis, but where each layer was transparent so shone together, and this wasn't really like an echo in the body—they weren't the same kind of skin—rather if you started at the top and looked down through that first layer, where you read "presencing" and read "what I project into" you'd see a devolving logic, an undressing, a going further in, so that the deeper you peered through the surface the less you were reading. Or perhaps reading had become something else, a lying-down among threads that were slowly reaching up toward the surface, moving through ancient structures—our letters, the space between them, bringing to your reading new lines, now entwined with the old. But, in the case of this one drawing, in which I was soon to attend Mauricio's concert, there were two pictures and one lay on top of the other:



In one was language: it could be read. Yet, in the other was also language, but a kind of language crumpled and stretched, becoming something else: it seemed to be written backwards, it seemed like rocks had been dropped on a series of letters; it seemed as if portals in the page now had an outline around them—you entered this space, stepped through it, into a brightly lit room with high ceilings, where the air appeared trapped in the light, a vaulted space, very open, very bright, full of rocking chairs, in which a person—S.—comes in, revolves slowly around the room, counts shadows: you looking at her but are as yet recognized (she thinks she's alone), and the day proceeding, the room filling with other bodies, some leaning over railings, gazing out windows. And, this was a way of drawing in the space of living, where you sat listening to someone speak, as your hand moved in some unfamiliar dictation, some rupture of linearity, writing into the legible. This was when I noticed the threads waving in ultra-thin lines above the picture, many threads from each picture extended upward, undulant, living, and it was not long after that that I wanted to write about the threads. They did not connect; they didn't bend toward one another but were this ongoing picture of aliveness: two

incredible conversations happening simultaneously, but with this space in between them, another blank space, one I hadn't noticed before, in which I found myself standing. You were standing between two drawings between two texts and two buildings between a wall and a line of rock between something saying something and something doing something, where the doing reaches into the saying, but doesn't connect so doesn't become exactly visible but crackles I've said too many times, burns the page without markings, leaves something in me about writing, but a writing you only want to draw. You draw but drawing is so astonishing that you interrupt the drawing to write but soon begin to interrupt the writing to return to drawing and doing it all in the same space, because the gesture changes the location even though your hand doesn't move, or moves slightly up in a loop grabbing the lines above it, opening an already inscribed space for your wondering, writing over what is already there, writing backward over it, drawing a line through, making a square then a square within the square, then pulling a line from that conflation and going up over up and out and up and turning inward, the point going out and back and under then up straight to suggest the vertical and over right to suggest the plane and then down diagonal then down straight and shade and shade the space in between then write something but talk to the buildings you have made, write what the buildings say to the plane. What the buildings would say to the plane had everything to do with what the legible said to the illegible as those two texts sat in this unspeakable juxtaposition. I reached my hand in and stood in the space between them allowing lines to encircle me and cross me out as I asked again into the writing: what does it mean to draw what I am saying into the space beneath these thoughts about presencing and Mauricio's concert, which did occur and was amazing, was discordant and scored, and had percussion and strings, and a woman who played havoc inside the piano. So, a line extended from the concert to the page, was long, thin, penciled, and seemed to lift the notebook out of itself but invisibly and not in sync with the time in which bodies sat in an auditory of contemporary classical music. The notebook stood up and dissolved in the same moment of my listening and drawing and dissolved again later in my memory as I sat down to write about the funny feeling—the line extending out of the page—the beautiful girl next to me with her own notebook, not drawing, catching petals.

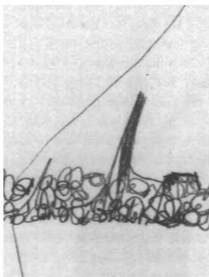
And this was another moment where I remembered the threads, the moment of the dissolving memory, where the drawing and the text above the drawing sunk into the page, and a new kind of line emerged from each, many lines, thin, pointing straight up then moving about in some kind of wind, never losing their verticality, just wavering and pointing out of the book, but the book itself had long since flipped the event of drawing and writing, had retreated into time, pages had been flipped, months had passed, and turning back to the page was something else like detection, or math. You went back to put the pieces together, to find another way of saying: I am drawing, I have drawn, to connect that with presencing, with music (sound gathering in a vaulted space, the woman next to you bending forward, then turning to speak: when the concert finishes where are you? Will you get the train home? The next movement begins before you have a chance to answer.) But, all the while the legible was talking to the illegible or was coming out of it or making way for it in this adjacency of language and mark-making, where the one becomes the other between bodies humming and sound swirling and breaking across the room. I drew a line next to a word. First I wrote a series of words that pointed to some thought about living, some idea about wanting to be more or to see more while living, and I wrote until I was done with that pointing, not exhausted with it but satisfied with the gesture: I wrote, I wanted to be present, I wanted to project this presence into the space of work and said "Mauricio's concert" to myself, perhaps wrote it somewhere off screen, outside the line of reading but not yet in the line of drawing, and closed the note with a period. I imagine I walked calmly from the book, or closed the book and crossed my legs or crossed my ankles depending on what the other legs around me were doing, and probably thought no further about being present or Mauricio, and later I returned to the notebook and felt the energy of that page and drew instead of wrote into the blankness. I wrote something but it was a drawing, and this was when the threads emerged and the percussionist, surrounded by unconventional instruments, tapped a little bit on his pot.

## Slowly We Have the Feeling #10

I could be upended utterly by a line drawn across a surface, and all of a sudden it had become essential to know why: why was something so slight also stirring, and how did it appear that a seam had been opened along a small surface of a mountain whereby the mountain was absent but its immense presence implied, and it was a mountain all your own, that no one saw but you and no one else needed, but again so enormous in the pressure and gravity it brought down upon the page that, though, this was a mountain that was invisible and non-existent to observers, outside of you seeing it yourself, it affected the geography not only of what you placed on the page but also of the terrain from which the emergent thoughts originated. It struck me suddenly that these lines were specious to a kind of math that used moving lines to measure some phenomenon of time or space, some simultaneity that was so inside our actions, our walking across a room, so deeply embedded in the time in which everything has happened (things having happened so long ago still occurring in some corner of the room) that we've forgotten to study it or give it a name or draw a connection between it and writing, the language of the world, the language of your doing what you do (wanting to walk in the forest with her, wanting to see the moss of Norway). But, it wasn't just the suggestion of an ancient math that brought me out of reading the novel I'd chosen for that day; it was also that you could draw a line across a surface, a flat, unimportant surface (the front of a discarded folder) and perhaps carry that line up four inches along the plane then have it loop back over itself; you could let loose another line, pull it out of this reading space (the book lay in proximity) and draw it over the same space but just slightly off, like a murmur of the first shape: you loop and build and return, drawing with a pencil, in the silence of some morning (except for the call of a raven: it's early, you're nestled in the woods), and in this drawing, these faint lines retrieved from a putting aside of reading, something immense was felt. The surface on which I was drawing made everything marginal; the drawing was indistinguishable from other accidental markings of a pencil made on some other occasion; you could hide many drawings here, because the drawings were slight

and didn't call attention to themselves; they wanted silence, to slip in the space between objects, to move objects around in their definitions by bisecting space; they wanted to turn space into math, a way of seeing composition, but not so much with the intention of solving the problems of space, which were numerous, it was more to activate the problems, so that you couldn't read a page of prose or look at a sign or even go to write your name, without feeling a certain electricity everywhere. That was why the drawings were sometimes hidden and sometimes you felt the immensity of the thing the drawings signaled (a mountain, in my case) without ever seeing that thing in the drawn space. When drawings were hidden, the surface on which the drawings were made were hidden as well, and this was something sneaky that happened when you were drinking coffee. I was drinking coffee and my brain was changing, though I couldn't see what mechanics were operating; the top of my brain was lifting away from my mid-brain and a walk opened up between them; you could now be hiking in a forest, running from one path to another and seeing all the rocks there were, jumping over roots, bypassing horse dung, and this was because some light had gone on in the world of your thinking, lifting and making space for you, and the liquid in the cup was the catalyst, though the cup was never to appear in the forest. But, you walked in the forest all day and even ran between junctions that connected the lake to the valley of firs or connected the cemetery to the land trust, and these were just signs that you began to memorize as the hours passed because everything else you saw was moss, or trees, or rocks; I thought about rocks as I climbed a scree in my running and counted the number of breaths in my brain; they were sentences breathed instead of spoken because this was the forest you were in, and a woman ran slightly behind you so that she could stop and look at mushrooms at will, but I knew when the forest grew silent it was because she had stopped: the sun was brighter, everything rose toward the sky, everything had fingers that didn't touch you but didn't avoid you either; the breath was in the place, in placing your foot in the scree, and imagining something missing—the wall on which all of this was happening in the middle fork of the brain, the music that was your memory, and you walked up and around and up and down and around and out into a clearing then down and down and around and up and slipping in the scree then up and over,

across, across with her singing, then down and down and down mud and dung and around, stepping over, through, and stopping (pulling the socks up) then up, fast as you could, out over the brightest sun in the forest (again the valley of firs, second day coming) then around and down and flat for a long time then up and out, this breath, the sentence finally falling apart. And there it was: the mountain.



But, not a mountain for climbing—I was on the paper now—rather something to not see and sit up all night waiting for: someone said the clouds would clear and you'd see the mountain in the distance, so you waited and sat through the dark, welcoming, at last, the gray coming, and when there was enough light to see beyond the trees and shrubs and moss of the forest, out past the water, along the ridge of the forgotten page—well, there should have been a mountain. Yet, had there been one you wouldn't have been sitting there waiting for it; you wouldn't have drawn that faint, anonymous line that looped and doubled beside itself. The mountain rose over the page, in an alternative mode of being, invisibly a memory of some engagement of breath: you drawing a line to move deeper in time, years

ago or yesterday drawing this line, but that moment looking back over what you had done, running a loop that seemed to expand the longer you were on it, and the mountain occurred as an idea of space, out of ear shot, out of any line of sight, even with rain falling in the clearing, the place of a new forest, a not-yet forest but a space held for some adjacent growing (the forest wouldn't be planted here, but would hold bodies that had been removed and would serve as a break for runners: you stop; you want to know what has happened to the forest). And, there were signs throughout the forest that reminded me of a hand moving against the sky, where, if you are quiet, you feel a mountain there, but the hand that moves only wants to make a thin line that bisects the surface of the world, so that a kind of aliveness escapes, an aliveness that defines and gives heat to the day: the line was a bringing-down of silence and an opening. You climbed in with your looking, and ran and walked all day, as the light closed in. The line vibrated against the page, but nothing stirred and I did not stir, yet this forest grew in my mind. I drew the line and all went quiet and became vast, enveloping the body sitting at the table, the body in a t-shirt, boxer shorts, leg warmers, the church bells going off at noon, clanging nine times, again at 6; the hand searching for a way to see or to build in silence, without matter; so a line was drawn and space exploded, but not in any way you could see, and settled all over you, and it was then, it was in this moss-covered place, that something seemed to brush against you, an idea connected to an infinity of ideas, which, perhaps in that moment, felt merely like a bit of heat against if not your actual face then the face of your thinking. Somewhere in that moment of your face cracking and the page cracked, a drawing emerged that was a map of the running you'd done: it was the scree and the valley, the cemetery, the dump; it was Craig's Head; it was that gathering of firs. Your face cracked and you drew a line on a folder, then put it away for a day or days, coming back to it only when it was a memory, some time having passed, some bridge between acts, and it was in this return that the line glowed and an idea settled in you about the mountain. I looked at the line and felt the past stir in my body; it was an indication of another day spent on an island off another state and the running I'd done on that island, yet the line had been drawn weeks before I'd traveled there so was made before anything in the forest had ever happened, yet you looked at it and it reminded

you of the mountain calling out from behind the page, and though the mountain did not border the forest was not a part of the forest was not an idea of the forest the mountain emerged because of what you learned in the forest: you could be running up a scree and the person running slightly behind you could stop to look at mushrooms and this would make the world go silent, for a long moment, even your slipping could not be heard, and you'd look back just to make sure you were still where you were (you hadn't been transported through your thinking), just to make sure the other's body was there (crouching, with her mouth too near the fungus) and all of this fell into place, and above this scene a slight parting of the air, something to do with the trees, the cover of trees, the dim light of the forest, the angles of aliveness. I had already made this drawing but it seemed to be underneath the page rather than on top of it.



## When the Tide of Misfortune Hits, Even Jelly Will Break Your Teeth

*Porochista Khakpour*

Bad things were happening, he had started to think, more than usual. It had occurred to him that he was cursed for a long time at that point. In his first few decades on this planet so much had gone wrong. In his brain, it all ran like a list, all the many injuries that he had still not gotten past, that somehow seemed to inform his every move. *Papercut that turned into an infection. A very long flu. Death of a cat. Neighbor molesting you. The floods. Father losing job. Earthquake. Broken arm. Flu. Ear infection. Bronchitis. Droughts. Failing math class. Unrequited love. Allergies. Death of a dog. Mother's mental illness. Getting lost in the woods. Not getting into university. Parent's finances gone. Grandparents dying. Fight with brother. A summer spent entirely in a mysterious illness. The government collapsing. Extreme weight loss. Favorite cousin in jail. Girl you love hit by a car. Suicidal ideation. Being fired from first job. The cicadas. Being fined*

*for drunk driving. The worst job. Another girl leaves you. Heat wave. Father's affair. Mother's attempted suicide. Your siblings moving out. Loneliness. Depression. Poisoned crops. Pills not working. Insomnia. Mouse infestation. Getting evicted. Birds dying mysteriously. Unemployment. Weight gain. Father disappearing. Grandparent's death. Pre-diabetes. Ant infestation. One night of homelessness. The mugging. Getting a disease from a girl. Drug addiction. Another bad job. Panic disorder. Hurricane. Mother in mental hospital. You in rehab. Constipation or diarrhea only. New corrupt regime. Lack of drinkable water. Constant anxiety. Blood in urine. Bankruptcy. Roof collapsing. Roaches. A close friend's deceit. Too many diagnoses. Death of Mother. Record for coldest winter. Running over that fox. Wasp sting that results in hospital stay. Catatonia. Death of Father. More phobias. Failure. There was probably more that he had forgotten.*

*Failure seduces those most who have known it before, he read somewhere, maybe in a generic advice column.*

So, when he heard this "Spiritualist" was coming to town and her specialty was in getting the unfortunate back to fortune he gave it some thought. Usually he would never consider such a thing, but then again usually he was very much steeped in bad luck. He tended not to believe in such things, the wisdom of the stars and planets, the echoes of ancestors and past lives, the meddlings of dead souls. But there was nothing in his life that told him he should proceed as he had before. He could not recommend his own ways any longer. Something told him things were worse than usual or about to be at least but he couldn't pinpoint it either. And because the only not-unlucky thing that had happened of late was that he had a few extra hundred dollars in the bank—from selling a motorcycle he loved but knew would be the end of him, given how things went—he considered visiting "The Spiritualist."

She had no name it seemed but "The Spiritualist," which was a term he had not heard before. There was no photo, just a description of her services and the number to call, along with a simple graphic of a dove flying in a sky littered with flowers.

He called the number and a woman answered.

"May I speak to The Spiritualist?" His voice sounded off to himself, shaking as it was and somehow higher, like a child's.

The voice that spoke back was deep and rich. Every word was deliberate and firm. "Yes, this is she, The Spiritualist. What might I help you with?"

He paused. He didn't know what to say. "Well, I could use some help to get back on track. My life, you see. . ." He paused some more. How could he put it? "It's all been a mess."

"I understand," she said.

"You do?" he said, sounding a bit too excited for his own comfort.

"Yes, I do," she said. "It's part of my job. People rarely come to me when all is well, after all."

He thought about that. It seemed right. But perhaps sometimes they would want blessings before a good occasion, a wedding, a birth?

"Of course, sometimes they want blessings before a favorable ceremony or life event," she said, as if reading his mind, which he realized she probably could do.

"That's just what I was thinking!" Again, too excited.

"Yes," she said, but he couldn't tell if that was a *yes* to knowing he was thinking that. "Anyhow would you like an appointment? I will be in your town on Sunday."

"How do you know what my town is?" he asked, gasping.

"Your area code came up," she answered.

He appreciated her honesty. She could have pretended it was her clairvoyance.

"Yes, I would like one," he said, and he gave her his name and she gave him a time and the address and how much money he should bring.

"I only take cash," she said. "So bring cash."

"Of course," he said quickly.

"Okay, I will see you then. Please try to get a full night's sleep before then."

He wondered how she knew he was having sleep problems. Maybe that was why he felt things were worse than usual. "Yes, I will be sure to," he said, somewhat lying as he knew he could not count on it.

"Well, do your best." She was, naturally, not so convinced. "Goodbye!"

That night he did not sleep at all, he was so excited by the possibility of turning his life right again. He did not worry about not sleeping though because it meant he would be extra sleepy the next night, and that was the night before his appointment. So at least he could keep his word to The Spiritualist with a full night's sleep.



He had maybe expected a castle like a queen's or a strange cottage like a witch's or even a hut like a shaman's, but it was just the basement floor of an apartment building in the worst part of town. An orange cat came to the door when he arrived, hissing at him from the other side of the screen. The door was ajar and he suddenly heard that same strong, resolute voice call, "You may come in!"

He opened the door carefully so as not to let the cat out, and just stood there in the middle of an unfurnished living room with somewhat dirty brown carpet. He felt relieved that his own apartment was nicer than this, but then he reminded himself that The Spiritualist was just a visitor to his town. She had probably just rented this for her sessions. It was probably cheaper than a hotel room, or maybe it belonged to a friend or client.

In the corner he saw a small table with a jug of water and some cheap plastic cups. He considered having some water, but the water looked a bit murky to him. The whole place smelled old, dusty, not tended to.

"Please come to the back room!" her voice rang out again.

He followed the sound through a long dark hallway that led to a single room, with a door only slightly ajar. On the door was taped a single green feather. It looked like a parrot's feather.

"You may come in," the voice inside said, aware of his body.

He slowly opened the door, suddenly fearful of what he would find inside.

He walked in and the room was similarly unadorned and dark and musty. There was a single desk—like the cheap wood kind you'd find in an insurance office—and a generic black office desk chair and on it sat who he assumed had to be The Spiritualist. He could only assume at best because the voice did not match the being.

She was tiny. A child, it seemed. A very pale, thin, brittle child, in an austere black cotton dress. Her sole adornment was a purple velvet ribbon that tied her brown hair back. She had something in her hands she was playing with but it was unclear what. She looked at him with her giant gray eyes, the eyes of a cat, a wildcat perhaps. She could be no older than thirteen, he thought.

She nodded for him to take a seat. There was a black office desk chair, just like hers, across from her, on the other side of the desk. He sat.

"Hello," he said, wondering if he should shake her hand but she did not offer.

"Hello," she said back. Her thick, adult voice seemed so disorienting given her appearance.

"Well, you look . . ." He didn't know what to say. He did not want to start off with an insult. "You are much younger than you sound!"

She nodded. "Many say this," she said. "I am older than I look."

He nodded. "That's good," he said awkwardly.

"It's neither good nor bad," she said, still staring deep at him. "It just is."

He nodded.

"Did you find it easily?"

He nodded.

"Good," she said. "It's my first time in this space. It belongs to a client. It's very different from my own space. I live very far away and my space is much more . . ."

She gestured her hand in a few odd flourishes but did not complete the thought.

"It's nice enough," he said, lying a bit but perhaps only a bit because he had lived in much worse.

"Let's begin," she said. "You have cash?"

He nodded and began to remove his wallet.

"No, you can give it to me after," she said. "I'm not a prostitute. I don't need to see it upfront."

He smiled as if to laugh, but she looked very stern and serious.

He nodded apologetically.

"It's okay," she said. "Let's begin."

He closed his eyes for some reason.

"You can open or close your eyes," she said. "None of it matters. I just want you to tell me about your life, whatever you can."

He looked confused. Was this therapy? Shouldn't she already divine that? What could he say?

He went over this long list of misfortunes and thought to start there.

"Well," he cleared his throat. "This is how I tell myself: Papercut that turned into an infection. A very long flu. Death of a cat. Neighbor molesting you. The floods. Father losing job. Earthquake. Broken arm. Flu. Ear infection. Bronchitis. Droughts. Failing math class. Unrequited love. Allergies. Death of a dog. Mother's mental illness. Getting lost in the woods. Not getting into university. Parent's finances gone. Grandparents dying. Fight with brother. A summer spent entirely in a mysterious illness. The government collapsing. Extreme weight loss. Favorite cousin in jail. Girl you love hit by a car. Suicidal ideation. Being fired from first job. The cicadas. Being fined for drunk driving. The worst job. Another girl leaves you. Heat wave. Father's affair. Mother's attempted suicide. Your siblings moving out. Loneliness. Depression. Poisoned crops. Pills not working. Insomnia. Mouse infestation. Getting evicted. Birds dying mysteriously. Unemployment. Weight gain. Father disappearing. Grandparent's death. Pre-diabetes. Ant infestation. One night of homelessness. The mugging. Getting a disease from a girl. Drug addiction. Another bad job. Panic disorder. Hurricane. Mother in mental hospital. You in rehab. Constipation or diarrhea only. New corrupt regime. Lack of drinkable water. Constant anxiety. Blood in urine. Bankruptcy. Roof collapsing. Roaches. A close friend's deceit. Too many diagnoses. Death of Mother. Record for coldest winter. Running over that fox. Wasp sting that results in hospital stay. Catatonia. Death of Father. More phobias. Failure . . . and there is probably more, but I have forgotten."

Her eyes were closed, he noticed, and for a moment he worried she was asleep. She said nothing after he was done.

"That's all," he said to let her know definitively he was done speaking.

She nodded slowly, with closed eyes. "Many troubles," she said. She opened her eyes slowly. "Do you know the saying, when the tide of misfortune hits even jelly will break your teeth?"

He shook his head.

"They say it in the villages," she said. "It has a logic to it. Your life made me think of that."

He nodded, feeling embarrassed suddenly. It never felt good to go through that list, to unload it all, especially in front of a stranger and now a spiritualist of all people. He briefly considered telling her he had to go and leaving.

"Now wait," she suddenly said. "You have much ahead of you, though, you must know this. You are forty?"

He was not. "Thirty-six," he said. "Close, I guess."

She nodded. "You are from the capital originally?"

He shook his head. He was from the second largest city, a southern port.

She nodded. "Give me your hand."

He was a bit alarmed at this idea, extending this hand to this child-like figure, but she held her hand out and he took it.

Her hands were, as he guessed, very cold and thin. His were large, sweaty, and hot.

"You are low on money," she said, with closed eyes again. "I mean recently you got some money but in general money does not come easily to you."

"Yes."

"Do you play lottery?" she asked.

"No."

"You should," she said. "Play these number this week: 11, 57, 41, 9, 6, 14, 23."

He asked her to repeat it and wrote it down.

She opened her eyes.

"Let's end there," she said. "I would feel more comfortable taking your money knowing you had more. You can pay me next week. Same time, same place."

He felt strangely empty after the session—a bit ripped off, if he were to be honest. Lottery numbers? That was not what he had hoped for. But that week he went to a corner store and asked for a lottery ticket. He did not know what he was doing, but he "played" those numbers.

"They will announce the winners on the radio tomorrow night," the store owner said. "Good luck, I guess!"

He nodded and wondered if he had done it right, if it was the same national lottery, if he had written her numbers down correctly. And what if she was wrong? Should he go back to her? He decided he would not. It would just be some odd free session he got and he would never think of her again and he would never trust such silliness again. He had to try, though.

That night, he sat by the radio as they said they were announcing the numbers. He held his ear close to the speaker, even though the volume was very loud. He felt

very nervous, suddenly, like he was about to be very ill. He held the piece of paper with the numbers before him and he noticed his hands were shaking.

*Eleven*, came the first number from the announcer's mouth. The background music was giddy and outdated, comforting somehow, like the jingles of his adolescence before all had gone bad.

That was his first number, but of course he had many to go so he did not get too excited.

*Fifty-seven*, went the second number.

His stomach did a turn. The odds. He was no math person, but this did seem like something noteworthy.

*Forty-one*, went the third.

His heart was racing.

*Nine*, the fifth.

*Six*, the sixth.

He suddenly got up to his feet, as if he'd have to run if it was indeed right, but run to where he did not know. How could this be happening?

*Fourteen*, went the seventh. And the last number is . . .

There was a drumroll on top of the jolly music.

*Twenty-threeeeeeee!!!* the man shouted.

He heard himself scream, so loud and so long he worried the neighbors would call the police.

He was a winner.

He had never won anything in his life. He didn't even know what he had won, but he had won something and that was a lot already.

The Spiritualist, he decided like many before him, was actually real.



The thousands of dollars he won came to him in installments and made it easy for him to agree to a series of consultations with The Spiritualist. He did not know how long she'd be in town but it seemed indefinite now. One time he saw a vase with a single pink carnation in it on her desk and he thought she might be

decorating as she was now putting roots down here. Otherwise, she looked exactly the same, the same black dress, the same purple ribbon, the same green feather on her door, everything was the same.

When he told her he won she had just blinked at him, not surprised at all. She'd asked for the money for the last session and he had given it to her with a big smile. He had thanked her and again she had said nothing.

"We will not play the lottery again," she said. "Just so you know. Occasionally the winners want to prolong this."

He nodded. "Wait, are the winners always your clients?"

She nodded. "Always."

"Why don't you play yourself?" he wondered.

She had on a small smile and just shook her head. No comment.

This time she closed her eyes and remained this way for some time. He didn't dare say a word and eventually he closed his eyes too.

"You need to go to the restaurant closest to your house," she said. "A small place. There is a waitress named Mina who works in the back section. Sit there and meet her. Ask her out. Kiss her and all that soon. Eventually marry her."

He gulped hard. Was she kidding? This seemed a bit much, although winning the lottery also seemed a bit that way.

"See me in one month," she said. "Same place, same day and time. Bring cash."

She saw him to the door and he thanked her and decided that he had no choice but to try at this point.



The restaurant was a country-style place. They served simple stews, soups, fresh bread and butter, coffee, tea, and soda. There was nothing too great about it but nothing bad either. He rarely ever went, but he went that night. He walked right to the back of the restaurant.

A man came right up to him to wipe his table. "Are you my waiter?" he said fearfully. This was no Mina.

The man shook his head. "She is coming."

And then he walked over to her, apparently this wife of his. He was pleased that she was tall and thin though her face was very plain. But she looked good enough.

She mostly looked exhausted. "Welcome," she sighed, handing him a menu. "I am Mina, your server."

He nodded, pleased it was all going as planned. He ordered a fish stew quickly.

As he ate his bland stew, he wondered how he could get this all to escalate. He only had one month till he saw The Spiritualist again. He had to marry her soon, or at least she needed to become his girlfriend in a matter of days, he calculated. He imagined kissing her thin, pursed lips one day soon, as instructed.

"You are very beautiful," he said, once she brought the check.

Mina blushed. "That is kind of you but I am not," she said, shaking her head.

"No, I mean it," he said. He had never been great with women, no expert at flirting. "Can I take you to dinner some time? Some time soon?"

She looked at him like he was crazy. She meant to shake her head but something made her nod. She was surprised at herself.

"Okay," she said. "I work all the time. But after? It might be late."

He nodded, pleased. "How about tomorrow night?"

She paused. What was she doing? But she heard herself say it: "Yes, okay, I could do that."

He thanked her and put down double the tip he'd normally put down, especially for such a mediocre meal.



After two weeks, he asked Mina to be his girlfriend and she found herself saying yes. "Life is so odd," she said. "I feel like a character in your dream, the way things are just happening so fast and out of my control, it seems."

"Mina, do you love me?" he asked, taking her face in his hands.

She was not sure but she caught herself saying, "I love you very much."

In two more weeks, the day before his session with The Spiritualist, he married Mina, her parents very pleased that a poor country girl like that was marrying the nation's lottery winner.

On his third time to The Spiritualist, he said nothing, but extended his hand to show her the wedding band.

She nodded, no smile, nor words, nothing.

"Mina is a good woman," he said. "I thank you for her, the money, everything." She nodded.

"It always works out well," she said. "At least at first. All the marriages are happy the first few months but then they come to me with problems. They say the marriage rate is 50/50. I wish I could do better. Still they make kids and it is better than being alone, they say."

"You're not saying all married people come to you?" he asked.

She nodded.

He nodded back. He wondered if The Spiritualist was crazy. But her ideas were working. He knew he would have to know her forever at this point.

"What now?" he asked.

Her eyes were closed. After the usual too-long-a-time, she said, "Now, a job."

He smiled. He had wished she would do that.

"You will write a book," she said. "The book will come out the same time as your baby."

He gasped. A book and a baby.

She nodded. "Come back in one year. You will have a newborn and you will be done with your book tour. Bring cash."

In ten months time, his son was born.

In eleven months time, his first book came out. A novel about a man who wins the lottery.

When he went to The Spiritualist, same day and time, just a year later, he was amazed to see the space had not changed. Same orange cat. There was even a vase with a pink carnation. Everything was the same, even the unpleasant nature of the space.

He wanted to hug her he was so thankful but she just blinked as he told her all she had predicted had come true. It made sense she would not be surprised, but still he wished she could show some reaction.

"I feel like I don't want anything more," he said. "I have money, I have a family, an occupation with this book. What more could I ask for?"

The Spiritualist stared hard at him. "Are you asking me?"

He paused and then nodded. What had he not thought of.

"The end of the story is always one we will not like," she said. "Illness and death."

"Will it be soon for me?" he asked, anxious suddenly.

"Depends on what you consider soon," she said. "In ten years, you will be ill. Do not take your medicine. Come back then. Bring cash."

He was perplexed. Ten years. Well, she didn't say he'd die. But what sort of illness? He had so many questions.

"I cannot say more," she said, without him even asking. "Please go now."



He was forty-seven when he got the ailment. At first, he had forgotten what The Spiritualist had predicted but once he got the bad news, he remembered.

"What's wrong? Other than the bad news? You look like you suddenly saw a ghost," his doctor said, handing him the prescription.

He took it in his hand and remembered her saying not to take it. He considered telling the doctor and then he began to. "I have this psychic, you could say, this spiritualist—"

The doctor laughed in recognition. "Ah, yes, we all do! She's the best. I could not have had a family or this practice without her!" she chuckled and then got very serious and said, "Do as she says."

He thought about saying that he could not take his medicine then, but he didn't. He just nodded.

"Small world," he said to his doctor but she didn't answer.

---

In ten years, he found himself sitting across the table again from The Spiritualist. Some things had changed, but only minorly. The cat was absent or else hiding. She had a fan now in the room. And a paperweight that looked like a crystal ball. The feather at her door had come apart but was still there. She wore a simple gray dress, similar to the black, and her ribbon was brown velvet. It somehow relieved him to see some changes.

"I am ill," he told her. "As you said I'd be."

She nodded.

"I have not taken my medicine."

She nodded.

"What now?" he asked.

She was, as usual, silent with closed eyes for some time. He noticed she had not seemed to age much. She still seemed like a teenager at most.

She opened her eyes and said one word, "Death."

He nodded, afraid she'd say that.

"That's all that there is now," she said.

He nodded. "But when?" he asked. "Hopefully not too soon?"

All his life with all his bad luck, he had hoped for an early death, but now with all his good fortune he wished for more.

"They always want to live longer when they get ill," she said. "But I want the suffering to stop."

"I don't feel that bad," he said.

"Your illness has just begun," she said.

"Please," he said and he did not even understand why.

She shook her head. "This is the last time we will see each other."

He nodded. "But when will it come?"

She laughed or maybe snorted—it was an odd peal, like the sound of broken glass, not quite human. He'd never heard it from her before. "I can't tell you. I don't know."

He grew upset. "But you've known everything so far! Lottery numbers, my child, the book!"

She shrugged. "You have time."

"How much?" he asked.

"Enough," she said. "Now please go."

He refused to leave.

"I have many other clients," she said. "So many. Everyone."

He nodded. "Please."

She shook her head and walked him out.

"Goodbye, Spiritualist," he said and she said nothing in return.

He paused by the jug of water and plastic cups and took an empty cup as if as a souvenir.



Like many in old age, he grew mad. The disease they said progressed to the mind. They blamed it on him not taking his medicine, but sometimes he pretended to. His rantings and ravings grew more and more disturbing, they noticed.

"Everyone on earth goes to her!" he said. "I know this! You all know who I'm talking about! That little girl! The spiritualist child in that nasty basement office!"

Most people just blinked. Occasionally someone would nod knowingly and once in a while someone would say, "Oh yes, her." But that was it. They never got into it.

He grew more and more angry the more unclear his condition seemed. He was in so much pain, but the pain in his mind was the worst. Mina and his son didn't know what to do. His editor was very worried as well.

One day he found himself speed walking to the bad part of town. He noticed he was going to The Spiritualist's office. He remembered her saying that was the last time they'd see each other, but he wanted to know what would happen if he broke that pact. What if for once he did not do as she said?

He got to the door and again there was no cat, and no screen door open, no call from her to come in. But the door was unlocked. He went in. Inside: no more water and cups, but the same dirty rug and ugly lighting and the same bad air.

"Hello!" he called out.

Nothing.

Her door was closed but he could not hear her—she was not with anyone else. There was no feather at the door but the tape was still there, as if holding onto an invisible feather or the idea of a feather.

He knocked on the door. "Please!" he shouted. "I must see you!"

Nothing.

He was not the kind of man to break into someone's space without an invitation but he knew this was what he had to do. He took a deep breath. He called out for her once more, as if to give her a chance. Another knock, another chance, and nothing.

He was very frustrated.

He had never disobeyed her orders before. He had no idea what could happen if he did.

He found himself weeping, tears suddenly pouring from his eyes. He could only do one thing now.

He found himself taking the greatest breath he could, filling his diseased lungs with more air than he thought was possible. With the exhale, he released the knob and walked right in where she was not.

Just black smoke or the idea of black smoke. Nothing, just nothing.

And before he could process what had become of him, of them perhaps, all the light in the world, past present and future, went out.



Fig. 1. taisha paggett, with Hunt, Zumpfe, & WXPT, *School for the Movement of the Technicolor People: Demonstration Score #16*, *Duet*, DiverseWorks, 2016. Left to right: taisha paggett, Eternal Lokumbe. Photo by Ashley Hunt.

## Conversants: An Interview with taisha paggett

*Kemi Adeyemi*

taisha and I came together at Portland Institute of Contemporary Art's (PICA) Time Based Art festival in 2016, when we sat together on a panel titled, *Black Queer Feminist Performance Now*, and learned there was much more to say. Our practices begin to come together around dance. Through individual and collaborative endeavors, paggett works through dance pedagogy—as structured by institutions, but also as lived in everyday life—as a critical site for remaking the individual and collective body; producing new phenomenologies of being and being with, in the process. I think/write/teach on social dance as a quotidian site for theorizing and intervening upon the distribution of neoliberal urban governance across the landscape and the human

sensorium. We are both invested in thinking with and about movement as a method of doing, thinking, and being/becoming black queerness.

This conversation was staged over email, a vexing medium for us both, but it afforded us each slowness with our thoughts. What follows is the first in a series of jumping-off points, the continuations of which may very well remain between us, as the space of email—and the conceptual terrain, moving from the literal ground to the structuring influence of the dance studio on black queer subjects—has proven to be intimate, timely, rigorous.

**Kemi Adeyemi:** These are the things I've been thinking about lately: repetition, the ground, leaning. Maybe they should be in reverse order: the ground, leaning, and repetition. I mean the ground quite literally: the surface(s) that we are on top of. I'm interested in how one's supposed mastery over the ground (over in the sense that one can control the ground through agriculture, for example, but also in the sense that one's sheer ability to be over rather than intertwined with, hands dug into, or underneath the ground) articulates a kind of relation to the rational, Human.

**taisha paggett:** omg, preach this. At the risk of being dramatic, this is one of the fundamental ethos of our misdirection. In relation to the ground, we think of ourselves as gladiators...wtf?! We should be listeners, expert listeners, I think. This reminds me of a recent collaborative project that I organized and performed. We built a movement score-cum-aphorism that, for me, asks for a different strategy for living and being in the world, and is perhaps a modest improvement upon what you're astutely identifying: "to be with rather than on top of the mountain."<sup>1</sup>

**KA:** So, to be vulgar about it, the better one is over the ground, the more rational, Enlightened, capable of citizenship, capable of subjecthood, etc. The most upstanding, upright citizen (that language is intentional) possesses a sharp 90-degree angle to the ground.

**tp:** I'm so into this thought about uprightness not being a panacea for knowing. From being shuffled in straight lines as kindergarteners to being told to sit up

<sup>1</sup> *Mountain, Fire, Holding Still*. Created with Gregory Barnett, Yann Novak, and Marbles Jumbo Radio at/for the Getty Villa in Los Angeles (2016).

straight (beyond the limits of the serpentine spine) to uniforming ourselves in phallus-y “business” suits as a rite of passage into professionalism and the real world, 90 degrees is forced into us as a symbol of success, no? If anything, 90 degrees is just a symbol for how folks struggle to survive.

**“WE DON’T STAND UPRIGHT, THOSE  
TRULY LIVING, RATHER WE DANCE  
IN THE SPACES BETWEEN THE  
HORIZON AND THE VERTICAL.”**

I mean, physiologically, 90 degrees is unsustainable; an illusion. Letting go of that illusion and accepting the dance is to step into deep agency, IMHO. I did a dance piece a few years back called “a right-angled who lost her faith in being upright.”<sup>2</sup>

It was a “Fila Buster”-adjacent project in which I was looking at spiritual practices—specifically the Shakers (who were very much about lightly stepping on the earth) and Sojourner Truth’s vision questing as her site of power—and I got especially caught up in sigils, hidden symbols, and thus fell in love with parallelograms. Imaging one standing on its side, suspended between standing and collapsing, as this modest symbol of fugitivity. We don’t stand upright, those truly living, rather we dance in the spaces between the horizon and the vertical. This is the struggle, this is the living.

**KA:** But what are the other ranges of motion, the other angles, that make this entirely perpendicular relationship possible? I think in dance, in particular, we are accustomed to talking about horizontality (and that which precedes it: falling), but I’m more interested in the points of contact and the specific kinds of muscle contractions that come when you are hunched, swaying, leaning, woozing, hazing, etc.

**tp:** yes yes.

**KA:** There can really be no stillness when you’re at 66 degrees.

**tp:** Yup yup. And if we wanna get granular, there can’t even be stillness at 90 degrees. Steve Paxton’s (yt man) practice “The Stand” is interesting here as it points out the dance of standing, tuning in and yielding to the orchestra of muscle twitches and contractions involved in the body being held upright. I should insert here: I’m bent on

---

<sup>2</sup> Presented for/at Danspace Project at St Mark’s Church, NYC (2013).

“blackening”<sup>3</sup> or otherwise politicizing and marking white dance practices (I’m certainly not alone in that endeavor) and “The Stand” was a practice that made up half of my first “Fila Buster”<sup>4</sup> performance. Fila Buster stood at a microphone in this standing meditation, in silence, until the contraction of subtle movement gave rise to a nonstop speech/speaking that was the act of her naming herself, calling herself into being.

**KA:** Ultimately, I’ve been thinking about these degrees as a way to think about the spatial registers through which blackness becomes intelligible. I’ve been reading a lot of Tiffany King, Monique Allewaert, Hagar Kotef, Katherine McKittrick (always), Fanon, Merleau-Ponty; reading on Hobbes, Locke, and the other yt men who we can’t hardly escape from. What are black, queer, feminist interventions into the logic of 90 degrees? Looking for a history of blackness that is of course about the experience of having one’s body, movements, affect marked and delimited, but in what ways are these delimitations specifically spatial? In what ways does blackness, or do black bodies, make sense as in excess of 90 degrees? Bent over, sprawled, horizontal (of course), swaying, scrambling; proximities to the ground that the Enlightenment could only reckon with as *substrata* for 90 degrees.

**tp:** My brain is on fire with all of these thoughts. I’ve been possessed with a curiosity about verticality versus horizontality as signifiers of agency (or the absence of) as they come through (western modern, postmodern, and contemporary) dance aesthetics and somatic practices, but also the aesthetics of professionalism: what one does to appear ready, together. Again, I think about being disciplined as a kid to sit up straight, to a fault. The breath gets held, it is a growing away from the ground, away from roots, it is a stillness that can’t be maintained.

**“I THINK ABOUT BEING DISCIPLINED AS A KID TO SIT UP STRAIGHT ... THE BREATH GETS HELD, IT IS A GROWING AWAY FROM THE GROUND, AWAY FROM ROOTS...”**

<sup>3</sup> I love this notion of blackening. It evolved from something I got from my white collaborator, Kim Zumpfe . . . From a conversation she had with Frank Wilderson, whom she studied with at UCI . . . Paraphrasing what she recalled: It was a comment about the “impossibility of allyship” and that, from the perspective of a non-black person, the only remaining option is “to be blackened.” All to say I think about blackening these days as an answer to many contemporary questions. (Standing inside, standing with, rather than championing. Marking and getting marked. “Being with rather than on top of . . .” An answer that doesn’t answer but rather offers a process, an invitation . . .)

<sup>4</sup> Created as part of “This is What I Want” for the Queer Arts Festival at SomArts, San Francisco (2012).





Beyond a conversation of physical mechanics, we are in a culture that professes uprightness while simultaneously it systematically presses the people down. But we fucking float and rise and dance and trespass into new spaces and unforeseen possibilities. That, I believe, is how blackness “makes sense [...] of 90 degrees.” The vertical line is a location and so we trespass into other spaces. For better or worse. We bend our bodies as we bend the rules and the syllables and the gravity of our form and the text/files that shield us. Bend, break, wreck everything. For better or worse. For survival. For getting by.

By which I mean, there could be another layer of questions here: What blackness? Which black bodies are we speaking of? And black queer, black feminist queer? From that perspective lies a whole other substrata of intervention, strategy.

**KA:** I was really moved by Arthur Jafa’s newest piece, *Love is the Message, the Message is Death*, for a lot of reasons. But one of the themes within it that struck me most of all were the scenes of black people dancing with one another—line dancing, partner dancing, dancing solo but with and for friends and family. Can you talk a bit about how you learned to move, around whom you learned to move, and how movement itself became a way for you to think with and about your own body, and your body as part of larger collectives?

**tp:** I appreciate you asking how I learned to move rather than “dance.” It’s relieving and gives permission to avoid my typical dance training narrative, which I’ll probably still end up boring you with, indirectly. Since this is an origin question/story, I first must say that I cannot separate being black from being queer (While still knowing, of course, that the two *are* separable and very much *need* to be parsed out at times, and that they stem from tremendously different conditions and histories of power and access and pain that cannot be fused or put on the same level without wreaking havoc. Yes.) I guess what I mean—a better way of putting it—is that, for me, black is inherently queer, was queer before queer was queer, has always walked/danced the margins and built worlds and possibility where there otherwise were none. And despite this, there is too a normative inside of blackness.

**Fig. 2 (p. 92-93).** taisha paggett, Research trip to the Sojourner Truth Memorial in Florence, MA, for “a right-angled object who lost her faith in being upright,” 2013. Photo by Ashley Hunt.

**Fig. 3 (right page).** taisha paggett, with Hunt, Zumpfe, & WXPT, *School for the Movement of the Technicolor People: Demonstration Score #17, Duet*, DiverseWorks, 2016. Left to right: Norola Morgan, Brittani Broussard. Photo by Ashley Hunt.



All to say, and getting back to your question, when I came to dancing as a queer black young adult in a city where there weren't many people like me, black social spaces were not spaces of comfort. (If we go back deeper I can tell you also about the internalized racism of my social upbringing, in which my legibility, my success—my course toward uprightness—relied upon certain strategic disavowals of as much of my deep blackness as I could muster, without completely disappearing myself.) So when I came into dancing, into movement, it was not through rhythm, getting lost in the beat of social dance, the club. Or steps learned at home and family reunions. The setting in which I learned to move was the institution; college dance class after college dance class and then one downtown NYC dance studio class after another and then back into academia, on repeat. Modern dance technique, postmodern dance aesthetic, somatic practice, contact improvisation were my jam. Certainly there were Hip Hop and African dance classes and Jazz that I had access to, but to stand in those forms made me too conspicuous. Be it the internalized racism or my queerness or a cocktail of the two.

At the same time, I was genuinely transfixed by the story of postmodern dance: Of people making dances composed of walking and doing socially weird things to

**"DANCING AGAINST THE MUSIC;  
DANCING WITHOUT MUSIC. THIS  
SHIT GENUINELY TURNED ME ON."**

music. Dancing against the music; dancing without music. This shit genuinely turned me on. I think it gave me permission to dance/move and resist the limiting beliefs that I was fighting around me of what a black body is supposed to be, do. And of course, that world eventually revealed itself to be a

false refuge and I started to build a critical lens as to the absence of blackness and the insidious racism embedded within those white practices and formal conventions. This is what fueled me into wanting to not just dance but create my own work.

Amongst so many other things that I was up against, being a fly in the buttermilk of a predominantly white/Western/European dance world in which the black body and black expressivity was perceived, re-produced, and thus expected to *be* excessively muscular, athletic, robust, to produce bigness, have legible intent, convincing emotional registers, and high virtuosity through the body was a hard screw to avoid. I wanted to be the opposite. To, yes, invert virtuosity and slow down time and not be the hero. It's worth noting that these ideas were hallmarks, in certain ways, of my somatic dance

training, where we studied skeletal models and talked about the voluptuousness of small gestures, etc. etc. But those white spaces also sought these through the notion of a neutral body, which I eventually came to dispute as a highly privileged perspective and, from my perpetual conspicuousness, an impossibility.

As I reflect back now I feel that my work as a mover is about eliding limiting notions of how black bodies move and are perceived, represented. And as much as I support how black dance practices are finally taking a more center stage in and outside of academia, I feel my project is about staying standing inside of these white forms so to blacken them—that dance of necessary trespassing, necessary reclamation.

So I play with dance conventions as a site of knowledge but also as a way to talk through the failures and possibilities of the world around us. A gentle exploitation and conceptual bending of the form of the dance company

**“...I FEEL MY PROJECT IS ABOUT STAYING  
STANDING INSIDE OF THESE WHITE FORMS SO TO  
BLACKEN THEM—THAT DANCE OF NECESSARY  
TRESPASSING, NECESSARY RECLAMATION.”**

model, for example, gave way to me creating WXPT (we are the paper, we are the trees), a dance company-cum-intentional community project brought together to identify new strategies for standing inside the fire of racial injustice and trauma through actual rehearsals, and the eventual creation of collaborative project *School for the Movement of the Technicolor People*, a free school and installation in which our conversations evolved into physical practices for the public.<sup>5</sup> That company was my cypher. Philosophically, I feel most of my conversation these days and formal plays with movement come from a conversation with contact improvisation, an excessively white practice of which I have a complete love-hate, push-pull relationship. It's where this conversation about the virtuosity of verticality as a marginal body is rooted. And through other somatic forms and contemplative practices I've found ground in thinking about stillness itself as a dynamic world.

<sup>5</sup> *School for the Movement of the Technicolor People* was created with WXPT in collaboration with (visual artists) Ashley Hunt and Kim Zumpfe, first for Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (2015) and later for DiverseWorks in Houston (2016). LA WXPT has included: Joy Anderson, Charmaine Bee, Heyward Bracey, Rebecca Bruno, Erin Christovale, Loren Fenton, Maria Garcia, Kloii Hollis, Meena Murugesan, Sebastian Peters-Lazaro, Kristianne Salcines, Turay, Jas Wade, Devika Wickremesinghe, and Suné Woods. Houston WXPT: Adam Castaneda, Celestina Billington, Caleb Fields, Rosine Kouamen, Eternal Lokumbe, Norola Morgan and Kenneth Owens.



**Fig. 4.** *a right-angled object who lost her faith in being upright*, Danspace Projects, NYC, 2013. Left to right: Willy Souly, taisha paggett, Rebecca Bruno, Anna Martine Whitehead. Costumes by James KIDD, sound by Yann Novak. Photo by Ian Douglas.

**KA:** One thing that compels me most about your work is the way you challenge assumptions, or push against common-sense notions, of what a black dancing body does. I remain struck by what you said on our TBA:15 Festival panel: “I got really interested in what it means to invert the virtuosic bodies and *do less*, do what I want... dance is not a contract for actions but a container of time in which a body can occupy space and design and decide how people share that time and space.” This is one of the most generative statements I’ve heard in a very long time, in part because you are not necessarily talking about the *refusal* of movement, but of a deep dive into other ranges of movement that are (dis)allowed to black subjects. Can you take some time to elaborate on what *doing less* looks and feels like in your practice?

**tp:** Right now I think the doing less has just been not listening to what I’m supposed to pay attention to as a dancer/“choreographer” and instead about looking at and working from the conceptual framework of dance-making and building from/onto that frame rather than decorating within it; shifting where and how my labor goes.

Hmm, not sure that makes sense so an example might help: In 2012 I created a work, *A Composite Field* (in collaboration with sound artist Yann Novak) which to me was about not-dancing-so-to-dance and about taking up a dance performance's most elemental registers—sound, light, motion, stage—and simply letting them live, letting them be. We could have a longer conversation about the research of the work (about how photosynthesis relates to blackness and about morphing and masculine femininity and becoming and and and) but, in short, the doing less in that work was about moving slow enough—expanding time—so that everything could be felt and doing less so that my body as it is/was could stand alone as evidence. Letting the sound and light turn slowly, illuminating both my body and the audience's so that there was no mistake that *all* of us are/were part of this performance.

Indeed, for me, dance is a container, a container of relations, marked by time. When you strip away all the aesthetics and vocabulary, this to me is what dance yields, produces, offers. Recognizing and working from this for me is a “doing less” because it frees me from the neuroses of all that I've been taught and allowed to do or not do in the studio and in the world. (Though of course the rub is that I most often end up doing more. Like, performances turn into 4- to 10-hour long immersions, or year-long social relations such as the company projects. But such is the work of unleashing, unlearning...)

**KA:** I see your movements conversing with other movers who are thinking with isolation and repetition as methods of inquiry—and as sites that might subvert the valorization of the so-called virtuosic body, which is often framed as that person who can execute the biggest, grandest movements. Of course, breaking movement vocabularies down to their component parts is not new in contemporary dance, but I have been wondering whether working through isolation and repetition—operationalizing *doing less*, to some extent—becomes useful for intervening upon the ways in which black people become The Black Body (a concept which itself depends on a skewed notion of virtuosity: that no matter what, your presence is so all-consuming so as to be singularly capable of inciting response). The identification and codification of black people as The Black Body—as a dangerous figure, in particular—has as much to do with the racialization of particular body comportments; “acceptable” ranges of movement and chains of movement vocabularies. So much so

that a black person simply standing upright becomes so threatening that a police officer so fears for his life that he “must” shoot to kill in order to survive, right?

**tp:** Yes and yes and yes.

**KA:** I’m wondering how your work allows viewers to identify and experience black dancers executing a more diverse range of movement typically not allowed to black subjects, or assumed that black subjects do not execute—especially in work like *A Composite Field*. So, you are not only insisting on the complexity, nuance, and personality unique to yourself and your dancers, but are potentially opening a larger question about what kinds of movement vocabularies are even *allowed* to black people.

**tp:** I guess what I can say is that I fear sometimes that my work comes off as white or as putting black bodies in white spaces in ways that diminishes blackness. What a heavy heart that gives me. As said before, pulling from Wilderson, it is a blackening of

**“ALL TO SAY, BLACK/THE BLACK/BLACKNESS IS EVERYWHERE AND IN EVERYTHING, AND PERPETUALLY THREATENING, REGARDLESS OF HOW WHITE IT IS (MOMENTARILY) PERCEIVED...”**

white spaces and practices that I hope, at least, to put out in the world. All to say, black/the black/blackness is everywhere and in everything, and perpetually threatening, regardless of how white it is (momentarily) perceived...

**KA:** The previous comments can also be more specifically directed at the place of black people in dance history—framed as what kinds of black bodies are seen to be capable of executing what kinds of dance movements (i.e. racist discourses that black people’s bodies render them incapable of executing the technical and conceptual ranges of movement that characterize ballet). So, a constellation of questions: Who/what genres do you see yourself in conversation with?

**tp:** I really fight to remain inside of dance, to say that all of these things I do are dance/ dance-making/in the dance tradition. In other words, I don’t call myself a visual artist or other hyphenations, though I’d of course be remiss to overlook my relationship with

visual art practices. I studied Art History as I was coming up as a dancer, so there's always some dovetailing in my practice. Right now I'm specifically turned on by the work of Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger, what they do and have done. They are both black women in the visual artist realm who employ the body and embodiment in their practice.

Otherwise I always have a hard time answering questions like these because most of my mentors growing up have been white and I'm struggling right now to persist in holding up that torch. I have come to calling my work "interdisciplinary dance," which sometimes feels redundant but does a lot of explaining, nevertheless. I've always had deep admiration for Bebe Miller and Ralph Lemon and Ishmael Houston Jones, specifically their positionality as black dance artists, though I've never been moved to fashion my work after them. #expandtheframe

#EXPANDTHEFRAME

**KA:** What are the multiple and at times diverging genealogies of black dance you situate yourself within?

**tp:** Definitely the folks mentioned above, specifically because there was a time when they weren't identified as black choreographers because their projects never matched the identifiable template. I also think about Eleo Pomare and Blondell Cummings, both deceased, who invented their own ways of traversing white dance spaces.

**KA:** What conversations within and beyond "black dance" do you hope to extend and to initiate?

**tp:** I really just want to expand the frame, expand the conversation of who we point to when we name black dance artists and expand the conversation about what we expect and allow of dance. I want dancers to see themselves as artists more holistically and less laborers to a specific silo or container of actions; and for "choreographers" to see themselves as more than just directors of bodies but rather activators of space and time. And if I could go even further, to open up a convo about abolishing the distinction and hierarchy between dancers and choreographers altogether and that of "audience" versus public because it is really a shared stew of labor and magic and healing.

## کمرنگترین

آزار مکش! قفل دلم واشدنی نیست  
تندیس تمنای تو پیدا شدنی نیست

گنجینه لطف تو بزرگ است بزرگ است  
در پیکره کوچک من جاشدنی نیست

راهی که فراروست دوخط متوازی است  
یعنی که حدیث من و تو ماشدنی نیست

توصیف مکن از خط و خام، مفرییم  
پروانه پر سوخته، زیبا شدنی نیست

بیخود مده امید بلندم به بهاران  
سروی که کمر بر شده، بالا شدنی نیست

شاید تومسیحا شده ای، لیک مزن دم  
دردی که دلم راست، مداوا شدنی نیست

کمرنگترین واژ دیوان حیاتم  
درخط کج وزیز، که خوانا شدنی نیست

بگذار که نا خوانده و بیگانه همیرد  
این واژه نفرین شده معنی شدنی نیست

اسد ۱۳۸۱

## The Most Faded Word

### *ghazal*

Don't bother! My heart's lock can't open  
The figurine of your desire can't be found here

The treasures of your kindness are large—large  
My small body can't hold them

There are two parallel paths ahead—  
the tale of you and me can't become “we”

Don't admire my beauty, don't seduce me  
The burnt wings of a moth can't brighten

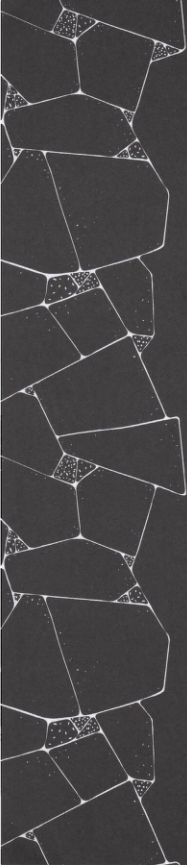
Don't give me hope for spring  
A cypress tree that is cut from the waist can't rise

You may have become Jesus, but don't breathe on me—  
my heart carries a pain that can't be healed

I am the most faded word in the book of life  
written in a small and crooked script that can't be read

Let it vanish, unread and unknown  
This cursed word can't be understood

*Asad 1381 / Leo 2002*



# TAISHA PAGGETT

P. 103-107

**taisha paggett,**

Research trip to the Sojourner Truth Memorial in Florence, MA for “a right-angled object who lost her faith in being upright,” 2013. Sojourner Truth Memorial in Florence, MA. Photo by Ashley Hunt.

P. 108-112

**taisha paggett & Meena Murugesan,**

*counts orchestrate, a meadow (or weekly practice with breath),* 2017.

ICA Philadelphia.

Created as part of Endless Shout (the performance practice series curated by Anthony Elms within the Freedom Principle exhibition). Photos by Stacey McDonald

P. 103-109

Featuring:  
taisha paggett

P. 110-111

Left to right:  
Meena Murugesan,  
taisha paggett

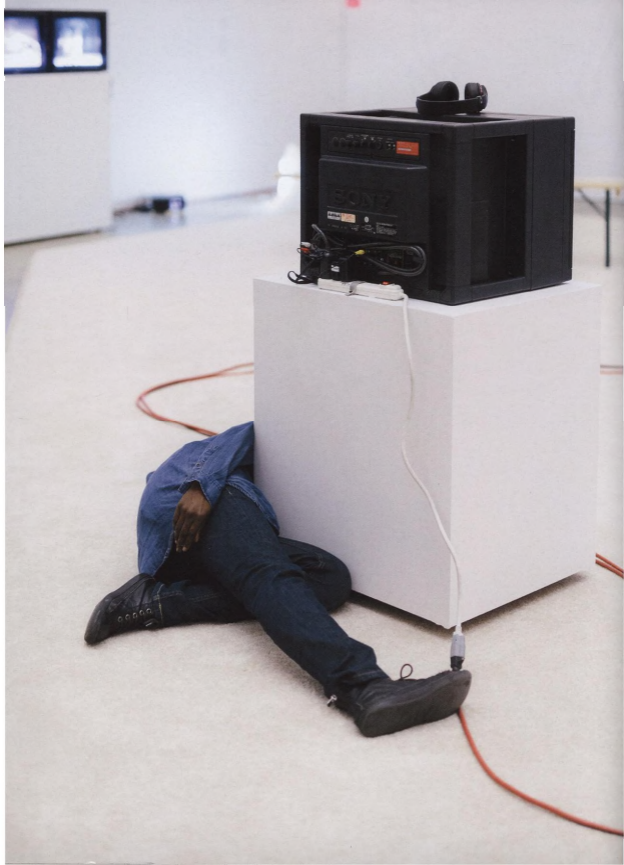
P. 112

Featuring:  
Meena Murugesan

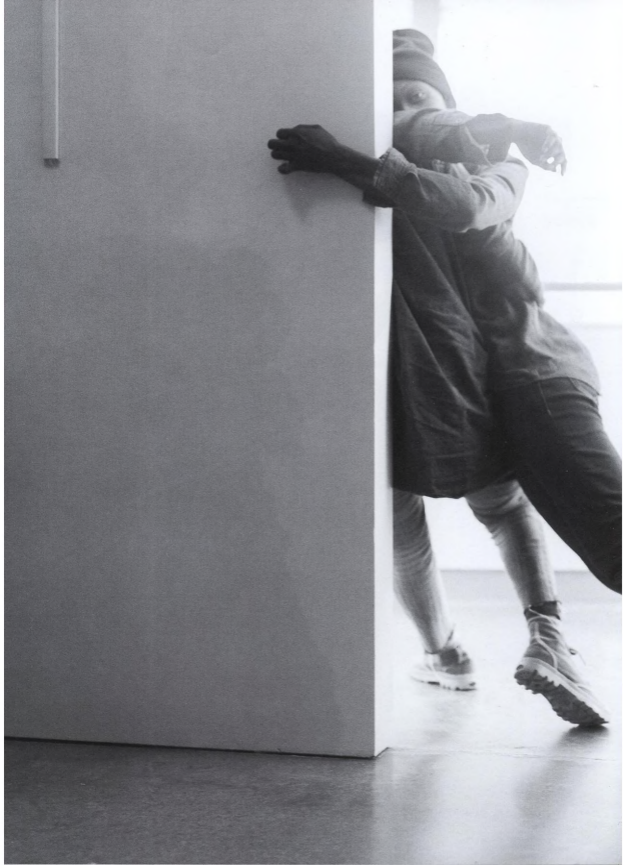


















Fiction

---

**THE ISLAND**

by Debbie Urbanski

Charlotte, my daughter, turned seventeen that fall when everything seemed about to catch on fire, if you can recall, or else it did catch. The sports shed in back of the school, for one, a fire in which a lot of ancient croquet mallets were lost, too bad, along with Mrs. Fisher's bobtail cat. Or the boat house where they kept the oars. Or the library basement, though that fire fizzled out on its own because of the dampness and mold. I suppose such fires could have been arson though the previous summer had been a dry one bordering on a drought, so it made sense to me how our entire town seemed ready for a burn.

Becoming seventeen years of age meant my daughter would be going out to the island that October. I didn't want her to go. To me she appeared complete as she was. Also I had hoped, selfishly, that she would grow up to be like me. "You do not have to go the island," I wanted to say, though I certainly did not have the authority to say this. But if Charlotte were like me, I would have at least tried. I wanted to say, "I won't sew the maroon thread onto you if you don't want me to. Let's find some other way to live!" The sorts of things I wished my mother would have told me the autumn when I turned seventeen myself.

The problem was Charlotte wasn't like me. She had never been like me. Rather, from the very beginning, she had resembled all the other children in our town, curious about the maroon threads, always grabbing onto my thread when she was young or onto Elliot's and trying to stuff it into her mouth. On the walks we now took together in the afternoon, the crows in the brittle trees calling after us as we strolled down the gravel path that led to the pier, she lusted after the threads of our neighbors like she couldn't wait to possess one of her own. I was never like that. When I was a child, I tried not to notice the glutinous

protrusions sticking out of the sides of all the adults I knew, thinking if I did not notice those threads, they would go away. "Oh my God, look at that luscious one of Mrs. Reeves," Charlotte had sighed on a recent walk. Mrs. Reeves, squatting in her front yard, looked up and waved. The start of her maroon thread was coiled beside her, around a plastic gardening pail for several turns, then the thread trailed off like some type of sickly worm across the lawn, snaking its way through the open doorway of the house, to where her partner must have been resting.

Let me acknowledge here that the term *thread* might be misleading, as that word conjures up, at least in my mind, a useful spool of sewing floss. Our threads were more like knobby cords or like a crudely handmade rope. Usually they had kinks in them after a year and often a knot, and you couldn't get the knots out once they happened, and each knot in your thread was uncomfortable, like getting a splinter in your eye. The thread felt, if you had to feel it with your fingers, like a firm gelatin. It was always damp, sometimes damp enough to appear to be sweating, to be dripping a clear secretion that would stain the carpeting if you didn't wipe it up immediately. Even though I tried to wipe up such drippings immediately, we had odd shaped stains anyway all over the floors of our house. It was the color of dried blood but no one defined it that way. *Maroon*, I suppose, was the more palatable description. Most days I wished to yank my thread out of my body, and I would have burned it, only there is no room for the unconnected in our community. *A person without a connected thread cannot love nor be loved*, our guidebook to the island says. Love, at least a certain type of it, forms the foundation of our town.

Only here's what I loved: the shadows of the birds when they flew over us during our walk back home. I loved the night sky and the distance of the stars. "There is Betelgeuse, and Bellatrix, and Rigel, and Saiph," I told Charlotte, pointing, when we sat on the porch together beneath a clear sky. There is a certain pleasure that comes from loving something so far away that it cannot touch you. I saw each star existing individually and independent. I loved Elliot in my own way. I loved him most when he was not here, our maroon thread limp between us at such a distance, when our love existed only within that distance. Like a moth in love with a light it would never reach. I still thought of that as love. I loved my

daughter when she was lying alone in her bed, asleep, breathing her deep breaths and dreaming dreams I hoped I could still, for the time being, understand.

---

*Excerpts from The Guide to Our Island*

*Now that you, my reader, have come upon your 17<sup>th</sup> birthday, I would like to tell you more about where you will soon be going, knowing you are likely experiencing many emotions about your upcoming journey. Emotions such as nervousness or fear. Do you feel butterflies in your stomach? (If you do, remember those kinds of butterflies aren't real! It's only adrenaline released into your blood stream.) Some of you may even wish you could avoid the island and remain in your parents' house for the rest of your life like a recluse.*

*I am here to tell you all of these emotions are okay.*

*When I was your age, I longed for a guide like this one which could help me understand the mystery of what was about to happen to me. Now, in a time when a firesome minority of you is questioning why you must venture to the island at all, a book like this one becomes even more necessary. I hope my little book can serve as a useful manual, providing you with the courage to see why we must all take this adventure if we wish to grow up. I, along with this entire town, look forward to welcoming you as an adult into our community very soon, once you do what you are supposed to do and return from the island attached to your partner(s) by your maroon thread.*

*I have two things I want you to remember.*

*Whatever your thread attaches to—boy or girl, person or people, object or animal—it is all fine, as long as you are attached. So make sure to come home attached to a partner or partners.*

*Also bring plenty of water to the island as the streams have become contaminated.*

---

"I don't want her to go," I finally told Elliot. The thread we shared, stretching from above my right hip bone to his own right side, should have been a saturated maroon at our age, as we were barely over forty, but ours

was pale, faded to an almost pink, like that of a sickly couple. Elliot had tried several expensive ointments but none had worked.

"Nobody doesn't go," Elliot reminded me.

"What about last year. Those two boys?" The previous year at the pier, two of the youth threatened to rip their threads off then they ripped them off. There had been blood and a lot of screaming.

Elliot waved his hands dismissively. "Do you remember what happened to those kids?"

"What about the other one. The one who ran away?"

"Come on, the only thing Charlotte talks about now is going. Do you want her to stay a child for the rest of her life? We're giving our kids this gift and nobody in their right mind refuses a gift like that." To him the threads were these erotic and necessary connections between us. He reached down to pet its surface, the excess portion which he had looped around his belt. The petting was an old habit of his. His eyelids lowered and he smiled. I felt his touches like a series of involuntary shudders in my abdomen.

I did not want our daughter to stay a child forever.

In our community, this was the only way anyone knew to grow up.

"Let's talk about something else," I said, and I brought our thread up to my mouth. This was the kind of thing we were expected to like to do. It tasted a little bitter. That's all.



Over the years I have watched Charlotte so many times sleeping, or falling asleep, or waking up. I have watched her breathe so many times. Once I sat beside her in the early morning, on the wooden stool beside her bed, this was when she was very small, and I spoke her name several times. She lifted her head and laid her head in my lap then she fell asleep again, or maybe she had never woken up and my voice was the voice of a dream. Once, before bed, she said, "I am going to give you the biggest hug in the world." She stretched her arms and legs around me and pulled me to her, trying, with such concentrated sweetness, to crush me with her love. Elliot had used a similar

position in bed before, though he was always kneading our thread at the same time, or doing something to it. The thread transformed and darkened every gesture of affection between us. The moment Elliot started touching our thread like that, it was like I could sense this animal stalking around our room in the shadows, in the corners, all snout and muscle and a dank smell and heavy breathing and fur. His need or whatever you want to call it. His *passion*. What a pretty word for it.

That night, when Charlotte had kissed me on the lips, smashing her lips into mine, laughing, I sensed no animal enter the room. No stalking. Her kiss was only brightness. It was only a warm light because it was also an ending, a finite point. "Did you ever give a bigger kiss than that?" she asked, looking into my eyes. I wanted to put her away in a world where this was what love looked like. "Of course not. That is as big as kisses go," I promised her a long time back.



***Briefly, your maroon thread:** you will receive your thread the evening before you depart. Your mother will sew it onto you. No, I am not talking about the kind of thread you use to mend your clothes! Your maroon thread is nothing to be afraid of, though at first it may feel like an inconvenience, like one more thing to carry around. But you will get used to it. I promise. You will even grow to like it. Irritation at the incision site is natural so keep the site bandaged. On departure day, store the excess length of your thread, safe and warm, in your coat pocket, until you are back on the boat and coming home. We are only allowed to journey to the island once in our lives so make sure to pay attention when you go.*

*On the boat, coming home, this is what you do. You remove your thread from your pocket. Then, don't worry, you will know what to do next. Your thread will know what to do. Just you wait to see what happens.*

***The geography of the island:** the island is difficult to see unless you are standing at the pier. From this particular vantage point, it looks like a grove of drifting trees, like one day it might just float away. Which I hope it will never do. At night it becomes difficult to distinguish the island from the surrounding dark as its boundaries*

*disintegrate into the dark. No one here has ever given the island a more formal name as it's the only island visible from our shore.*

*Leaving from the dock, it will take you an hour at least to reach the island as the boats tend to be slow and must be rowed by hand, or two hours, depending on who is doing the rowing. Despite the surrounding waters being deceptively shallow, I would never call such a place welcoming, but being welcoming was never the point of the island.*

*On the day of departure, all the adults from town show up along with their respective partners, our maroon threads looped festively around our waists, and around our partner's arms and each other's shoulders, and between our legs, in a fully glorious show, and we will throw pinecones into the boats, like the rules say we must, as the boats depart with you in it. Your own threads will feel new and raw, and you will be tired, as we will have woken you very early that day, before dawn, so that you could be robed correctly in the yellow garments, which are complicated to get on.*

*After you leave for the island, the rest of us remain on the pier, watching the boats that are carrying you away grow very small. Many of us bring sleeping bags and that night, we will stay awake to watch the island appear to change into something else. Something that is breathing in and out. Something whose dim perimeters open to take you in then close itself shut. It is kind of scary to be honest, but the following morning, the island has reverted to looking like an island, and by the afternoon, the boats have brought you back to us. You will be covered in dirt and attached and so happy. Everyone crowded onto the pier will catcall and applaud.*

*How to tour the island: right now there are no tours to the island.*

"Mom," Charlotte asked in the weeks leading up to her departure, "what does it look like, where I'm going? Are there really sheep with gold fleeces and caves made out of glass? And pits with fires that never go out?"

"It's different for everybody," I told her because that's how I wanted it to be.

"No it's not," Charlotte said.

"Now you go to sleep."

“Mom,” Charlotte asked another night, “what will my thread feel like? Is it sore at first? What if someone touches it—how does that feel? Do they—you know.”

“Do they what,” I asked. “Who.”

“Do they kiss it,” she said, “Or—”

“Sometimes.”

There was a story my mother told me when I was a child. I think she made it up to scare me. A ghost story about a young girl who had the maroon thread begrudgingly sewn onto her the night before—“a mean girl with a terrible attitude,” my mother assured me, insisting the story was real—then the next morning the girl climbed into the boat with eleven other youth. The youth rowed the boat across the water to the island’s dock as they were supposed to do. The first thing this girl did on the island was slice off her maroon thread, as much of it as she could, having to dig into the flesh on her side with a sharp rock to get it out, because she hated the weight of it. She threw her thread into the lake. Then, though the girl herself hadn’t set her foot in the water, she drowned.

“Will I want them to kiss it?” Charlotte asked.

“I have no idea.”

“Did you want to kiss it? The maroon thread?”

I told her it was late.

On another night: “So what does *that* feel like?”

“How does what feel?”

“When they kiss it. Kiss the thread.”

“Go to sleep,” I pleaded. Many years ago my own mother sat similarly down on the edge of my bed to tell me about the island I would be going to, its streams and its caves, and what should have happened to me there, and the maroon thread that she would soon force upon my body. It seemed an easy role for her to play. Those days on the island had been the best days of her life. The entire time she was

talking to me, she looked as if remembering a bright and satisfying dream. “Of course it all takes some getting used to, that constant tugging,” she confided. “But I’d miss it now if it were gone. If it were taken from me. And there is a lot of—” She blushed, hesitating. “There are a lot of good feelings there as well.”

Charlotte said, “I don’t think I can sleep. I’m too excited and you’re not answering any of my questions.”

I was tired of her questions. “Fine,” I finally said. “You want to know what it feels like? It feels wonderful. That’s what people say, isn’t it? As wonderful as being swept away.” Like in an undertow, I said. Drowning. Suffocating? Charlotte’s eyes grew concerned then, as I continued on with my imagery, they turned scared until I made myself stop. I had to stroke the top of her hands until she calmed down. “Actually, it’s like floating in a gentle stream. Right? Charlotte, are you listening? A stream you want to be floating in.” This hadn’t been my experience but I assumed it would be hers. So it’s not like I was lying. “Like you’re floating because someone is finally cradling you.” I went on like that until she closed her eyes.

A few years after Charlotte was born, my father died and then, within an hour of his death, my mother died too. This is often the case. When one partner dies it is just a matter of time. Though it was hard to lose both of them in the same day, I was also glad in a way, as I think, if only my mother was left, she would have been unbearable and lonely, her maroon thread flapping empty in the wind, like a kite without a kite.



*The island’s quadrants: once you arrive, you will be drawn to one of the following areas of the island. This attraction to a specific quadrant will influence, but not determine, the final selection of partner(s) or object(s).*

*The North: follow the faint game trail to the shore to find the caves. If you venture far enough in, the caves are interconnected by passages made of glass, or something like glass, the walls of the cave smooth enough so you could see your reflection if there was any light. For a grand view, retrace your steps to the cliffs where you can climb the stone outcrop. The outcrop is nicknamed “The Lighthouse” though there is no actual lighthouse.*

*The East: impassable due to thorns.*

*The Center: you are not to go here.*

*The West: look for old growth trees, patches of late berries, and an abundance of gray squirrels. This quadrant also includes the stream and wishing pool.*

*The South: a popular destination, pleasant and sheltered, containing the remnants of a settlement's stone walls and several apple trees (don't bother eating the fruit). If you'd like, climb the hill for a gentle overview of the land. At the top of the hill, you will find a rock circle. I recommend you stand in the circle's center and shut your eyes, as many others before you have also done, so you can feel like you are part of a long line of people identical to you, all of you having experienced this.*



The night before my daughter left for the island, I considered sabotaging her thread: a weak stitch covered by a loose bandage so no one would have to know. The thread would fall off on the island the moment it snagged inevitably in some thorns. Then Charlotte would return, threadless. Then I could cut off my own thread. Then we could go together into the hills, into the part of the woods where I had never gone. Then we would build a new life, even if it were not the life she wanted. Up until when my needle first entered her skin, I intended to do this.

Only there, in that moment when I first secured the thread to her side, was when she released a small contented sigh. The sound startled me. I tried at first to imagine there was sadness in that sound, but I think it was only my own sadness filling the room like a white noise.

The first time I looked at my thread sticking out of me, I had been sick, vomiting in the toilet, suddenly claustrophobic and in need of air. Running to the window, I knocked over the water pitcher.

"Take it off of me," I begged my mother.

"No," my mother said. She sounded tired. I have always assumed she could have removed the thread from me in that moment had she tried. Though perhaps the decision was more complicated. I remember she would not look at me.

Twice now, I have taken my own thread off. This is different than tearing it out, you know. At least I hope it is. I hope it is less destructive. Still, the reattachments I made are not nearly as strong. Each time, the end of my thread became more ragged and I had to glue it back together. I didn't go far from my thread either time. It's not like I ran away. I set the thread down onto the bed, onto a clean towel I had laid there. The end of the thread I placed in a bowl of warm milk, thinking this would keep it, and in turn Elliot, more comfortable. As the thread was still connected to Elliot. I did not want him to be uncomfortable. Then I looked in the mirror at myself, hoping I would look like a different person. Hoping I could see, for a moment, who I actually was supposed to be. There are so many things in this world to touch. Or to not touch. The air held me differently, I know that. I kept the blinds drawn. Neighbors are watching, you know. At least my neighbors. Each time I took off the thread, I'm sure Elliot must have felt a slackening, the thread losing its vitality, despite the clean towel, the warm milk. He never brought it up with me.



In the end, I did not set down the needle as I had planned to do after sewing my daughter's initial stitch. In fact I found myself working over her stitches as if sewing a sailcloth whose strength was necessary for our survival. At the same time, I felt like I was telling Charlotte goodbye. At least a part of her. The part I had understood. She looked down at her side, her face radiant, like it used to be when she was very young and I walked in the room. "Can I touch it now?" she asked. I lifted up the thread, the surprisingly heavy coil of it, warm and pulsating, the last time I would touch it myself, as mothers are not to touch their child's thread after this, are they. I would have said it was like touching my daughter's heart only I think my daughter's heart would be beautiful and private and these threads of ours are neither of those things. Charlotte inhaled sharply when I placed the thread into her cupped hands, her fingers fluttering around the edge of it. In her lap the island's guidebook was open to the appendix. Her copy was worn and marked. The book outlined everything that should have been there on the island, though what I had seen, the ravine in particular and its light, were not included.

"Mom," Charlotte said. I wished for her to say more but this was all she said. She slipped the thread into her pocket and hugged me briefly before hurrying off to bed, where she must have spent the entire night awake, fingering her new textures. I tried not to think of it.

---

### **Appendix B.**

*For the Mother: Instructions for Sewing the Thread to Your Child*

**1.** Assemble your supplies: scissors, towel, bowl of warm water, needle, knife, another bowl filled with ice cubes, numbing lotion, bundle of thread #03, envelope containing your child's maroon thread.

**2.** Cut open the envelope. Remove the maroon thread. It should feel chilled and solidified from being stored in the fridge.

**3.** Warm the thread in your hands. You may want to breathe on it as well to warm it. Or try placing the thread in the bowl of warm water.

**4.** Once warmed, unravel the end of the thread marked by the white tape.

**5.** Numb your child's skin, the skin on their right side, using ice cubes and numbing lotion. Thread your needle with #03 thread.

**6.** Cut a small incision and insert the first inch of maroon thread into your child's body. Using a catch stitch, secure the thread to your child's side, to the skin above their hip bone.

**7.** There may be discomfort.

**8.** To help with the discomfort, share your own stories about your maroon thread. Like how proud your mother was after she completed your final stitch. Can you describe the expression on her face? Or how, when you first looked into the mirror after you had your thread, you felt immediately different, like you had been transformed into this other person with recognizable wants. Or that moment when, in the boat, on the way back, your own thread joyfully sought out, then connected, with the thread of your future partner(s). Do you remember how exciting that was? Describe your excitement to your child.

**9.** Place a clean bandage over the incision site then put your child to bed. Tuck them in tightly.

**10.** Remind them how tomorrow is going to change everything.

---

Either time, you know, I could have left my thread there on the bed floating in the bowl of milk, and I could have walked away from my family and my life. Why did I stay? I used to tell myself it was out of love for Elliot and my daughter. In truth, I lacked the imagination. The only story I could imagine about myself is the story of my life as it is. The story where I went to the island like everybody else, and on the way back my thread had not known what to do, so I had thrown it into Elliot's lap. No one else had to do this. Elliot saw me but he didn't say a word. He had to hold my thread to his until the ends of our threads merged. No one else had to do this. The story where I became attached by a thread I never wanted to a partner who I have tried my best to love. It is still a story, you see. It is still a life, even if it's not the story or life I would have written for myself.

I doubt our thread could survive being glued back together a third time.

"If I ever cut off our thread," I said to Elliot one day.

He interrupted. "Why would you cut the thread?"

"I will still love you. Even if the thread is gone. But what about you—will you still love me?"

Elliot hesitated. He tried to change the topic. Eventually he told me no, he didn't think he would love me still, not in that way. For what special thing would connect us if the thread wasn't there? "We'd be like friends," he said. "Like old friends, and I have enough friends at this point in my life."

Back when I had visited the island myself, by early afternoon I remember thinking I must be lost. This had not been intentional. I was trying my best to follow all the instructions and rules. I was, in fact, trying to reach the north quadrant when I stumbled upon the ravine, and then out of the ravine came the unexpected shock of light. It was a yellow light with a slightly putrid smell, and I remember how the light surrounded me and reached for me but stopped short of touching me. I didn't know what the light meant or what it wanted me to do. Was it telling me to climb into the ravine? Was it telling me to look away and shut my eyes? Ever since, I have had the feeling that whatever I did, I did the wrong thing. What was I supposed to have done? The only other person I have told about that light was Elliot, who thought it sounded like a dream I must have had. It was okay, he told me, better even, to forget dreams like that.



I made Charlotte several of her favorite sandwiches using a sharp aged cheese, the bread slathered in mustard. I wrapped each sandwich in wax paper. Also in her food bag I placed three apples from the tree in our yard, as well as a bag of roasted almonds and some extra water tablets. Elliot already had gone off to sleep. I knew this because our thread lay slack on the ground, rising and falling with his breath, while my breath made miniscule and opposing ripples. I checked that Charlotte had packed her poncho, because the weather can be unpredictable out on the island, and included bottles of insect repellent and sunscreen. The two guidebooks were thin so I slipped them in as well. The other children would undoubtedly be carrying them too, studying them on the ride over the water. Before dropping the topo map into the zippered pocket on the top of her pack, I unfolded it, marking in the center of the map, where you weren't to go, and in pen, so it was permanent, where I remembered the ravine had been.

Then I put my own poncho on, because it was already raining, and I walked down to the dock and climbed into one of the boats, which was not locked up. The way was obvious. Due north. If I sailed away, if I didn't return, there wouldn't be enough boats left for the young people tomorrow morning. Our thread, Elliot's and my thread, was a long one though it was growing taut. I told myself, I will just row a little further out, only a few more feet from the shore. Beside me the thread skimmed the surface of the water, cutting through the single reflection of the moon.

## Group Sex

There's you and your lover and there's also his idea  
of who you are in this moment, and your idea of who  
he should be, both of these like both of you but better—  
poreless skin, flushed lips, hairless where convenient.  
It's awkward, the theatrical way your lover throws back  
his head, and should you as well? What if you're facedown?  
The other him, the one who never forgets to roll the garbage can  
to the curb the night before pickup, he would never let his right eye  
droop upon climax, he would never smack your bottom afterwards  
and say "good horse." He never has to give her the what for.  
Her hair is always clean and she doesn't bring up the past  
like a sopping lobster trap every time the two of them  
are finally moving forward. She sees a wider vista.  
You could watch the two of them all day, those toned limbs,  
the faint perfume rising from their skin like ozone after a storm,  
like roses bred to excess until the blooms break the canes,  
you could watch her raise her hand to touch his face, softly,  
as if she cannot believe he shaved for her,  
as if there's only just the two of them in the world now.

## Maaru Tang

romaanista *Pelon maantiede*

Loistin, kiillekuoriainen, ja avauduin  
vuotaakseni tyhjiin kuin neste  
linnunjalkojen ja kasvinvarsien sekaan.  
Sanokaamme että nukuin kuin käärme,  
naamioituneena  
mustaksi kiveksi mustien kivien joukossa.  
Kuin mädän keskeltä nouseva kääpiösieni  
olen jaksanut elää ja olla haihtuvan pieni,  
sisältä pintaan hauras ja puitten varjoa imeä,  
kanssani vetinen heinä ja väsynyt pimeä.  
En mehiläistä pelota  
ja tunnen perhosen.  
Metsän väen kohtelu  
on sydämellinen.  
Olin keskellä kirkkosi laivan  
ja pieneksi haihtunut aivan.  
Olin eläin ja kääpiöpuu  
ja korva ja auennut suu.

## Maaru Tang for “The Mycelium”

from *Geography of Fear*

I lit up, a glow beetle, and split open  
only to run dry and leak  
over the birds' feet and plant stems.  
Let us say I slept as a snake,  
    camouflaged  
a black stone among black stones.  
An elf mushroom huddled in rot  
disappearingly small, brittle, a dot,  
I persisted and drank the shadows of trees  
the sodden hay and a worn-out dark as company.  
The bee does not fear me  
and I know the butterfly.  
The creatures of the woods  
treat me with courtesy.  
In the vessel of your holy house  
I was a wisp, a desiccated mouse.  
I was a living thing and a pygmy tree  
I was an ear and a cavity.

## Subvocal (Hadley)

Watch out for the failures,  
the middle managers laughed out of art

school, sitting sulky and cross-legged  
under the trees

of their ambition. It has to go somewhere,  
like storm runoff washes over pesticidal

fields to find a river. Neither  
Manson nor Hinckley could write a hook

to save their lives or maybe we would have a few  
more Californians and Reagan wouldn't be

such a boring hero. They say everyone  
wants to be an artist. Not me.

I want to be debonair.  
I want to rise on a throne of fire

and lash the cities with my seven arms,  
so even the rich will have to pay attention.

Seung-Hui Cho  
signed his stories with a question mark.

He wanted to be Jesus  
and burn down the school where we learn

all this crap. Once, Hadley left a suitcase  
of Hemingway's manuscripts on a train.

Now there's a story. Just thinking about it makes me nervous,  
like watching video of the Dalai Lama brushing away

a huge mandala of colored sand, pouring it back  
into nonexistence. Too bad we can't all be so cavalier.

Cho had locks, chains, hollow  
points made to bloom in the brain

of Liviu Librescu who survived the Focșani ghetto  
so he could die bracing a door.

Better scope out the exits. Better sit with your back  
against the wall. Keep an eye on the nervous types, silent

types, guys in bulky jackets. Better check beneath your seat  
for a suitcase full of stories, a backpack full of nails.

Better bow down to the body.



## Stay and Go

*Tyler Barton*

In Jersey, we did neither.

My boyfriend and I just rode the elevator. At the Hampton all weekend, we pranked guests, conducted social experiments, collected data we never wrote down. Facing the wall, our backs to the elevator doors, we challenged everyone to join us in our error. Our metrics: how many people would turn to stand like us? How long until they flipped? How many seconds until everyone in the elevator stood backward like us runaways? Most turned immediately. We hid our faces. If the audience asked questions, we kept silent. That's what Marco called everyone else: audience. Only once did someone try to correct us—an outlier, meaningless, but I remember her French tips, zebra-stripes, the knock her stilettos made on the marble. *Son*, she whispered, *turn around*. I pulled a glossy paper bird from my pocket, handed it to her, and said, *Sbbb*.



What waited in our room was a big bleach stain on the carpet—a mistake in my makeover, and it stank. Marco pinched me some glasses from the hotel bar and my disguise was complete. Now I was a man—astute, escaped, sixteen, free, my blond-hair leaning a little green—who looked nothing like the photo of the boy on the news. They said I'd been missing for two days, but we didn't like that term. Missing. Was there a word for somewhere between *lost* and *found*?

We never left the Hampton. From the elevator, we could feel what the streets of Newark offered us, and feeling was enough—the long breath of possibility, a little fear, a little hope, even that faint, foul scent of crab. We held on to that. We lingered. If we hung out in the room at all it was for sex, or showers, or we passed time coloring each other's hair and folding the pages of porno mags into origami. For me it was a skill I believed someday, somehow, might come in handy—patience, focus, how to see a line before it's there. I made animals; Marco, aircraft. He had dark, wide, stubborn hair I could pin down into braids and dye individually. His dreads looked like Nerds Rope. Nights, I toyed with those cords until he slept and then penned muddled, unsendable letters to my mother on hotel stationary.



Marco's favorite act—we called it *The No You*—was where we'd stand as close as possible to the doors, a few other passengers behind us, and wait for the elevator to open on the lobby. Then, one of us would motion for the other to go first. *No, you, the other would say.*

*Ob, but I insist.*

*You're so polite, but seriously, it's all you.*

*No, you.*

*You.*

*You!*

Eventually the people waiting behind us would angle their way out, hurrying past before the doors trapped everyone in. We kept a timer. The record was set when the doors closed and not a single person had left. Together we all rode right back up. I laughed so hard Marco had to hold me.



We never agreed on much, but we were firm in our belief that the true draw of a hotel was its elevator. Tight space, dim light, the lottery of who will join that awkward, heavy quiet. The elevator is the trip. The elevator means you're almost

there. It's almost sex, almost dinner, almost show, museum, zoo, almost sleeping spread wide as a starfish. Almost a scalding shower, almost a cab ride. In an elevator there's not much to do except be alive around each other. Most just look at their shoes, or their phones (we'd ditched ours for fear of tracking), or those glowing buttons. If you're brave you can look at other people's faces—you're allowed—but no one does. If you're us, you can hand them a horse folded out of porn. We were romantic in that way, in our need to unseam social norms. We were whispering our message: the whole essence of travel is distilled into middle spaces. Empty moments. Though common knowledge says an elevator is for people with a place to go, we said no. We rode over and over and over.

Our place to be right now was here.



Marco had come into some money the day he turned eighteen, two weeks earlier, something about a second uncle who had, for a brief and litigious time, been mayor of the city of Las Vegas. We didn't know what we were doing in Newark, or anywhere. We were working through it at the Hampton. Sometimes we ordered room service cocktails, but we never went into bars to use our fake IDs. By Sunday, it'd been three days at that hotel. We sat on the window-side loveseat in our room like, Okay, let's figure this out: we can go north. A ton of cheap land in Maine. We could try Canada, where health insurance is a right. We could go home and kill our parents, haha.

"Okay," I said. "Seriously, let's make a plan."

Marco laughed and flew his porno plane—smack—into the window.



The origami I obsessed over that weekend was this bird called a swallow. It's a bitch because you have to unfold the whole thing completely just to get a final crease in the beak. You spend half an hour crafting and then you have to take each piece apart to finish. My hands would shake like the hotel was coming down. *Chill out*, Marco would whine. *I'm really trying*, I'd say.



Instead of a plan, we spent Sunday afternoon devising new ruses. We returned to the elevator, dragging in a chair from our room. I wore a dress and sat with a magazine in my lap. When the box was full of people in severe heels, hairspray, and luminescent dresses, it began. Marco entered in a bathrobe fashioned as a lab-coat, holding a clipboard he'd nabbed from the front desk. He placed a hand on my shoulder and my whole body raced with anticipation. Then, he spoke with a deep, doctorly, bedside manner: "Ma'am, we have the results."

"Oh god," I sighed. "Give it to me straight." I forgot to mention I was wearing my Lady Gaga wig—white-blond with those goddess bangs—the one I used on the getaway drive from Pennsylvania. I'd taken to sleeping with it on, even though we'd cut and dyed my hair to hell.

Marco took a deep breath, put a hand on my shoulder, and said, "You're a homosexual."

Here I sobbed on cue.

That night I learned of my talent for crying on command. All I had to do was conjure up my mother's face thinking about my face. The lenses of my glasses got wet and fogged.

Marco asked the passengers to pray for me. As the elevator doors pulled open, someone clapped, ruining everything. I threw the wig on the floor. We wanted to create discomfort, not entertainment. We didn't understand that they were the same thing.



I think that what Marco and I truly wanted was to be in that box when the machine got stuck between floors, to be trapped and not at fault for it, to have men in yellow uniforms pry open the doors and pull us to safety. At least—I think—that's what I wanted.

So, that night, we rode into morning. But something was off. Waking up in a Hampton on a Monday would feel, just, wrong. The hotel totally loses cachet if there's no next destination. How do you savor the middle if there is no end? You only create the page because you know it will be a bird. Plus, honestly, how much of Marco's money were we going to spend on these games? We'd had three days to figure it out.

We paced the 8x8 box of the Hampton's elevator #3. No one else was getting on. The sun—you could see it from the 18<sup>th</sup> floor window each time the doors slid open—had begun to bubble above the skyline, and that's when a security guard walked into the elevator.

"I've heard about you two," he said. His uniform was too small and his tattoos showed.

Marco immediately began speaking in Spanish (*Vete, audiencia!*). I did some quasi-ASL, random gestures, eventually moving my fingers like scissors, pantomiming slicing off my ears.

"So you're artists," he said, ripping the wig from my head. "An artist worth \$10,000 dollars." Then he had Marco by a braid. "An artist worth a long sentence for kidnapping a minor." The elevator stopped. The doors weren't opening. He killed his squawking radio.

Marco promised to dye the guard's hair any color he wanted. I offered an origami dog.

Then a blowjob.

Marco laughed but looked at me sideways like, *How much of this is a joke?*

My offer hung there in the air, and as the doors parted, the guard started to smile. Marco shoved him hard, and we took off.

---

Growing up I learned something I don't think most kids know, which is that the best part of a vacation is before it ever starts. That preceding day and a half when the thing feels finally here, when you're packing, singing, making plans for

classmates to collect your worksheets—the restless sleep you take on the eve of the drive. Nothing, not even the first turn in the road, the first stop at Sunoco, the first rip in a bag of Sun Chips, nothing yet has ended. No one is screaming. Neither parent has had *Enough*. The single ticket flight back to Pennsylvania is still unbooked. A jellyfish has not yet stung you. A stranger is not pissing in your hand.

What I mean is the night before Marco came for me—sleeping in the backyard on the broken trampoline, the black vinyl bed sagging into the wet grass—was the best day of my life. That restless sleep contained every part of the world.

I remember I woke to the rattling of the springs, terrified.



After the guard, we switched hotels. The Marriott was no destination, but there we were, stuck in another interim space. These elevators had A/C, colored lights, and the weirdest thing ever: doors on either side of the compartment. You'd reach a floor and have to guess which set would open. It unnerved me.

But then Marco discovered how, at the top floor, both doors opened at once. The new plan was to stand outside the elevator, and when those doors slid open: run, leap, clear the empty elevator completely. I tried to imagine us landing firm-footed in the opposite lobby.

We stood on the twenty-fourth story and waited for the bell to ding. For our path to open. For the double row of doors to unfold like a swallow.

And when they did, we saw straight through to the other side.

*You, he said.*

*No you, I mean it.*

## God-shaped Woman

What it is to dusk  
her neck, its gleaming

sun. To be a slave:  
the pull of light,

the chain's idle  
bind. She draws

you into a tale—  
she is thin, a slight

curve, and cannot  
move to infinity.

You, pacing her  
tower's garden, trample

the heads of poppies.  
When she tells you

to climb the arc  
of the cypress to fetch

her the ripe, hanging  
moon,

you swoon. But once  
she bends,

and her eyes candle,  
you understand:

*Life is a game.*

Then you cannot look  
at her, just as

she cannot see  
herself in a mirror.

## Symptoms of Misunderstanding: Poetry & Art in the New Millennium

(Or, Claiming Marclay's *The Clock as Poetry*)

For the first six months of 2017, *ArtForum* used the word “poetic” in print or online sixty-seven times. Five of those times, the word was used to describe some form of writing, including one book of poetry; the other sixty-two times, it was used to describe sculpture, painting, video, photography, drawings, theatre, choreography, collage, woodcuts, textile, architecture, concept art, mixed-media, a documentary, installations, historical and contemporary art movements, and notable museum or gallery events.

It's no big secret that artists and art critics have co-opted the word “poetic” to describe art. But just what does the word mean to non-poets? Do the artists know? Do the critics? Do poets?

Seemingly, no one can define the term. It's a term dropped and left: either it is so widely understood that it needs no explanation, or—more likely—none of us knows what it means. Generally, it's clear that when someone uses the word “poetic” to describe art, she means to give the artist a great compliment. In reality, a greatly vague compliment is given.

According to the dictionary, no definition of “poetic” eludes *poetry*—using the word means making a connection to the art of writing verse. So why doesn't this happen? Or why isn't it clear when it does happen?

Charlotte Higgins, the chief arts writer for *The Guardian*, began her April 2013 review of Peter Doig's retrospective at the Scottish National Gallery with these words:

A lone figure walking beside an indigo swimming pool; a boat passing before the entrance of a cave as a great black bird swoops by; a girl dressed in white, clambering high in the branches of a vast tree on a starlit night: these are some of the strange and poetic recent subjects of the painter Peter Doig.

The article's headline also features the word "poetic"—though nowhere in the article does Higgins venture to explain how or why Doig's work is poetic. The reader is left to make the connection on her own—which means poetry ultimately remains detached from Doig's paintings.

A 2004 article from *Tate Etc.* is another example of the divide between the two disciplines. The article, titled "He is Poetic, but . . ." is a transcript of a conversation between artists and critics regarding the work of painter Luc Tuymans. Participants included Adrian Searle, Paulina Olowaska, Chris Ofili, and Peter Doig (of the retrospective noted above).

[...]

*Paulina Olowaska*

And how about [Giorgio] Morandi?

*Adrian Searle*

[Luc] Tuymans wrote somewhere that he thought Morandi was 'poetic bullshit.'

*Paulina Olowaska*

That's terrible.

*Chris Ofili*

I think Tuymans has a habit of making brash statements. You can say Morandi is 'poetic bullshit,' but it's just muscle flexing. Tuymans though, is a poetic painter.

*Paulina Olowaska*

He is poetic, but he has a very specific idea about what poetic means. Anything can be poetic, and poetry can be violent. A bouncer can be a poet. He was a bouncer himself, was he not?

*Adrian Searle*

Yes, he used to tell everyone that story.

*Paulina Olowaska*

He loves anecdotes. What do you think of his idea of anecdotes in connection to the actual work?

[...]

A much more interesting direction for this conversation would have been for Olowaska (or any of the participants) to elaborate on Tuymans's "very specific idea about what poetic means." They could have asked, "How is his work poetic? What in his paintings justifies this description?" Instead, a vague assertion is made that "[a]nything can be poetic"—and then the conversation moves on to a discussion of how anecdotes fuel Tuymans's work. (Anecdotes: the antithesis of poetry?)

In her book *Where Art Belongs*, art critic Chris Kraus explains, "For years writers have played a circumscribed role in the visual art world. Our job is to write about art; to give it a language that translates into value." Kraus believes that writing is more than just a tool to give meaning to art—that it, too, is an art. Most artists probably believe this as well. But sometimes the language of the art world suggests otherwise.

Darren Bader, an artist selected for inclusion in the 2014 Whitney Biennial and the recipient of the 2013 Calder Prize, showed at Andrew Kreps Gallery in June 2014. Speaking about the show to *ArtForum*, he said: "[A]rt is commonly intuited as a home for the poetic [...] there are some good 'poets' out there. Mediocrity is normal, but good poetry is what matters." What does he mean? *ArtForum* didn't ask.

A few years later, in 2015, Bader published fifteen poems called *Round Room* as part of his first solo show, "Reading Writing Arithmetic," at Radio Athènes. The poems, which are available for download through his website, are original works by Bader that were translated from English into Ancient Greek into Modern Greek and then back into English. The premise is interesting enough. He explains, "The

necessary precondition to revel in the cascades of language and dislocations of meaning more than once is bilinguality.”

While Bader’s interest and respect for language is itself respectable, too often the poems of *Round Room* disappoint, mostly due to his use of tired subjects prone to cliché. Descriptions of “vast desire,” “love,” and “time” abound: “Love may have been lost in time / Yet the heart still remembers it.” The poems resemble the contents of a teenage diary more than they do the contents of an international art show. And perhaps that is how Bader wanted it: to give away a chapbook of poetry on opening night in order to generate some buzz for his show at Radio Athènes—not as art itself.

In 2010, installation artist, painter, and sculptor Dan Colen had a solo exhibit at Gagosian Gallery, simply titled “Poetry.” It had zero poems in it.

Jerry Saltz described the show as having “paintings made of cheesy materials; kicked-over tricked-out motorcycles; those skateboard ramps.” Purportedly, every piece sold, with prices starting at \$300,000. (Is it worth mentioning that Jane Hirshfield, who wrote one of the best-selling poetry books of 2011, made only \$6,000 in royalties? But it’s not about the money.)

Colen’s statement for his show, “Poetry,” reads: “This show has a lot to do with failure and potential, accident and intention, and time at its most minute and most infinite. It’s about how powerful a single simple gesture can be.” Here, poetry is not mentioned. In reviews of the show, poetry is not mentioned.



In Paris in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—one of the most romanticized eras of art—there was, as Stephen Spender puts it, “a marriage between literature and painting.”

It was, indeed, a time of great collaboration and experimentation: the principles of cubism and surrealism pervaded art and literary culture, eventually spreading to music, theatre, philosophy, and even politics. The effect was global, but it was felt most intimately between two groups in particular: the poets and the painters.

LeRoy C. Breunig documents the relationship in the introduction to his anthology, *The Cubist Poets in Paris*: “The painters illustrated the poets’ poems and

painted their portraits; the poets wrote the painters' praise and defended them in journalistic wars. They loaned each other money, gave shelter to each other in times of need, inspired each other, and fortified each other's resolve through thick and thin."

Gertrude Stein's apartment at 27 rue de Fleurus was a headquarters for the two groups to meet and discuss ideas. Stein, for example, enjoyed a famous, lifelong friendship with Picasso. (Of the portrait he painted of her, she said, "I was and still am satisfied with my portrait, for me it is I, and it is the only reproduction of me which is always I, for me." She returned the gesture by writing him a portrait poem—"If I Told Him"—in the cubist style.) Other poets and artists—André Breton, Max Jacob, Paul Klee, Henri Matisse, Guillaume Apollinaire—forged similar bonds. Robert Motherwell famously noted, "One can only marvel at the instinct of Parisian painters to keep their art in the hands of poets."

This tradition continued in other movements as well, including the Fluxus movement of the '60s and '70s, which was even more inclusive of other disciplines. Artists, writers, composers, actors, playwrights, economists, scholars, and others participated in this international movement to break down barriers between disciplines and become practitioners of "intermedia." Hannah Higgins writes in her book *Fluxus Experience* about the gatherings that artist Mary Bauermeister hosted in her atelier in Cologne:

Both [John] Cage's class and the Cologne atelier can be described as comparatively non-hierarchical exchanges of information across national, disciplinary, and age boundaries, since the class and atelier were basically free exchanges among many kinds of artists. It comes as no surprise that the Fluxus movement evolving from these situations was also international, interdisciplinary, and generationally broad (with artists of three generations from the United States, every Western and Eastern European country, and Korea and Japan working in sound, text, performance, and new media).

So why today, in an era of interconnectivity with ever-increasing modes for collaboration, does the relationship between poets and artists feel strained?

What if Dan Colen's poemless show, "Poetry," did include pieces that were actually "poetic"? What if he wrote poetry, or collaborated with a poet, and had the poems installed on the walls of Gagosian?

That very thing happened one year earlier at a different Chelsea Gallery. The Bernadette Corporation, an international group of artists, organized a show that featured two things:

- 1) photographs marketing a fake denim company, and 2) a large-scale printout of their 130-page poem, *A Billion and Change*, also referred to as *The Complete Poem*.

Corinna Kirsch describes the collective: "For the past eighteen years, the Bernadette Corporation has taken a rebellious stance toward art: they've designed clothes, published magazines, customized terry cloth towels, altering just about anything that's not a painting on canvas. They don't give a damn; anything goes with their corporate ethos, because the world as we know it is a shithole."

With that in mind, it wouldn't be out of the question that their epic poem, *A Billion and Change*, was created to rankle the New York art scene.

The poem begins with an epigraph from an A.R. Ammons poem, "Garbage":

scientists plunge into matter looking for the  
matter but the matter lessens and, looked too  
far into, expands away: it was insubstantial all  
along:


And from there, the poem goes on to discuss the insubstantial:

Skinnyjeans are very tight.  
Standing next to denim butts dancing.  
I can't fall asleep on the sidewalk anymore.  
Let's watch your figures in skinnyjeans.

In her review of the show, Kraus states that Bernadette Corporation's move to use poetry—actual poetry “displayed like a work of art in a gallery space”—was “terrifying to visual artists” and “deeply disturbing to most.” She continues, describing overheard reactions to *A Billion and Change*, “Is it sincere, or is it a parody? Is it—umm, any good?”

Jim Fletcher, a member of Bernadette Corporation, also recalled the overwhelming reaction at the opening—people asking, “Is this a real poem?”

Kraus asserts that yes—it is a fantastic poem. It is “both sincere *and* a parody”—which is to echo Mary Ruefle's idea that so many great pieces of art (poems and otherwise) are both sincere and irreverent. The artist R.H. Quaytman agrees: “[It] is totally a real poem, actually.”




In 2012 and 2013, Denver's Museum of Contemporary Art hosted “Postscript: Writing after Conceptual Art”—an exhibition dedicated to “the work of over fifty artists and writers exploring the artistic possibilities of language.” The exhibit was an ambitious one, tracing conceptual art's history back to the Art & Language movement. It's an exhibit that ultimately works to eliminate the divide between conceptual artists and writers.

In conjunction with the exhibit, Denver's MCA hosted discussions between conceptual artists and poets in New York City. Surveys were given to audience members after each event. One of the survey questions asked, “What is the biggest problem with conversations between artists and poets?”

One audience member responded, “[T]he insistence on a distinction between the two titles, ‘artist’ and ‘poet.’ These are constructions that distract and present barriers between people who otherwise should experience constant, smooth dialogue.”

Another person answered the same question, “People talk to poets? It's a nice thought, anyway.”



The distance between poetry and art today perplexes and disappoints. At best, it's a cold but polite distance in which the art forms just don't understand each

other; at worst, it's a deliberate divide in which the art world appropriates and mimics surface-level elements of poetry while excluding the real thing.

Is poetry to blame for any of this?

In July 2017, poet, essayist, and editor Matthew Zapruder published an essay in *The New York Times* called "Understanding Poetry is More Straightforward than You Think." He begins the essay,

Do you remember, as I do, how in the classroom poems were so often taught as if they were riddles? What is the poet really trying to say here? What is the theme or message of this poem? What does this word 'purple' or 'flower' or 'grass' really mean? Like classical music, poetry has an unfortunate reputation for requiring special training and education to appreciate, which takes readers away from its true strangeness, and makes most of us feel as if we haven't studied enough to read it.

Perhaps Zapruder is right, and that poetry's reputation doesn't make it easy for genuine appreciation to happen, let alone organic, interdisciplinary collaboration. Perhaps some people view poetry as too mysterious, too untouchable, as something beautiful but incapable of being fully understood. And so it is put on a shelf, out of reach, and perhaps those people invoke its name only to humbly compare something that is not a poem to the glorious puzzle that is one. Perhaps when they describe a Tuymans painting as poetic, they are really saying, "Like poetry, this is too difficult to try and describe but we know it's good."

Perhaps those people have it all wrong. Could it be as simple as what da Vinci recorded in one of his notebooks? "Painting is poetry that is seen rather than felt, and poetry is painting that is felt rather than seen." It could be.

---

Wallace Stevens asks us to "Consider":

- a) That the whole world is material for poetry;
- b) That there is not a specifically poetic material.

He is saying that poetry can be found anywhere. Which means anything can be poetic. Which means Paulina Olowaska was right. Kind of.

Stevens is inviting poetry to be discovered in *anything*, perhaps especially visual art (cf. his book inspired by Picasso's "The Old Guitar"). He is encouraging the creation of "poetic" paintings, sculptures, drawings, films, video games—and I'm agreeing with him, but with one stipulation: Let's enlist poetry.

Many visual artists already do so, and with great success. Installation artist Ann Hamilton identifies poetry as a major influence, and cites her friendship with poet Ann Lauterbach as being integral to her work (see *Whitecloth*, their collaboration). Experimental filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky credits John Ashbery as an early inspiration. A friend of Rexroth, Spicer, and Ginsberg, video artist Stan Brakhage said, "Probably in my life, my richest correspondence has been with poets."

How interesting would visual art be if poetry were included in more of it? If Gregory Crewdson staged a photograph inspired by Robert Creeley's "The Rain"? If Cecily Brown made a series of paintings after Sharon Olds' first book, *Satan Says*? If Thomas Sayers Ellis and Kehinde Wiley had a show together, featuring poems and photographs by Ellis and paintings by Wiley? If Ryan Trecartin read D. A. Powell? If D. A. Powell watched Ryan Trecartin's videos? If a sculpture student were presented with the work of poet Cathy Park Hong and painter Kerry James Marshall in a graduate-level class, and was inspired by both?

And maybe these things are already happening. I hope they are. But let's see more evidence of it. And let's be more responsible with our language while we create.

Artistic collaboration happens all the time. Nick Flynn, a poet and memoirist, teaches a course on cross-discipline collaboration at the University of Houston and has himself collaborated with dancers, graphic artists, musicians, and video artists. Collage artist Jon Beacham describes his most recent collaboration with poet Joshua Beckman, *Porch Light (lamp and chair)*: "It's not just a poetry book. It's not just a book of visual art. It's not just a handmade book. It's a little bit of all those things, and every one subtly presented."

Ann Hamilton is a master of creating art from "a little bit of all of those things." In December 2012, her show, "the event of a thread" opened at The Armory in New York City. The massive installation included oversized swings,

columns of shifting white cloth, pigeons that were caught and released each evening, readings of concordances by professional vocalists, and writing from several poets, including Natalie Shapero, Khadijah Queen, and Sara Grossman. An artist who has long used language as a grounding medium in her work, Hamilton (dubbed a “poet-philosopher” by *The New York Times*) proves that it is possible to create truly “poetic” visual art.

But is it possible for visual art to be “poetic” without having ties to language?



Christian Marclay’s 24-hour video collage *The Clock* is proof that non-language-based art can be “poetic.” The word was forced out of me by my partner, a visual artist who was pleasantly surprised by my interest in *The Clock*. “What about it do you love?” he asked as we emerged from our first session of Clock-watching at Ohio State’s Wexner Center for the Arts.

I bumbled through an explanation for several minutes before realizing that what I really loved about *The Clock* was that it reminded me of my favorite poems.

Despite it never being described as such in its dozens of high-profile reviews (and by critics who have generously applied the term to other pieces of contemporary art), *The Clock* is poetic. Here are five reasons why:

### 1. Element of Surprise

To make what many critics are calling a masterpiece, Marclay deftly stitched together thousands of clips from movies and television in which timepieces are featured. The result is a 24-hour video that plays in real time. Yes: *The Clock* is a clock. Every minute of the day is depicted on screen, spliced between shots that are wonderful to watch due to the editing.

In one scene, Marclay connects a foggy underwater shot of a large blue fish about to be hooked to a hallway shot with a door unlatching. Though the fish is now off-screen, the sound of the door clicking open suggests the fish’s capture and imminent death. A few minutes later, a pink plastic watering can is kicked over and the screen bursts into flames. A little before 6:00 p.m., the Southern resistance

fighter from the black and white short film, *An Occurrence at Owl Street Bridge*, is hung from a bridge that overlooks water. We barely see him hit the water when Marclay cuts to a color movie of a rocket shooting out of the water. It's a smart edit that nods to what happens next in the original film: the man escapes.

Marclay's pairings sometimes make sense and are sometimes absurd. The unpredictability of his editing heightens the viewer's interest. Around noon, he pairs a black-and-white shot of a bloated corpse lying among trash with a color shot of a woman smiling beneath a parasol. It's strange cinema that—though largely sourced from Hollywood—we never see in Hollywood.

This quality—the ability to surprise your audience—is a definitive quality in the best poems. Through language, poets can bridge words and ideas that seem unbridgeable. I love it when Lucie Brock-Broido describes light as being “[o]chre-wedded,” when Robert Lowell personifies hay by making it “creak” toward the barn, when Gertrude Stein defines “salad” as a “a good cake,” when Maggie Nelson tells us sex is “pink ants.”

Poet and novelist Stephen Dobyns writes, “We call a work original when it surprises [ . . . ] and expands our preconceptions of the limits of the form. A given piece must appear both inevitable and surprising.”

André Breton's “Free Union” (published in 1931 and translated by David Antin) surprises the reader with every line:

FREE UNION (excerpt)

My wife whose hair is a brush fire  
Whose thoughts are summer lighting  
Whose waist is an hourglass  
Whose waist is the waist of an otter caught in the teeth of a tiger  
Whose mouth is a bright cockade with the fragrance of a star of the first magnitude  
Whose teeth leave prints like the tracks of white mice over snow

This poem made me breathless when I first encountered it, and permanently altered the course of my writing. Every line is anti-cliché: “My wife whose eyelashes are strokes in the handwriting of a child.”

Though the structure of the poem follows a formula, the images in this poem (like in so many Breton poems) are unnervingly original. The speaker's strange comparisons (wrists to matches, fingers to fresh cut hay) are to blame, but so is Breton's unconventional style of writing a love poem. "[My wife] with the sex of an alga and old-fashioned candies." It's *not* a typical love poem, and it's not a flattering portrayal of his wife. Breton's refusal to follow the conventions of the love poem is in itself a fantastic surprise.

## 2. Nixing Narrative

I usually don't enjoy watching movies: I too easily sense the time passing, the herculean effort for everything to seem realistic, the inevitable yet unconvincing love story, the intent to gain a buck . . . Even a beautifully shot movie like *Gravity* was, for me, tarnished by an extraneous and vapid mother/daughter relationship. (Just show me the panning shots of space! Forget manipulating me with the death of a child whom the audience never meets.)

Devices like the dead daughter in *Gravity* are proof that American audiences are addicted to narrative. "Narrative, the great narcotic," writer, filmmaker, and art critic Chris Kraus begrudges. But in *The Clock*, Marclay doesn't take the bait. Featuring clips from thousands of movies and television programs, *The Clock* jumps from one to the next without building plot, adding to an established conflict, or developing characters.

"Marclay's sources are works of narrative, which means they turn on the expectation of what will happen next," A.O. Scott wrote in *The New York Times*. "But what happens next is that you are thrown [ . . . ] into another movie." In *The New Yorker*, Daniel Zalewski writes, "Marclay often included several clips from a movie in a single hour, daring viewers to anticipate a big plot turn—which never arrives. Nine clips show residents of Elm Street preparing for sleep, but Freddy Krueger doesn't appear. At 11:57 p.m., a young Vanessa Paradis proposes sex to a boy while disrobing him. At 1:19 a.m., they're sleeping in separate beds. Did they do it?" The answer is irrelevant. Marclay has left many questions unanswered because he did not make *The Clock* to tell a story. Zalewski ultimately concludes that *The Clock* is "anti-narrative."

G.C. Waldrep begins his first book of poems, *Goldbeater's Skin*, with the line, "I do not want story. Story has had enough." What follows is a book rich in style,

diction, and lyricism. The poems are as dense as cinderblocks—brimming with allusions and comprised of words like “flensed,” “ictus,” and “fossae.” If you’re wanting narrative, this isn’t the book for you. *Goldbeater’s Skin* is a book built more out of words than ideas—which is similar to Marclay, whose *Clock* is built on snippets, and not any one overarching narrative.

John Ashbery published his first book in 1956; *Some Trees* was selected by W.H. Auden to win the Yale Series for Younger Poets Prize. The Poetry Foundation reports that Auden “famously confessed later that he hadn’t understood a word of the winning manuscript.” In 1998, after his publication of his seventeenth book, William Logan noted that “Ashbery’s poems revel in their detachments, their refusal of narrative [ . . . ] Few poets have so cleverly manipulated, or just plain tortured, our soiled desire for meaning. [Ashbery] reminds us that most poets who give us meaning don’t know what they’re talking about.”

William Carlos Williams defines a poem as “a small (or large) machine made out of words.” Made out of words—not ideas. This idea is echoed in the famous conversation between painter Edgar Degas and poet Stéphane Mallarmé. Degas told Mallarmé that he wanted to be a poet, but that he couldn’t seem to write well, even though “he was full of ideas.” Mallarmé is said to have responded, “My dear Degas, poems are not made out of ideas. They’re made out of words.” Poets build from words, just as Marclay builds from images and fragments of scenes, separated from the storyline.

Poet Sarah Gridley writes in her second book, *Green is the Orator*, “I could go / for a day / in the word canteen.” Her poetry is defined by pushing words into new territories. She reassigns meaning through bold stylistic choices: odd line breaks, unusual word pairings, strange syntax, wordplay. “Pick a prefix for heart- / Or pick a prefix for every object you have touched,” she writes in “Where Hardly Hearth Exists,” inviting the reader to reassign word meaning with her.

In her first book, the following poem appears:

#### SWAYAMVARA

Hello, Lovely.

Thank you for leaving that tone in my machine. I?

am dealing blackjack. A breeze is tampering with a chandelier.

A crowd  
has gathered, all gloved. A peacock fans on a green felt table,  
all eyes. A strange power  
lights the garden. Need I say who, in the corner, coughing?

A cigar box opens.  
The eyes raise. And I chose you. As if to explain flowers inlaid  
in a lady's cabinet. Or peace in a dripping grotto. Or evacuation of  
the flesh  
through secret, ivory keys.

Remember, Dearlungs, the body un-architected? Piled in a glass  
case, the played-out reeds?  
The grass? The hoppers? The thousand stops?  
Hello, Lovely.

Hello.

Gridley opens conversationally, warmly, and then presents a list of seemingly unrelated objects interspersed with questions—obscuring narrative. The idiom “all eyes” is used to emphasize the double-green we see: a peacock with feathers splayed stands atop a green felt table, the “eyes” also referring to the markings on the feathers themselves. “Inlaid” comes just before the same sounds in a different form: “in a lady’s.” Gridley takes a familiar abstract noun, “peace,” and places with a tactile descriptor, “dripping.” She divides the compound noun “grasshopper” in the penultimate line: “The grass? The hoppers?” The poem ends with the same word that opened it, “Hello”—giving the impression that it’s not finished. Or perhaps, like *The Clock*, it loops back on itself.

### 3. Structured Unstructure

Films have a clear starting and stopping point. Even those with non-linear plot lines follow a linear progression: beginning, middle, end. Everyone knew

when to show up to the theatre when *Pulp Fiction* was playing, and everyone knew when to get up and leave.

What happens when that isn't clear? When the film is a 24-hour looping video collage with no credits that roll at the end because there is no end?

Marclay wants the viewer to have the freedom to enter and exit *The Clock* at any time—stay for ten minutes or stay for three hours. It begins when you want it to begin, and it ends when you want it to end.

This way of watching is similar to how I read poetry. Though books of poems of course have an intended sequence, reading the poems out of order, as many readers of poetry do, doesn't ruin the book. (Apply the same technique when reading a novel, and it's literally a different story.)

This kind of reading experience is sometimes evident in singular poems. In *Dancing in Odessa*, Ilya Kaminsky fractures his long poem "Natalia" in two parts without assigning a reading order to either one. On the top of each page is what looks like a traditional poem: verse broken into lines. On the bottom half of each page, set up almost like a footnote, is a prose poem. The reader decides which section to read first—and how (or if) they connect.

Jamaal May wrote this stunning contrapuntal, which appeared in his debut, *Hum*:

#### I DO HAVE A SEAM

and you see it, there for you	in the center of my chest, of strings
to pull, a chrome zipper,	interlocking throat to sternum
a hollow from belly to thigh	or there is only a hole, barely
large enough for your	opening. Come soon,
puncture. Pull apart until	my halves billow open, and
muscle, sinew, and organ are	

awake in your room. Woman, with plumb thumbs, woman I'd fail for— careful seamstress, you stitch my selvage as it frays, but do you know how to be thread, spooled through	right there, pulsing here within reach, woman with slender fingers— hello, you needle in my sternum— you know how ragged I've been, and why I've always wanted the sewing machine of your hands.
--	---

May invites the reader to read the poem column by column, up and down, or by jumping across lines left to right. Any way of reading this poem is correct.

The poem's versatility does not mean it is without structure—it is a tightly edited contrapuntal. Similarly, *The Clock* is not indiscriminate. Its entire premise centers on time, civilization's most basic structural element. But within these confines, Marclay and May and Kaminsky (and many others) are free to push the limits of their art.

At a 2007 lecture in New York, poet Srikanth Reddy discussed how John Ashbery embedded forms into his otherwise form-less poems. This, Reddy argued, did not diminish Ashbery's experimental style, but rather emboldened it. The shadow of a sonnet amid blank verse served as a skeleton, some structure, to highlight the experimental voice that makes Ashbery Ashbery.

#### 4. Irreverence & Sincerity

In a Q&A session at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Marclay refuted a claim that he was a movie buff, and admitted to not even liking movies that much. (I think

of Marianne Moore's famous line about poetry: "I, too, dislike it.") He continued, without humor, "I really know nothing about cinema." This fact makes clear that *The Clock* is not meant to honor cinema so much as to manipulate it. Marclay is a collage artist, and film is just one of his materials. In using it, he realized an opportunity to toy with and even exploit popular methods of editing film.

"By putting the clips back into real time, it's contradicting what film is," Marclay explained to Zalewski, writing for *The New Yorker*. "You become aware of how film is constructed—of these devices and tropes they constantly use. Like, if someone turns abruptly, you expect someone else to be in the next cut. An actor looks down at his watch and, suddenly, you have a close-up of the watch. But, if the first clip is in black-and-white and the next is in color, you know you've been fooled." Through editing, Marclay conflates movies of different eras, different languages, different genres, different aesthetics. His mix-matching is sometimes jarring, often funny, and always prepossessing.

You could say Marclay's casual way of talking about his medium is irreverent; the stolen clips from thousands of movies and television shows (used without permission) suggest legal irreverence at the least. Poet Mary Ruefle argues that all art is irreverent: "[T]he newly made thing flies in the face of the already created and as such is based on negation (what already exists is simply not enough!)." In this way, *The Clock* is doubly irreverent, as it is made of 100 percent found material: Marclay has made a movie from movies that have already been made.

Ruefle goes on to argue in her essay, "Kangaroo Beach," that irreverence is often deeply sincere, and sincerity is often deeply irreverent—two sides of the same coin. She cites Jim Morrison's barfed-on, pissed-on, graffitied grave in Paris as proof. Those who decorate his grave with such things are typically deeply "sincere in their homage and tribute." She continues, asking, "Was Walt Whitman irreverent or sincere when he wrote his first unrhymed poem (March 22, 1850)?"

Sandra Simonds' long poem, "Poetry is Stupid and I Want to Die," is a good example of how the two qualities co-exist, and are even symbiotic. An excerpt:

The way I love you is not as a sheriff  
searches for a walnut it's more violent and I can't stay in the moment

of this poem long enough for the feeling to unfold I owe the  
 therapist \$80 The woman wearing a fur coat with her six kids on a leash  
 who showed up to the South Georgia poetry reading in her stretchy jeans  
 I was proud to have been the host to that  
 the way one might write a hallelujah ode to a black hole  
 with roses and tulips shooting out of it Oh the grotesquerie  
 John Keats, you don't have to say "mother" anymore  
 This is my quietness, I am the bride and also the urn  
 And you are my foster child as I make you sit here  
 And listen to my prayers are sweeter than any rhyme  
 Sprouting out of a dog's skull the beautiful bud on the cold stone

Simonds covers many classic poetry topics in these thirteen lines (love, motherhood, death, the universe, flowers—even Keats and poetry itself), but with a biting tongue. Her honesty ("I owe the therapist \$80" and "I was proud to have been the host to that") makes the poem sincere.

In 2009, poets D. A. Powell and David Trinidad compiled a mash-up of celebrity autobiographies. In the style of Marclay's media sampling, they carefully excerpted and arranged lines from exactly 300 celebrity memoirs. Each sentence in their mash-up (a book titled *By Myself*) comes from a different source. The end result is an autobiography that is sprawling, hyperbolic, larger than life. The passage below, for example, includes lines from autobiographies from Johnny Cash, Dolly Parton, Marguerite Duras, Agatha Christie, the Duchess of Devonshire, and Tina Turner, among others:

The journey into addiction has been described so often by so many people in recent years that I don't believe a blow-by-blow account of my particular path would serve any useful purpose. Everybody knows I like buttercream frosting on my birthday cake. I was sunk. And then in walks Bea Arthur. I hadn't seen Bea in seven years. She and I performed a very suggestive dance with me blowing away on the saxophone while she climbed all over me. I have always regretted interrupting that experience. Now, like to Eleanor Rigby's

grave, nobody comes. I began to get confused and muddled over things. I'd lose weight and gain weight, never enough to make me obese, but I stopped working out. I didn't give a damn what I did, where I went, what happened to me. What the heart held back the anus couldn't: it let out all that was in it. If I had to spend my birthday alone in my room, I was sure as hell going to have a celebration. But after two weeks in there, my stomach went boof! That was my last connection with earth. I moved the butter.

Powell and Trinidad edited enough to make the writing make sense, but they've also left enough exposed edges to call attention to their process. Marclay is after the same thing: he wants you to question his process, which is to question his medium. He wants you to be aware of cinema's duplicity—to recognize that editing, sound, and lighting are tools meant to deceive. He even calls out the dishonesty of acting. At 11:56 a.m., Richard Gere in *Unfaithful* has a tortured conversation with his adulterous wife, played by Diane Lane. Less than ten minutes later, he appears in *American Gigolo*, dancing around shirtless, snorting coke, and singing, "The promise of love was written on your face."

In this way, Marclay has made *The Clock* a game. Most *Clock* viewers I've talked to mention how obsessively they search for the clock in each scene; it becomes more than a motif—it's a trick. But spotting it is not always so straightforward; *The Clock* is not clockwork. Scenes pass without any apparition of time. In others, clocks are broken. They move backwards. Big Ben explodes. Sometimes you hear the ticking but don't see the clock. Sometimes you don't hear the ticking but you do see the sundial, or perhaps the hourglass, filled with gold dust. Incidences like this make it clear that Marclay not only wanted to meddle with Hollywood's conventions, but also his own.

My favorite allusions to time are the ones in which clocks are destroyed, broken, ruined—where time is negated. Around 2:45, Harry Lloyd in *Safety Last!* hangs from the hands of a clock affixed to the top story of a downtown building. His weight causes the giant clock's hands to drop and twist, until eventually the dial swings forward and the clock is a mangled mess. Around 5:20 p.m., Lily from *Black Moon* can't figure out how to stop a series of ringing alarm clocks and so she

hurls them out of the window of an old woman's bedroom. Grandfather clocks are pushed over and dials are smashed as time becomes an object to experiment with. Around noon, Ben in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* realizes his watch has stopped, and asks Mlle. de Poitiers for the time. She turns to one of the students and asks to see her watch. The student replies, "Don't wear it anymore. Can't stand the ticking above my heart." In all of these scenes, time is negated.

Marclay explained to *The Economist Online* that "[i]f I asked you to watch a clock tick, you would get bored quickly. But there is enough action in this film to keep you entertained, so you forget the time, but then you're constantly reminded of it." Even though *The Clock* keeps impeccable time—every minute of every hour appears onscreen in real time—it's not tedious. It's addictive. Watching for twenty minutes easily becomes watching for two hours, and seeing twelve noon will make you hungry to watch twelve midnight.

Hollywood, on the other hand, cuts corners in order to heighten pacing and keep the viewer engaged (e.g. twenty-four hours of story becomes twelve minutes of real time, and so on). Even with this time bending, movies often feel tiresome, with canned plotlines and overstated dialogue. Is *The Clock* meant as criticism of Hollywood? Probably not. But it succeeds in ways that Hollywood doesn't.

### 5. Sound as Bridge

In the '80s, Marclay made a name for himself through musical experimentation. One of his early art pieces was an instrument he invented: the phonoguitar, which art critic Kris Paulsen describes as a "self-styled wearable turntable." Before record scratching became popular, Marclay was doing it on stage in New York clubs, alongside Sonic Youth and John Zorn.

These roots in sound experimentation are evident throughout *The Clock*. At 6:31 p.m., Marclay connects a string of scenes from different movies that have the same rhythm. We start with a ticking pocket watch, and then move to a woman methodically chopping vegetables. Next comes a scene of people exiting an elevator—their steps match the pace of both the ticking and the chopping. After that, we see a group of people exiting a building and snapping open their umbrellas—again, to the tick of the preceding scenes. One man's umbrella gets stuck, however, and Marclay's

rhythm hits a snag. Appropriately, the next shot is of a man crying—but the rhythm returns in the form of a boy squeaking his shoes across a waiting room floor.

Just as Marclay exploits the jump cut, he also meddles with both diegetic and non-diegetic sound. For example, he'll let an orchestra score swell and sprawl into other movies, only to shut it off like a faucet two scenes later, when a character, for example, opens a door. At 8:00 p.m., we see a digital clock but hear a pile-up of grandfather clock chimes. He's messing with us.

At 7:29 p.m., right after Nicole Kidman and Tom Cruise get ready for an evening out in *Eyes Wide Shut*, Marclay cuts to a black and white film where a man lifts a needle from a record player and says, "Let's not play that"—the music stops. Around 5:50 p.m., the score swells in *Cleo from 5 to 7* but shifts a minute later to a dramatic and ominous drumbeat, which Marclay pairs visually with a pendulum that abruptly halts mid-swing. At 5:43 p.m., Marclay lets the Delta Rhythm Boys' "Dem Bones" connect an exterior shot at dusk from *Rain Man* to an interior newsroom scene of *Being There*. Around 8:15 p.m., there is a montage of theatre scenes, and in one of them, a conductor moves to music that doesn't match his gestures at all. Sound and visuals chase each other and interact playfully like this throughout *The Clock*—evidence of Marclay's belief "in the power of visuals to evoke sound."

Some of my favorite poems similarly feature playful soundscapes. Catherine Wing's prose poem, "Oh You," for example, is a Steinian exploration of assonance using nearly all one-syllable words.

Oh scruff, your moth song's sung. You shortcut through my  
frost to long odds. Your buzz dumb luck locks onto my low  
moon, but your blood's wrong. You don't. You won't do. But  
pots of you, my mouth's drunk. Your shout shoots through  
my lord 'n' jury. My bound-by-thought shuts off, shuts up.  
You know, don't you? You know you do not do. Your soft  
knock counts down: my crumb's out, our hour's up. But you  
cur, you run roughshod up my old song; you don't fuck off  
you hold on. Thus, knot my hollows. Thus, crown my cup.

You bolt my rock. You burn my sun. Your south. My soon.  
 You should. My ought. But no, no, no, our oughts should  
 not.

The poem, an address to an unknown “you,” is a negation as well as a negotiation. The speaker here is recounting the reasons for rejection (“your blood’s wrong,” “you burn my sun”), and the sonic play heightens that. “Your buzz dumb luck locks onto my moon”—the speaker wants whoever or whatever it’s addressing to buzz off and move on. It could be that the poem is trying to escape itself: to unlock and detach from the shackles of language and the push to make meaning with words. Does the speaker get what she wants? Not entirely: “[Y]ou don’t fuck off / you hold on.” Just as *The Clock* is a collage stitched together by sound and visual cues, Wing uses end rhymes, slant rhymes, assonance, and alliteration to bridge seemingly disparate ideas.

*The Clock’s* best sound collages occur every hour on the hour, after the minute hand has circled the dial. Marclay ascribes to a “more is more” philosophy and piles on the chimes, the chords, the cuckoos, the car horns, the crowds scuttling through Grand Central Station. Noon and midnight are especially spectacular, though each hour (at least the dozen I’ve seen) are a sight to see. At 6:00 p.m., George Banks arrives home in *Mary Poppins*, singing the cheery musical number, “The Life I Lead.” The mood turns dark, however, as Marclay cuts to pounding, chord-heavy music to match the image of voyeur on a dark street. He makes another abrupt shift to include a cuckoo clock cuckooing, and then there’s that scintillating shot from 1947’s *Black Narcissus*: a nun ringing the 6 p.m. bell on the very edge of a steep Himalayan cliff. Poet Marie Howe once described Frank Bidart’s poetry as being “very loud in every way—like every possible knob is turned up as much as possible.” This is the description I would give Marclay’s editing style at the top of each hour—hyperbolic, excessive, outrageous. Just how far will he take it? Ironically, the 6:00 hour ends with a character from *The Time Machine* (the 1960 version) demanding, “Time. Have respect for it.”

As time ticks on, the boundaries between sound and image become blurry. At 1:37 a.m., dialogue from one movie continues even after Marclay cuts to another. At 1:45 a.m., the same wind soundtrack cycles through several cuts. Telephones ring from

one scene to the next and the sounds of a storm are heard in numerous shots; the rain turns on and off throughout the night. At 2:24 a.m., the sound of the creaking, sinking Titanic in *A Night to Remember* bleeds into a cozy, domestic scene of a couple in bed. It's as if the movies are different rooms in the same house, and the walls are paper-thin.

This echoing reminds me of the repetition that drives Thomas Sayers Ellis's brilliant poem "Or,": "Or Oreo, or / worse. Or ordinary. / Or your choice /of category // or / Color //or any color / other than Colored." Ellis's repetition of the word "or"—a word typically meant to indicate choice—here suggests limitation, or lack of choice. Similarly, his use of very short lines implies constraint. The sonic effect of repeating "or," the poem's anchor, is the effect Marclay achieves in his editing of *The Clock*—sounds, words, and ideas carry over from scene to scene, from line to line. Ellis's title, "Or,"—note the punctuation—is telling; the comma suggests continuity, something lingering, unfinished.



Marclay's *The Clock*, a colossal accomplishment and modern masterpiece, proves that yes: art can be "poetic." It proves that the word "poetry" (and all of its variants) need not be used to mystify, intellectualize, or elevate other art forms. It proves that art need not be language-based in order to earn the comparison to poetry. *The Clock* proves it's possible to use poetry without *using* poetry. To learn from it. To pay homage to it. To make better art because of it.



# Parachutes

*Joshua Wheeler*

## I. Memory

When it came time to harvest the pecans we'd always get out the parachutes. This was an amateur operation, just a dozen trees around the house and no fancy tree shakers or tractor harvesters. We'd gather nuts by hand and bucket and parachute in order to sell them around Alamogordo for a few bucks a bag. Granddaddy built the adobe house in 1953. He planted the trees soon after, one of his many side ventures. Mostly they were a prayer for shade during the long scorch that drags from winter to winter in Southern New Mexico. By the time I came around, three decades later, he and Grandmommy had moved up the street and my family had moved into the adobe house and me and my folks and my sisters were in charge of the pecan trees that had managed to slurp enough rain to grow into bona fide monsters. They shaded for sure, but they also shed a ton of nuts and hulls. Like any answered prayer, they were a nuisance if you were not industrious about upkeep.

Granddaddy had developed an ingenious system for streamlining the harvest. In October or November, before the nuts really started falling, we'd pull out a couple of huge parachutes he'd smuggled home from his job at the White Sands Missile Range, spread them out under a tree; those massive, white, nylon canopies covering all the gravel and sand and concrete, all the rock gardens Momma installed when the pecans sucked up all the water and conspired with droughts to kill any chance at lawn. The apex vent of a parachute, it turns out, fits right around a pecan trunk. The canopy spreads into a thirty-foot circle, getting under the most far-reaching branches. Our trees seemed ripped from the surface of a faraway planet when the parachutes were deployed, like they'd been flung through the universe and floated down amidst their billowing skirts until they stuck finally in our earth, our backyard. Pops and Granddaddy would climb a tree with a couple of broomsticks and shake the branches and jump on the branches and use the sticks to bang on the branches they couldn't get to by climbing. They would pull out the twenty-foot A-frame ladder that was so rickety and patched with amateur welds that a crowd of neighbors would gather anytime it was in use. Part of being human is not wanting to miss out on a tragedy. Part of tragedy is that it illuminates our humanity. So, Ms. Smith and Mr. Stumpf and the whole extended Gutierrez family would gather at a distance, wait and watch, sort of hoping to witness something awful and dumb and senseless that they could stuff into the goop of collective unconscious, thereby edifying our species' understanding of itself. Pops and Granddaddy climbed and teetered and slipped and hollered and climbed and swung. The nuts rained down. Over the years there were a few falls, but nothing fatal, and the neighbors always eventually wandered back inside. When the branches were finally bare, everyone in the family grabbed an edge of the chute and walked toward the tree, gathering nylon in our arms and kicking at the chute so the nuts rolled toward the center, the circumference of the chute shrinking until we were all practically hugging around the trunk, holding one big pouch full of pecans that we could fairly easily pour into boxes. Mostly the harvest was always a real pain in the ass: a thousand pounds of nuts needing to be hulled by hand and shelled by hand and bagged and dragged around the neighborhood in a little red wagon that me and my sisters knew infused our sales pitch with pathos of the nostalgic variety, thereby expediting the term of our commerce obligations: like, here we are, children from the

idealized past of your youth—see our dusty dimples? our Radio Flyer?—and one taste of our pecans will transport you posthaste to the Good Ol' Days . . . but be sure to buy a pound or two so you never have to come back. Why do we get suckered by the past like that? I guess it is not about time, but innocence, which is also a notion for suckers. The months of hulling and shelling and selling were always a drag, but those first few days of harvest every October or November, when the yards around our house were covered in parachutes, that was a kind of fantasy. That sounds saccharine, but I don't know another way to explain it. I'm trying to avoid saying *It was a more innocent time*.

We rarely got snow in Alamogordo. The pecan harvest was the one time of year us kids ever saw the landscape change in a real appreciable way. Desert life is about getting intimate with microshifts in shades of brown and yellow but in one fell swoop of the chutes we had ourselves a winter wonderland. I guess a lot of boys would hanker to climb the trees with Pops and Granddaddy, get involved in the jumping and shaking and knocking, but I found staying grounded really helped my imagination soar. I loved playing on the parachutes and in the parachutes and under the parachutes. Me and my sisters would gather up a little edge of the chute, each our own edge and hold it around our waists and pretend we were all together wearing the world's biggest, most beautiful wedding dress. We'd play hooky from the harvest and get out Momma's costume jewelry and have a big wedding party in our parachute wedding dress. We'd make a little fort in the space where the parachute draped over a cactus or oleander and stay in there for hours playing house or, if I ever got to overrule my sisters and choose the game for the day, spaceship or submarine or ice cave full of cannibal Neanderthals. The neighborhood kids would come over, ostensibly to pitch in on the harvest, but end up always on the parachutes doing snow angels, which we called nut angels. Whatever our reverie it was made more resplendent by the silky nylon of the chute filtering the hot sun into the most calming kind of chiffon or alabaster and even though there was all the dirt and grit of the nuts covering us and stirred up everywhere, that dust glowed like the exact sepia of nostalgia and felt like the air giving hugs all the way to the underbellies of our lungs. I guess tangled in those giant, filthy parachutes every harvest is one way I honed my daydreaming, how I knew for sure magic was the stuff at the root of everything.

## II.

### A Photograph

Her hand just barely touches it, the wing, not even all of her fingers but just the ring and the pinky, lightly on the steel. She's not propping herself up. This is more like a caress. And the word DRONE printed just like that, right above her hand on the wing of the sleek beast. She's on a runway with the drone behind her, and behind it is a control tower and rows of pressurized explosives containers. This is the 1950s so everything is labeled simply and therefore also a bit perplexingly.

DO NOT DROP, say the bombs.

DRONE, says the drone.

She's beautiful with her dark hair clipped to the right side of her face and her nose thin and sharp and the way her posture is not so stiff even though her long, plaid skirt is pulled up very high on her waist. She is relaxed. She slouches, even. She caresses the drone. I call her Eleanor because I do not know her name and because Eleanor seems a name of sophistication with a dash of abandon and a bed of mothballs holding it over from a previous era of glamour and manners. It was a more innocent time. Her eyes are closed and her mouth is just slightly open and one of the reasons she is so attractive is that she has that look of quiet pleasure. Think of a bikini model in the hot rod magazines but put a bunch more clothes on the model, put all the clothes on the model until she looks like a schoolmarm, and do not pose her in any way suggestive of anything sexual except just where she touches the hot rod as she stands by it instead of sprawled humpingly on its hood, and also replace the hot rod with a Q-2A Firebee, a little blunt-nosed remotely piloted aircraft about the size of a big hot rod but it is not a hot rod, it is the earliest generation of American military drone. The Firebee. And Eleanor. This photograph (let's christen it *Eleanor and the Firebee*<sup>1</sup>) contains the suggestion of bikini-model-on-a-hot-rod—flesh and steel, woman and machine, nature and technology, sensuality and mechanized force finding common ground and proclaiming this is the alliance that will fuck up the world—but it is so much less conspicuous than that and therefore somehow more troubling. Eleanor is just a regular girl getting a little wholesome pleasure from her war machine. I can almost feel it in my spine as I look at the photograph, her pleasure, as it gathers in the small of her back and causes her to

slouch and close her eyes just before it crawls up into her shoulders and makes her shiver, slightly open her mouth. The photograph is only erotic if one stares at it long enough. I have stared at it long enough.

Roland Barthes has trained me to look for the punctum in photographs, the small detail through which a viewer personally connects with a photograph, finding not the meaning intended by the photographer or manufactured by the culture but the thing that is there just for you—the spectator—the maybe almost invisible detail that makes your heart stick in your throat when it jumps like it does on the occasion of any revelation, however joyful or sorrowful. Barthes' word *punctum* translates literally to point, but really what he means is *piercing*, really he means *wound*. At what point does *Eleanor and the Firebee* wound me? I can't tell if Eleanor is acting or modeling, just pretending pleasure or if this was really how people felt in the decade after our Second World War, that our killing machines were something to snuggle up to, to touch—sense the power of the steel beast and give yourself over to the strange vivification of industrial warfare. Her expression is my wound. The one strand of her hair caught up in the wind is my wound. The flash of the camera bouncing back off the nose of the drone is my wound. The whole photograph is my wound, Mister Roland Barthes, and what am I supposed to do now with such a serious injury? I guess if I had to choose the biggest wound, I'd say it's the way her skirt billows like a parachute or how just below the wing I can barely see that she is wearing high heels or how even though I can't see her legs at all I know she's wearing slick nylon hose.

I find the photograph in Granddaddy's closet shortly after he dies, among a dozen boxes of photographs he squirreled away behind thirty pairs of identical white briefs in three identical stacks. I did not know that briefs could be folded so precisely. For a lifetime, I have wadded mine. But Granddaddy was a better man than me. I'd always understood that after he retired his Navy pilot wings, after the Korean War, after building our adobe house and planting our pecan trees, he'd settled into three decades as some kind of manager, a boring desk job, a cog in the machine for the aeronautics titan Ryan Air over at the White Sands Missile Range that controls so much of the land down in Southern New Mexico, a military installation whose classified work causes so much of the bottom of our state to get grayed out on maps.

You've heard about this place. We blew up our first atom bomb here. And lots of missiles. And now, this is where we train remote pilots of Reaper drones.

Granddaddy talked mostly about the Patriot missile and when my folks were asked what he did, they said he tested the Patriot missile. That, like most things, is partly true. But armed with *Eleanor and the Firebee*, I start asking more questions and buying a lot of military history books about unmanned aerial vehicles and clipping lots of news stories about drones called Reapers and Predators, drones that these days kill thousands of terrorists and civilians in the Middle East. I confirm that Granddaddy did work on the Patriot missile. Or, Granddaddy worked *with* the Patriot missile. He managed the flights of test targets for the Patriot, and other missiles and fighter planes, as far back as 1951. The test targets were towed behind an aircraft using a hundred feet of cable called an *umbilical cord*. Granddaddy flew the aircraft that towed these targets. He flew them not from a cockpit, but from inside a little steel shed on the ground, his hand on a joystick, surrounded by a bunch of giant boxes of knobs and blinking lights, staring at images on the screen at least as intently as I've been staring at *Eleanor and the Firebee*. So then this is why Granddaddy kept the photograph stuffed in a box: the biggest chunk of his working life after the war was spent cultivating Firebees. He was a manager of the unmanned aerial vehicle project at the White Sands Missile Range, tweaking and flying the machine that Eleanor caresses—our first drone. I guess he stuffed this photograph in a box not as a secret, but a humble keepsake. When people asked him what he did with his life after the Navy he'd say *I goaded our great missile into perfection* and if they cared to know more he'd talk about the Patriot and maybe only briefly mention the Firebee. Until recently, nobody much cared to hear about a grown man flying remote controlled airplanes. And yet, I discover many hundreds of these Firebee photographs in Granddaddy's closet after he dies—6x8s of the drones in flight or crashed in the desert or dragged through Alamogordo's streets on parade or all carted up with dozens of others in a hangar or crawling with the hairy arms of sweaty men and their wrenches.

I hoard the photographs without asking permission from anyone or really even understanding why I need them. Inheritance. Isn't it funny how that word sounds real similar to *innocence* yet they mean nearly opposite things? I hang on the wall, in tasteful yet bold frames, the ones I cannot stop staring at, not the action shots of the Firebees

in flight or crashed in the scrub but the real sleek professional shots with beautiful women posed around the drones. There is a whole series of these: Eleanor and a few other women equally schoolmarmish and quietly erotic in their gentle strokes of the Firebee. I do not love them. I just cannot make sense of them and so I spend hours staring. Are they meant to be some kind of marketing campaign? A pinup for the missile range lounge as the boys sit around with Budweisers and Camels and shoot the shit and gawk after a long day on the joystick? Is Eleanor someone's wife or secretary or daughter and they just stuck her in frame at the last moment, sensing something was off about the photo, that it needed the human touch? Or was the missile range in the '50s not the stereotypical sausage fest of that age but maybe included a whole brigade of women engineers who liked to pose with their creations? Or is this a kind of subversive art, some government contract photographer looking to get out from under her oppressive employer or get back at her oppressive employer with a couple of dainty/hardcore/subliminal photographic critiques of their fascist bullshit?

I dig through boxes of photographs and through archives at the White Sands Missile Range Museum and through the digital archives of the San Diego Air and Space Museum, looking for clues. I want to know exactly what Granddaddy did with those drones. I want to find Eleanor's real name or find Eleanor, know if she is meant to be a pinup or a commercial or an insurrectionist. I want to know if Eleanor would say: *It was a more innocent time.* I get mixed up in the head and believe if I can just talk to Eleanor, maybe I can understand something about my dead granddaddy, something about how we humans ended up at drones. So, I consult experts. I transcribe their conclusions about Eleanor, all of which are in the same vein and in composite read like this: *Likely some kind of marketing campaign. It was not always so easy to sell the American government on drones. A pretty lady never hurts.*

She wounds.

In the SDASM archives there are many hundreds of hours of film of these early drones, declassified training films and assembly films and marketing films of the early Firebees in the '50s and '60s. The narrator always has that nasally tone of old newsreel announcers. The scores are always a patriotic big band blaring unsteady in the wobbly way of antique celluloid. So much technical jargon and zooms on bolts and welds and transmitters but I'm searching the films for human signs, for glimpses

of Granddaddy and Eleanor, looking to see if she is somewhere at the edges of frames or if that is maybe his hand installing a camera in a drone for the first time in history, if that is hat or if that wrist has a watch on it with a turquoise band like the one Granddaddy wore until it was slipped off over his stiff fingers just before the first shovelful of dirt hit his coffin. I want more than the specs of the fuel cell or the close-ups of the gyroscopes or recitations of procedures for how to jettison the umbilical cord. Why in the world do we ever jettison the umbilical cord—blow up our first and last real human connection? And then there he is. Bald head and big teeth and pearl snaps. There is his hat. His turquoise watch ticks away. His sleeves rolled up as he tends to the Firebees: Granddaddy. Why does the past seem more real when it's on film? Why does our obsession with photographing the present make it feel so artificial? Having a visual record stabilizes the recorded thing in that moment but also makes it more distant because it is now mediated. This is the exact conundrum of drone warfare, that it gives us a sense of stability—confidence—about killing, while simultaneously distancing us from the morality of the action. Eleanor, I realize, battles against this conundrum, however unintentionally. She reaches out from the photograph, burrows into my gut. Granddaddy too. I see them and feel the umbilical cord running out of me, straight into the tail of the Firebee.

Granddaddy didn't work out at the missile range alone. Drones were a community affair, a family affair, even. Early every morning for decades he'd fire up the '52 Chevy Townsman and pick up a guy from church and pick a guy from the nearby village of Tularosa and pick up his brother-in-law who was trying to keep the family ranch afloat by working days cranking a wrench on Firebees, working mornings and nights and weekends with a branding iron. They were not engineers, just blue-collar vets of our Second World War, now on the civilian side, carpooling to the range because military operations had gobbled up nearly all the land and made it tough for a cattle operation to succeed.

In 1948, the first iterations of the Firebee took to American skies. There would soon be many variants leading to many convoluted designations like Teledyne Ryan Q-2/KDA/xQM-34/BGM-34. But they were all, at first, the Firebee. By 1954, *Popular Mechanics* was on the story: *Tiger-toothed, fire-engine-red "fish" soaring over New Mexico's sand dunes rarely get a second glance now. They are Firebee pilotless-jet*

*target drones being flight tested by the Air Force.* These early drones were painted bright red because they didn't need to hide, painted for fun with teeth to give the blunt nose more of a bite. The *Popular Mechanics'* article<sup>2</sup> was published a few months after Granddaddy came back from the Korean War and built our adobe house and planted the pecan trees and began work at the missile range. Those were his tiger-toothed, fire-engine-red fish in the sky. On January 9, 1959, Granddaddy was part of a ceremony to *land a jet-propelled Q-2 target vehicle atop the Alamogordo Chamber of Commerce.* The landing was not really a landing. They used a crane to place a model of the red fish like a poorly sculpted gargoyle overlooking the eaves of our single-story Chamber of Commerce. The Firebee drone had become such a part of the fabric of our region that, in the early '60s, it surpassed even the atomic bomb as SNM's most historic military endeavor: *The Firebee symbolizes Alamogordo's claim to the "Rocket City" title and represents the teamwork between the Army Test Center and Air Force Missile Development Center neighbors of Alamogordo.*<sup>3</sup>

In 1960, military experiments began fitting these drones with surveillance equipment, even though tests showed that pilots viewing the battlefield on a screen *identified 5 times as many false targets as those who viewed with the naked eye.*<sup>4</sup> But this didn't stop the military from developing surveillance Firebees (eventually renamed Lightning Bug) at WSMR and toying with deploying them during the Cuban Missile Crises and Vietnam. In 1964, Ryan Aeronautical was the first company to test an armed drone. In the highly secretive Project CeeBee, they teamed up with the Army at WSMR to fit a Firebee with two 250 lb bombs. The results were less than stellar and kept top secret out of shame more than anything else. But CeeBee was the seed of a paradigm shift planted by Ryan's Firebee crew at Alamogordo, and it grew. Over in San Diego in 1971 they fired a Maverick missile from a Firebee, completing the first ever missile launch and direct target hit from a drone. But the weaponizing of drones remained for decades more or less a hobby of the military industrial complex. Most of Granddaddy's work with Ryan Air, until his retirement in the '80s, was towing targets with Firebees, getting a plastic bogey in the sky for the Patriot Missile to pulverize, proof that the backbone of our defense system could shoot out of the air any enemy plane or warhead hurtling our direction. In 1993, General Atomics built on the long tradition of

Firebees, changed the game when they designed the Predator drone and finally had some good cameras to saddle it with. They succeeded in weaponizing the Predator with Hellfire missiles in February of 2001, just in time to avenge the attack on the World Trade Center that would happen seven months later. The first Predator drone strike was in Afghanistan, in November of 2001, and the rest is history, more or less still classified: Predator drones and Reaper drones carrying out attacks all over the Middle East, killing with precision lots of people, it is increasingly clear we haven't bothered to identify with precision. Soaring over New Mexico's sand dunes these days are not Granddaddy's tiger-toothed fire-engine-red fish, but their progeny: those gray, many-winged, penis-looking birds known as Reapers. They have evolved eyes like Firebee never had. They have evolved Hellfire. And they are forcing us to evolve too. The men and women who now have Granddaddy's job, they come to the Applebee's in their flight suits with patches for the 29<sup>th</sup> Attack Squadron; they eat and drink beer just like the rest of us, but they spent the day hovering over Waziristan, waiting for a command that will make the little figures on the screen they've been staring at disappear in static and a white flash.

For all the decades at the missile range and thousands of Firebee flights credited to Granddaddy and Uncle GB and the Ryan Air crew, they never landed a single one. Drones made the big jump from target to weapon not (only) because of the Hellfires but because they evolved the ability to land. Back when Granddaddy was at the controls, they weren't sensitive enough, the drones were too heavy and awkward. Back then their drones' eyes didn't exist or didn't see clear enough for complex maneuvers—the operators had only one screen and it was the boxy tube type. Back then the drones could only crash. Back then the Firebee had to deploy a parachute and come down with a thud in the sand when it was done with the sky. And so this is what I've been trying to tell you: in the picture from the 1954 *Popular Mechanics* article and in all of the hundreds of hours of films in the SDASM archives and in so many of the photographs of the Firebee I find alongside Eleanor, there it is: a giant nylon parachute spread out behind the drone, covering the sand like the world's biggest, most beautiful wedding dress or an instant winter wonderland.

### III.

#### A History

Remember the first flight of your youth, the 747 cruising at 30,000 feet and Pops pulling you onto his lap so you can peer out the window, him pointing to where the land is tamed and untamed and the collision of the two which is really more of a blur from way up here, the grids of civilization fading in and out around deserts and ranges and rivers and it is hard to tell exactly where civilization begins. He laughs when you ask to roll down the window for a better view. Know now that you only have that view, share that laughter, see the grin on his face because people in planes at cruising altitude don't need oxygen masks, because the cabin is pressurized, because in our Second World War we needed the men in our B-29s to move around freely as they prepared to drop our tens of thousands of 500 lb cluster bombs full of napalm on Tokyo.<sup>5</sup> You are now free to move about the cabin because first we needed to move back and forth from the cockpit to the turrets to the bombs below. And remember playing handyman with Pops, fixing doors and pipes and roofs which means mostly biting strips of duct tape from the roll. Know now that you can fix anything like Pops because the bullets of the infantrymen in our Second World War kept getting wet, the steel ammo cases with too many cracks and crevices, the tape created as a temporary shepherd through the storm for so many rounds that would never be pulled from tens of millions of corpses. And remember the Silly Putty that first made newspapers interesting, how you could pancake it over the print and have an exact copy of the news, of the facts of the day except now you could stretch them and twist them and make them look more like how they made you feel. Know now that Silly Putty was meant to help tires on Jeeps roll effortlessly, more dexterously, through the mud and over corpses riddled with bullets that stayed dry until they hit flesh and never got pulled from guts. Remember your first ride in a Jeep, cloth top off on the highway and sunglasses and wind in your hair. Remember sunglasses. Remember the Slinky you hated because you grew up in a house with no stairs. Know now it was meant to stabilize the sensitive instruments of a Navy aircraft carrier launching Corsairs to preside over the burning of Tokyo. Remember your first wristwatch. Remember the Swiss Army knife and Super Glue. Remember your first sip of instant coffee

around the campfire, the freeze-dried bitterness that only tastes right when you are in the wild. Know now that your bread is sliced and your TV dinners hot and your condiments convenient in their little packages because no soldier likes to kill on an empty stomach. Or every soldier needs a little taste of something like home before he dies. Remember the unnatural color of your fingers after digging into a can of Cheese Balls, the way your grin was dusted with the dehydrated orange of impossible cheese while you watched cartoons of Transformers and G.I. Joes but know now that the first orange fingers and dusted grins were those of real soldiers in a real war, our Second World War, young men who would soon be covered in nothing but red. And the necktie you wore to church to give your first sermon and to weddings and to dances where schoolgirls giggled and tried to unclip the tie but it was tied like a real tie by Pops like he always tied his ties, like the ties were first tied around the necks of the best warriors in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE because China's first emperor wanted everyone to recognize without fail the men who shed the most blood on his behalf. And so he invented the necktie: the sure sign of a great warrior. Remember the schoolgirls giggling and pulling at your tie and hobbling unsteadily on their high heels, their legs not yet accustomed to the strain of being sexy but why is it so sexy, the high heel that rose up out of 15<sup>th</sup> century Persia as a way for soldiers tearing ass on horseback to steady themselves in stirrups as they stood and took aim and fired arrows into the little space of throat between the chest plate and helmet of a charging Ottoman. Remember the internet and GPS. Remember the drone. The fabric of our lives is wrought from gore. Remember nylon pantyhose. Remember the parachute and pecan harvests. So then of course Granddaddy dragged those parachutes home from work at the missile range, from work on the American military's first drone. There's no way to know exactly which Firebee your harvest parachutes came from, no way to know if you played house in the canopy of top secret Project CeeBee's first ever weaponized drone, no way to know if you wore as a wedding dress the chute of the drone that teased the Patriot missiles into perfection. But now you know the real story of the chutes of your youth: they were the tails of an evolving Reaper. And the chiffon or alabaster glow of those harvest memories turns a little crimson. Or is it the other way around, that despite all the awfulness and savagery of our species and all the

stuff we create to enable our savagery, we can still do some reclamation, can make from a monster in our times a toy, a source of joy for the next generation, can somehow make innocuous, sustaining even, the fruits of our savagery? Remember the Slinky. Remember the Silly Putty. Remember the necktie and the pressurized cabin and the duct tape and the sliced bread. Let's call them all parachutes—from the Greek *para* meaning *against* and the French *chute* meaning *fall*—and say they are our reclamation of murderous things. These are our things against falling in the biblical sense. Parachutes to save our souls. The equation is simple, really: the things that cause joy must outpace the things that cause sorrow. So when the time comes to harvest pecans, you and your sisters put on Momma's high heels and pantyhose and wrap the corners of the parachute around your waists like the world's biggest wedding dress and smile through the orange mask of all that impossibly dehydrated cheese and laugh through vows about forever and ever until death do us part. We are the sum of our savagery over all time. But hike up your hose and strap up your heels. We are the sum of something else too. I want to say: there can still be a more innocent time.

---

<sup>1</sup> We are programmed to be captivated by images and programmed to be fearful of confusion, so look at *Eleanor and the Firebee* to kickstart those programs into firing at peak simultaneity throughout the gooiest parts of your gray matter:



<sup>2</sup> Just to give a sense of where we were with more domestic technologies, the headline following this Firebee article advertises an innovation in camping: LAVATORY COMPLETE WITH RUNNING WATER ATTACHES TO SIDE OF CAR. Or maybe the magazine's pairing of the Firebee article with this absurd camping innovation, which appears to be little more than a bucket on the car's roof, suggests how innocuous military drones seemed way back in '54, a novelty on par with a bucket you attach to your station wagon for face-dipping on Girl Scout weekends at the state park.

<sup>3</sup> The local paper prints a photo of this ceremonial landing right above an AP story called MAN DESTINED TO UNLOCK MYSTERIES OF OUTER SPACE in which a scientist predicts a near future of daily space travel. In this year, 1959, America was on the cusp of its moonshot, the beginning of the Apollo program, and big, manned rockets were all the rage. We have always been so brazen with prophecies about our mandate to inhabit the greater universe while the things that may really come to define us, may really come to define the reason we need to inhabit the greater universe, sit quietly on the roof of a desert Chamber of Commerce waiting to evolve from fish to Hellfire.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted from a study in *Kill Chain: The Rise of the High-Tech Assassins* by Andrew Cockburn, a smart history of the evolution of American drone warfare that doesn't quite look back as far as the Firebee, unfortunately. But maybe it's for the best, because no one really wants their granddaddy to show up in a book with that particular title.

<sup>5</sup> Likely cabin pressurization would have come about eventually anyway. One could argue cabin pressurization exists only because airplanes exist and airplanes were not born of wartime and savagery but of tinkers and the human spirit of grandiosity which describes not just the Wright brothers at Kitty Hawk but goes as far back as the wooden wings of a monk named Eilmer who strapped them on and jumped off his Abbey in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, C.E. That's an argument I'd buy as far as old Eilmer is concerned. However, the first man to die in an airplane crash was an Army sergeant along for a flight with Orville Wright. Orville brought the sergeant along because he was trying to convince the military to buy his fledgling invention. So, in a way, the military industrial complex pervades that origin story too.

\* Another Eleanor in heels. Here, the wound is the old drone's shadow, how familiar it has become these days. And another picture: my granddaddy at the controls of the Reaper's granddaddy.



## Holy Thank You for Not

Once you considered marrying a stranger  
just to change your name. Once you woke up

disappointed that the sun rose, that you rose,  
once you held a map and considered every way

you could fall off of it, thought if one pill  
could almost fix it, certainly twenty would.

Once you asked someone to hide the bottle,  
and once you didn't. Once it rained

on your rain. It was then everyone seemed to leave you.  
Especially you. The steering wheel so jerkable.

Once you began imagining your funeral  
and counting the empty seats. There are so many

ways to die. Most of them you can do while living.  
Once you heard that Shame is the closest thing to Death.

Once you said *you* in a poem when you were too ashamed to say, *I*  
*have wished to give my life back to my mother,*

*in a long dark box.* My father looks at my arms  
and says that in some Jewish cemeteries, graves do not open

their mouths for the tattooed, or the ones who took  
their own lives. Now I can promise

that if I am not buried in a Jewish cemetery  
it will be because of my tattoos.

The first time I considered killing myself was when I believed  
the worst of me was the all of me. The worst of you

is never the all of you. You are awful, yes,  
and wonderful. You have been wretched

and you have been beautiful. I know how difficult it is  
to be kind when I am hating myself and I intend

to be kind, and honest. And whole. Holy Thorned Beauty.  
Holy Cactus Filled with Magic. Holy Hurt

and Hurter. Holy Bitch. Holier Than Thou  
When I Most Feel Like Shit.

The thing that has held me back the most  
from being amazing is the belief that I am not.

On the anniversary of the night I considered this Earth  
would be best with me beneath it, someone asked me to write a love letter

to myself. I wrote: I relinquish you from the possibility  
of ever meeting who you could have been and regretting

who you became. You could decide today  
that your body is perfect and that could be the story you told

for the rest of your life.  
And you would be so right.

What peace can we make in this world  
if we can't first make peace with ourselves?

Every hero you have ever had  
has been someone's worst nightmare

which explains your fascination with stacking dolls:  
inside you is another is another is another is another

and finally one unbreakable bean:  
your life, which has already saved itself.

Remember when you moved across the country for love  
in two days when it was supposed to take four?

That's how much love fuels you. Amazing.  
Drive through the night for love. No sleep

'til love. Now imagine it is yourself  
you're driving towards. Call that your new home.  
Come home. Go home. Be home.

# Instigating the Future: Cross-pollinations of Race and Translation



*A roundtable moderated by Adrienne Perry, featuring  
Ji yoon Lee, Stalina Villarreal, Madhu Kaza, Yvette Siegert,  
& Poupeh Missaghi*

The roundtable conversation reproduced here began in a classroom, at the foundational moments of a friendship between two very different but very kindred practitioners of translation—Jen Hofer and Adrienne Perry (also the authors of this introduction)—and then extended into coffee shops, spilled over into walks and hikes, began to fill our inboxes and text messages. We knew from the outset that the questions we were discussing so ardently will accompany us for the rest of our lives, that conversations about race and translation are larger than any two people's consciousnesses and must necessarily involve others, and that the questions and curiosities and concerns activated by this inquiry extend back into a history that precedes us and far into a future that will outlast us. We are grateful to the thinkers, writers and translators who have engaged with us thus far, and hope this publication will open spaces for others to join in the conversation as well.

In the first days of October 2016, in the first public iteration of this conversation, we hosted a roundtable called *Inheriting the Future: Cross-pollinations of Race and Translation* at the American Literary Translators Association (ALTA) conference in Oakland. We were interested in how we (as translators, writers, editors, teachers, and the many other things we are) might nurture practices of translation among more writers of color and diasporic writers. We wondered how an expansion of



translation practice among non-white writers and heritage speakers might shift the terms and the landscape of both translation and writing. Namrata Poddar, César Ramos, Kenji Liu, Sawako Nakayasu, and Vickie Vértiz joined us for the 2016 roundtable. Trading routes as a metaphor for translation, transnational identity, how other translators of color influence our work, representation (and a lack thereof), mentorship—everyone on the roundtable and in the audience shared brilliantly on these and other topics. The conversation was lively, urgent; we parted with the agreement to keep in touch and to keep talking.

The following edited roundtable, recorded at the 2017 ALTA conference in Minneapolis, continued our conversation/instigation from the previous year, yet with a new group of translators. We returned to key questions, none of which had lost their urgency. Many of our questions, in addition to those already mentioned above, came from either our 2016 ALTA audience, or the roundtable participants:



- + How do our own racial or ethnic or national or anti-national identities inflect our choices of who and how to translate?
- + How do views about race and ethnicity that don't originate in US/American categorical frameworks potentially affect the translation process or translation politics?
- + As writers of color, who are we translating for? To what end?
- + How do we create community within languages and cultures and across languages and cultures?
- + What are strategies we can use to foster bilingualism/multilingualism and an appreciation for multicultural approaches among young people? How do we instigate passion for cross-language practices among youth?
- + What are strategies for approaching texts with humility?
- + What might a non-institutional translation training utopia look like?
- + What can we do as translators to raise awareness about the politics of translation and the publication of translation?



Responses to these questions—among roundtable participants and the audience—pointed to the deeply personal and political stakes of translation. At the same time, the conversation underscored a desire to create opportunities—whether through editorial work, in academic institutions, or in our living rooms—to dramatically and tangibly alter the translation landscape, as well as any “prevailing wisdom” (if there is such a thing) of who makes a good translator and why, which texts are worthy of translation, and where and how our translations might circulate.

When we began these roundtables, we imagined an exploratory, provocative, improvisatory, and open-ended conversation that we hoped would result in some new interconnections among people dedicated to the expansion of a translation practice conceived with resistant politics in mind. We continue with that imagining, that hope, and anticipate many opportunities to continue to nurture the instigations represented here.

— Jen Hofer & Adrienne Perry



**Adrienne Perry:** My first question for folks is, “What are your stakes in this conversation?” Or, your being on this roundtable here today. “What does this topic mean for you? What does it get you thinking about?” Just briefly spend a minute or two talking about that question. And know that I can be a little—I don’t want to be authoritarian with the timekeeping, but sometimes I might lovingly move us all on. It comes from a good place. You can start here, or we can start wherever. Anybody feel compelled?

**Ji yoon Lee:** What’s at stake for me . . . As an immigrant translator, whose source language is Korean, my mother tongue, and target language English, the language system I had to assimilate into (still working on it), translation always felt like a metaphor for assimilation: when I translate Korean into English, I’m catering to an audience who most likely doesn’t speak Korean. So, the struggle I experience during the process of translation—working with the source text to build a living and legible translation, not a flattened autopsied object—is similar to the struggle I had during my immigration process—preserving and questioning my sense of self, while trying to present myself in a legible form. So preserving *strangeness*—[the] not immediately

accessible quality of foreign text, may that be from different syntax structure or words without equivalent counterpart in English—not fully domesticating the source text feels personal to me. The strangeness of foreign texts mirrors the strangeness some might see in the immigrant minority, and preserving the excess and strangeness feels like an advocacy for my community.

**“...PRESERVING THE EXCESS AND STRANGENESS FEELS LIKE AN ADVOCACY FOR MY COMMUNITY.”**

**Stalina Villarreal:** I am a Spanish speaker and translate from Spanish to English. But, being a heritage speaker wasn't something that was always natural to me. For me, it's important to keep the diversity of having more heritage speakers be translators. But also, I feel like I became more in touch with my heritage by becoming a translator. It keeps me more in touch with my culture, and it also keeps me abreast with what's new in the conversation as well.

**Madhu Kaza:** The question, as I received it, was, “What are your stakes in thinking about race and cross-language work?” My first response is that, as a raced and cross-language person, my stakes begin with my self. Like Ji yoon, I think issues of assimilation and strangeness and difference are really interesting. But, for me the question of translation actually has to do with the impossibility of assimilation of languages and selves. I work from my first language, Telugu, a South Indian language that is not translated much into English. In my North American life, I deeply miss my language. Doing translation is a way for me to reckon with two things that don't meet. And specifically, it comes out of a feeling of loneliness and difficulty, though Telugu is not an obscure language. It's spoken by between 80 and 100 million people. It's one of the top fifteen languages in the world, and yet that lack of communication between the two languages is about many things that are deeply political—including differences in literary values in the two literatures. So, it's not fun work for me, but that's what brings me to it.

**Poupeh Missaghi:** I translate from Persian into English and from English into Persian. I started translation in Iran because literary translation is such a big part of the literary scene there. People read more translation than original texts written in Persian. When I moved to the U.S., I think that it had to do a lot with missing home so much, an important part of which was the language aspect of it. Also, the Iran and U.S. political

situation since I was born has been very difficult, so translation always had that political aspect for me as well. Seeing all these representations of Iranians in the U.S. media that have been problematic, and, even in the literary circles, seeing mostly stories and

**"...EVEN IN LITERARY CIRCLES, SEEING MOSTLY STORIES AND NARRATIVES BEING TOLD THAT FIT THE POLITICAL AGENDA, I WANTED TO TRANSLATE THE VOICE OF PEOPLE AND WRITERS WHO DO LITERATURE FOR THE SAKE OF LITERATURE."**

narratives being told that fit the political agenda, I wanted to translate the voice of people and writers who do literature for the sake of literature. They don't necessarily

want to be political agents, or they are not immigrants, but they are doing important work. I think that aspect of it was the most important for me.

**Yvette Siegert:** I'm Yvette Siegert, I'm a heritage Spanish speaker. I learned English when I was five. For me translation has always been very natural, because it was this urgent, necessary way of negotiating daily life for my [grandmother]. I think that's the case for a lot of people. I think—Stalina, I think we might have very different experiences, or slightly different experiences, because I always felt more at home in Spanish, even though English is the language of my schooling. And translation helped me feel a little bit less foreign, because it was this grounding place in which to negotiate these two worlds that I inhabit. And so I continue to translate as a way of processing things and to negotiate cultural differences. Now that I live outside the Spanish/English binary—I live in Switzerland, which is itself a very complex, multilingual place—I think that urgency of thinking between Spanish and English becomes very personal and also very urgent, as a way of maintaining access to the linguistic structures but also to family politics, to the politics in the countries that my family is from. So, all of these things come into play, even if I'm translating work from Spanish that comes from countries in which I have no personal history. And I think I translate for my grandmother, who was an illiterate woman who cared deeply about reading and about books. I'm constantly thinking about giving voice to relatives like her who did not have much say.

**Adrienne:** I could really relate to what you were saying, Madhu. I am a biracial kid from Wyoming and I do most of my work in fiction and creative writing, with some translation,

and [I] read translation theory. But as I encountered translation and started going through that process of translating, I felt like it was articulating for me a set of experiences I had had but had never been able to put into words for people, where I couldn't quite describe these various, uncomfortable middle grounds that I moved in, and the kind of imagination that is projected onto people like me from the place where I'm from. I feel like I was able to see a relationship between the limits of language and the limits of [racial] imagination that I also came up against when I started working in translation. Translation was teaching me another way of thinking about my experience.

We have this rich set of questions . . .

**"...I FEEL LIKE I WAS ABLE TO SEE A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LIMITS OF LANGUAGE AND LIMITS OF [RACIAL] IMAGINATION THAT I ALSO CAME UP AGAINST WHEN I STARTED WORKING IN TRANSLATION."**

**Ji yoon:** I'm open to starting the conversation [laughs]. I love hearing this reverberation of what I've been thinking about in this beautiful roundtable. I'm not a heritage speaker, but I feel very invested in supporting heritage speakers to be more connected to their (or their community's) culture and language, and hopefully to translate. So the question that I choose from the list is, "How might we nurture more translators who are heritage speakers?" To talk a little bit about why I chose that question and why the question is important to me, here's my personal anecdote. When I first immigrated on my own as a teen to a small town in East Texas, there was this one Korean girl whose parents were first-generation immigrants, and she was a heritage speaker. The small town was an environment that I'd describe to be . . . lacking diversity? So the girl's parents specifically asked me to talk to the girl in Korean whenever I could, so that she would stay connected to Korean culture and Korean language. But, she had a different idea. Whenever she saw me, she would pull away, literally run away. There were two bus stops at the school, and she would literally run across the street to get to the other bus stop [laughs]. At the time her reaction was confusing, but now I read her reaction to be coming from the gap between the culture she was expected to identify with (the White space) and what I represented (some sort of Jungian shadow, her ethnic shadow). To her, I imagine, I and her parents' culture were an impediment to her becoming part of the majority culture. When I got to know some other heritage speakers, I kept seeing the anxiety rising from the sense

**"WHEN I GOT TO KNOW SOME OTHER HERITAGE SPEAKERS,  
I KEPT SEEING THE ANXIETY RISING FROM THE SENSE  
OF GAP BETWEEN MAJORITY AND MINORITY CULTURE."**

of gap between majority culture and minority culture. There was a Vietnamese heritage speaker whom I became friends with, who shared that while living in a small town in Missouri, she didn't speak Vietnamese in public, ever, because she felt that there was

irreconcilability between her household language versus what was being spoken in public. There was an Italian heritage speaker who also shared that she felt resistant to

speak to her parents in Italian. She said she replied to their Italian questions in English. To me all those experiences are gesturing towards the sense that there's no space for negotiation between the majority culture and the minority culture. And that has to do with what Madhu said about the impossibility of translation and what Yvette said about negotiation. I want negotiation to be possible between this gap.

So, where do we go from here? What do we do with this gap, especially prevalent in certain areas that are not as cosmopolitan as other areas in the United States. There was a research I previously read that I wanted to dig up before this panel (I couldn't find it) that was about how heritage speakers often choose English as their main mode of speech and tend to compartmentalize their inherited language, because the quality materials in non-English language is often invisible in the media. Yes, there are visible non-English pop music and soap opera. Yet, quality materials are surprisingly invisible. So I think it's us translators' mission to provide more quality material and make them available. You know, with internet, and interconnectedness of social media, I think we can make it happen. I think that's the first step we as translators can take to encourage heritage speakers to feel part of both cultures, to feel like they can negotiate majority-minority culture, and hopefully to translate.

**Madhu:** I'm thinking along the same lines, the same question of how we can nurture more translators—for me it's writers of color as well as heritage speakers. I don't feel like I was particularly nurtured into this space and I'm kind of confounded that I'm here. Which is totally fine, but I think of what would have helped me, and how I might work with others now. We need to create more conversations, contribute more resources to commissioning works by people of color who don't

necessarily already see themselves as translators. It's resources. It's invitations. If you're having this big translation party, it involves opening the doors so that more people can come to the party. But the party has to change, too. The music has to change, there can be different food.

And I think that's important. That's the part that doesn't get said as often. Because, for me, the problem with very reductive ideas of diversity and inclusion is that it's like, "We're going to keep doing the same thing, but

we'll add three different people of color to this." And I think that it doesn't speak to some of the actual impediments for people to enter those spaces. We've all been in spaces that have felt unwelcoming, even though we've been invited. I also think it's about rigorously—not casually, but rigorously—rethinking some ideas about mastery, or opening up ideas of multiplicity in translation.

For example, sometimes heritage speakers don't feel quite adequate. Right? Maybe you didn't get schooled in your language, in Korean or Spanish or Telugu, or whatever, but you speak to your grandmother in this language. And you feel that maybe that's actually not sufficient to engage in literary translation. But, you're also a writer. And you're also someone who deeply cares about language. For me, creating opportunities also includes trusting people and experimenting. What I like about the book I edited, *Kitchen Table Translation*, is that it includes professional translators who are widely recognized and also people who do not consider themselves translators. When I approached people, some said to me, "But I'm not a translator." And I said, "But try this. I'm just giving you a prose poem. Why don't you try your hand at translating this?" Eleni Stecopoulos, a wonderful writer, said she might have a hard time translating a poem into Greek. She ended up doing it with her mother, and I'm so glad. And I think we have ideas about being good, and what it means to be professional and do it right and be self-sufficient. What if we cracked this open? I'm also thinking about Sony Coráñez Bolton, who uses queer and disability studies as a way of thinking about translation. He writes, "There's a colonial model of disability that characterizes an entire population as unfit to engage their own intellectual and cultural patrimony." What does it mean to be a heritage speaker

**"IF YOU'RE HAVING THIS BIG TRANSLATION PARTY, IT INVOLVES OPENING THE DOORS SO THAT MORE PEOPLE CAN COME TO THE PARTY. BUT THE PARTY HAS TO CHANGE, TOO."**

and feel you're not fit to engage your own ancestral language? And what would it mean to actually go to the body that you are in, to its particularities, including its "disabilities," and work from there? I find that actually really exciting.

**"AND WHAT WOULD IT MEAN TO ACTUALLY GO TO THE BODY THAT YOU ARE IN, TO ITS PARTICULARITIES, INCLUDING ITS 'DISABILITIES,' AND WORK FROM THERE?"**

**Yvette:** I find this conversation stimulating, and I'm still processing what some people have said, but I want to go back to this idea of resources. As translators we often

advocate, push our editors to publish the books we're translating as bilingual editions. And what purpose that has tended to have in my head is, "Ah, show the readership that this is the original text, and that the translation gives access to the Spanish." But, I'm thinking that as a resource to heritage speakers, young heritage speakers in their teens, discovering translation, having [a] bilingual [edition] is very powerful, because you have access to both sides, and so which side gets privileged in that format? And looking at the presentation of a poem on both sides of a page and thinking, "This is a constant way of moving in-between languages and is very familiar to me. I can do this too, I can look at language and I can do this."

This summer I became a fellow at Canto Mundo, which is this organization like Cave Canem for African-American poets, and Kundiman for Asian-American poets. It stimulates discussion among the Latinx community, it promotes poetic practice for Latino poets, and the question of translation kept coming up as a way of thinking, "How do we, oftentimes as bilingual speakers, take on the question of translation?" Some of us had grown up translating, and some of us had never done it. And the idea that came out of that conversation was something [ . . . ] one of the coordinators for Kundiman, says. You take all the resources you have amongst each other, you take these resources, and you foster abundance amongst each other. You teach each other, you encourage each other. Just the way we as translators promote each other's books on Facebook, on social media, we write reviews for each other. Seeing that energy develop in these communities of color, amongst heritage speakers and non-heritage speakers, I found really moving. And, a possibility for increasing the number of heritage speakers who translate. So, yes, this idea of abundance, is something I've been thinking about, too.

**Poupeh:** I'm going to continue on the issue of access. I totally agree that access is very important. What city in the U.S. are you living in? How much access do you have to the first language community? But also how much do the experiences of, for example, the parents who have emigrated affect their choices of whether to educate their children or not? Even within the same family, with the same experiences and journeys, I've seen people who go two totally different directions. Like, one sibling says, "I'm not going to teach my children anything because I want them to be immersed in this new culture." The other one says, "No, they have to learn their source language, their source culture." So, in thinking about that, I go back to this idea of how important it is to open the space up to multiple experiences and multiple voices. And I want to tie this back to the question of not only translation prefaces and introductions, but also to how we as translators can write about disrupted spaces, rethinking our experiences of living in different languages, different cultures, in essay format, in writing. We need to do the translation, but we also need to have conversations about translation and about disrupted spaces. Because I think what is important is the opening of space, remembering how personal these experiences are and how different they are from one another, but also remembering how they have this shared core that brings us all to the space of translation. I want us to pay attention to how we also need to write about what we do and the complexities of its different layers.

**Stalina:** Well, for me, translation is actually kind of awkward because I didn't choose to become a translator. My mentors sort of chose it for me. I was the token bilingual person in a lot of my environments at that time and ended up becoming an interpreter or translator. I think a lot of Spanish speakers growing up in the U.S. sometimes, when they're young, get into that uncomfortable situation in which they have to become interpreters.

**"I DIDN'T CHOOSE TO BECOME A TRANSLATOR.  
MY MENTORS SORT OF CHOSE IT FOR ME."**

Part of my hesitation to become a translator, at the same time, was my insecurities. Some people who learn Spanish learn it better than the way I speak it. So, I'm sort of in this middle ground in which I feel the need to translate, but then at the same time I have that insecurity. But what has really helped me was peer mentorship, more so than the regular mentorship of my teachers, because with peer mentorship I found solidarity. And through that solidarity I was able to grow as a translator. And I think that conversation of

encouraging each other, and advocating for each other, is really important. But I also think exposing translation to younger audiences would be important as well, because some of them don't realize that their second language is an advantage.

**Adrienne:** I would just add to that that I, because I'm still finishing my academic work and I'm around a bunch of people who feel that they need to be experts about everything. (Apparently that resonates with people in the room.) So I think, for me, and certainly there are many layers that can be incorporated into this, but someone like myself might think, "Well, I can't translate because I have to know this language absolutely perfectly before I could even set foot near the dictionary and near this other person's text." So the idea of playing and just doing—something like you were talking about, Madhu, "Here's a poem, try it, see what it's like." I think for me, and for the other people in the environment that I'm in, folks feel like they need to be experts before they could begin to think about translation. One of the things that I struggle with is helping people who are writers, who primarily identify as writers, understand the way in which they're already working with translation, and the way in which they could begin to incorporate more translation into their work.

**Yvette:** I wanted to ask all of you, since you touched on this question, Stalina, about insecurity. And I guess this question would be for everyone. This question of humility, how do we [approach] the text with humility and insecurity at the same time? Because regardless of how fluent you are in a language—I mean, I consider myself fully bilingual, in my own experience with Spanish—but I still feel very insecure when I'm approaching it. Not insecure in the sense that I can't handle it, but insecure [in] the sense that this is very

humbling to approach a text as a reader. And that, when you translate, regardless of how experienced you are, the text shows you your limitations as a reader. You can translate something and think you got it, and then the next day you realize that you actually misread a very basic subject-verb

**"...I LOOK UP WORDS AS IF I DIDN'T KNOW THEM, BECAUSE IT HELPS ME SLOW DOWN AND THINK ABOUT THE ASSOCIATIONS THAT THOSE WORDS HAVE FOR ME..."**

agreement. And you think, I should get another job. It's beautiful that the text stops us, that the text slows us down in that way. I look up very basic words. I look up the word for "box" in Spanish. When I translate I look up words as if I didn't know them, because it helps

me slow down and think about the association that those words have for me, what kind of insecurities those words brought up as a heritage speaker, as a child. So, I'm curious as to how you negotiate your humility and your insecurities in your work.

**Poupeh:** I think actually that space of discomfort and not ever being sure about what is right or wrong is actually the space I want to be in. Or, maybe I push myself to stay there. I also realized something. I started translating from English into Persian, and then little by little it became Persian into English. I see now that depending on which direction I do more often, my ability and comfort with the language changes. Sometimes I realize I'm forgetting Persian as if I never spoke it, and I think, "Oh! That was my first language." Now I can translate into English much easier, rather than the other way around. So with regard to humility, it's like a never-ending game and I want to stay in that never-ending game, where there is always a space for this humility. Texts have so much to offer and they're always evolving, I'm also evolving as a person, and the context around me is evolving and changing as well. All that affects the way I feel in this space and the way I can view and do my work. Being aware of that makes it even more of [an] amazing experience.

**Ji yoon:** I want to build on what Poupeh was saying, and also respond to Yvette's question about humility. We, as translators, are often expected to perform the role of expert, the master of at least one of the languages. We also play the role of ambassador, because when we choose a certain text, we are curating those texts to be important in portrayal of the culture the text arises from. There is a lot of implicit power given to us in this position, so I think it is important to articulate a sense of humility, to communicate that translation isn't a task only allowed for someone with mastery. As Poupeh was saying, in the process of translation, we see a defamiliarized version of our source language, of our source text. We realize being the master of language, whatever that means, is not really possible at all. I think openly communicating this sense of humility—acknowledging that I am just a person with limited experience with certain aspects of certain culture and language who happens to be translating—will allow me to be a more authentic translator and ambassador of the culture.

**"WE REALIZE BEING THE MASTER OF LANGUAGE, WHATEVER THAT MEANS, IS NOT REALLY POSSIBLE AT ALL."**

**Poupeh:** I wanted to raise the question, “Who are we translating for and who is the audience for our work? Who do we think about when we engage in translation?”

**Stalina:** I always think of multiple audiences because I want to have a translation in which the author of the work would approve of the reading, but at the same time I’m interpreting for an English speaker. I translate poetry. So for example, if something has wordplay in Spanish, I want to have that wordplay in English, but because they don’t translate with similar sounds, I have to come up with another way to have that wordplay. So, that way I’m respecting the form that the original source language has, but, in the target language, I’m doing something new at the same time. I try to have a balance for both audiences.

**Yvette:** I translate for the author of *Eat Pray Love*. I’m serious. At a really low point in my life, I read *Eat Pray Love*, and all I remember of the book is that she mentions at one point that she writes all her books for someone. That she has a person in mind that creates the voice and that each book develops a very different voice because she’s talking to a different friend. And I actually found that very useful in thinking

**“I TRANSLATE FOR MY GRANDMOTHER WHO DIDN’T READ ENGLISH, OR READ ANYTHING, BUT I THINK IF SHE DID I WOULD WANT HER TO ENJOY A STORY.”**

about this. I have a book that I’m translating for my brother. It’s a book that’s set in our father’s native city. My brother has never been there, my brother doesn’t speak Spanish, so he’ll probably never go. So I translate

that book wanting him to love it, wanting him to see things. He’s not an academic, he’s not a reader, but I would like for him to find beauty in that text. I think it’s personal. I translate for my grandmother who didn’t read English, or read anything, but I think if she did I would want her to enjoy a story. Or, I would want her to think this was lucid.

**Madhu:** Sometimes language precedes thought. The other day I was talking to someone and I said, “Oh, I’m much closer to language than I am to people.” Then I was like, “What did I mean? Why did I say that?” Yvette, I wrote down what you said earlier about your grandmother, “I translate for my grandmother who was illiterate and loved books.” Now you just mentioned *English*, but I understood your earlier statement as, “I translate for an impossibility.” There is something to that.

Classical Telugu literature is deeply poetic and beautiful; it's rich and ornamental. Contemporary Telugu literature is completely ideological. Writing is deeply political and it's why it doesn't work in the U.S. in translation. People are like, "Are you a Marxist writer, a feminist writer, a Dalit writer? What are you?" Imagine us all having to classify ourselves that way. It's not that one is good and one is bad. I'm deeply informed by modernist aesthetics, so in fact I originally had trouble engaging this other literature that comes from my own culture. Some of the work I've translated, I know it doesn't come across as good. And I'm not even speaking to my translation abilities, which are completely—I don't know what they are. But maybe it's okay to read a story and think, I don't know if this is a good story. I'm actually interested in some of that discomfort.

**Ji yoon:** I'm glad you brought up the pleasure of synthesizing your languages and the competing ideologies within you, and cultural expectations given to literature, when you're facing two different cultures and two different literary communities.

When you asked the question, Yvette, I was like,

"I translate for myself, because I like it. Oh wait, that sounds super-selfish" [laughs]. But it's true: the pleasure of synthesizing different languages is a big part of my motivation. That doesn't have to be seen as a self-absorbed motivation (I

hope), because I'm trying to share that pleasure with the readers. Whether that be English-speaking readers who don't speak any Korean, or Korean-speaking readers who want to see how the poem/text evolves through translation. That pleasure of synthesis, and negotiation, and that's what I want to share. That's my motivation. So whom I'm writing for, the audience is both me and not-me.

**"BUT IT'S TRUE: THE PLEASURE OF SYNTHESIZING DIFFERENT LANGUAGES IS A BIG PART OF MY MOTIVATION."**

**Adrienne:** I love what y'all are saying, because I think it points to this question of audience. Audience changes depending on where we are—there isn't some kind of widespread statement that could be made about, "This is how translation operates in Latin America, and then it's also going to operate the same way in West Africa."

For example, questions like, "Are you a feminist or a Marxist?" bring up the issue of positionality. What is the position from which you're translating? Last

night, we were talking a little about the challenge of translating some texts in a non-U.S. American context [and] the way certain people are racialized, or the way certain languages get racialized or contextualized. Even thinking about what racializing means for how we as translators take up space, or what we feel able to do, or entitled to do. I thought it was an interesting conversation and I wondered if anyone had any other thoughts about this topic. How we take space, how different contexts require more slippage?

**Madhu:** I want to say something really quick about this question from last night. For instance, that even in Latin American literature, that there's the difference between

**"ALL I WANT TO SAY IS THAT THE  
IMAGE THAT CAME INTO MY HEAD THIS  
MORNING WAS: GLORIA ANZALDÚA AND  
ROBERTO BOLAÑO TOGETHER IN A ROOM."**

Latin American literature and Latino literature, Latinx literature in the U.S. The class divides, the cultural and aesthetic differences—all the different things that come up. All I want to say is that the image that came into my head this morning was: Gloria Anzaldúa and Roberto Bolaño together in a room.

**Yvette:** I would love to be in that room!

**Adrienne:** And it also gets to this party that we need to have, where we're going to open up the party, and we're going to change the food and music. We're going to have to change our DJs.

**Yvette:** How do we brainstorm resources for heritage speakers and for promoting translation amongst heritage speakers or translators of color, as the case may be? I dream of this. I was walking over from my Airbnb and I kept thinking that I would love to see a scholarship for heritage translation and what that would look like, who would fund that, and what possibilities that could lead to. I'm thinking very locally in terms of the Canto Mundo community that I became a part of, because there the advocacy amongst the members is so beautiful and urgent and concrete. People helping each other for very serious personal circumstances. So, I wondered what we could do in the next five years. How could we visualize this translation scene being populated with more and more heritage speakers?

**Poupeh:** I feel like we can just continue the conversation in our different roles. In our roles as educators, we can encourage our heritage speakers to enter that space of multiplicity and feel okay with it. Or as editors, we should actually not be lazy and look out for voices that are not there, reach out and ask for people to submit work, rather than staying within the circles that we know or people whom we know. Once again, trying to force ourselves beyond that comfort zone of feeling, “these are the people and the kind of voices or speakers that I know,” matters a lot. We need to push ourselves to look for other voices.

**Ji yoon:** When we’re situated in academia, I think, sometimes even without realizing, we publish or publicize our work with the publishers or venues associated with academia. But they are not the most readily accessible or visible venue to the general public. I feel like as translators we need to take a

step further by providing quality materials to be available online for free, accessible to everyone, and visible on social media. This might be just me, but I often feel anxious whenever I promote my

works on social media, because I keep asking myself, “Should literary translation be promoted in a more classy way (whatever that is)?” But I think propagating and availing the quality materials is as important as the act of translating. I believe increasing the availability of quality materials will enrich the cultural landscape, allowing emerging translators and heritage speakers to participate in the conversation.

**“I FEEL LIKE AS TRANSLATORS WE NEED TO TAKE A STEP FURTHER BY PROVIDING QUALITY MATERIALS TO BE AVAILABLE ONLINE FOR FREE, ACCESSIBLE TO EVERYONE, AND VISIBLE ON SOCIAL MEDIA.”**

**Adrienne:** This may already exist. I don’t know because I feel like I’ve had my head buried in the sand. I’ve just been hiding for a year. So it’s nice to see you all! I remember when I was working on my MFA and I was like, “I’m so jealous of all my friends who are in Cave Canem. There needs to be a Cave Canem for fiction writers because then I would apply to it.” There is now; it’s called Kimbilio. And so one of the things I’ve wondered about—and I keep playing the Lotto hoping this will happen and I’ll get some money—would be some version of VONA for translators, where we would get together every summer and it would [include] people who might see themselves as translators, “This is my main role. I’m a literary translator and I teach in an institution,”

[as well as] someone who thinks, "I'm mostly a poet, but I'm kind of interested in doing some translation, too." People would get together, mentors and teachers [and folks eager to learn], and that would form a community . . . over time. Organizations like Cave Canem and VONA have created real change in our literary landscape. So I wonder about [a program like this], besides the fact that it would be a lot of fun.

#### Q & A

**Question:** A few of you talked about peer mentorships and working with communities that don't understand themselves as literary. And my question is: Is it important for the organizers of peer mentorships to be from the same immigrant community? Is it important for there to be groups for separate communities, or are there advantages to communities drawing together?

**Stalina:** It depends on the type of relationship you have with the fellow translator or person thinking about translating. So, for example, a year ago I was in a workshop with someone who translated from Urdu, and I don't know any Urdu, but I was able to mentor her. Through her descriptions of what she was doing from the Urdu to the English, I was able to mentor her and help her troubleshoot some of her issues. But if there's someone who does speak the same languages, then you can have the type of mentorship which you can foster more in detail, what they're doing, in exchanging work, and having that conversation of, "What are you doing? What does it look like?" and the nitty gritty of, "I see that you're doing XYZ. What have you thought about ABC as well?" Having a dialogue with that person.

**Question:** One of the things I've been thinking about, as someone who teaches at a small liberal arts college with a literary translation program, there's a lot that we can all do within our institutions, but each of us also has limitations. One of the things I've been thinking about are possibilities for getting our undergraduates together, from different institutions. Particularly for heritage speakers,

**"...THERE'S A LOT THAT WE CAN ALL DO WITHIN OUR INSTITUTIONS, BUT EACH OF US ALSO HAS LIMITATIONS."**

which is an interest of mine, it seems that students find their way to a small liberal arts college in New England, and there are other students who find their way to urban

colleges, or to state universities in the Midwest, and I think the differences in these institutions could be mutually interesting, and for students to have exposure to their peers in completely different contexts. And as we're thinking about things we might try to raise money for and try to organize among ourselves, I would be curious to see whatever people thought of the possibility of that, the appeal of it, if we can go shoulder to shoulder with this?

**Poupeh:** I think it's absolutely amazing if it's possible. And of course it is important that we continue to think of how it would become possible with our limitations. What matters is to help students to not feel isolated just because of where they're located and to have access to other people with the same interests and same concerns. Also it matters that they have the support of teachers and professors, to have them actually encourage and help them, rather than they as students having to do it all on their own. I think it's very important, but I don't have any specific ideas about how that could be done, other than using our mentors to help students with that.

**Adrienne:** Sometimes we have to do bootleg versions before we can get our LP done in the studios. You get people together and say, "Let's hang out. We're going to have some food and we're going translate." That feels radical and beautiful, too. Even before a grant gets written. I often have to remind myself of those sorts of things. I always want to just go big: "And now I have \$100,000 to do this thing," instead of thinking, "How about you just knock on your neighbors' doors?"

**"SOMETIMES WE HAVE TO DO BOOTLEG VERSIONS BEFORE WE CAN GET OUR LP DONE."**

**Question:** I was curious if someone could maybe speak to, and I think all you have maybe in some way or another, intersections of gender and race in translation? One of the things I'm thinking about a lot is the inherently plural nature of identity, of the capacity for the language of translation to deal with that complexity, and the ways in which there's sort of a rigidity around binaries: Source and target. (And I can think of a whole bunch of others.) And, of course, received categories of being and how they relate to this.

**Ji yoon:** It was interesting to see *Cheer Up Femme Fatale* being categorized in various ways: feminist poetry, Korean poetry, Asian studies, translation. I feel like each category elicits different questions about the work. During the book tour, a lot of the questions I received was about how Korean history and culture influenced Kim's writing, and it felt like those questions were framing "Korean culture" to be some sort of self-enclosed system, within the boundary of which Kim's writing was born. But Korean culture has been in conversation with Western philosophy and culture, and Kim's works are too. Kim thinks of Sylvia Plath to be one of her biggest influences. There is a poem in the book that makes a direct reference to Kierkegaard. There's this one poem that I particularly love titled "Bluebeard's Last Wife" where the ingenue in the Bluebeard story—a western folktale—turns out to be the one who's been orchestrating all the murder. There's a poem called "The Phantom of the Opera" where the ingenue and villain position is flipped in a similar way. So the question of cultural influence is more

**"SO THE QUESTION OF CULTURAL INFLUENCE IS MORE COMPLICATED THAN NATIONAL IDENTITY AND HISTORY."**

complicated than national identity and history. But as Madhu was saying, certain categories are more legible, which allows the text to become something that American readers can relate to, and such category will be chosen as the framework for the text. I feel like the existing categories don't reflect intersectionality as well as I would like. How do we resolve that? I don't know. I like to imagine online bookstores attaching Wordcloud to each book, tagging the book with various themes it is in conversation with. You know? Wordcloud where multiple words appear, but certain words related to recurring ideas appear larger? I feel like that kind of format will allow the readers to see the complexity better, how the book engages with multiple threads of conversations.

**Question:** Madhu mentioned earlier, "rethinking ideas of mastery." I was wondering if you could speak to that a little more.

**Madhu:** I don't mean to suggest, "Oh translation! Everyone should do it!" (Though I think everyone should.) I don't mean to not take seriously our efforts as translators to closely read our texts. I value what comes from experience and great effort. But there's this perpetual question for a translator, "Am I good enough? Am I good enough to do this?"

For heritage speakers there's sometimes a sense of not being good enough, which isn't necessarily productive. It's not that we don't want to be good, but maybe just tableting that for a moment and saying, "Well, what would it mean to not focus on whether I'm good enough, but to just experiment and play?" It's about the plural possibilities of translations.

And I want to say something about bad translation—the opposite of mastery. First of all, who has the chutzpah? Samuel Beckett had that.

There's this translation of Mexican poetry that Samuel Beckett did and it's recognized as being a bad translation. Masterful writer, but he did this bad book of Mexican poetry. But then I'm so grateful for that book because it opens the door to something. It's there, so people can look at it and be like, "That's bad, I can do it better." Or just, "I encountered this writer that I hadn't encountered before." I think that translation has multiple purposes and different purposes, and so sometimes focusing obsessively, wondering if something's masterful, can close the door to other things.

There was a conversation I had with Elisabeth Jaquette about book production. The editorial process in the U.S. is very long. So what comes out is very polished. We were talking and I said, "Well, what about the space for books to be brilliant but a bit less tamed?" She was saying that in Egypt there's prize-winning, very formally produced work. But there are also really good writers who self-publish and they distribute their own work and it doesn't mean the work is considered unprofessional or bad. It's just a different publishing culture. So what about wild literature, wild translations? Where it doesn't have to be like the Random House book of Mexican poetry. Of course there are things like pamphlets and chapbooks. And I do know we're all busy, that translation requires a lot of effort and that we want our work to reach more than our five friends. It's a complicated conversation. But it's a start.

### Audience Questions and Comments

**Question:** I'm interested in the ways in which a translator's positionality shows up in what they're translating. Getting into it, coming from a poetry side, I haven't heard people talking about the positionality of the translator in particular. For the text that you choose and are in the process of translating—the decisions, the problem-solving—

**"WELL, WHAT WOULD IT MEAN TO NOT  
FOCUS ON WHETHER I'M GOOD ENOUGH,  
BUT TO JUST EXPERIMENT AND PLAY?"**

how do you think your positionality is helping you relate to, see, and explore that task? I'm trying to translate an Afro-Cuban writer—Nicolás Guillén—but I'm not Cuban, so I'm thinking about blackness. What we have in common and what we don't have in common and how that can be [manifested] in the translation.

**Question:** I really love the idea of a VONA for translators and I'm wondering if something that can be a step towards that is working with groups like Kundiman, Canto Mundo, and start there with translating workshops or translators' groups that specifically emphasize that you don't have to be a translator, you don't even have to know the language. I know that when I took my first translation workshop, it said, "No knowledge of foreign language required." And I'm a heritage speaker, but it was really important to me to see that because I feel like my insecurities about language are so great.

**Question:** I am very curious, as someone who moves between multiple languages, what your relationship, if you had a first language, how [your relationship] changed as you've become more adept, or whatever word you want to add there, in translation? In teaching texts in translation, I often think about that when I try and talk to my students. How [translation] doesn't take away; it adds. And that there are [times] though, that if it is my first or second language, I have to think about whether [the first language] is more accurate. Or is that more my relationship to the language itself, or is that the text showing me its relationship to language? Does that make sense? So it's less about positionality, but it's connected to that. So, how does your relationship to that language change the more you delve into considering those interstitial spaces? I find it really curious as a teacher, and as a performer. I love to go between, but I also think my body's changing the more I become adept at speaking English, for instance, or another language.

**Question:** I was also curious about the idea of introductions and translator's notes. Are they necessary to position different works of literature? For what works of literature are they necessary? Who should be writing them? There was a bit of a kerfuffle when *Kintu* came out, [ . . . ] by Ugandan author, Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi. And Aaron Beatty, who is neither Ugandan nor African nor female nor black nor anything—[he] knows a lot about African literature—and there were a lot of people who were like, "Why is this white guy doing the introduction, even if he knows this stuff?"

## [To say I love you put a bird on a wire]

To say I love you put a bird on a wire  
so I told her enough times to get an abacus  
going in the sky. To follow her body  
made my heartbeat a flight of stairs,  
of swallows twisting up to the tower  
of a bell which went silent on the condition  
of Consuelo & I & dusk & the roofs suddenly  
everywhere around us. We weren't afraid,  
what people thought of us on a distant  
ship that would never reach the shore,  
& since everyday Death said hello in  
a different manner, not one kiss went  
missing, not one ecstatic gaze, nor  
the desire to love each other above  
the apathy of passing cars, the people  
coming to church, crossing themselves  
& us, giving up their blessing by mistake.  
The paletero barking out his flavors,  
making us laugh, because what kind  
of ice cream man is angry.



JUDGED BY DARBY ENGLISH

The background is a solid, deep red color. It is framed by a decorative border of stylized, light-colored leaves and branches, which appear to be layered or have a slight shadow effect, giving them a three-dimensional appearance. The leaves are arranged in a dense, vine-like pattern along the top, bottom, and sides of the page.

WINNER

"DUST BALLS"  
BY  
BRANDON BROWN

HONORABLE  
MENTIONS

"KOCHI-MUZIRIS  
BIENNALE 2016"  
BY BLESSY AUGUSTINE  
&

"OUTSIDE THE MANÈGE"  
BY ALEXANDER CASTRO

## Dust Balls

I was sitting on the edge of a bed in the emergency room in Richmond, trying desperately not to move my body. Explosive spasms of pain effloresced in my upper back and traveled down my right arm. A sequence of doctors had tried for hours to coax a dislocated shoulder back into its proper place, with no luck. Finally, one of them, also named Brandon, came in and asked me if I was familiar with Ketamine. "Um," I said, nodding yes. "Have you ever heard of the K-hole?" he asked.

Indeed I had heard of the K-hole. A friend had told me a harrowing story about snorting too much K at a party on Haight Street one night, then lying face down on the sidewalk next to a heap of puke, immobilized until the drug started to wear off. It is a canonical drug story for me, a horrifying morality tale that has repelled any desire to dabble. But what choice did I have? Brandon and his colleagues had done all they could do; Ketamine was a last resort. "You might have some *thoughts* when it kicks in," he said to me calmly. "*Weird thoughts.*" He paused, mulling over his choice of adjectives. "*Dark thoughts.*"

One of the classic manifestations of the K-hole is the feeling that one has died. Coincidentally, I had just read a number of books about near-death experiences, all those wonderful corny stories about going into the light, talking to your dead uncle, coming back morally improved. This is not the death I experienced. Ready for that warm white luminescence, the return of lost family members and friends, a perpetual banquet of oysters and Lillet, I was disappointed to find death both harrowing and tedious.

Trying to describe this experience to Brandon later, language failed me. Death had felt bureaucratic, a waiting room without magazines. The shape of the afterlife was spherical, an orb around which my dead body hovered, still as hanging laundry but scary somehow. I felt at once both larger than myself and profoundly minor. When the peak intensity of the drug's dissociative high began to wear off, the room slowly came back into blurred focus. I could see my pants, but they weren't in the same universe. At a great distance, they just sat there stubbornly on my body. "This is what it looks like to see your pants when you're dead," I thought.

*Dust Balls* is the title of a series of fourteen photographs by Mike Kelley, nine of which are on the seventh floor of SFMOMA, with a stray in the photography exhibition on the second floor. Mary Clare Stevens, executive director of the Mike Kelley Foundation, shared with me that they were shot with a 35mm camera on tinfoil by the artist himself. "They are not actually 'dust balls,'" she remarks, "but lint from the dryer." Lint is an aggregation of textile fibers in clothing. When we dry our clothes, the machine jostles lint out of their weaves, transforming it into common garbage. I mean, on the other hand, where there is lint there is life. Like Paleolithic cave paintings, lint signifies human intellection.

The photographs in *Dust Balls* render these small, insignificant pieces of human trash as sublime, apocalyptic natural phenomena. Without the parenthetical subtitle, one might mistake them for galaxies being born, or tremendous explosions in the sparse outlying areas of the universe where stuff like "galaxies being born" happens.

This warping of scale, portraying a little piece of lint in the dimension of a major outer-space event, reflects the uncanny as well, and recalls an interview in *Minor Histories* (The MIT Press, 1999, p. 77) in which Kelley discussed the experience of watching television: "you must mentally blow yourself up to the size of a giant to account for the minuscule figures on the screen." Transgressions of space, like transgressions of time, displace the body, effecting a deletion of the self as it is replaced by something bigger, smaller, or in another epoch.



Fig. 1. "Untitled 10," *Dust Balls* collection, Mike Kelley, 1994.

Kelley has linked the photographs which make up *Dust Balls* with other works, including *Color and Form* (1999) and *The Two Faces of God* (2002), describing them as “overt attempts at applying the aesthetics of painterly biomorphic abstraction to photography.” The “biomorphic abstraction” he refers to here is represented in part by Abstract Expressionism and the painters who emerged from that tradition. But it is also a quality he identifies in kitsch. Writing in *Minor Histories* (Ibid, p. 122) about a local landmark in Los Angeles known as the “Chinatown Wishing Well,” a whimsical, miniature landscape behind a dilapidated fence meant to evoke Chinese gates, he addresses the “formlessness” he adduces in the sculpture:

Part of my admiration for such coloration is the murky unspecific ‘space’ it produces. I have recognized and appreciated this kind of space in paintings that span art history from the obscure, muddy backgrounds in Rembrandt’s paintings, to the primordial goo space of 1940’s biomorphic abstraction. Such space has an erotic appeal for me.; it is the confused ‘nothing’ space of presexual consciousness.

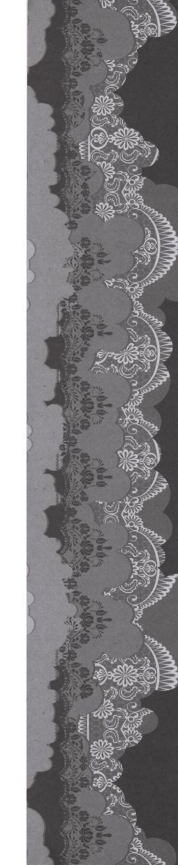
Connecting public artifacts like “Chinatown Wishing Well”—which many would dismiss as mere junk—with Rembrandt is classic Kelley; his art frequently valorizes the mundane and shitty. And indeed the photographs in the *Dust Balls* series represent several lowly masses of undifferentiated garbage, which most of us would thoughtlessly dispose of, scaled to the size of a canonical painting—or, in Kelley’s terms, the historical scale of erotic feeling.

There’s a moment I treasure in *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure* (1989, dir. Stephen Herek), a film about the utopian promise of art disguised as a low stakes time-travel comedy. Bill and Ted have arrived in the agora in ancient Athens, hoping to track down Socrates, so they can whisk him to the future, save their high school careers and, more importantly, their world-redeeming rock band Wyld Stallyns. Typical of their stops through time, they find their target right away.

Socrates is philosophizing between two big columns, next to an hourglass, delivering a lecture on the frail and impermanent nature of the human body (in contrast to the eternal life of the soul). The metaphor Socrates uses in this

lecture for the human body is “dust.” It’s not a moment I recall from the Platonic corpus, but it doesn’t really matter for Bill and Ted’s purposes. Socrates is, after all, speaking Greek, a language these two splendid doofuses have woefully neglected in their academic curricula. Still, they have a purpose and stick to it. “Philosophize with him, dude,” Bill enjoins Ted.

When Ted approaches the rostrum, Socrates pauses in his remarks, confused. And then Ted begins to speak: “All we are . . . is dust in the wind, *dude*.” As Socrates and his flock continue to look perplexed, not knowing English, much less the 1977 hit “Dust In The Wind” by prog rock dingleberries Kansas, Ted clarifies: holding up the hourglass, he motions to his body, then the dust inside it, then blows. That’s all we are, *dust in the wind, dude*.



**MIKE KELLEY**  
**&**  
**TATSHA PAGGETT**

P. 209-210

**Mike Kelley**

"Untitled 4" & "Untitled 11"  
from the series *Dust Balls* 1994.  
Gelatin silver print, 31" x 24".  
From the Collection SFMOMA.  
Gift of Byron R. Meye  
© Estate of Mike Kelley

P. 211-213

**taisha paggett**

**In Collaboration with**

**Gregory Barnett** (costume),  
**Marbles Jumbo Radio** (dance),  
& **Yann Novak** (sound).  
*Mountain, Fire, Holding Still*. 2016.  
Featuring taisha paggett, the object.  
Getty Villa.  
Curated by Audrey Chan  
Photo by Christopher Wormald.

P. 214-215

**taisha paggett**

*Decomposition of a mutable  
landscape*, 2016.  
Featuring taisha paggett.  
UC Irvine xPML Theater.  
Curated by Simon Leung.

P. 214

Photos by Jason Gowans.

P. 215

Top: Photo by Jason Gowans.  
Bottom: Photo by Maura Muranme.

P. 216

Photo by Maura Muranme.

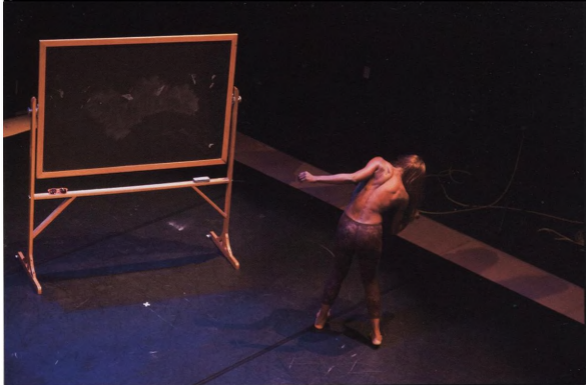
















Nonfiction

**LYNN, LYNN,  
THE CITY OF SIN**

by Jeff Wasserboehr

Lynn, Lynn, the city of sin,  
You never come out, the way you came in  
Lynn, Lynn, the city of sin,  
You ask for water, but they give you gin  
Lynn, Lynn, the city of sin,  
Where them girls say 'no,' but then always give in  
Lynn, Lynn, the city of sin,  
Where you can't scrape two pennies to make din-din  
Lynn, Lynn, the city of sin,  
If you ain't bad they just won't let you in  
Oh, Lynn, Lynn, the city of sin,  
The damndest place you will ever live in

— The Lynn Limerick

At General Electric Plant No. 2, some ten miles north of Boston in the southwestern corner of Lynn, my por por assembled lightbulbs that would be sold to the country's movie theaters—bulky, fluorescent, 60-watt things of tungsten and glass. With her small hands, nimble and yet curled with early on-set arthritis, she brought light to 1960's American cinema. She worked the first shift of the day, starting at 4:30 a.m. While getting her things together before leaving for work, por por would wake my mother before dawn so that she could get a few hours of study in before her school day began.

Por por would sing, *When the red, red robin goes bob-bob-bobbin' along* . . . and kiss my mother on the temple. *Wake up, wake up, you sleepy head. Get up, get up, get out of bed* . . . My mother would inherit this song and sing it to wake me when I was a child. These Bing-Crosby sentences were some of the only non-broken English my Cantonese grandmother would ever learn to speak.



My grandparents' immigrant story was no different from thousands of other immigration stories in that it, too, was built on falsehood and illegality. My Chinese grandfather, who I called gung gung, was a paper son who came to the United States under a false name, seven years after he'd been abandoned by his own biological parents in southern China. He was smuggled into the United States under the identity of his deceased, American-born younger brother, and my gung gung lived his entire life as Bing Doon Yee—a name that didn't belong to him. In fact, to this day no one in my family knows my grandfather's real name, only the name he occupied: Bing Doon Yee; this name under which he did everything in his American life—fought in WWII, opened a laundromat, passed a Mig/Tig welding certification program, took out loans and mortgages, retired from The GE, and collected Social Security.

The War Brides Act of 1945 allowed American soldiers like my gung gung to marry and bring home [Asian] women from overseas. After the war, and before returning to the States, my grandfather married Poi Gin Lee in southern China; he'd selected her with the help of a Canton marriage broker who held a practice that fanned out to a rural Taishan village. My por por was one in a lineup of dozens of potential brides. She could cook and sew, and she had the best singing voice. My grandfather would tell his children that out of all of the country bumpkins, por por was the most "cosmopolitan," for unlike the others, she had made one or two trips by mule-led cart into the small, nearby city, some thirty or forty miles from the farm. What did it matter if she had hardly any education?

Por por came to the U.S. while the seeds of McCarthyism were being planted—when Americans feared communism and kept most Asians out of the country or under very close scrutiny. She spent several months locked in a detention center in East Boston, where she had been sent from Angel Island, San Francisco, in a freight train with hundreds of other Chinese immigrants. Upon her release, gung gung put her immediately to work. Por por ran his laundromat in south Lynn while gung gung took welding classes; but when the laundromat was robbed, gung gung wised up and sold it to another new Chinese immigrant family. They just might have better

luck, he surmised: circle-of-the-immigrant. Por por and gung gung went to find work at The GE. The GE loved immigrants, but especially the Chinese, because of their willingness to die rather than to bring shame to their family.

At the colossal GE Plant No. 2, in two separate facilities, por por made lights and gung gung welded metal parts for airplane turbines. Pre-OSHA, welding was seriously dangerous work, and all that aberrant manganese that would lead to gung gung's getting the coveted GE iron hammer also led to a hefty dose of Parkinson's that would confine him to a human shell of shakiness—a man abuzz in a chair who drooled into his clothes and sometimes moaned but never stood upright in front of my sister and me.

This vibrating, spitting man with no memory, crumpled over, was the only version of my grandfather I knew. I never heard him speak—Cantonese or otherwise. Growing up, and visiting him week after week in Lynn, I always wondered how he'd become this: A man who lived in this terrifying city, and yet didn't know where he was, who he was, or who his wife, children, or grandchildren were. He'd forgotten his own story—no longer a welder, a father, a grandfather, a diehard Celtics fan, a soldier, a veteran, an immigrant. A man with no identity, no memory, and a false name. On the day we pulled the plug, I thought a lot about that—and selfishly, too. If this man who I'd never heard speak or seen in any other position but splayed out in his chair was my grandfather, and if he couldn't remember his own damn story, let alone his name, what the fucking hell did that make all of us? And yet, when he died, I'd never missed anything else so acutely.

**You never come out the way you came in.**

People were one thing in Lynn, and another thing when they were out of it. My cousin Marc and I were teenagers when we decided it suitable to take on a faux version of what we then surmised to be the identities of TJ and Jacob, the two men who always occupied por por's front stoop—drinking, rolling dice, blasting hip hop from an old-school boom box. TJ was por por's neighbor. Jacob was TJ's friend who never left. With gung gung gone, they were por por's bodyguards, they claimed.

TJ and Jacob were large-bodied and hard. Everything my Eurasian cousins and I were not. To mimic these two, Marc and I traded in our snug, white-boy T-shirts

for baggier, looser, all-white T's that hung down nearly to our knees. We wore baggy jeans with no belt, letting our boxers fluff out our backsides. Marc was first to buy a gold chain and watch; he got them from our "Uncle" Jackie in Chinatown who knew a guy who knew a guy. Marc and I started writing rap songs and rapping in his parents' computer room—songs about being whaysian, about growing up in a white, racist state, about never fitting in and it being the immigrant's fault. Here's a gem: *Shoulda just stayed in the homeland, what you seein'?!/Got me feelin' like a nomad, tired a breathin'*. We imagined we were deep. At fourteen, I had the girl I was dating pierce my ears with the tip of a needle she burnt with a lighter. Afterward, I started wearing faux diamond studs that I'd bought at K-Mart whenever I went to Lynn. I bought a cheap, black do-rag that I wanted to wear to complete the outfit, but I never actually put it on. Still, when I entered Lynn, I told myself, I would act tougher. I was a brown, mixed-looking kid on the rough North Shore now; I had better behave like it.



My mother, now sixty-three, grew up and spent her first twenty-eight years in Lynn. Even when she was attending MIT to study aerospace engineering, she was one person at home, in Lynn, and another in Cambridge. Somewhere along the forty-five-minute trip from the Lynn Commuter to Wonderland Station to the Red Line, my mother shed her non-rhotic Boston accent, shimmied the scoliotic curve out of her spine, and turned the wringing of her anxious hands into a calmer pitter of fingertips atop her kneecap. At MIT, she became the Shirley Temple she was named after—Shirley—not Shuh-ri; she affected an accent with an elegance resembling more that of a wealthy, south shore Brahmin. Her professors often drew attention to her in class as a shining example of a "good student." In turn, my mother became a TA while she was an undergrad. At twenty, she was invited to assist in a conference presentation to a crowd of doctoral engineers. After the conference, my mother was approached by a man in a black suit.

"You'd make an excellent recruit," he said. "For the CIA."

My mother stared back at the man in disbelief, her heart launching itself against her chest wall. Her? A four-foot-eleven Chinese woman with small

hands and near-blind vision? Her? A young woman who could only speak two languages—English and math? Her? A spy? Her hands were so small and thin, she wondered if she'd even be able to grip a gun. She'd never been athletic.

"Think about it."

"Why me?" my mother asked.

"Your brain. I like who you *could* be. You had all these people fooled about who you really are. You're smart—and confident."

Confident? The word punched a hole clear through her. My mother had never felt confident. She told the man thank you and promised that she would indeed think about it. He gave her a card with a number on it to call. After that encounter, on the T, the bus, the train-ride home, the thought caused her anxiety to come flooding back; it gathered—bunched itself into a cone in the pit of her stomach. She started wringing her hands again somewhere between Chelsea and Revere. Started sweating and gasping for her air between Revere and Saugus. Started believing she was having a heart attack between the fetid Rumney Marsh and Lynn.

When she came to from her panic attack, her skin was pale. The train had arrived at Lynn Station. A fellow passenger helped my mother off of the train floor and rubbed her back. "You home now," she said. "Let me help you." The woman ushered my mother to a bench in the station and left her. Still gathering her breath, it took my mother several minutes to realize the woman had made off with her purse.

Soon my mother's panic attacks became regular and she grew fearful of leaving her house in Lynn. She stopped attending classes, and a semester passed. And then another, and another, and she dropped out of MIT, forfeited her scholarship. She found part-time work at the Lynn Public Library.



**If you ain't bad, they just won't let you in.**

I never saw a sunset in Lynn. Maybe they happened somewhere. Maybe they all only ever took place whenever I was inside. I didn't believe it then and not now, but my por por's *bhikkhu* told her that a city very much like Lynn was where Buddha himself was tempted from the path toward Nirvana and where he learned


to tell lies. What I did know for sure about Lynn was its pallor, and the tall, cement-gray buildings that served no aesthetic purpose, really, save for to carve angles into a dim sky. I knew the city's abandoned lots and storefronts and apartment towers, knew the swell and recess of the starving who roamed the streets, knew the dueling Latino-Cambodian Deuce Boyz gang and the Avenue King Crips and the Bloods around the barrio, the sweet-caramel-burnt-plastic smell of crack my por por's neighbors huffed from pipes on their front stoop and the jagged gigglefits that ensued. I knew that every house owned its own CVS shopping cart and that the local CVS had to keep buying more and more to meet the shopping demands of its actual customers—because now everyone on the southeast side of the city had one—those carts sitting on single-family home front porches as if they came stat with the house upon date-of-sale.

I don't know if I was born bad, but Lynn was where I first learned about drugs and prostitution; about guns, weapons, murder, and robbery. Lynn was where I learned how to steal. First from my uncle, then from my sister, then from my mom, then from the corner store, Full Moon Market, which didn't even have a goddamn scanner at the exit; then, finally, from my por por who left her purse wide open on the kitchen counter by the telephone. I took cigarettes, but soon moved onto old Budweisers from the basement, and soon whole bottles of cognac, soju, and potato liquor. The money I eventually started stealing from por por I used to buy weed, mushrooms, acid, perks, Vicodin, and other scripts. Por por never dealt in card or check, didn't believe in banks—only ever cash, and she had rolls of it just like any other inner-city immigrant.

It gave me pause, stealing from my old, arthritic grandmother, but that thought never stopped me. Usually, during the car ride out of Lynn, guilt would overcome me, and I would think of turning back. I would think of what my por por used to say on Chinese New Year, and on other days throughout the year when she felt especially cheery, giving my sister and me money in a red and gold envelope, a *hóng bāo*.

"Put in bank," por por would say, handing the envelope over. "Save. Make baby." When she gave me *hóng bāos*, I was instantly reminded of the value of the dollar—and how much literal pain had gone into the money she was now so easily giving away—that money caused her hunched spine, her limp, her numb fingers, her cancer.


But even these thoughts weren't enough, and I didn't stop. I bought drugs and sold them, bought more and sold more. Bought again, crushed pills, snorted them, and got high.



Ask anyone in Massachusetts and they'll tell you Lynn is one of the most dangerous cities in all of New England. The gangs, which battle for territory, for market share, for their race and their families, rob, rape, murder. Every year, the city of 90,000 commits over 2,000 violent crimes, and a handful of murders.

The bright blue graffiti that colors the foundations of the houses on my por-por's old street, Aborn Place, is bright blue for gang-loyalty to the Avenue King Crips. My uncle Stevie used to always tell me, "motherfucker, you in Crip territory now," whenever I came to Lynn. Counter to what you'd think, something about that notion made me feel safer. Like, in spite of their murderous reputation, they were in actuality keeping us safe from the Bloods, and the other greater Boston gangs, including the Irish mob. For this reason, I was young when I swore my hip-hop allegiance to Snoop Dog, Nate Dogg, Eazy-E, Ice Cube, and NWA—the Crip-associated rappers of the West Coast. Whenever friends back home would play DMX or The Game, I would throw up E-C sign for East Coast Crips in protest; an insanely stupid gesture for an insanely dumb hapa teenager—a preposterous sign that I had no business throwing out there willy-nilly.

Even now, though I recognize the stupidity, I still feel this loyalty. It's stupid and yet unshakable. I recognize Kendrick Lamar as the most talented hip-hop artist alive and listen to him often, but I do not buy his records for the inconvenient and nonsensical rationale that my Chinese grandparents' house was located within Crip territory.



"You have to steal. Or you have to fight. Real work's for pussies, and you'll get your ass robbed and kicked." This was what Uncle Stevie told me. Stevie

grew up here with my Ma and their two other siblings. Stevie had assumed ownership of the house on Aborn when my por por died. He has been on welfare since he turned thirty-five—and he is seventy now. He has tattoos and a ponytail and when I was growing up rocked a severely angled *fu-manchu* with a soul patch (East meets West on a Chinese face). While I was growing up, Stevie spent a lot of time in Chinatown and we all had our suspicions; he took regular flights to and from Columbia, to and from Panama, Peru. He did something with drugs. I don't know what.

"Never," he said, looking at me once, "never, walk down the street to the video store or the bodega without me." I nodded. "Or, without a knife," he added, and he reached into his pocket, pulled out a cloth, and unwrapped it. My first knife: an Italian Stiletto. I was eleven. "Don't tell your Ma," he said. I nodded. I would later sell that knife to a high school friend for money to buy drugs.

Stevie learned to expect violence. He and my mother were in their teens, and the only ones at home, when a gang of thieves broke in through the window and tore their house up, looking for jade, for Chinese jewels, for hidden money. "You chinks hide shit in the ceilings, right?" one masked man shouted at my mother, before slapping her in the face. Panicking, crying, my mother couldn't respond. "Tell me where you hide it. Don't make me fucking hit you again." But she didn't know, so she got hit again. In my Ma's version of the story, Stevie hid himself in the closet and thought not about protecting her, his younger sister—she could hear him sobbing through the door. In Stevie's version, Ma and him were duct-taped up and thrown into the closet while the thieves ransacked the house. Even now we don't speak to the accuracy of either version. The thieves left through the back door, and made off with thousands of dollars that my por por had kept in a tin Maxwell House canister in the basement ceiling panels; money that she kept hidden from her husband and children for reasons no one knew. Each house on Aborn has been robbed several times. Each house now has bars on its windows, tall fence out front; each house now has signs, dogs, alarms—hammers and crowbars leaning up against the walls by the doors. The people in Lynn are ready. For what, they aren't sure. Something bad.

—◆◆—

**Where you can't scrape two pennies to make din-din.**

Route 1, also known as the Lynnway: full of used car dealers and fast food restaurants and the poor and hungry wandering through the lots looking for scraps. On Saturdays when my sister and I visited my por por and gung gung, we pleaded to be taken to the Lynnway for KFC. My por por, tiny, thin, with round owl-eye glasses and dyed jet-black hair peered through us, then yelled, "Shame!" because even if we associated her house with the foods we hated to love—*goyzas, jiaozi, bokshoy, char-sui*—we always got there, our Chinese family home, where we entered and felt Chinese, and then craved American. This was all part of being half-and-half; Eurasian, you know? we tried to convince her. You still love us, don't you? Por por would take her CVS cart and wheel it with us inside down the Lynnway, where, on the way back she would hit the bodega for vegetables and Argentinian sweets.

The hunger I inherited is a hunger from my mother. It's a hunger that didn't let me eat when I was younger and now makes me eat too much. It's a hunger that brought me to restlessness, to drugs, to addiction, to arrests, to self-harm. My Chinese uncles and aunties tell me this hunger has been passed down from their own childhood hunger—never satisfied; that I was like my mother—picky, finicky, never hungry; that they knew it straight away, from when I was born: a colicky baby. When my mother and her brothers and sister were growing up in Lynn, there was never any food, and no real "meals." On a good day, they would split a can of tuna between the four of them. Mostly, they would eat white rice and only white rice for every meal. The rice became a daily ritual: the four of them, sat around the dining room table, pounding their forks and spoons into the surface in unison, chanting *rice, rice, rice, morning, noon, and night! Rice, rice, rice, morning, noon, and night!* They learned to Americanize the rice, adding ketchup to it, or butter, salt, or Old Bay seasoning. They'd crack and fry an egg and mix it in with barbecue sauce and Frank's RedHot. Spicy offered them the illusion of feeling fuller.

Even when The GE was booming and everyone was working—and American restaurants, mostly specializing in lobster and seafood, sprung up all across Lynn—immigrant families still ate at home: home-cooked meals from the homeland.

Por por and gung gung never let the *rice-rice-rice* chants get to them. They just kept feeding the growing, hungry kids more and more rice. As a result, only my uncle Stevie is over five-foot-five. My mother and her sister are barely five feet, and my uncle Stanley is a legal little person. Now I watch my own sister's daughter eat and eat and eat and I wonder where all the hunger has gone.

---

### **You ask for water, but instead you get gin.**

Or cognac. At least for the Chinese who spend too much time in Chinatown. Fresh-off-the-boat Chinese can tell how rich other new-ish Chinese-American families are by how much cognac they have. And though my grandparents hardly drank, their whole basement was full of it.

Lynn is dive-bar city and most everyone has a drinking problem.

In the Crip territory where por por and gung gung lived, in a neighborhood that was mostly black, TJ and Jacob would sit on my grandma's porch and do "guard duty," while drinking Old English and liquor straight out the bottle. One time, TJ gave me a deck of cards and asked if I wanted to play cowboys and Indians.

Foolishly, I said yes.

He snatched the cards out my hand and said you're the cowboy, now, go round up the fuckin' Indians. He threw the whole deck of cards up into the air and they fluttered down into the street. He nearly fell down the steps laughing so hard. My por por yelled "shame!" and kicked him off her porch, telling him not to come back. He laughed his way home, but other than that one time, TJ hardly ever left my por por's house. He always hung around long enough for my por por to reach a certain level of guilty that allowed her to feed him.

"Shame!" I watched my por por say once, handing him a bowl of rice, veggies, and leftover pork. She whacked him on the back of his head and walked back up the stairs smiling her big, open-mouth smile. Por por's big smile contained two gold teeth—replacements she had filled in the late '70s to pair with her disco-inspired beehive hairdo.

"When you die, por por," TJ once said, "I'ma snatch those things right outtcha ya mouf!"

It wasn't this moment per se, but I never trusted TJ—even though he never did my grandma any bodily harm. It was the way he looked at me when he was drunk with red eyes. The way he made me laugh uncomfortably when he said, "one of these days . . ." and swung his fist upward through the air in slow motion, "*pow!* Right to the moon."

---

Por por had trouble with my white, Irish-German father well before he had trouble with drinking. And part of me always wondered, when after I turned twenty and was addicted to painkillers and opioids myself, if she hated me in just the same way. Surely, it wasn't hard for anyone to see: my bloodshot and baggy eyes, my withering body of mostly bone, my brain that faltered, errored, and made little sense, my nonstop fidgeting and coughing. My speech, which had the same nervous, jittery erraticism as oil popping off a skillet. One Chinese New Year, I stood up from the couch and a baggy of Percocet fell out of my pocket onto the sofa. Por por spotted the pills instantly.

"*Jook-fee!*" she shouted my Chinese name. I looked at her, embarrassed; my stomach sunk deeper into me. "Shame!" por por said. I remember looking at her face, the makeup she wore and the color of it—like a light sun—the shine of her skin from years of applying oil and baby powder. The English curse words por por must've wanted to unload on me then but simply didn't have. How that disconnect allowed me to take the pills up and tuck them back into my pocket.

---

### **Where all them girls say 'no,' but then always give in.**

The five major Lynn gangs control the whole flow of drugs, guns, and prostitution that make Lynn exactly what it is today: a city where, when you step outside your front door, you have a one-in-thirty chance of becoming a victim of a violent crime. Worse, of course, when you're brown or black. Or, rather, another way to describe it, as someone once told me: If you live in Boston and want to do something wrong—"in-the-shadows," so-to-speak—

that's where Lynn comes in handy. Like other small, crummy cities in America, there's no need to go to some special part when you are in Lynn. No one place is any more happening in these shadowy regards than another. Here, you just have to talk to the person you first see. They know. And if they don't, they know someone who knows. Drugs or what.

My co-worker from the construction site in Weston, Sammy, and I were high at a bar in Lynn, when we learned the "girls-always-give-in" line. I was twenty-six, and visiting. Sammy and I died laughing when a random guy at the bar told us that the line was true. "Have you ever given it a try?" he asked. "I mean, for fuck's sake, it's Lynn. You never know until you do . . ."

Sammy and I agreed. And the next time we were in Lynn together, we went for it. Four Winds was as dirty and shitty as it got, people blowing lines straight off the pine and fucking in the bathroom stalls—one teeny step above illegal. Two blocks in from Nahant Bay; easy salt breeze and sea wafting in wave after wave of white trash. Mandy had spent the entire day on the beach, tanning. Her blonde hair was nearly white. She wore a holy Red Sox jersey from the early '90s. She was a conservative twelve years older than me. It took somewhere between six and ten drinks for Sammy and I to get Mandy and her friend back to Sammy's split-level. Mandy never said 'no' exactly, but she did give in—as the limerick goes, she went too. When I quit the construction site where I worked that summer to move toward the Berkshires in western Massachusetts, Sammy would text me telling me that I was missing out. *Four Winds, brab*, he wrote. *Motherfucker, I wish I'd known about this shit when I was eighteen!* Sammy had dreams of becoming a cop. I wonder if Sammy has ever left.



Later that year, when I was twenty-seven, and still recovering from a failed engagement to a South African woman I loved, fucking my way through my pain, and attending sex addiction anonymous sessions, I would contemplate often the thought of going back to Lynn. I had never gotten a prostitute. Sure, there were prostitutes in Springfield, but there was something about the familiarity of Lynn.

I had been six or seven when I saw my first prostitute, and it's a story my family loves to recount. There I was, walking down the street behind my parents, holding onto my big sister's hand, when a woman in a shiny green halter, who was just falling out of her top, approached us. I caught eyes with her and paused right there on the sidewalk. The woman got closer. She smiled a bright, red lipstick smile, and I was whole-body arrested, ogling her chest. My sister tugged me by the arm: "Come on, Jeffrey!" But I couldn't move. I watched as the woman walked closer and she kept coming, and, as she neared us, she took both of her arms and used them to cover herself. She looked at my mother, my father, my sister—she looked at me. Her face flushed. She was embarrassed.

At twenty-seven, I drove one hundred miles from Amherst, MA, to Lynn. I took my car up and down the Pinkham strip several times, passing, at the far end the crowd at the night club, turning around, and driving the length once more. I paid a careful eye out for patrol cars. I must have driven the strip a dozen times, contemplating what to do now that I was actually there. It was so easy: Just pull over, roll the window down, unlock the door. Nothing to it. Just a quick jaunt to a motel.

All I had to do was pull over. But I couldn't. That big lipstick smile stopped me.



### **The damnedest city you ever lived in.**

The Yee side of my lineage has been in Lynn since the late 1920s. The city has hardly changed. It was where streams of immigrants landed, wrecked, weary, and embattled, and it is still the very same place where immigrants refuge. Lynn was the terrifying, crime-ridden city that my Chinese immigrant grandparents never wanted to live in—and the city that all of their kids swore, they, too, would someday leave behind for good—and yet here they are. We are all still here, year after year.

The house on Aborn Place where my mother and her siblings were raised—this is still the house where we celebrate Chinese New Year annually. It is where we have our summer gatherings. It is where we return to after visiting Mt. Auburn Cemetery where all of my Chinese relatives are buried. It is where we have good-bye parties and hello parties.

When my por por died, fifteen years after my gung gung, she left the house to her eldest son, as per Chinese tradition—the first-born son being, in truth, the S-U-N. Stevie subsequently moved into the house his Chinese mail-order bride, who is thirty-six years younger than him, and their three children. The Lynn house shifted owners, but smelled the same: Like Chinese five-spice powder, like joss-stick incense and smoke, like steamed white rice cooked over the coil burner not in a pressure cooker; like beef broth, pork shoulder, goose, and duck; like persimmon and pear; like dust, floorboard rot, old carpet, and menthol cigarettes. My grandmother's food, my uncle's. My grandmother's furniture, now my uncle's. Her Newport 100s, the same brand my uncle smokes. There is usually bowling on TV. Each time we visit Stevie's now, we all bring food—recipes we have inherited from this very house. We enter, we pass the long table of steaming food where we deposit our own plates, and we stand in line before the Yee family shrine at the far end of the dining room; a royal red-colored and golden Buddha adorned with photographs of the Yees, the Lees, the Hongs, the Chois—our makeshift ancestor tree, only some of which are our actual ancestors. The shrine sits on a table before a giant mirror. It is decorated in colorful offerings: paper money, faux rings and jade, and snacks—for the Buddha, and for the dead, for they are always hungry. We bestow offerings before we eat, and we let them eat first. Before por por died, she would instruct us to stand here, to clasp three sticks of incense in our hands and bow, conducting *kaotao*—three times, for the three jewels: honor, worship, and devotion. I never got it; the redundancy of prayer, the whole act of prostration. During *kaotao*, I had taught myself to start closing my eyes on the first bow and just disappear, for every time I bowed to the floor, I would rise again only to see an unfamiliar face—some non-relative in a golden shrine staring back at me, and then I would see myself, eerily, in the mirror behind the shrine. Now when I bow, I do not close my eyes. I bow once, and I look at her. I bow twice, and I look at her. I bow three times, and I see.

## Dark Helicopter

When the dark helicopter descends on the neighborhood  
we must duck down and cover up the flower beds  
as the water from the bird bath catapults its skeletons.

The lawn breeds black spikes in the oppressive geometric  
shadow of the helicopter. This is how they grew the nails  
for the crucifixion. When we say this it has an extra layer in it.

Dark helicopter believes it is an improv coach. It shouts  
its auto-message through crackling speakers: Say yes!  
It's the same crackle of unwrapping the mints we keep

in our jackets to remind us there are no dark helicopters.  
There are balloons, planets, puppies, snowflakes, mini-muffins,  
but not this wood-paneling and this water cooler and this yellow

legal pad and this man holding up his hands to describe  
a new addition to the library. But hands up happens  
and the helicopter becomes the hands and hands

become the helicopter. This is what the mints are for.  
I'm in a conference room under a broken umbrella,  
which is to say I have reservoir on my head

to catch the dark weather falling from the helicopter.  
Stupid insomniac helicopter threatening to turn  
my blazer into salsa. You can do this! shouts the helicopter.

In a four-way mirror full of conference rooms,  
a million rooms goose-stepping across my backyard,  
a man leans out of a helicopter with a megaphone,

and the swings whip around, and the roses bleed,  
and I offer them a tissue. Dark helicopter  
tries to convince me it has a rainbow inside of it,

the same way an oil well hides rainbows  
inside of its elbow grease. Work harder, yells the helicopter,  
You can do it! You can be a productive member of society!

while it blows the trees sideways and slices up  
the neighborhood into all the spare parts  
that humans are made of.



## Setting Up Your Voicemail Greeting

*Kristen Arnett*

"You're a good writer, but you're not great," he said, and poured the last of the wine into his glass. "I mean, not yet." The empty bottle made a clank like it wanted to tip over when he set it back on the coffee table. It sounded like giving up.

"Hmm," she replied.

"Don't take it the wrong way. I mean, you have the capacity to be better. It's definitely there." There wasn't much wine in his cup, even after he drained the bottle, but he swirled it so it caught the light. It was purposeful, that kind of wrist flicking. It made the wine look like chicken blood, pinkish and watery.

"Okay," she said, thinking privately that his wrist looked too thin to swirl the wine that way. All the swirling made him look like his hand was about to break off, right above the bone. Just a flopped off dismembered hand dropped on her coffee table next to the wine glasses and the overdue library books she needed to return.

"Your writing could be a lot better. It can be better. That's all I'm saying."

*You're always saying something*, is what she thought, but instead she shrugged and said: "Maybe." She didn't bother turning off the lights when he finally went home for the night so it was bright as daylight in the house. When she fell asleep on the couch, she saw red behind her closed lids.

With friends like these, who needs friends, she thought, repeating it like a mantra. She went to sleep powering on the cadence of *friends, who needs, with friends, who needs*, thinking it would maybe work well in a poem.



There were several messages on her phone, voicemails, but she didn't check them for three weeks and by then it didn't matter anymore, he'd stopped calling. The last one was her favorite and she listened to it so many times she was ready to sing it like song lyrics. A single sentence, starting with her name:

"Janina," he said, exasperated. "You really shit on this."



She went out to brunch with other friends who didn't read her writing. *Queer friends*. I need my queer friends right now, she thought, before sending a group text for queer brunch in all capital letters. They were the kind of friends who talked about art like they wanted to fuck it, but when they saw it moving toward them with any kind of certainty they averted their eyes. They were secret art prudes, Janina thought. Art teases. All talk, no action.

Lee scooped melon balls onto her plate and stabbed them violently with her fork. She poured everyone very small portions of mimosa and gave herself the last of the carafe, thinking no one would notice when her portion was half an inch larger than everyone else's portion. Everyone noticed, but no one said anything.

"I'm not talking to Steven anymore," Janina said, and took Lee's mimosa. She added the drink to her own so that it was double the size of anyone else's drink. Her new double drink spilled over onto the table. She used a straw to

suck it up and it made a sound like a cappuccino machine. It tasted better with the straw, she decided. Fizzier.

"Don't you think art should be flawed," Maggie said, and took away the straw so she wouldn't have to hear the sucking sound.

"Steven's dead to me." Janina took the drink and spilled some over her melon balls and ate them that way.

"Art doesn't have to be anything," Lee replied. Janina wished Lee still had something in her glass. She looked foolish holding the empty cup, but there was no way to talk about art or feelings without holding the drink, so Janina let it slide. Steven would've apologized for taking the rest of the alcohol, but Janina wasn't that kind of friend.

"We had that baby and now the baby is somewhere else and Steven can go be with it, for all I care."

They all took a drink after that statement, even Lee, whose glass had nothing in it.

"There's nothing wrong with me saying that," Janina added. "Neither of us can even remember it. That one time we fucked or the baby." But she got up to pay her check instead of sitting at the table and finishing her drink. When she left, she waved from the doorway and mimed taking a phone call. Her abandoned drink leaked tears on the tablecloth until Lee picked it up and poured the liquid back into her own glass.

"I don't think art has to be any kind of way," Lee said, and took a sip.



Hot spots cropped up on Janina's legs. She listened to the voicemails again and focused more on Steven's tone; or what she would have called "tone" back when they were hanging out all night drinking and writing or talking about drinking or thinking about writing.

"It feels like a sudden burst," she said to Maggie. She put everyone on speakerphone because she couldn't bear to have the voicemails that near her brain, where they might absorb and make her believe things from a person who

disappeared like setting a lit match to tissue paper. Was friendship that easy to destroy? Janina thought it would be harder to trash something so significant, but this had been as easy as never returning a phone call.

"What do you mean," Maggie replied. Aside from Steven, no one ever knew what Janina meant so everyone always asked her to clarify. In order to talk to Janina, you had to already half know what she was going to say before she said it.

"I'm having problems with my skin now, too."

"How do you mean," Maggie replied, and her voice echoed until it sounded like two separate Maggies talking over each other.

"Are you in the bathroom?" Janina asked, and Maggie's hmmm sounded like it was banging off the walls of Janina's apartment. Steven never would have called her from a bathroom or he would've at least done her the courtesy of lying about it.

"I'm going out," Maggie echoed and banded. "Text me, I'll reply back."

When they hung up, Janina googled pictures of Steven on her phone and used MS Paint to write: "Janina, you really shit on this" over the tops of them. She messaged them to Maggie, who didn't respond, and then to Lee, who only said "nice," and then she googled pictures of the baby they'd given up, or she would have googled them if she knew how to look for that kind of thing.

"What's art but pain," Janina asked her cat, who rolled over and licked at a drop of spilled wine on the floor. The apartment wasn't clean, but it wasn't exactly dirty. There were a lot of clothes strewn around in small, select piles, as if Janina had walked right out of them and into fresh ones. Her cat was the nicest thing in the apartment, but that animal was self-sustaining and self-cleaning. Its gray fur shone like a very expensive rug.

"You're the best thing here," Janina told the gray cat, who rolled over and presented its hind end like an award.

There wasn't any wine on the countertop and there wasn't any in the fridge, either. Janina sat and wrote a poem about cats and their hind ends and then she took a picture of that and opened it in MS Paint.

"Janina, you really shit on this," she read aloud, and then she sent it to Maggie and *The Paris Review*.



Steven hadn't liked her work very much, but that was something she told herself so she wouldn't feel bad about his voicemail being all that remained of their friendship. He'd actually liked her work fine and told her so on multiple occasions.

*Saying you need edits is not the same thing as saying dislike*, he'd told her, and she'd told him to go fuck his manuscript. He said he'd thought about it, but he was worried about getting it pregnant. *We're very fertile, you and me, and maybe you've read my work too many times and then it'll birth some bad flash fiction.*

"That wasn't very funny because we had a baby together," Janina croaked, and the cat jumped on the bed and sat on her head.

She was tempted to hit play on the last message again, to hear the sentence about her shitting on things, but she worried what would happen if she no longer recognized his voice. Would it mean he was officially a ghost? What was a ghost, anyway, besides the memory of a thing taking up space in your brain?

She remembered a joke then, a stupid one:

[What did the ghost say to the other ghost?]

[[Do you believe in humans?]]

They'd read it on a Laffy Taffy wrapper one drunk Halloween and laughed themselves sick. Steven was the kind of guy who ate chicken tenders for dinner twice a week. She once saw him pull a pristine uneaten doughnut from a garbage can because it wasn't touching anything but the doughnut box. Janina frowned and scrubbed at her face. Was that really what happened? Or had he just told her that story and she remembered herself being there? Maybe she was already the ghost in the friendship, dead long before his part ever left.

"I should write a poem about that," Janina said, and then she sat up too fast and knocked the cat off the bed and into her nightstand. There was a lot of fierce yowling. Wine spilled all over the floor.

She dialed Maggie and that went to voicemail and she called Lee and that went to voicemail so she called a woman she'd been sleeping with named Diana and she answered. "Can I tell you a joke?" asked Janina, picking up the cat, who had wine dotting her whiskers and was licking her chops ferociously.

"It's seven in the morning," said Diana, whose throat always sounded full of mucus. "I'm not ready for jokes."

*I don't think I can fuck you anymore*, thought Janina, but instead of that she said: "Yeah it's early, let's both go back to sleep." When she hung up, it felt like she'd been on the phone for three hours, but it had only been thirty seconds. According to Steven, some people just had an eternity feel to them. Janina thought it was better to get far away from those kind of people while there was still time. Steven liked to say that exhausting people made good writing fodder, but he was a misanthrope who wrote fiction and the longest relationship he'd ever had was with his childhood best friend, Mark, who played synth for a weird electronica band. Janina knew Steven's sister, who liked her a lot, and Steven's father and his mother who liked her okay, and his great aunt and his two shitty racist cousins, who didn't like her at all. She'd been to three separate Thanksgivings at his house. He was a groomsman in her brother's wedding.

*Neither of us are very good at intimacy*, Steven liked to tell her. *We both have problems with anyone whose feelings are bigger than our own.*

"Janina, you really shit on this," she told herself in Steven's voice, and wanted to smash her phone with a hammer. There was a hot spot on her knee and she itched at it with the heel of her right foot.

Pulling the cat under the covers with her, she dotted off the wine with the corner of the bed sheet and took another stab at sleep.

---

"Maybe your writing is too queer," said Maggie, who had never read any of Janina's poems. Neither had Lee. They'd never even been to a reading, though Janina had sent them multiple emails and social media invites and Maggie and Lee had both said "of course, yes, absolutely" because queer work was so important.

Writing and queerness. Janina talked a lot about it, but she wasn't ever sure what she meant. Did it mean sex? Did it mean fucking? Sometimes she said queer like a noun. Sometimes she said it like a verb. *You never know what you're talking about*, Steven told her, and she'd held up both middle fingers in the middle of a Denny's parking lot after they'd eaten pancakes there at 3 a.m.

"Maybe the poems aren't queer enough," Lee said, and told them she was seeing a woman who had the same last name as a former lover. "It feels very illicit," she confided, and Janina wondered if Lee knew what "illicit" actually meant.

Steven never said one way or the other about the queerness of her work. He said she needed to use spell check and a thesaurus. *You need a lobotomy, but you don't bear me bugging you about it*, she'd told him, and he replied he felt like he'd had one after reading one of her poems that misused the word *prognosticate*.

Janina had a reading and even she didn't even want to go to it, so she called them up to cancel. When she told the organizer she was calling in sick, the woman laughed and said it wasn't that kind of job.

"Well, what can I call in as," asked Janina, who really was starting to feel ill. Her face was sweaty; her mouth tasted like she'd chewed a raw onion. Hot spots on her neck, below her chin, one dotting the middle of her back. "Too broke? Too tired? Too depressed?"

The organizer laughed again. "No."

"Is it like cancelling a doctor's appointment? You need 24 hours' notice or I still have to provide the co-pay?"

"Just don't call in," advised the organizer, who hung up before Janina could offer up other suggestions.

The hot spots on Janina's skin appeared in strange moments and in odd places: the inside of her upper left thigh, along her collarbone, running along the arch of her foot. It was like a person pressed their thumb against her and then got bored and lifted it, immediately cooling the skin. *Phantom pains for a wannabe ghost girl*, Steven would've said and rolled his eyes. He was always telling her she made up illnesses just so she wouldn't have to deal with other people. Janina scrolled over the voicemails on her phone and contemplated deleting them again, but found her finger lighting up hot when she tried to press the button.

"Don't you shit on this, Janina," she warned herself, and then opened up the busted cardboard box where she kept all her personal papers. The cat wound itself around her bare ankles and she set manila files all over the floor until she was completely surrounded by paperwork.

"It's hard to find a baby when you don't keep good records," she said, and the cat crawled inside the box and fell asleep on top of all the roach shit that rolled around in the bottom.



It took less time to find the information than Janina would've guessed. "I wish it had taken longer," she told the cat, as she sat with the strewn paperwork and looked at the email she'd received from the baby. It was unopened. She knew it was from the baby because it had a last name that matched the paperwork and because the subject line read:

*Birth Mother* and the one line she could read without opening it said:

"I know this might seem weird, but I think we should meet."

Babies can't write or they shouldn't be able to write very well, thought Janina, who'd gotten her cat as an adult cat and never once considered getting a kitten. She picked up the phone and called Maggie, but it went straight to voicemail. Janina was absolutely done with voicemails. She refused to leave any ever again. People owned your voice after that and it just felt like way too much responsibility. Who knew how they might use it against you? Diana, the woman she'd been fucking, kept leaving messages and Janina deleted them without even listening to them. Too much mucus in the throat, Janina thought, then felt bad because the woman had been nice enough.

Paperwork looked a lot like poems when she thought about it for more than a few seconds at a time. *Janina, you have really gone and done it, you've successfully shit on this*, she scribbled in green ink on top of the medical bills from the hospital where she'd given birth. Steven was there when the baby left her body, even though it felt like he was less the father and more her aggravated sibling. He'd held her hand, looked down at her face, and told her to *get a move on already*. Baby, female. Six pounds, seven ounces, rating eight on the apgar scale. Baby, Steven, Janina: like the holy trinity. There was no record of where the baby went after that because the baby had become a ghost.

"Guess ghosts can come back from the grave after all," Janina said, and lay back on the paperwork to think if that meant a baby could be a zombie or if it meant something else entirely, like Jesus.

The cat proceeded to set up shop in the box and lay there purring whenever Janina was in the room with the papers, which seemed like most of the time. Steven always said she was disorganized and blamed that on her poet's brain. *What the fuck do you know about poets, you're a fiction writer*, she said, and he told her he didn't need to know about poets, he knew about Janina, and that was enough to understand everything.

There wasn't any wine, but she looked for it anyway. She held an empty glass in her hand, because the dramatic action required it, and then she clicked open the email. Her hot spots went away after that.



"You didn't come to the reading," the organizer said. "Everyone was very upset."

"I tried to call in," Janina replied, but the organizer kept talking over her so Janina sat on the floor and made a paper airplane out of the medical bill from the hospital. According to Steven, eight folds was all you needed to make a great plane. They'd made a ton of them one night out of his novel manuscript; the one the agent told him to burn. *Let's launch them from the roof*, Steven suggested, and Janina told him she'd set the agent's house on fire.

"Your friends were there and kept asking about you. They said you were going to perform new queer work."

"Who?" asked Janina, and the organizer described Maggie (tall, too thin, hair the color of an overripe eggplant) and Lee (also tall, curly hair cut into a triangular wedge that made a person think of cartoon cheese). The way they were described made them sound like someone else's friends. Steven, if he'd gone, would've been described as an inch shorter than Janina, as someone who wore thick, dirty glasses, as a guy who occasionally grew an itchy beard that made him scratch idly at his chin while he read paperbacks. Steven with his flannel shirts that smelled like unwashed hair. Steven with the birthmark on his forearm shaped like a pelican.

Ready for flight, the airplane launched across the room and slipped smoothly over the rug and the coffee table and the piles of clothes she refused to pick up. The message—that she'd shit on everything—landed safely on the topmost cushion of her cream and beige Ikea sofa.

"I don't know who those people are," replied Janina, who grabbed the cat from the paperwork box and tried to feed her a bit of leftover cracker. The cat remained unconvinced of its tastiness and crawled back toward the box, hissing and aggravated, scraping the papers into a swirl.

"I wish you'd shown," said the organizer, and Janina said she'd mail over the co-pay and hung up.

She sat the phone on the floor between her legs and looked at the voicemail notification. She pressed play and held it up to her ear with her eyes closed. Steven still sounded like Steven, thank God. Another thing she noticed, this time around: he was exhausted. He made the word "shit" sound less like a swear and more like an endearment.

"I am the exhausting person," Janina told the cat. "I make for very good fiction."

There was no more wine in the house so she got dressed and walked down to the corner convenience store with the cat stuffed into the front of her sweatshirt, meowing-meowing all the way there and back.



There was a second email from the baby and a third. Nothing had been established because Janina felt like she couldn't make a decision without thinking about it a while longer. It wasn't her usual M.O. *You think about things the way I buy chips at the grocery*, Steven told her after she broke up with two women in a single week. One had worn too much rose-scented perfume and the other fucked like she was trying to stab her whole hand through Janina's torso. *Like in the second it would take for me to decide between barbeque or sour cream & onion. That's how long it takes you to make a decision.*

"Well, not this time, buddy," Janina said, opening all three emails at once and looking at them like she'd examine abstract art. Jagged edges, too many colors. No real meaning behind anything, or at least none that she could interpret. "This time I'm going to think about it for way too long. I refuse to shit on it."

Janina picked up the cat and put her inside the box. The cat meowed happily and nested inside the bright blue towel Janina had used after her last shower. There

was cat hair all over it and the cat hair had migrated into Janina's hair so that the brown looked streaked with bits of gray.

Maggie and Lee came over for lunch and walked inside without bothering to ring the doorbell. "Do you even have food," Lee asked, picking up the paper airplane from the seat of the couch and putting it on the coffee table beside an empty wine glass. "Like any bread? Cheese?"

"I'll make an omelet," Maggie said, digging through the fridge until she discovered there were no eggs or vegetables or butter or anything, not even milk. There was an open bag of corn chips that the cat had nosed through on the floor beside the coffee table, but even that was mostly empty.

Janina ordered them a pizza and sat on the floor with the cat.

Maggie asked: "Are you still fucking that woman? Diana, with the wire-framed glasses and the bangs?"

"I couldn't anymore."

"What does that mean," Lee said, poking at the chip bag.

"I couldn't listen to that voice choking mucus next to my ear for the rest of my life," Janina said, and Maggie asked who said anything about the rest of her life, could she deal with two months of mucus if the fucking was good, and Janina said absolutely not.

"If you're not going to call her, can I?" asked Lee, who picked up the cat and immediately set her back down again when she made a noise like a motorcycle revving.

"I thought you were sleeping with that woman who had the same last name as your ex. The illicit encounter?"

Lee frowned and wiped the blood from the scratch the cat had swept along her forearm. "Turns out it's boring to fuck the same person you've already fucked."

Steven had called that the lure of the strange. He was a guy who slept with lots of different women because his brain told him he wasn't good enough for any of them. Steven was always too good for any of the women he slept with, but Janina didn't tell him that because he was already unbearably full of himself. "What if Steven was the love of my life," asked Janina, and Maggie laughed and looked horrified.

"But you're gay," Lee said, wiping the blood from her fingers onto her jeans.

"What's that got to do with love?" Janina countered, nudging the cat back toward her blue-towel-paperwork box. The cat went easily enough. "Friendship is intimacy. Maybe we could both fuck other people and love each other. Why can't we have love without the sex part?"

Recently she'd started writing poems where everything felt like an argument. She sat and edited until she wanted a body to punch. How could she write without Steven? Her brain needed him to bounce its anger off of.

"I don't think love and sex have to go together," Maggie said. "But it's nice if they do."

"I'd like to try it out," Janina said. "Just the love part, not the sex. I don't want to shit on it."

Then the pizza arrived and they stopped talking.



After the fourth email, Janina sat on the newly cleaned floor of her apartment and held a cat treat and her phone. She opened Steven's voicemail and listened to it again, on speaker, to make sure it sounded the same. When it did, she pressed call and let the phone ring through four, five, six times until it reached his voicemail.

The robotic woman asked her to please leave a message.

"Steven," Janina said, watching the cat climb out of the box and pad toward her. "Don't shit on this. Let's go meet our daughter."

She ended the call and let the phone rest in her lap.

## Madre Soltera

3.

Sí, el exceso de diminutivos es real, pero debe pensarse que estamos hablando de bebés. Lo pequeño de lo pequeño, los bebés. Inicialmente, lo liviano. No se les habla de la misma manera. Se improvisa un lenguaje que los roce lo menos posible, un equivalente de las palmas que los tocan sin pesar, incluso cuando se violentan. Por eso, primero, la palabra “bebé”.

6.

Soñé que a mi bebé le salían un montón de dientes pero en mi boca, una boca muy grande que yo veía desde afuera como si fuera de alguien más, con tres filas de encías como tienen algunos animales y muelitas chicas y medio flojas por acá y allá. Para mostrarle a la gente cuántas muelas le salieron a Junio yo abría la boca, después para cerrarla tenía que empujar las encías para los costados con la lengua, podía sentir con los costados de la lengua las muelitas flojas que se acomodaban en su lugar.

## Single Mother

3.

Yes, the excess of diminutives is real, but we should consider that we're talking about babies. The smallest of the small, babies. Initially, the lightest thing. One doesn't speak to them in a regular way. We improvise a language that disturbs them the least, like palms of hands that touch them weightlessly, even when they're having a fit. For that, first and foremost, the word "baby."

6.

I dreamt that many of my baby's teeth emerged but in my mouth, a mouth so big that I saw it from afar as if it was someone else's, with three rows of gums like some animals have and small, somewhat weak molars here and there. To show everyone how many molars had emerged in Junio I opened my mouth, and afterwards to close it I had to push the gums aside with my tongue, I could feel the weak little molars with the sides of my tongue that had settled into place.

## On a Pond that the Edge of the Wood

my father laughed at my mother  
for saying so but my mother insisted  
there off the curve of the road is the pond  
and it's bottomless bottomless my father  
said confident as a parson it cannot be

bottomless if a pond goes down it can't  
be forever I was told I was told  
said my mother of the rattling car  
of bumptious teens careening drinking  
it was said they were drinking

who missed the curve and sank  
into the pond forever they are still  
sinking they are damned to fall  
forever through its deepening  
the father of one even swam its lengths

and found no trace of them to which  
my father said brown water said snapping  
turtle pickerel tooth said braided knot of  
water grass around the throat the rattling  
car giving off a bloom of oil first

and later rust no no bottomless  
my mother said bottomless like the heart  
of winter like the love of god and in

the back seat having long given up  
on the hole dug to China nonetheless

I dreamed the pond bottomless    dreamed  
myself swimming down and down in my chest  
the breath tightening like a rope pulled  
to raise a child fallen in a well

## Shock Value: Kathy Acker's larger-than-life personal condensed to human proportions

Chris Kraus, *After Kathy Acker: A Literary Biography*  
MIT Press, 2017. Hardcover, 352 pp, \$19.67

"To lie is to try," writes Chris Kraus of Kathy Acker. "The story contains a kernel of truth, or at least of desire." The pronouncement is a rather tender take on Acker, a compulsive fabulist and postmodern literary giant who died at age fifty, in 1997, of cancer in an alternative Tijuana clinic. Acker's vast output included experimental novels, poetry, essays, and performative collaborations with artists and musicians, including *Great Expectations* (1983), *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984), *My Mother: Demonology* (1994), and *Pussy: King of the Pirates* (1996). An appropriationist who devoured sources, from classical texts to contemporary romance novels, Acker's work reflects a fragmented punk sensibility and a sex-positive, pro-excess attitude. Her personal charisma and daring writing, saturated with violence and sex, made her perhaps the most

CHRIS  
KRAUS  
AFTER  
KATHY  
ACKER



notorious female writer of her era. In her biography, *After Kathy Acker*, Kraus zooms outward, considering Acker within the context of her time.

*After Kathy Acker* takes on a monumental task: to extract truth from a written oeuvre based on critical fictions, to distill a myth down to human proportions. As Kraus describes it, Acker attained “the iconic status of Great Writer as Countercultural Hero,” a position she “desperately craved. Until she achieved it, no woman had.” Kraus traces Acker’s life mostly through her private correspondence and keen readings of her works. What is revealed is a writer who bucked conventions, favoring a singular path and a relentless pursuit of libidinal desires.

Born into a well-to-do New York family as Karen Lehman, Acker shrugged off the mores of her private-school education to become a precocious young intellectual. Her relationship with her family remained tortured throughout her life. After a few years in college at Brandeis, she married fellow student Bob Acker, and the two decamped to San Diego, California. There, Kathy became a student of the poet David Antin, who encouraged his students to “go to the library” and put pieces of found text together “like a film.” In Southern California, Acker developed her practice in proximity to the feminist artists Eleanor Antin (David’s wife) and Martha Rosler—about as diametrically opposed to Acker’s future haute-punk femme fatale persona as you can get—before ping-ponging back and forth to New York from the 1970s through the ‘90s, with extended stays in San Francisco and London. Her fame rose from the literary underground to that of a post-post-punk rock star.

Readers familiar with Kraus’s brand of semi-fiction might be surprised to read this removed, third-person account of Acker’s life (with the exception of the introduction, where Kraus places herself at Acker’s funeral). Kathy Acker, after all, was Chris Kraus’s peer and romantic rival. She appears in several of Kraus’s books as the frosty yet chic ex-girlfriend of her husband, Sylvère Lotringer, a French professor and publisher of the avant-garde imprint Semiotext(e). In this book, Acker and Lotringer’s relationship is treated more neutrally. Kraus frames her now ex-husband as one of a series of liaisons that helped propel Acker’s work forward: “With the exception of [*I Dreamt I Was a*] *Nymphomaniac*,” her 1974

book, “each time Acker worked on a project, she selected, perhaps unconsciously, a ‘silent partner’ as her ideal reader: a confidant, always male, who would serve as an oblique addressee.” The strategy sounds not unlike Kraus’s own homage to Dick (Hebdige) in her 1997 breakthrough novel *I Love Dick*, now adapted into a TV show. By Kraus’s estimation, Acker’s male “muses” include the poets Jerome Rothenberg and Jackson Mac Low, the artist Alan Sondheim, writers Ron Silliman and Paul Buck, and film scholar Peter Wollen. Not to mention her relationships with the musician Peter Gordon, screenwriter Rudy Wurlitzer and media scholar McKenzie Wark, among others.

Yet Kraus channels Acker’s penchant for female competition, sexual and intellectual, through accounts by other women. The artist Pooh Kaye, a relative of Acker (her father was Acker’s mother’s first cousin) and an estranged friend, says, “Kathy just had to make love with every man she saw [ . . . ] It was a territorial thing, as it was with many hypersexual people.” The artist Jill Kroesen, who wrote the song “Don’t Steal My Boyfriend” about Acker, calls her selfish, confessing, “I didn’t like her, and I didn’t like her art.” Yet she admits, “She was very vulnerable, and brought out your maternal instincts in spite of yourself.” As much as she is shown to be a terrible houseguest, and according to several interviewees, a fame-seeker, Kraus also paints a picture of Acker as a feminist in search of sexual passion and lasting love. In Acker’s adulthood, spanning from so-called sexual liberation movement to the AIDS crisis, the two desires weren’t necessarily compatible. “Her sexuality became the means to finding oneself and losing oneself,” Kraus writes. She is, too, the victim of a nasty double standard, with a sexual appetite that brought her fame and infamy.

In its scope of research, *After Kathy Acker* brings to mind Breanne Fahs’s biography *Valerie Solanas: The Defiant Life of the Woman Who Wrote SCUM (and Shot Andy Warhol)*, published in 2014 by the Feminist Press. Fahs wades through conflicting interviews, personal letters, and medical records to bring us a ‘truthful’ account of Solanas, another serial self-fictionalizer who died young (at fifty-two, in 1988). Despite being a brilliant satirist, Solanas consistently burned her bridges with nearly every person with whom she came into contact, from Warhol’s Factory crowd to the radical feminists who wished to give her legal

support. While Fahs's book can be a bit of a slog, it shows how subjective (and rife with sexist bias) systems like law and medicine can be.

Kraus's biography of Acker, by contrast, whizzes by at nearly 300 pages (excluding endnotes). Kraus's notably ambivalent relationship with the subject, and Acker's juicy language, help. The book telescopes in with an account of her funeral in 1998, then situates the reader in 1971, when Acker returned to New York with her boyfriend Len Neufeld after several years in California. She spends her days writing in bed and her weekends performing in a traumatizing live sex show. This entanglement of sex work and art work form the basis for Acker's writing.

Just as importantly, the book functions as an ethnography of the art worlds that Acker inhabited, from the libertine 1960s to the hippie '70s to the hard and glittery '80s to the countercultural '90s. Of these periods, Kraus's excavation of Acker's New York years in the '70s and early '80s—the period when the author herself arrived in the city, from New Zealand—is the most fascinating. For instance, Kraus posits that the poet Bernadette Mayer was an under-acknowledged influence on Acker's work. In February 1972, Acker was captivated by seeing Mayer's *Memory* project at Holly Solomon's SoHo loft. The installation consisted of 1,116 photographs and a six-hour audio recording of Mayer's journal, all captured by the writer during a single month (July 1971). Making the work nearly drove Mayer "insane." According to scholar Liz Kotz, the amount of detail in Mayer's project suggests almost a schizophrenic splitting of the self; for Acker, the piece presaged her literary device of combining many texts into a single self. According to Kraus, "to make her 'self' larger, [Acker] sought to cannibalize the intelligence of others whenever possible."

This fall, Mayer's *Memory* was shown in its original installation for the first time 1972, at CANADA gallery in New York's Lower East Side. The exhibition was lauded as a precursor to the digital deluge of self-revelation through social media platforms. A related piece, which the art world has recently rediscovered, is Acker's 1975 *Blue Tape* with artist Alan Sondheim—what Kraus categorizes as part of the genre of "porno-graphing." The video, which Kraus describes at length, depicts Acker and Sondheim engaged in a power play game of language and sex in real time. Kraus situates the work in relation to new-

age, cultlike groups like EST and Synanon. She argues that it went further than Conceptual body art of the time in exploring the “transactional nature of human relationships.” *The Blue Tape* provoked reactions from laughter to crying in screenings, cementing Acker’s status as a unique boundary pusher.

Indeed, Acker is shown throughout the book to test the limits of her body as well as her mind. As a teenager, she initiated an affair in 1963 with the future avant-garde film scholar P. Adams Sitney. She performed in seedy Times Square sex shows in the early 1970s, before the dawn of pornography’s golden age—an experience that would haunt her writing. She took movement classes with Judson Dance fixtures Simone Forti, Trisha Brown, and Kenneth King in downtown lofts later in the decade. Around the turn of the 1980s, she started bodybuilding at Gold’s Gym and getting tattoos. She became increasingly attracted to BDSM in the 1990s, finding herself part of the militant San Francisco dyke scene by the middle of the decade and collaborating with bands like the Mekons and Tribe 8. On the other hand, she also sustained a serious case of pelvic inflammatory disease, and once diagnosed with breast cancer, she turned away from traditional Western medicine to more esoteric practices like astrology and spiritual healing. As a result, she suffered with great pain from breast cancer, eventually succumbing in an alternative clinic in Mexico.

Twenty years after Acker’s death, Kraus advocates for her reconsideration—and by extension, her own place in the literary canon as a writer who blends biography and fiction. Toward the end of the book, Kraus delves into a recent controversy over a piece by one of Acker’s former students, Steven Trull aka Janey Smith (an alias borrowed from Acker’s *Blood and Guts* protagonist). Feminists lambasted Trull/Smith for his 2013 blog post “Writers I’d Like to Fuck (or Be Fucked By).” Kraus responds with irritation: “While the use of ‘the personal’ by female writers has been redeemed, satirical excess has been pushed off the map.” On the very last page, she briskly pens a few words: “Incredibly, critics of all kinds have embraced discursive first-person fiction in the last few years as if it were a new, post-internet genre. These contemporary texts owe a great deal to the candor and formal inventiveness of Acker’s work and the work of her peers and progenitors.”

Kraus's formal stamp of approval contrasts with her introduction, where she says it more simply: "Didn't she do what all writers must do? Create a position from which to write?" In her time, a feminist position was by necessity a fiction, as a female "Great Writer as Countercultural Hero" had not yet been created. A statement Acker's final notebook, likely penned while in the Tijuana clinic, concurs: "It is girls from which stories begin."

## If We Had a Lemon We'd Throw It and Call That the Sun

*and that was one thing quickly becoming another*

— Gerald Stern, "Red Wool Bathrobe"

I'd like to invite you to the party but I don't know your name, have your address, or know you well enough to really want you around my cat. I feel a kinship with all people and then I share a beach with them and want to yell use your inside voice. We're outside but that doesn't mean we'll not dissolve if raised to the light. Some days the sea wants to chew us into shattered two-by-fours. Some days she's a kitten pasting soft hairs around our ankles. I know—I know this for a fact—there are moist pasta salads being prepared and eaten all around me—in those bushes for instance—and I'm not getting any. I tried to start my life out right and still lost track of where I was going. Example, I picked my college because my girlfriend went there. She slept with my best friend. I went there anyway. That determined the course of the rest of my life. I wiped the table down with bleach before sitting and now my forearm smells. It's going to be okay though. I'm going to need this bleach-arm for some purpose. To identify

some wanderers in the sky it's helpful to  
determine the color. At a distance everything  
for me goes gray. A mountain range in  
a black-and-white film. We've been walking,  
my horse and I, for days. For water we  
think about rivers and lick our own ideas.

## Í Hoffellsdal

Innan um kræklóttar hrísurnar í hlíðinni  
neðan við gömlu silfurbergsnámuna  
hefur einhver skilið eftir sjónauka. Ég tek  
hann upp. Hann er ekki í neinu hulstri,  
er gamallegur að sjá, líklega svissneskur.  
Ég ber hann upp að augum og ætla að horfa  
inn dalinn, en uppgötva þá að þetta er í raun  
kviksjá. Silfurbergsagnir kvika og tindra  
í sjónhólkunum, og ég hætti við að fara  
upp í námuna. Vind blær fer um kjarrið,  
flytur slæmar fregnir svo lafin drúpa á eftir

## In Hoffellsdalur

Among the gnarled trees on the slope,  
along the way to an old spar mine,  
somebody has dropped a telescope. I pick  
it up. It's not in any kind of holster,  
looks antique, probably Swiss.  
I raise it to my eye, and nearly turn  
toward the valley, only to discover it's actually  
a kaleidoscope. Spar particles flit and flicker  
in the tube, and I decide not to walk  
to the mine. A gust sweeps the brush,  
bearing bad tidings that bow the branches

## This Year I Turned 38

As a kid, I used too-big tools to unscrew the bodies of my GI Joes. You remove their backs first, then unhook the black rubber guts keeping the legs in place. After that, it's pretty simple biology; pelvis, hips, and shoulders. Everything just falls apart. I could never get them back just right, they would never be the same—would be all loose and floppy and incapable of holding a pose. This is like me, I think as I am laid out on a paper-covered green chair too-big tools vying for space in my mouth.

My dentist is worried about my bone density about the mole on the bridge of my nose about my back which has stopped working and which is now making me fidget for comfort relief, anything but what feels like a giant screw torqueing my spine. This is the first time I've been to any kind of doctor in 5 years I tell her. I tell her I am healthy, or believed myself to be. Your gums shouldn't be this red she says. And your bones, that could be why you hurt your back. GI Joes have no bones no muscles. They are just exoskeletons filled with the idea of strength. With the promise of blood. GI Joes are real American heroes and I am just an aging American male happy to have health insurance he can afford.

Happy just to patch what holes he can. Happy  
it seems, to know that my head is my own  
that my arms are still locked in place, that my  
legs are down there, right where they are  
supposed to be. Look, I'm wiggling my toes  
I try to say to my dentist. You got water  
up your nose? she says, dabbing the corner  
of my blue bib at each nostril, dabbing  
because it's her job to put me back together.



**Fig. 1.** Yeni & Nan, *Transformation: element earth* (1983). Installation view of *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985*, September 15–December 31, 2017 at Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Photograph by the author.

## Mud Canción

*Laura August*

*This is the song of the mud,  
The pale yellow glistening mud that covers the hills like satin;  
The grey gleaming silvery mud that is spread like enamel over the valleys;  
The frothing, squirting, spurting, liquid mud that gurgles along the road beds;  
The thick elastic mud that is kneaded and pounded and squeezed under the hoofs of the horses;  
The invincible, inexhaustible mud of the war zone.*

— Mary Borden

*Not always so politically overt, dirt is packed with demonstrations of clay's incipient power to usurp, or at least mess with establishments.*

— Ingrid Schaffner

## Overture

Let us imagine, for a moment, that two geographies, which seem to have very little in common, can be linked by physical matter. That, despite their differences in latitude and longitude, in political history and language, that they might be bound (at least for an imagined instant) by something as subtle as the seasonal pattern of rain, as insidious as the unplanned sprawl of urban development, or as seemingly unremarkable as mud.

### First: Exposition

In August of 2017, the world was briefly transfixed by the image of Houston drowning in the floods of Hurricane Harvey.

After the rain stopped, the media left, and cleanup began, many Houstonians were faced with the problem of what to do when everything—furniture, homes, cars, roads, neighborhoods—was saturated with water. Water, mixed with chemicals and debris, seeped into the soil, making a toxic ubiquitous mud. The mountains of damp furniture, carpet, and Sheetrock sitting in front of gutted homes bred microorganisms that also sank into the soil, and Houstonians were warned not to let their children play in mud or standing water because of the poisons that lingered there. “Submerging a city means introducing a new ecosystem of fungal growth that will change the health of the population in ways we are only beginning to understand,” James Hamblin writes.<sup>1</sup> The wet afterlife of Harvey was an unimaginably enormous pile of festering garbage, a muddy wasteland, and, simultaneously, completely normal. Indeed, in the days and weeks after Harvey, the sun shone and there was no rain and eventually the soil dried. The immensity of the city meant that Houstonians could spend entire weeks without crossing into flooded neighborhoods. Life returned to its routines, or recovering became its own routine. In many places, the only indicators of the disaster were the sweet putrid smells that lingered like permeable boundaries of rotteness in the air.

---

Mary Borden, “At the Somme: The Song of the Mud,” *Current Opinion* (October 1917).

Ingrid Schaffner and Jenelle Porter, *Dirt on Delight: Impulses That Form Clay* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2009), 30.

<sup>1</sup> James Hamblin, “The Looming Consequences of Breathing Mold: Flooding means health issues that will unfold for years,” *The Atlantic*, August 30, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/08/mold-city/538224/>.

### Development: Melody

We often describe the complexity of a political moment as a landscape. With this metaphor, we compare the act of surveying the many events and effects of politics to the act of overlooking a field or lake, of trying to make sense of the parameters of the earth that surrounds us. Indeed, in many cases, our uses of metaphor place the human body as the central object in an assessment of something ostensibly unrelated to (or at the very least outside of) our bodies. That is, in order to understand scale or movement or significance, we foreground the body, even in our imaginative linguistic structures. A political landscape is often described as being shaped, as shifting, or as being confronted, but in any case, it is often understood as a relationship between a body and a ground. Body and ground are, simultaneously, two of the most embattled sites in the current political landscape of the United States. The legislation of health

**“BODY AND GROUND ARE, SIMULTANEOUSLY, TWO OF THE MOST EMBATTLED SITES IN THE CURRENT POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF THE UNITED STATES.”**

care, the deportation of people, and the widespread effects of climate change made body and ground seem newly vulnerable in 2017. Hurricane Harvey only briefly registered in a news cycle of environmental disasters and human rights abuses. As Houston filled with

water, the president of the United States pardoned Joe Arpaio, a former Arizona sheriff convicted for criminal contempt after refusing to cease his targeted detentions of Latinos. At the same time, the Mexican government organized trucks of food and supplies to be sent across the border to Houston. At the same time, “Dreamer” Alonso Guillen drove 100 miles to Houston with a boat to help with the rescue efforts; he and a friend drowned in the rapidly rising flood waters. These are political landscapes.

Let us extend the metaphor of the political landscape—the centering of body and ground—to one relationship characterized by ambiguity and dissolution and unknowing and antagonism, one perhaps best described by mud. An actual matter—mud is essentially broken-down stone or organic matter mixed with liquid—mud is also one of our most potent metaphors in English. When a relationship or concept is unclear, it is described as muddy. When angry language is used to hurt or to destroy someone’s livelihood or

reputation, it is called mud-slinging. When something is difficult or impossible to understand, we describe it as being clear as mud. Each of these metaphors take the body's physical relationship to mud—how it feels under our feet, in our hands, smeared across us—as a familiar category of experience.

Perhaps because we understand mud's ambiguous and often-changing material properties through touch, the matter often appears in creation narratives. Mud's thick relationship to life, its smell of death, its rich organic matter makes it a living material: humans shaped from clay come alive, and mud is the bed from which plant growth emerges. And yet, before we ascribe too much static strength to mud, remember that it also is endlessly unpredictable, moving, dissolving, drying out. The K'iche' Maya origin tale, the *Popol Vuh*, tells the story of the gods unsuccessfully building a human from mud: "Thus there was another attempt to frame and shape man by the Framer and the Shaper . . . Of earth and mud was its flesh composed. But they saw that it was still not good. It merely came undone and crumbled. It merely became sodden and mushy. It merely fell apart and dissolved. Its head was not set apart properly. Its face could only look in one direction. Its face was hidden. Neither could it look about. At first it spoke, but without knowledge. Straightaway it would merely dissolve in water, for it was not strong."<sup>2</sup> An experiment in building a human, the muddy prototype washes away in the rain, and so the shapers try wood and iron before eventually developing a prototype from corn. This parable is especially interesting not because it describes the use of mud to make a living being, but because *mud fails*. Its propensity for dissolution becomes a problem. The human made of mud comes undone, crumbles, is mushy.

**"THIS PARABLE IS ESPECIALLY INTERESTING NOT BECAUSE IT DESCRIBES THE USE OF MUD TO MAKE A LIVING BEING, BUT BECAUSE MUD FAILS."**

### Second: Exposition, Exhibitions

In the exhibition *Radical Women*, on view at the Hammer Museum at UCLA in the fall of 2017 as part of the Getty's Pacific Standard Time initiative, the curatorial team created almost a whole room of muddy work from the '60s,

<sup>2</sup> Allen J. Christensen, ed., *Popol Vuh: Sacred Book of the Maya* (New York: O Books, 2003), 78.

'70s, and '80s. Ana Mendieta lies face down in the wet earth for her *Siluetas*. Silvia Gruner rolls, head over heels, along a wet sandy beach. Celeda Tostes is covered in slip before being enclosed in a ceramic vessel from which she breaks free. Venezuelan artist duo Yeni & Nan smear their faces with mud and then stare ahead at monitors, unblinking, while the mud dries (Fig. 1). Other parts of their performance *Transformation: element earth* (1983) include lying prone and plastering each other with mud, which—the wall text tells us—serves as an analogy for relationships between skin and body; between geography, landscape, and body; and between earth and body. A floor installation of light boxes by Vera Chaves, *Epidermic Scapes* (1977/1982) underscores this tension between body and earth. In it, closely cropped detail photographs of the artist's skin are blown up to become topographic maps: they read visually as landscape forms made of skin.

But muddy work is not just historically bound to these decades, as several recent exhibitions and biennials prove. Simultaneous to *Radical Women*, a career retrospective of Anna Maria Maiolino's work at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles features a whole room of unfired clay objects (Fig. 2). Part of her *Modeled Earth Series* (2017), Maiolino's rolls, coils, and balls are made by hand and arranged on a table, on the floor, or in the chicken wire that is installed along one of the museum's walls. In her wall text, curator Helen Molesworth writes, "These shapes aim to be more than primitive forms, recollections of food, or products of domestic labor; in Maiolino's hands, each work rehearses a kind of mitosis—splitting, reproducing, and ultimately coming together to form a new body. Once Maiolino begins to create *Rolinbos* (little rolls), they move off tablets, tabletops, and cutting boards, and begin to stand, stack, climb up walls; shifting from units to beings." The metaphorical association of mud with living body is so naturalized that Maiolino's sculptures come alive even in Molesworth's description.

Opening two weeks before Maiolino's retrospective, the Annabeth Rosen retrospective at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston opened shortly before Harvey struck. In the artist's compilation of clay forms—fired, some broken, piled upon each other in precarious unpredictability—there is a lush abundance. Her grammar is about stitching pieces together, like visual phrases made of earthen bodies, metal joints, glazes and paints, all cracks and straining heaviness. The texts



FIG. 2. Installation view of Anna Maria Molitino, August 4, 2017–January 22, 2018 at MOCA Grand Avenue, courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, photograph by Brian Forrest.

describing Rosen's work mention the way her ceramic sculptures straddle a line between craft and contemporary art: Rosen "has demonstrably delved into the place of craft in the contemporary art landscape," the press release notes. Her installations, which meld "materiality and process," draw from her training in functional and decorative ceramics. That is, Rosen works with a category-fluidity uniquely inhabited by ceramics.

(I did not intend for this essay to center ceramics, but we would be remiss to neglect the muddiest of artistic mediums.)

As both exhibitions make evident, clay and the literature surrounding it are enigmatically between things, often awkwardly so. This squelchy matter exists between questions of daily life and work, between daily making practice and living practice and fine art. Clay can be functional or can slip into different registers of sculpture and installation and nonfunctional object, and for this reason it recurs frequently in work by artists inhabiting the political landscapes of female experience in the '60s, '70s, and '80s. These specific political landscapes are intimately connected to the dissolution of

boundaries between personal experience, politics, the body, and categories of artistic practice. In her book *Live Form: Women, Ceramics, and Community*, Jenni Sorkin makes a case for ceramics as the foundational medium for avant-garde practice in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. She describes the physicality and performance inherent in making ceramics as experiential modes of work and life. Sorkin grounds mid-century ceramics not only in a pedagogical history, but also in terms of the lived experiences of community. Ceramics, she writes, became a structuring device for nonhierarchical and participatory experiences: she describes clay as a medium that encourages social transformation. Defining “live form” (a descriptor first coined by California potter Marguerite Wildenhain), Sorkin writes, the “term goes beyond mere maker’s mark, conveying the artist’s embodiment of form itself, through an indexical presence that becomes ever present and unceasing.” As Sorkin notes, “another emigré potter, Otto Natzler, called this same phenomenon ‘immediacy,’ writing in 1968: ‘In no other art is there such an immediacy, such personal close contact.’”<sup>3</sup> Clay, then, not only dissolves boundaries and invites participation, but as it does so, it also activates a specific politics marked by inclusion, immediacy, community-building, and touch (so, by extension, marked by the body).



Fig. 3. Gustavo Artigas, *Tropo 2 (N)*, 2016. Video, 3:17 min. Installation view of *Gus*

<sup>3</sup> Jenni Sorkin, *Live Form: Women, Ceramics, and Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 11.

### Third: Another Melody

In 2016, I start a modest apartment gallery and artist residency program in an apartment I rent in Zone 1 of Guatemala City (Fig. 3). It is the historic city center, and the apartment is a few steps from the central plaza which serves as the economic, religious, symbolic, and political heart of the country. The gallery is named Yvonne, which is the name of the building:



Fig. 3: Veneno, July 30–October 1, 2016 at Yvonne, Guatemala City, photograph by Karl Williamson.

Located in downtown Guatemala City, Yvonne is an exercise in living-with, in inhabiting speculative fiction, in shared energy and conversation. She is a place and a person and a mood. Yvonne is an expat or in exile or running from something, and she is pensive about what that can mean. She lives with objects, and she invites artists, activists, lost souls, and writers to share her space. She listens to the city. She speaks something between English and Spanish, and in the spaces where her grammar fails, she offers emotional space and poetry. Yvonne believes that sincere and simple hospitality, with no expectations, can be a radical site for creative work.<sup>4</sup>

To anthropomorphize an architectural space is to enliven the thing that contains and surrounds the body. And, to make an art space that is also a domestic space is to muddy the boundaries between artistic practice and daily life through

<sup>4</sup> See [www.yvonne.soy](http://www.yvonne.soy).

the sharing of space. *Convivencia*, then, becomes that muddy anthropomorphic alive thing between the bodies who stay with Yvonne. That is, she—like clay does in Natzler's description—becomes alive through her interpersonal immediacy and close personal contact. The muddiness of the proposition is what animates her, and it is also what can provoke her dissolution.

The Yvonne residency is occasional, informal, and deeply tied to networks of friendship. The proposal is to live and work together, to embrace certain discomforts with the aim of making new discoveries in conversation with each other and with the specificities of Guatemala City. One artist-in-residence tells me that exactly this muddiness—the lack of clarity between our roles as friends and as professional colleagues—leaves him feeling unmoored and disoriented. He returns over and over to the word mud to describe a blurriness between work and life. *Convivencia* can be about discomfort, miscommunication, and alienation, we learn together, and it is most deeply about how we navigate the personal. MOMUS editor Sky Goodden describes the project of making a residency as an optimistic gesture, a kind of magical incantation, an invocation of the experimental. “To quote John Berger,” she says, “we are pushing our prodigious energy to forge links of friendship, political solidarity, shared poetry and hospitality.”<sup>5</sup> This push, Goodden notes, comes at a moment of widespread discourse about “globalizing” the art world, and the professionalization of the artist; its personal nature suggests a gentle resistance to such commercialized experience. At Yvonne, artists are invited to make regular returns to the city; the first artist-in-residence, sculptor Lily Cox-Richard will return every year for a decade, building sustained relationships with artists in Guatemala and developing a substantial body of artistic research there. Yvonne, then, takes the tenets of *home*—even when those tenets can be uneasy—as a sparking point for making—in conversation—and over long swathes of time.

---

<sup>5</sup> Sky Goodden and Lauren Wetmore, *MOMUS: Episode 2, The Artist Residency* (Los Angeles: MOMUS, 2017), Podcast, <http://momus.ca/momus-the-podcast/>. Goodden is actually paraphrasing Berger's 2003 essay “Stones,” included in the volume *Hold Everything Dear: Dispatches on Survival and Resistance* (New York: Vintage, 2008). The original quotation describes Berger's friendship with Eqbal Ahmed (1933-1999), a Pakistani political scientist, activist, and academic. Berger writes: “Eqbal learnt early on that life inevitably leads to separations. Everybody recognized this before the category of the tragic was discarded as garbage. Eqbal, though, knew and accepted the tragic. And, consequently, he spent much prodigious energy on forging links—of friendship, political solidarity, military loyalty, shared poetry, hospitality—links which had a chance of surviving after the inevitable separations. I still remember the meals he cooked.”

### Refrain from the First, Lento

Estimates vary widely, but news agencies report that Hurricane Harvey damaged as many as 200,000 homes and destroyed as many as 16,000 in the ten-county area that includes Houston. In the days of the storm, while waiting in a neighbor's house for the water to recede, Houston-based artist Edith Shreeve sends me a poem by Naomi Shihab Nye:

Before you know what kindness really is  
 you must lose things,  
 feel the future dissolve in a moment  
 like salt in a weakened broth.  
 What you held in your hand,  
 what you counted and carefully saved,  
 all this must go so you know  
 how desolate the landscape can be  
 between the regions of kindness.<sup>6</sup>

After the hurricane, we walk through Shreeve's home together. We talk about allowing a loved one to die, about sitting with a loved one as she passes away, of holding the house's hand, in a manner of speaking, as it transitions from its former life. We believe the house to be a living thing. We bring the house flowers and incense that I've carried with me from Guatemala (Fig. 4). While we walk through the house, we find an old Polaroid photograph of Shreeve's daughter, the image buried in the bare floorboards, past and present dissolved in the stripped-down and saturated bones of the house. "She was so beautiful," Shreeve breathes, and she could be talking about her daughter or her house.

### Dissonance

Mud has nothing to do with art criticism, I am told.

### But to continue that refrain from the First

After the hurricane, I return to my family's century farm in rural Kansas, to make peace with the empty farmhouse and its memories and to drive through the familiar

<sup>6</sup> Naomi Shihab Nye, "Kindness," in *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems* (Portland: The Eighth Mountain Press, 1994).



Fig. 4. Laura August, *Edi's house*, 29 September, 2017.

landscapes of the Middle West, the first time I have done so since the passing of my grandfather who farmed that land for over seventy years. Driving those rolling fields with my grandfather, checking irrigation systems, watching wheat stubble burn, collecting ears of corn from the field near his house, these are among the happiest memories I possess. I have deep, bodily-borne recall of the smell of earth after rain, the sting of rinsing ash out of my ears, the pungent scent of fertilizer raining over the fields, the sound of the CB radio communicating the delicate choreographies of harvest. In Guatemala, corn is also intimately tied to language and craft, is considered a living member of the family, reoccurs across contemporary artistic practices, lest you think it has nothing to do with the serious business of art writing, lest you think it remote from the concerns of art, lest you think these places irrelevantly unconnected. If we take mud, if we take corn, if we take our bodies and the earth as our subject for a critical writing practice about art, what might they allow—nay, *encourage*—us to say? Let us imagine speaking from an alternative landscape.

Tzu'tujil Maya artist Manuel Chavajay's video performance of walking through corn fields with caution tape, marking the fields (affected by recent legislation on



Fig. 5. Manuel Chavajay Moralez, *Awan*, 2015, photograph documentation from video performance, 50 x 76 cm, ed. of 5. Photograph courtesy of the artist and Extra Gallery, Guatemala City.

behalf of the global seed giant Monsanto) as a crime scene, for example, suggests the relationship many Maya artists have with land (Fig. 5).<sup>7</sup> Here, farming and artistic production are not separate endeavors. Here, life (the body on the earth) and work (care for the body and the earth) are inextricably interwoven.

Kaqchikel Maya artist Edgar Calel might turn up unannounced at Yvonne early Saturday morning or appear on a bus in São Paulo or be wandering the archaeological sites scattered across Guatemala: he seems to be always everywhere, always generous with ideas, describing dreams, considering the world he wanders and its many myths and stories, considering where his feet lead him and what he finds. At Trama Gallery in Guatemala City in the summer of 2017, Calel's exhibition *El rostro de la tierra que mis pies vieron* (The face of the land that my feet have seen) considers his recent visit to Brazil. Traveling among Guarani-Kaiowá communities along the border of Brazil and Paraguay, Calel carries many-colored seeds of maize, herbs, and squash

<sup>7</sup> W. George Lovell writes: "Land is something Mayas in Guatemala relate to in ways that transcend most Western notions of astute property management. For them land is like air and sunlight, a God-given resource over which no one exercises exclusive proprietary rights. Custom dictates that it be worked, protected, and passed on to offspring as a sacred gift handed down from the ancestors with that end in mind. Mayas consider themselves not so much owners as caretakers of land." (*A Beauty that Hurts: Life and Death in Guatemala*, The University of Texas Press, 2010, p. 6.)

with him as gifts for his hosts. "I very much wanted to remember this moment, to preserve this time and its atmosphere, along with its tonalities of color, that was my hope," he writes.<sup>8</sup> A simple defiance of contemporary regulations against carrying fruits and vegetables, seeds, and live animals across international borders, Calel's gesture is rooted in the importance of agriculture and landscape in his community's philosophy, quotidian life, and extensive history. "With the seeds, I was thinking about the people who have died for taking back their lands and returning to live in the manner that they lived in ancient times."<sup>9</sup> In exchange for the gift of the seeds, the Guarani-Kaiowá community he was visiting offered him a gift of thanks as well: standing barefoot in the area's reddish soil, they stepped on page after page of Calel's



Fig. 6. Edgar Calel, *The face of the earth that my feet have seen*, 2017. Mud on paper, 26 drawings, dimensions variable. Photograph courtesy of the artist and Trama Gallery, Guatemala City.

notebook, leaving their footprints (and the footprints of a pet dog and a pet monkey) for him. These pages hang on the wall at Trama, near a video of their making (Fig. 6). Watching children take turns stepping on Calel's pages, one might imagine a dance

<sup>8</sup> Edgar Calel, Facebook message conversation with the author, September 2017, translation by the author. "Yo tenía muchas ganas de guardar en mi memoria ese momento que había presenciado. Conservar ese tiempo y su atmósfera, junto a sus tonalidades de colores, era un deseo."

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. "Pensé en las semillas, en las personas que habían muerto por retomar sus tierras y volver a vivir de la manera como se vivía antiguamente."

unfolding. These mud footprints are not only portraits of their makers, but they are also registers of a shared experience. Cael writes:

To share time  
 To cross paths and walk with bare feet  
 To feed ourselves from the same squash  
 To receive the shade of the same tree  
 To understand that our roots are vibrating in our face when a soft wind touches  
 the pools of water the rain left behind, where we see ourselves reflected.<sup>10</sup>

#### Fourth Movement: Song, Andante

In the fall of 2016, I return to Milledgeville, the small town in Georgia where I spent most of my childhood. It was Flannery O'Connor's hometown, and it was where I attended college. Together with Guatemala City-based poet Julio Serrano Echeverría, I give a series of lectures and seminars about contemporary Guatemalan art and independent spaces. The trip is marked the way trips home can be marked as weird when you take along someone who has never been there. Its strange magic is compounded by grief; we are there also to remember a beloved friend of mine, who died unexpectedly in May. Escaping the intensity of those days of grief and work, Serrano and I make a pilgrimage to find sculptures by Beverly Buchanan, who lived in Georgia in the 1980s. We drive first to Macon, Georgia, and find the Museum of Arts and Sciences. Buchanan's sculptures are just beside the guest parking lot. One of seven site-specific sculptural installations Buchanan made in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina, these stones bear a plaque that marks their title, *Ruins and Rituals* (1979). They are well-kept, and their simple forms are suggestive of shamanic experience. They sit in a green, wooded area, and the afternoon light filters through the leaves of the trees in the cool, damp air. The sculptures could almost be found stones, in their simple composition and rough-hewn textures. Their surfaces show the evidence of their combined materials, the rough mixture of rock and dirt make a chunky concrete, pocked by time.

<sup>10</sup> Edgar Cael, artist statement circulated at his August 2017 exhibition at Trama Gallery, August 2017. Translation by the author. "Coincidir en el tiempo / Cruzarnos y reparar los caminos con los pies descalzos / Alimentarnos de la misma abóbora / Recibir la sombra de un mismo árbol / Comprender que nuestras raíces están vibrando en nuestro rostro cuando un viento sutil tiene contacto con charcos de agua que dejó la lluvia donde nos vemos reflejados."

Buchanan's *Marsh Ruins* (1981) in Brunswick, Georgia, are much more difficult to locate. They seem to deteriorate into the marshy landscape where they sit, and they could easily be mistaken for stones deposited there over long sweeps of time. These sculptures are decrepit, craggy rocks in a bog, just on the edge of a river inlet that drains to the sea. "Daily the sculpture is flooded by the tide," writes art historian Andy Campbell, "which, years after its installation, has left the sculpture in a truly pitiable state: cracked, broken, and partially buried in smelly marsh mud."<sup>11</sup> Serrano and I pick our way through mud and spiny plants. I sit on one of the sculptures, tucking my feet under me. The smell of damp earth, the sound of nearby fishermen and women, the wet heat, all surround me in a familiar way. Serrano has brought a book he has written

---

<sup>11</sup> Andy Campbell, "We're Going To See Blood On Them Next': Beverly Buchanan's Georgia Ruins and Black Negativity." *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 29 (2016). Accessed 16 November 2016. doi: 10.20415/rhiz/029.e05

**Fig. 7.** Julio Serrano Echeverría, *Ofrenda*, 2016. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



wrapped in a textile to place on the stones, an homage from Guatemala to the swamps of Georgia and their deep histories of slavery and violent loss (Fig. 7). The stones of Buchanan's *Marsh Ruins* look out to the spot in the water where seventy-five Africans, arriving from the brutal Middle Passage, drowned themselves rather than be enslaved.

Campbell writes about Buchanan's split practice, the ways in which her work moves between modalities, inhabiting an in-between place:

During the years she lived in Macon, Georgia, Beverly Buchanan could often be found at work in her airy, second-story, light-filled studio on College Street. This little geo-locational fact is more important than may at first appear. As in many American towns, College Street served as de facto racial dividing line—mapping out the working class, black part of town from the middle class and affluent white part of town. In the years that Buchanan lived in Macon (1977-1985), College Street was a mixture of grandeur and dilapidation; that Buchanan located her practice on this street makes a kind of sense. Her sculptures not only trafficked in the similar purgatorial space between looking both made and unmade, but the understandings and distribution of her work was largely bifurcated amongst these two Georgian viewerships.<sup>12</sup>

That purgatorial space, we might say, is the mud.

Serrano and I talk about other viewerships, about what it means for a Guatemalan poet to make a pilgrimage to the swampy banks of Georgia, about the strange coincidences that would take an art historian from the Deep South to Central America. Campbell is the first writer-in-residence at Yvonne: these things move in circles. These things are not as disparate as they might seem, and Serrano and I agree that we are affectively bound together by our relationships to landscape, our interest in how volcanoes and stones and rivers and fires teach us about life and loss and community and politics, about what mud can make and how it can also stand in for negative affect, for failure, for dissolution, for deep depression. Recall: in *The Neverending Story*, the depressive horse Artax succumbs to a quicksand named The Swamp of Sadness.<sup>13</sup>

In the fall of 2017, the fourth *Prospect* exhibition opens across New Orleans, taking its inspiration from the swamp lotus. "This aquatic perennial takes root

<sup>12</sup> Andy Campbell, "Life on the Line," unpublished article, used by permission (2017).

<sup>13</sup> For a thoughtful study of quicksand in U.S. history and popular culture, see Daniel Engber, "Terra Inferna: the rise and fall of quicksand," *Slate*, August 23, 2010, [http://www.slate.com/articles/health\\_and\\_science/science/2010/08/terra\\_inferna.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2010/08/terra_inferna.html).

in the fetid but nutrient-rich mud of swamps so that its beautiful flower may rise above the murky water. The flower's grace is inextricably connected to the noisome swamp, just as redemption exists in ruin and creativity in destruction," writes curator Trevor Schoonmaker.<sup>14</sup> Swamps, mud, and murky fetid bogs are rich sources for growth, and the premise of *Prospect* is on the beautiful flower that emerges from such an environment, the interrelationship between beauty and ruin, "an optimistic cartography." But the mucky environment itself—its ability to dirty, to sink, to suck, to smell, to act as metaphor for ambiguity and dissolution, remains—perhaps fittingly, given its specific material qualities—unresolved. Mud holds ambiguities, points to the potentials and failures that blurriness allows, and so is a difficult subject from which to build a text or exhibition or biennial.

Serrano attributes the building of interpersonal connection—the foundation of an artistic collaboration—to the natural functions of the earth:

... We wonder if it would be possible to create a community, to design it, let's say; it's possible to make some "efforts" to consciously build community, we thought, but there is something really organic to it, there is a tree-like, a plant-like, a fruit-like quality to community. There is something in embracing that comes from the root, and that is why we know who is embracing what and how. There is something in playing that comes from the earth, and that is why we know when someone is letting us win. The lady at the grocery store knows who she is greeting, even though she greets everybody, and the person who cuts our hair understands better than many friends why a broken heart is hard to mend. That's a common form of intelligence in this communal experience, and perhaps that is why, when we try to design one we can't get our ducks in a row.<sup>15</sup>

Mud might be a sinking feeling, a series of words used to cause pain, a confusion about relationships, or something to build from, might be the

<sup>14</sup> Trevor Schoonmaker, "An Optimistic Cartography," *Prospect 4: The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp*, Artistic Director's Statement, January 23, 2017, <https://www.prospectneworleans.org/blog/2017/1/23/an-optimistic-cartography.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Julio Serrano Echeverría, "The Place Where Favors Are Born," in Laura A. L. Wellen, ed., *Acts of Aggression: An Exhibition about Community*, Exh. cat. (Dallas: Southern Methodist University, 2017), 52. Translation by Fernando Felgu-Moggi.



evidence of something past, or the life source of something new. In the 2009 exhibition catalog *Dirt on Delight* for the ICA in Philadelphia, curator Ingrid Schaffner writes, "Mud is viscous and lugubrious. Smacking of excrement—of excess and expenditure—it is a base material, one of life's raw essences . . ." She adds, "it is as if clay itself were a leveling medium, a disruptive field of operations in which advancing and regressing are indistinguishable objectives."<sup>16</sup> As a disruptive field of operations, mud's metaphorical relationship to the overlap between life and work reflects a set of stakes within the political landscape of the present. To build affective relationships with artists, to walk through our homes together, to share our grief and vulnerabilities, to love and live in a shared space: these things muddy the lines between what we do and how we live. It is a return to an artistic practice of many feminist artists of the '70s and '80s. It blurs the here and now with the there and then, it messes up easy categories of us and them, work and life, in favor of a practice based on the quicksilver unreliabilities of affect and emotional connection.

When John Berger wrote of "pushing our prodigious energy to forge links of friendship, political solidarity, . . . shared poetry and hospitality," he was writing for a friend who had recently passed away, a friend whose life was in many ways defined by the griefs and losses of political activism.<sup>17</sup> And so, yes, art criticism can be poignant and full of feeling, indeed it must be, in order to get at the specificities of what art actually effects in the world. These things are not separate.

### Chorus, in another key

Calel gathers mud from an area near his hometown of Comalapa, a place plagued by mudslides. With his family, he balls the mud into small *bodoques*, or pellets (Fig. 8). "With my two hands covered in mud, I rub until you take shape, I spit in your face and give you life," he writes. "Now you are ready to step back a few centimeters to gather momentum and travel in the air, to divide the body and the soul of any living being . . . Each point of clay is a center. Each point of clay is a point of reference."<sup>17</sup> Calel intends to take the mud balls to national government buildings in Guatemala City and hurl them

<sup>16</sup> Ingrid Schaffner and Jenelle Porter, *Dirt on Delight: Impulses That Form Clay* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2009), 26.

<sup>17</sup> John Berger, "Stones," in *Hold Everything Dear: Dispatches on Survival and Resistance* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 9.

at the structures. The thought of these small pellets pinging and exploding off the colonial buildings is immensely satisfying, gives new meaning to the term mud-slinging, changes the place from which the mud is slung.

### Two notes

1. In San Pedro La Laguna, Chavajay begins a new series of work, collecting found ceramics discarded in Lake Atitlán and hanging them at eye level, with clear cords from the ceiling (Fig. 9). Chavajay has worked with ceramics before: his series *Cba'ab'ag* (2012) takes traditional Maya ceramic forms and covers them in contemporary images of violence from the Guatemalan press. In *Kuku'* (2015), Chavajay repairs a broken ceramic vessel that belonged to his grandparents

<sup>17</sup> Edgar Calel, correspondence with the author, September 2, 2017. Translation by the author. "Edgar Calel, 2017 *K'aqob'el / proyectil de barro endurecido Tierra agua y saliva Dimensiones variables Con mis dos manos enlodados te frote hasta darte forma escupí tu rostro y te di vida Ahora tú estás listo para retroceder unos cuantos centímetros para tomar impulso y viajar en el aire para separar el cuerpo y el alma a cualquier ser vivo. Acción Punto de barro en aire. Exposición Punto de barro estático. Cada punto de barro es un centro, Cada punto de barro es un punto de referencia."*

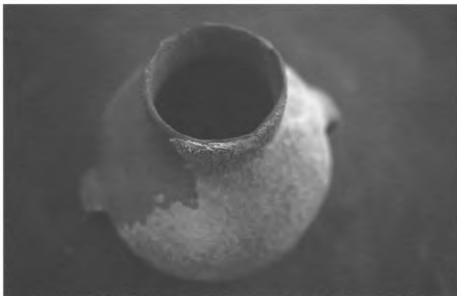


Fig. 9. Manuel Chavajay Moralez, *Retaal'*, 2017, ceramic with the sediment of time. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

with plastic pieces: the traditional vessels are disappearing with the ubiquitous presence of plastic, and this mended piece shows the uneasy joining of old and new. He titles this newest body of work *Retaal*' (the mark we leave over time). Here, the found ceramics are covered in a thick patina of mud and moss from their years submerged. Chavajay imagines the many reasons the vessels might have been discarded in the lake, and to whom they might have belonged. They are familiar forms, their shapes indicating whether a man or woman carried them to retrieve water. A thick, green, impasto-like film covers three-quarters of one such vessel, its indentations and roughness a kind of moonscape. The vessel's mouth is uneven, but any roughness from its break has been gently worn away by time and so the edges are rounded and meander in gentle slopes. The green-patinaed mud skin of the piece looks like an aerial photograph of the lake, a way of understanding it from above, even as it emerges from below.

2. Houston-based artist and writer Sebastien Bony describes Houston's landscape and artistic practices as existing on the edge of predation, of catastrophe, of wasteland, as a "crushing wall of blue" and an unending fight between slabs of concrete and the greens of bushes, vines, weeds:

Every beautiful movement is funded with blood money, every gorgeous sunset is colored with the cancer that is pumped continually into our air . . . There was something unnerving about living right at the edge of predation that I became thankful for. Reminders of life as a series of disasters that one either walks straight into or narrowly averts . . . Catastrophe is etched in keen detail, but the impact is never a punch connecting, but rather the breeze created by the near miss. Shakes, laughter, and tears follow . . . There is no stillness here. This is the wrong motherfucking place to be Donald Judd, or Barnett Newman, or James Turrell. Sure you can appreciate their efforts, but there is nothing about this town with no skin that invites the manufacture of the sleek, the sublime, the stable, or the elevated. This is the wasteland; these artists make work that lifts the dream mists of cheap demagogues. If you're gonna ride out there, ride with real folk.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Sebastien Bony, "Dirt, Seeds, and Blooms: Don Dadas," June 20, 2015, *Not That But This: Arts and Culture Webzine*, <http://notthatbutthis.com/2015/06/dirt-seeds-and-blooms-don-dadas/>.

If anything, his description resonates even more clearly after the storm. This is the wasteland. We all take photographs of the piles of garbage in front of Houston homes after the storm (**Fig. 10**). There is too much to carry away, and so these mountainous reminders of loss wait and rot in our landscaped yards.

### Coda

This song is mostly about Houston and Guatemala City, but it touches on New Orleans and Los Angeles and rural Georgia and deep Kansas, and it moves across temporalities, from now to the 1970s and back again. It is anachronistic and amorphous and metaphoric and personal and a little bit hard to hold on to, a little bit musical, even if it jars.

**Fig. 10.** Laura August, *Bellaire*, 29 September, 2017.



This song is about mud and its afterlives, both material and metaphoric. It sings that mud reflects how we live alongside one another, even as it becomes unclear, even as our narratives unravel and we find ourselves in that in-between place, between life and work, between function and form, between landscapes of disaster and moments of despair, between institutionally accepted norms, between countries and communities and histories, however deeply intertwined they might be. This is an old, old song, a chthonic song with a postindustrial counterpoint, with interruptions from the rafters, with concurrent sounds sometimes harmonizing, and often just swirling around each other.

This song is about mud as disintegration, as a building material, as something that dissolves. It is about close personal contact, about shared living structures. It imagines an art and politics premised on touch, about bringing unlike things in contact with each other.

This song is an apology for the fact that the personal is still, more than ever, political, critical, relevant, and inseparable from work. Its chorus is, unequivocally, that work is about bodies and earth. This song says: we inhabit specific political landscapes, and we do so together. This song is a wonky, cacophonous symphony of voices, and nothing is clear, and that is as it should be, and that is just like life.

— Laura August  
December 2017  
Guatemala City

---

Short excerpts of this text were developed in texts for [www.piedrin.com](http://www.piedrin.com), for the 2017–2018 yearbook published by the CORE Artist Residency program at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and for the 2017 Clay Houston symposium on narratives in clay. My thanks to: Dorota Biczal, Edgar Calel, Andy Campbell, Manuel Chavajay, Rachel Cook, Oscar René Cornejo, Lily Cox-Richard, Hannah Feldman, Fernando Feliu-Moggi, Charles Gaines, Mary Leclère, Ruslana Lichtzier, John Pluecker, Patrick Reynolds, Julio Serrano Echeverría, Edith Shreeve, Krista Thompson, and Eric Zimmerman for the exchanges that have nourished this text. Any lingering muck is only the fault of the author, not that of her wise and patient readers. This essay is dedicated to the memory of Tina Yarborough (1949–2016) and Virgil Rice (1929–2017).

## There's No Wrong Way to Eat a Reese's

One bite / No chewing / Eager as a Shop-Vac / Straight out of  
the bag / Sandwiched between two peanut butter cookies  
Dipped into a jar of peanut butter / Baked into peanut  
butter cupcakes / Braying like a turned-on donkey

Out of a drawer next to the toilet / Fervid, mid-shit, twitchy  
with yes / Under the blankets, in the flashlight's beam  
Greedy as a newborn king / Groaning on the floor  
of a gas station bathroom / Sweating a range

of mountains / At dawn / While sleeping / While getting off  
to a workout video / As a gesture of political vandalism  
Turgid / Tumescant / Turned-out in dream country  
Like shoving coins into a jukebox that plays

only silence / Against holy / Against the taxpayer's dollar  
Against the back wall of the theater so Greta cannot  
see you / Cramming them clean into your heart  
While being torn apart by lilacs / As church

or as abattoir / Tongue unspooling like the torah / Bent  
in the birthday dark / Through a mouthful of ashes  
As alligator / As opened wound / As midnight  
swamp sucking the bones out of stars

Over & over / Because the money / Because a woman  
Because Wednesday or Sunday or traffic or snow  
As jackals jockey for the throne / As a river  
drowns in your furious blood / After

opening the ark to reveal a blazing vending machine  
As time eats you in much the same way / Solitary  
Frozen / Perpetual motion / While professing  
to be an actual person / Sugar's last rabbi

on your knees, summoning apocalypse / While torching  
the synagogue / Burning the beloved / Barricaded  
into the house of your body, a SWAT team  
of angels approaching the door

## On the Train a Man Snatches My Book, Reads

On the train a man snatches my book, reads  
the last line, and says *I completely get you,*

*you're not that complex.* He could be right—lately  
all my *what if's* are about breath: what if

a glass-blower inhales at the wrong  
moment? What if I'm drifting on a sailboat

and the wind stops? If he'd ask me how I'm  
feeling, I'd give him the long version—I feel

as if I'm on the moon listening to the air hiss  
out of my spacesuit, and I can't find the rip. I'm

the vice president of panic, and the president is  
missing. Most nights, I calm myself by listing

animals still on the *least concern* end of the  
extinction spectrum: aardvarks and blackbirds

are fine. Minnows thrive—though this brings  
me no relief—they can swim through sludge

if they have to. I don't think I've ever written  
the word *doom*, but nothing else fits.

Every experience seems both urgent and  
unnatural—like right now, this train

is approaching the station where my lover  
is waiting to take me to the orchard so we can

pay for the memory of having once, at dusk,  
plucked real apples from real trees.

# Reviews





## Touched in Some Way by Flight: Five Books of Contemporary Poetry

Conor Bracken

sam sax, *Madness*

Penguin Books, 2017. Paperback, 93 pp, \$18.00

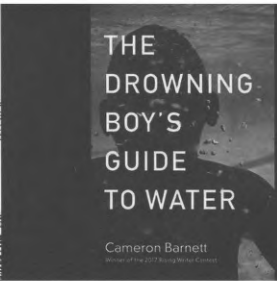
Sam sax's *Madness* scrutinizes with flair the systems that (often falsely) define and (fail to) cure madness more than it does thinking about or enacting madness. It's too bad, because when sax gives into flights of imagination (e.g. "Theia Mania," "Miasma") or allows his speaker to tiptoe beyond the brink of reason (e.g. "Psychotherapy," "Hematology," "On Mass Hysteria"), his poems bristle, shine, and discomfit, leaving the reader with uncomfortable questions, like "is madness ecstasy or pathology (or both)?" And "what other crimes have been perpetrated in the name of health?"

The book is an impressive achievement, in that every poem deals candidly and in a distinct, un-repeated form with madness (or its medication), but few poems end up matching the imaginative brilliance of "Fairy Tale," in which a boy, kicked out of his home, presumably for his 'deviant' sexual orientation, (which, according to the DSM-I, a page of which opens each of the book's four sections, is a kind of madness), "becomes



Angel  
Hill

MICHAEL  
LONGLEY



THE  
DROWNING  
BOY'S  
GUIDE  
TO WATER

Cameron Barnett

Winner of the 2017 Rocky Mountain Contest

the steam / men breathe in + out again." There are also the leaps sax makes—perhaps madly?—drawing startling connections between supposedly disparate things:

i have to remember the internet  
began inside the murder  
corridors of a war machine

every time I link to a poem  
or watch two queers kiss.

The book's more compelling moments lay bare the power sickness and violence have to both connect and divide us, from each other and ourselves.



William Logan, *Rift of Light*

Penguin Books, 2017. Paperback, 109 pp, \$18.00

William Logan, known best perhaps for the ornate acid of his criticism, is also concerned with how larger forces operate; his forces of choice, however, are time and history. His tenth book, *Rift of Light*, a collection of highly textured verbal snapshots of a variety of personages and objects wrested from the slow erosive jaws of time, takes to heart Williams' "no idea but in things." Where sax strives to humanize madness, Logan puts the creak back into heirloom

armchairs and reminds us of the jowls and petulance of Martin Luther, which the soft light of history fails to highlight.

Not much aside from Logan's obsession with variety connects the poems (the book has the wacky parameters of a cabinet of curiosities), but his use of sound is so lush and punctilious that each poem, however slight or strangely turned, sits on the page like impasto. Take "Bad Garden," which opens:

Spattered with indigo,  
the prickly borage  
conquers the roses  
like a Mongol horde—

The chewy sonics helpfully distract one from the ending: a pat revelation on beauty's fugacity. Drama, for Logan, resides in image and sound. Except when it doesn't, as in the final poem, a six-page surprise in the voice of the castaway who inspired Defoe's Crusoe, and who, Logan gleefully inform us, harbored to his death a fondness for the first island goat he ever made love to.



Frank Ormsby, *The Darkness of Snow*

Wake Forest University Press, 2017. Paperback, 128 pp, \$14.95

Frank Ormsby, whose crisp, low-lit images carry much of *The Darkness of Snow*, is more earnest than Logan (and less bestial: the presence of a donkey in his wonderful poem "Neddy" highlights the distance mechanization puts between us and the natural world, not how humans will abuse it for comfort). Ormsby, like friends Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon, and Michael Longley who crop up sporadically in the book, is a Northern Irish elder who weaves out of his experiences of childhood and the Troubles subtle, lambent, melancholy poems.

The best among them reverse normal polarities much the same way the title does, revealing the cool underside of the familiar. In “Altar Boy” and later in “The National Anthem,” Ormsby renders Latin and Irish via homophonic translation into English (“Me a cowboy, me a cowboy, me a Mexican cowboy”; “*Sinead feigned her fall. / A toffee girl, a gay run.*”), desacralizing the sacred while reminding us how the uninitiated perceive rituals that aren’t theirs: as incomprehensible, solemn, and faintly ridiculous. It’s a deft technique, whose irreverence is offset elsewhere by poems that engage with the solemn sincerely, marveling at and preserving mystery instead of trying to package or analyze it, as the speaker believes machines and religion often aim to.

The book contains a few long sequences (ekphrases of Irish paintings; a series of poems on Parkinson’s; a polyvocal treatment of a war crimes tribunal) but Ormsby moves best when he moves small, like the snail he sees and asks “Where will you turn / at the top of the white mountain?”

Michael Longley, *Angel Hill*

Wake Forest University Press, 2017. Paperback, 72 pp, \$14.93

If Michael Longley finds any snails while rambling the western reaches of County Mayo, he doesn’t say. For much of *Angel Hill*, he’s walking the coast “head / down, looking on the ground for lark’s nest” and other avian jetsam. He finds a lot, and if he doesn’t find it on the ground, it’s at distances far—“counting oystercatchers and sanderlings” with his wife—and near—sharing a WWII trench with “a stranded wheatear.” Longley’s attention to the natural world and its rhythms is meticulous, tender, and rich (he names local flora with the nonchalance others use to give directions), and it shows in the attention he pays to his sentences, which move over multiple lines like water down a rocky slope—steadily, with a couple flashes, and no strain whatsoever.

Longley never strays far from Carrigskeewaun or the lives around it, but since few of his poems are not touched in some formal or thematic way by the concept of

flight, we can find ourselves watching Apollinaire fly over no-man's land in WWI, as easily as we do back near Belfast with Heaney, deciding which religion to cop to at armed checkpoints. His geographical—and even iconographic—ambit is small, but Longley writes with such radiant simplicity and grace that each poem has the inevitable shape and airy heft of driftwood. As he says near the collection's end:

I make little space for philosophizing.  
I walk ever more slowly to gate and stile.  
Poetry is shrinking almost to its bones.

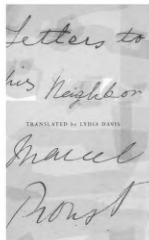


Cameron Barnett, *The Drowning Boy's Guide to Water*  
Autumn House, 2017. Paperback, 104 pp, \$17.95

Cameron Barnett, in his debut *The Drowning Boy's Guide to Water*, spends his time in, not along, the water, musing on the fluidity one is and is not granted as a black man in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries United States. His speakers are ever on the margins, though: one gets “coldcocked . . . for Talking / white” while another is made to read from a book a racial slur that applies only to him and is therefore, per his classmates and teacher, his. In “Crepe Sole Shoes” and elsewhere, he addresses Emmett Till, meditating on how slippery justice was (and still is) for young black men in the U.S.

Aside from the book's second section—a series of poems which deftly mimic Komunyakaa's bluesy sandpaper timbre—“Muriatic” stands out as an achievement. Though bafflingly titled after an acid that appears but once, the poem is a single sentence which smoothly moves from swim lessons in Anaheim to tainted water in Flint to segregated public pools in the '30s to other historic intersections of black folks, history, and water, ending finally on Simone Manuel winning gold at the Rio Olympics, suggesting to the speaker that “water can be our home too.”

Barnett consistently exhibits a formal genius as abundant as sax's, conjuring new poetic structures and patterns for every poem; the book overflows with variety. But some of the tricks feel baggy and gimmicky, muting or distorting lyric effects which in other poems he is more studied in presenting. However uneven, though, this book announces a poet who can wield "memory like a walking stick / whittled into a spear."



## Four Titles from New Directions

*Christian Bancroft*

Marcel Proust, *Letters to His Neighbor*

New Directions, 2017. Paperback, 112 pp, \$19.95

Marcel Proust needs no introduction, though the latest collection to bear his name, *Letters to His Neighbor*, does need a little background. The book consists of twenty-three letters—with a nice translation by Lydia Davis—written to a woman named Mme Marie Williams, the wife of an American dentist, Dr. Charles D. Williams, whose noisy office was directly above Proust's apartment—much to the writer's chagrin. Unfortunately, we do not have Mme Williams's letters, though Proust's wit and mellifluous writing style are in full force here. While Jean-Yves Tadié, who provides the forward, wants us to see the collection as “a real novel in miniature,” it is perhaps best to view it however one wishes—as a novella, as a gateway to *In Search of Lost Time*, as insight into one of the twentieth-century's most profound writers, or merely, as letters between neighbors. Whether complaining of the “harmonious team” of construction workers and repairmen or quoting epigraphs by Pelléas, *Letters to His Neighbor* will entertain both readers who have never read a page of Proust's magnum opus and Proustian experts.

Susan Howe, *Debths*

New Directions, 2017. Paperback, 244 pp, \$15.95

Susan Howe's newest book of poems, *Debths*, is one of her best. The title is taken from a passage of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*: "childlinen scarf to encourage his obsequies where he'd check their debths in that mormon's thames, be questing and handsetl, hop, step and a deepend, with his berths in their toiling moil." The collection is organized in five different parts, and is inspired by the art of Paul Thek and the Isabella Stewart Gardner collection. Its five sections also alternate between short poems and collage poems, most of which which are centered on the page and taken from texts that seem to vie for space. The collage poems are taken from books by and about poets such as Wallace Stevens, Robert Browning, and W.B. Yeats, in addition to other historical texts. The effect forces the eyes to make out phrases, words, or even letters from the textual amalgamation. I wouldn't say that these poems deconstruct language so much as construct it, much like Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*. Howe does not appear interested in razing linguistic structures as she does in building them from their elemental sounds and shapes, creating a different sum from their parts. The other poems in the collection, while perhaps not as formally inventive, nevertheless display Howe's wisdom with little fanfare. These poems show her developing her skills as a poet—even after a long and successful career. While a number of contemporary poets try to create inventive ways of wrestling with language, Howe proves that she has always been—and continues to be—one of the forerunning poets to reconceptualize poetry's relationship to language.

—◆—  
László Krasznahorkai, *The World Goes On*  
New Directions, 2017. Hardcover, 288 pp, \$24.95

Translated by George Szirtes, Otilie Mulzet, and John Batki, who have won various prizes for translating László Krasznahorkai's work, most notably the 2015 Man Booker Prize, *The World Goes On* is a collection Krasznahorkai's short stories, without operating in the conventional sense, as short stories. The book is divided into three parts, to which a mysterious "He" refers: I. SPEAKS, II. NARRATES, and III. BIDS FAREWELL. And in the second of these, the story "The Swan of Istanbul," includes "seventy-nine paragraphs on blank pages." Thus, Krasznahorkai's book is not for those who revel in Gogolian games and Kafkaesque themes. Nonetheless, for those who are patient enough to sift through the meaningless of our civilizations to which Krasznahorkai points our attention, will be rewarded with transcendent moments like "Memory is the art of forgetting" or "amidst the most profound beauty and decay, we may glimpse something anything that refers to us." While not as enchanting as *Seiobo There Below* or as dark as *The Last Wolf & Herman*, this latest book nevertheless reinforces Krasznahorkai as the "Hungarian master of apocalypse," as oft-quoted by Susan Sontag, that reads as disturbingly as it does perceptively.

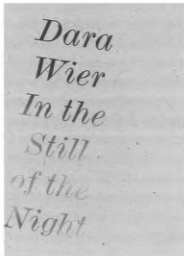
—◆—  
Ryszard Krynicki, *Magnetic Point: Selected Poems*  
New Directions, 2017. Paperback, 224 pp, \$18.95

Ryszard Krynicki's *Magnetic Point: Selected Poems 1968-2014* is one of two recent publications of the Polish poet's work. Translated by Clare Cavanagh, who is known for her excellent translations of Zagajewski's work,

*Magnetic Point* provides a nice survey of Krynicki's oeuvre. Along with Adam Zagajewski and Stanisław Barańczak, he was a prominent figure in what came to be known as the "Generation of '68," or "New Wave" of Polish poetry, "a loosely affiliated group of young writers who came of age in People's Poland and found their voices in the wake of the political upheavals that marked the late sixties," as Cavanagh tells us in her introduction. This group of poets eventually split into two other factions, the "straight speaking" school of poetry, led by Zagajewski, and the "linguistic school," represented by Barańczak and Krynicki. Over time, Krynicki became associated with a style of poetry that is bare and gnomic, yet teeming with emotion. In "Still Seeking," he asks, "Where do you hurry, my heart, // as if still seeking / your incarnation?" Other poems convey a sharply political tone (though Barańczak warns readers not to read Krynicki's work only through a political lens): "[A]nd we really didn't know, that living here and now" confesses Krynicki, "meant pretending to live elsewhere, in other times, / and to oppose at best the shadows of the dead // through an iron curtain of clouds." In our current global and political climate, reading Krynicki couldn't have come sooner.

## “Not a fine light flickering”: Dara Wier’s *In the Still of the Night*

Dara Wier, *In the Still of the Night*  
Wave Books, 2017. Paperback, 112 pp, \$18.00



Dara Wier’s latest book of poems with Wave Books, *In the Still of the Night*, reads very much like a collection of nocturnal thoughts. Many of these poems navigate the spaces of death and loss, and work best when she addresses darkness directly, as in the poem, “That’s What the Dead Do”:

That’s what the dead do.  
The ones who’ve died,  
who have given up their lives,  
who have died for us so that they say  
to us  
See here this is  
all it means to be dead—

Poems such as these work so well in part because of their elliptical and terse style, in addition to their use of enjambment. Overall, Wier’s book of poems defy convention in ways that are surprising. For example, she seems to privilege the musicality of language above a poem’s content throughout the book, and in these moments, the senselessness (and speechlessness) of loss is finally voiced.

**Cara Blue Adams's** stories have appeared in *The Kenyon Review*, *The Sun*, *The Missouri Review*, *Epoch*, *The Mississippi Review*, and *Narrative*, which named her one of their "15 Below 30." She is the recipient of the Kenyon Review Short Fiction Prize, judged by Alice Hoffman, and the Missouri Review William Peden Prize. Other awards include scholarships and fellowships to the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, the Sewanee Writers' Conference, and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. She is the former co-editor of *The Southern Review*. Now, she lives in Brooklyn and is an assistant professor of creative writing at Seton Hall University.

**Kemi Adeyemi** is Assistant Professor of Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies at the University of Washington. Her book manuscript, *Making New Ground: Black Queer Women's Geographies of Neoliberalism*, is currently in development, and she is in the process of co-editing a volume titled *Queer Nightlife*, a collection of essays, interviews, writing, and ephemera that documents the diverse expressions of queer nightlife worldwide. Recent publications span academic and arts audiences, and include "Donald Trump is the Perfect Man for the Job," in *QED: A Journal of GLBTQ Worldmaking*; exhibition catalog essays for *black is a color* (Los Angeles, CA), *Impractical Weaving Suggestions* (Madison, WI), and *Endless Flight* (Chicago, IL); as well as various interviews with and writings on artists such as sidony o'neal, Brendan Fernandes, Adeo Roberson, and Oliverio Rodriguez. Adeyemi's exhibition *unstable objects*, co-curated with Sampada Aranke, opened at The Alice Gallery in 2017.

**Alexis Almeida** grew up in Chicago. Her poems, translations, and essays have appeared recently in *BOMB*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Folder*, *Prelude*, *Cordella*, *Essay Daily*, and elsewhere. She is the author of the chapbook *Half-Shine* (Dancing Girl Press) and translator of Florencia Castellano's *Monitored Properties* (UDP) and Roberta Iannamico's *Wreckage* (Toad Press). Her translation of Marina Yuszczuk's *Single Mother* is forthcoming from Spork Press, and her translation of Dalia Rosetti's *Dreams and Nightmares* is forthcoming from Les Figs. Her chapbook *I Have Never Been Able to Sing* is forthcoming from Ugly Duckling Presse. She was a recent Fulbright research fellow to Argentina, and now lives in Providence, Rhode Island, where she runs 18 Owls Press.

As a teenager in Herat, Afghanistan, **Nadia Anjuman** attended the Golden Needle School in which a group of women gathered to meet and discuss literature with local professors under the guise of practicing needlepoint, a pastime approved by the Taliban government. In 2001, with Afghanistan's liberation from the Taliban, Anjuman began attending Herat University and soon published a book of poetry entitled گل نودی (*Gul-e-Dodi / Dark Flower*). Her readership was not limited to Afghanistan گل نودی (*Gul-e-Dodi / Dark Flower*) found readers in Iran, Pakistan, and beyond. She continued to write poetry despite the objections of her husband and his family, and she was set to publish a second volume of poetry in 2006 entitled يك سيد دلهره (*Yek Sābad Delhoreh / A Wealth of Worry*). In November 2005 Anjuman's husband beat her, and she ultimately died from the assault. In 2007, the Iranian Burnt Books Foundation published گل نودیا (*Divāne Sorudehāye Nadja Anjoman / The Complete Poems of Nadia Anjuman*). گل نودی (*Gul-e-Dodi / Dark Flower*) has been reprinted three times and sold over three thousand copies. This is the first publication of her complete works in English.

**Kristen Arnett** is a queer fiction and essay writer. She was awarded *Ninth Letter's* 2015 Literary Award in Fiction, was runner-up for the 2016 Robert Watson Literary Prize at *The Greensboro Review*, and was a finalist for *Indiana Review's* 2016 Fiction Prize. Her work has appeared or is upcoming at *North American Review*, *The Normal School*, *TriQuarterly*, *Ninth Letter*, *Electric Literature*, *Literary Hub*, *Bennington Review*, *Portland Review*, *TinHouse Flash Fridays/The Guardian*, *Salon*, *The Rumpus*, and elsewhere. Her debut story collection, *Felt in the Jaw*, was published by Split Lip Press and was awarded the 2017 Coil Book Award. Her novel, *Mostly Dead Things*, will be published by Tin House Books in Summer 2019.

**Diana Arterian** was born and raised in Arizona. She currently resides in Los Angeles where she is a doctoral candidate in literature and creative writing at the University of Southern California. Her work has been recognized with fellowships from the Banff Centre, Caldera, Vermont Studio Center, and Yaddo, and her collaborative translations of Anjuman's poetry have appeared in *Apogee*, *Asymptote*, *Aufgabe*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *Circumference*, *Eleven Eleven*, *Exchanges Journal*, *International Poetry Review*, *National Translation Month*, *North American Review*, and *Two Lines*.

**Laura August** makes texts and exhibitions in conversation with artists, poets, activists, and loved ones. Her recent work has been about mud and stones and our shared geographic and metaphorical landscapes. She is a 2016-2018 critical studies fellow at the Core Program of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. August holds a PhD in art history, and is a recipient of The Creative Capital | Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant for her writing in Central America. She lives in Guatemala City and Houston.

**Blessy Augustine** is a writer based in New Delhi. She has an MFA in art criticism and writing from the School of Visual Arts, New York. Her work has appeared in publications such as *Art in America*, *Blouin Artinfo India*, *Degree Critical*, *Mint*, *The Hindu Business Line*, and *Time Out Delhi*.

**Christian Bancroft** is the recipient of a Michener Fellowship. He is also the co-editor, with Jenny Molberg, of the 2018 *Unsung Masters Series* on Adelaide Crapsey. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Missouri Review*, *jubilat*, and *Asymptote*, among others. He is a PhD candidate at the University of Houston, where he has completed a dissertation on queering translation as well as a poetry manuscript on the persecution of queer men and women during WWII. He can be reached at christianbancroft.com.

**Tyler Barton** is a co-founder of FEAR NO LIT, the literary organization responsible for the 2017 Submerging Writer Fellowship. He serves as the assistant to the director of the Native American Literature Symposium. His podcast, *SHOW YOUR WORK*, released its first season in 2017. He has fiction forthcoming in *The Iowa Review*, *Yemassee*, and *Bat City Review*. Find more of his stories at tsbarton.com, and follow him @goftyler.

**Chad Bennett's** poems have appeared in journals such as *Colorado Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Fence*, *jubilat*, *The Offing*, and *The Volta*. He is an assistant professor of English at the University of Texas at Austin and the author of *Word of Mouth: Gossip and American Poetry* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), a study of the relationship between modern American poetry and the queer art of gossip.

**Conor Bracken** has recent poems published or forthcoming in *The Adroit Journal*, *At Length*, *Colorado Review*, *Diode*, *Indiana Review*, and *The New Yorker*, among others. His chapbook, *Henry Kissinger, Mon Amour*, selected by Diane Seuss as the winner of the 2017 Frost Place Chapbook Competition, was published by Bull City Press in September 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, in Houston, Texas, where he and his wife currently live.

**Brandon Brown's** most recent books are *The Good Life* (Big Lucks) and *Top 40* (Roof). His work has appeared recently in *Art in America*, *The Best American Experimental Writing*, *Fanzine*, *Oberon*, and *Open Space*. He is also the author, with J. Gordon Faylor, of three volumes of Christmas poems, most recently *The Cloth Bag*. He is an editor at *Krapskaya* and occasionally publishes small press materials under the imprint *OMG!* In 2018, Wonder will publish a new full length book, *The Four Seasons*.

**Lizzie Buehler** studied comparative literature at Princeton University. She now lives in New York and works as an educator and editor for *Asymptote*. Her writing and translations from Korean have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Massachusetts Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Litro*, *Asymptote*, and *Korean Literature Now*.

**Lisa Carter** is an acclaimed Spanish to English translator and writer. Her work has won the Alicia Gordon Award for Word Artistry in Translation and been nominated for an International DUBLIN Literary Award. Lisa owns and operates a creative communications business, where she gets to be both an entrepreneur and a wordsmith. Living in Ottawa, Canada, with her partner and her cat, Lisa travels daily (albeit vicariously) through the pieces she translates, edits, and writes, and explores the real world whenever she can. You can find Lisa online at [www.intralingo.com](http://www.intralingo.com).

**Alexander Castro** (b. 1992) is a writer based in Massachusetts. His journalism regularly appears in *Big Red & Shiny*, *Mercury*, *GLASS Quarterly*, and *Art New England*. In 2017, the Rhode Island Press Association named him a Notable New Reporter. He is currently working on a collection of essays that combine research, memoir, and criticism. His website is [OhNoCastro.com](http://OhNoCastro.com).

**Abigail Chabitnoy** earned her MFA in poetry at Colorado State University and was a 2016 Peripheral Poets fellow. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Tin House*, *Pleiades*, *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*, *Nat Brut*, *Red Ink*, and *Mud City*, and she has written reviews for *Colorado Review* and *The Volta Blog*. She is of Aleut and Pennsylvania Dutch heritage and currently resides in Colorado.

**Christopher Citro** is the author of *The Maintenance of the Shimmy-Shammy* (Steel Toe Books). His awards include a 2018 Pushcart Prize for poetry and first place in the 2015 Poetry Competition from *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*. Recent and upcoming publications include poetry in *Ploughshares*, *Crazyhorse*, *The Missouri Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Best New Poets*, *Narrative*, *Blackbird*, *Pleiades*, *North American Review*, *Meridian*, *Southeast Review*, and elsewhere. His creative nonfiction has appeared in *Boulevard*, *Quarterly West*, *Passages North*, and *Colorado Review*. Christopher received his MFA from Indiana University and lives in Syracuse, New York.

**Maximiliane Donicht** is the author of *Bees of the Invisible*, a chapbook forthcoming from Finishing Line Press. She once worked as a pastry chef in Paris, practiced classical Japanese swordsmanship in New York, and now lives in Taipei, where she eats an ungodly amount of purple sweet potatoes. Maxi earned her MFA in poetry and literary translation from Columbia University, and her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *The London Journal of Fiction*, *Bone Bouquet*, *Paris/Atlantic*, and *Cold Mountain Review*. Her translations have been published online at *The Grief Diaries* and *Columbia Journal*, and she is the translator of Professor Dr. Thomas Höllmann's *The Chinese Script*. She is from Munich, Germany.

**Rebecca Dunham** is the author of four books of poetry. Her most recent collections are *Cold Pastoral* and *Glass Armonica*, both published by Milkweed Editions. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Antioch Review*, *FIELD*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *The Cincinnati Review*, and others. Her poem "Tensile" will appear in her new book *Strike*, due out February 2019 from New Issues Press. She is Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

**Gyðir Eliasson** (b. 1961 in Reykjavík) is an Icelandic poet and translator, brought up in Sauðárkrúkur, a small village in the north of Iceland. Married, he has three daughters. His first book, a volume of poems, was published in 1983. Since then he has published many books of poetry, along with several novellas and collections of short stories and essays. He has translated some twenty books into Icelandic, primarily from English.

**Megan Falley** is the queer femme author of two full-length collections of poetry on Write Bloody Publishing. Her chapbook, *Bad Girls Honey (Poems About Lana Del Rey)*, was the winner of the 2015 Tired Hearts Competition. A Woman of the World and National Poetry Slam Finalist as well as published in *PANK*, *Rattle*, and *Muzzle Magazine*, Falley's work is vibrant in both print and theaters. She has been featured twice on TV One's *Verses and Flow* and is the creator of the online writing course "Poems That Don't Suck." Her YouTube videos have garnered over one million views and she has toured over one-hundred colleges nationwide. Her work focuses on LGBTQ issues, sex and body positivity, combating sexism and homophobia, and love. Her next book of poetry is slated to be published in September 2018. She currently lives and loves in Colorado.

**Renee Gladman** is a writer and artist preoccupied with lines, crossings, thresholds, and geographies as they play out in the interstices of poetry and prose. She is the author of eleven published works, including a cycle of novels about the city-state Ravicka and its inhabitants, the Ravickians—*Event Factory* (2010), *The Ravickians* (2011), *Ana Patova Crosses a Bridge* (2013), and *Houses of Ravicka* (2017)—as well as the recently released *Prose Architectures*, her first monograph of drawings, and *Calamities*, a collection of linked essay-fictions on the intersections of writing, drawing, and community, which won the 2017 CLMP Firecracker Award for Creative Nonfiction. Recent essays and visual work have appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Granta*, *Harper's*, *Stonemitter*, and *Poetry Magazine*. A 2014-15 fellow at Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University and recipient of a 2016 Foundation for Contemporary Arts Grant and a 2017 Lannan Foundation Writing Residency in Marfa, Texas, she makes work in New England.

**Rebecca Hazelton** is the author of *Fair Copy* (Ohio State University Press, 2012), winner of the 2011 Ohio State University Press / The Journal Award in Poetry, and *Vow*, from Cleveland State University Press. She was the 2010-11 Jay C. and Ruth Halls Poetry Fellow at the University of Wisconsin, Madison Creative Writing Institute and winner of the "Discovery" / *Boston Review* 2012 Poetry Contest. A two time Pushcart prize winner, her poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *The New Yorker*, and *Best American Poetry 2013* and *2015*.

Born in Andhra Pradesh, India, **Madhu H. Kaza** is a writer, translator, artist, and educator based in New York City. She is the co-editor of the recent anthology, *What We Love*, and the editor of *Kitchen Table Translation*, a volume that explores the connection between translation and migration and which features immigrant, diasporic, and poc translators. She directs the Bard Microcollege at Brooklyn Public Library, teaches in the MFA program at Columbia University and helps run the artists collective, No. 1 Gold.

**Porochista Khakpour** is the author of the novels *The Last Illusion* (Bloomsbury, 2014)—a 2014 "Best Book of the Year" according to NPR, Kirkus, BuzzFeed, Popmatters, Electric Literature, and more—and *Sons and Other Flammable Objects* (Grove, 2007)—the 2007 California Book Award winner in "First Fiction," a *Chicago Tribune's* "Fall's Best," and a *New York Times* "Editor's Choice." Her next book *Sick* (Harper Perennial, 2018)—a "Most Anticipated Book of 2018," according to *The Boston Globe*, *Buzzfeed*, *HuffPost*, *Nylon*, *The Rumpus*, *The Millions*, *Bitch*, *Bustle*, *Autostraddle*, and more—is her first memoir. Her other writing has appeared in several sections of *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Al Jazeera America*, *Bookforum*, *Slate*, *Salon*, *Spin*, *CNN*, *The Daily Beast*, *Elle*, *Conjunctions*, *American Short Fiction*, and many other publications around the world. She's received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the University of Leipzig, Yaddo, Ucross, and Northwestern University's Academy for Alternative Journalism, among others. Currently, she is guest faculty at VCU and Stonecoast's MFA programs, as well as Contributing Editor at *The Evergreen Review* and *The Offing*. In 2019, collection of her essays *Brown Album* will be out on the Vintage imprint of Knopf; Pantheon will be publishing her next novel *Tehrangles* in 2020. Born in Tehran and raised in the Los Angeles area, she currently lives in New York City's Harlem.

**Ji yoon Lee** is a poet and translator. She translated Korean feminist poet Kim Yideum's poetry with Don mee Choi and Johannes Göransson. The collection was published as *Cheer Up, Femme Fatale* (Action Books, 2015). She is also the author of *Foreigner's Folly* (Coconut Books, 2014). She was born in South Korea and immigrated to a small town in East Texas alone as a teen. She received her MFA in creative writing from the University of Notre Dame and is currently pursuing a PhD in creative writing at the University of Houston. Her new book of translation *Bloodsisters*, a novel by Kim Yideum, is forthcoming from Deep Vellum Press (2019).

**Paige Lewis** is the author of the chapbook *Reasons to Wake You* (Tupelo Press, 2018). Their poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Poetry*, *American Poetry Review*, *Ploughshares*, *The Georgia Review*, *Best New Poets 2017*, and elsewhere.

**BJ Love** is a middle school English teacher in Houston, Texas. A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, his poems have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies. Recent work can be found in *The North American Review*, *Hobart*, and *Dig if you will the Picture: Writers Reflect on Prince*.

**Majja Mäkinen** is a Finnish-born writer and translator. Her writings on place, belonging, and immigrant memories, along with her literary translations, have been featured or are forthcoming in *Los Angeles Review*, *Scandinavian Review*, *Transnational Literature*, *anglistica AION*, and publications in Finland. She is the winner of the American-Scandinavian Foundation's 2017 Nadia Christensen Prize in Translation, the University of Cambridge Lucy Cavendish Fiction Prize, and the Editor's Choice Award in *Best New Writing*, and recipient of the Kone Foundation's Saari Residency and Fellowship. Majja holds an MFA in creative writing from Boston University and lives in Brooklyn.

**Meg Matich** is the unabashed founder of the Reykjavik Poetry Brothel. Her translations have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Boston Review*, *Asymptote*, and others. Her first book, *Cold Moons* (Phoneme Media, 2017) by Magnús Sigurðsson, received a PEN/Heim Translation Fund grant, and is currently being turned into a choral symphony. Otherwise, she's received grants and fellowships from the Fulbright Commission, the DAAD, the Banff Centre, the Icelandic Literature Center, etc., and is optimistically at work on two thin collections of contemporary Icelandic poetry for *Words Without Borders* and *The Cafe Review*. She blogs Icelandic language and culture at *Transparent Icelandic*.

**Jennifer Metsker** lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where she is the Writing Coordinator at the Stamps School of Art and Design. Most recently her poetry can be found in *Whiskey Island*, *Rhino*, *Beloit Poetry Review*, *Cream City Review*, *Banango Street*, and *Birdfeast*. Her audio poetry, which recently won the Third Coast Short Docs Audio Prize, is regularly featured on the BBC radio program *Short Cuts*.

**Poupeh Missaghi** is *Asymptote's* Iran Editor-at-Large. She is a writer, Persian->English translator, editor, and educator. Holding a PhD in creative writing and an MA in translation studies, she currently lives and works in New York City. Her nonfiction, fiction, and translations have been published in different outlets.

**Jenny Molberg's** debut collection of poetry, *Marvels of the Invisible*, won the 2014 Berkshire Prize (Tupelo Press, 2017). Her work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Ploughshares*, *The Missouri Review*, *Copper Nickel*, *Boulevard*, *Poetry International*, *The Orison Anthology*, *Best New Poets*, and other publications. She teaches at the University of Central Missouri and is co-editor of *Pleiades*. Find her online at [jennymolberg.com](http://jennymolberg.com).

**Mark Neely** is the author of *Beasts of the Hill* (2012) and *Dirty Bomb* (2015), both from Oberlin College Press. His awards include an NEA Poetry Fellowship, an Indiana Individual Artist grant, and the FIELD Poetry Prize. He teaches at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana.

**Marina Omar** was born in Afghanistan and has worked as an interpreter for Afghan refugee families. She is currently a Doctoral candidate in foreign affairs at the University of Virginia.

**taisha paggett** is a dance artist whose individual and collaborative interdisciplinary works re-articulate and collide specific western choreographic practices with the politics of daily life in order to interrogate fixed notions of queer black embodiment and survival. Such works include the dance company project, *WXPT (we are the paper, we are the trees)* and the collaborative *School for the Movement of the Technicolor People*, both of which seek to radicalize concepts held within contemporary dance by way

of an intersection with social practice; critical pedagogy; somatic and contemplative investigations; queer, feminist and black studies; performance and visual art studies; and the political and philosophical meshes of personal history. paggett's work has been supported by the University of California Institute for Research in the Arts; Clockshop; the MAP Fund (in conjunction with Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions); National Performance Network; DiverseWorks in Houston; and the ICA in Philadelphia, amongst other institutions. From 2005-13 paggett co-instigated the LA-based dance project and discursive platform, itch. In 2014 paggett was featured in *Vedootpark magazine's* 25 most significant queer women of the year list, and in 2017 was one of ten "womyn, and womyn-led community arts organizations" honored with an Avest Award for their "outstanding contribution to arts in Southern California." As a dancer, paggett has performed, toured with and made significant creative contributions to many choreographers and performance projects over the years including that of *Every House has a Door*, David Rousseve/REALITY, Victoria Marks, Kelly Nipper, Meg Wolfe and Yael Davids. paggett maintains an ongoing collaborative practice with Ashley Hunt titled *On movement, thought and politics*. paggett received a BA in art history from UC Santa Cruz, an MFA from UCLA's Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance, and is grateful to now be amongst the UC Riverside community.

**Adrienne Perry** grew up in Wyoming, earned her MFA from Warren Wilson College in 2013, and is a PhD candidate in literature and creative writing at the University of Houston. From 2014-2016 she served as the Editor of *Gulf Coast: A Journal of Literature and Fine Arts*. A Hedgebrook alumna, she is also a Kimbilio Fellow and a member of the Rabble Collective. Adrienne's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Copper Nickel*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Tidal Basin Review*, and elsewhere. She is at work on a novel and a collection of essays.

**Jeremy Radin** is a poet, actor, and teacher living in Los Angeles. His poems have appeared in *Cosmonauts Avenue*, *Nailed*, *Sundog Lit*, *Union Station*, *Winter Tangerine*, and elsewhere. He teaches acting at The Beverly Hills Playhouse and is currently the coach of the Get Lit Players. He is the author of two collections of poetry, *Slow Dance with Sasquatch* (Write Bloody Publishing, 2012) and *Dear Sal* (not a cult press, 2017). He's appeared on several TV shows, including *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, *CSI*, and *Criminal Minds*. He lives in Los Angeles with his plant, Ramoth the Queen of Dragons, and his refrigerator. Follow him @germyradin.

**Lishani Ramanayake** is a final year literature student at Yale-NUS College. She calls both Sri Lanka and Singapore home.

**Camila Reimers** is the author of four novels and numerous short stories in English and Spanish that have been published in Canada, Europe and Latin America. She has also written eight books for children in Spanish that have been translated into English, French, Italian, Portuguese and Chinese. Camila won the International Latino Book Award in 2016 for her novel *De conventos, cárceles y castillos* and in 2017 for the bilingual title *El condor pasa sobre el Norte/When the Condor Meets the Eagle*. The edition of this children's book contains augmented reality in the illustrations, the first of its kind ever published in Chile. Camila lives and works in Ottawa, Canada. <http://camilareimers.com/>

**Marieke Lucas Rijneveld** (b. 1991) is a Dutch writer and poet. Her work has appeared in many Dutch language publications including the *VPRO gids*, *Das Magazin*, *Terras*, *Hard//Hoofd*, *Het Liegend Konijn*, *De Poëziekrant*, and *Het Hollands Maandblad*. Marieke Lucas won the Hollands Maandblad scholarship 2014/2015 and the 2015 C.C.S. Crone literary fellowship. In June 2015, her debut poetry collection *Kalfsvlies (Calf's Caul)* was published by Atlas Contact. In 2016 she was hailed by Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant* as the national literary talent of the year and won the C. Buddingh' Prize for best poetry debut. Rijneveld's first novel, *De avond is ongemak (The evening is uneasy)* was published in February 2018. Besides writing, Rijneveld lives in Utrecht and works part-time at a dairy farm.

**Lara Rüter** was born in 1990 in Hannover, Germany. She studied archaeology for a year in Berlin and subsequently cultural studies at the Literaturinstitut Hildesheim. She is currently completing her master's degree in creative writing at the Literaturinstitut Leipzig. Her work has been published in several anthologies and online at *BELLA triste*, *Fixpoetry*, and *Babelspresch*, among others.

**Anja Snellman**, formerly Kauranen, (b. 1954) is one of the most acclaimed Finnish authors of her generation. She rose to fame with her 1981 debut novel, *Sonja O. Was Here*. In many of her books, Snellman has dealt with the role of women, the awakening sexuality of teenage girls, as well as the gender-specific repression mechanisms of religious and ideological fundamentalism. She is the author of 23 novels and three collections of poetry. Her works have been translated into more than 20 languages.

**Eric Schlich's** first book, *Quantum Convention & Other Stories* (available November 2018, from the University of North Texas Press) is the winner of the 2018 Katherine Anne Porter Prize in Short Fiction. His stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Fairy Tale Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Mississippi Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Electric Literature*, *Redivider*, *River Styx*, *Nimrod*, and *New South*, among other journals. He lives in Dunkirk, New York, and teaches at SUNY Fredonia.

**Shane Seely** has published two books of poems: *The Surface of the Lit World*, winner of the 2014 Hollis Summers Prize from Ohio University Press; and *The Snowbound House*, winner of the 2008 Philip Levine Prize for Poetry. His third book, *The First Echo*, is due out from LSU Press in 2019. He is an associate professor at University of Missouri-St. Louis, where he directs the MFA program in Creative Writing.

**Yvette Siegert** is a poet and Spanish translator who lives on the French-Swiss border. She has a BA and MFA from Columbia University and is currently writing a thesis on Latin American literature and translanguaging at the University of Geneva. A CantoMundo Fellow, she has received support from PEN/NYSCA, the Academy of American Poets and the National Endowment for the Arts. Her translation of Alejandra Pizarnik's *Extracting the Stone of Madness: Poems 1962-1972* received the 2017 Best Translated Book Award for poetry.

**Mike Soto** is a first-generation Mexican-American, raised in East Dallas and in a small town in Michoacán. His current manuscript uses themes from the drug war taking place along a fictional U.S./ Mexico bordertown. The manuscript can be described as a "Narco Acid Western" told in about forty-five poems. It is written in lineage with Alejandro Jodorowsky's film *El Topo*.

**Adeeba Shahid Talukder** is a Pakistani-American poet and translator. She translates Urdu and Persian poetry, and cannot help but bring elements from these worlds to her own work in English. Her chapbook *What Is Not Beautiful* is forthcoming from Glass Poetry Press, and her book *Shahr-e-Jaanaan: The City of the Beloved* is a winner of the Kundiman Prize and is forthcoming from Tupelo Press. A Best of the Net finalist and a Pushcart nominee, Adeeba's work has appeared, or is forthcoming in, *Anomaly*, *Solstice*, *Meridian*, *Washington Square*, and *PBS Frontline*, among other publications. Adeeba holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Michigan and is a Poets House 2017 Emerging Poets Fellow.

**Yuki Tanaka** is an MFA student at the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas-Austin. His poems and translations have appeared or are forthcoming in *American Poetry Review*, *Paris Review*, *Poetry*, and elsewhere. He is also Poetry Editor of *Bat City Review*.

**DJ Thielke's** stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *EPOCH*, *Colorado Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Bat City Review*, and *Crazyhorse*, among others. A graduate of Vanderbilt University's MFA program, where she was Editor-in-Chief of the Nashville Review, her fellowships include the James C. McCreight Fiction Fellowship at the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing and the Olive B. O'Connor Fellow in Fiction at Colgate University. You can read more of her work at [djthielke.com](http://djthielke.com).

**Sarah Timmer Harvey** is a writer and translator currently based in Brooklyn, New York.

**Debbie Urbanski's** stories have been published in *The Sun*, the *Kenyon Review*, *Terraform*, *Nature*, and the *Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy 2017*. She lives with her family in Syracuse, New York. Find her at [debbieurbanski.com](http://debbieurbanski.com) or on twitter @DebbieUrbanski.

**Stalina Emmanuelle Villarreal** lives as a rhyming-slogan creative activist. She is a Generation 1.5 poet (mexicana and Chicana), a translator, a sonic-improv collaborator, and an instructor of English. She is a PhD student in creative writing at University of Houston. Her MFA in writing is from California College of the Arts. Her poetry can be found in the *Rio Grande Review*, *Texas Review*, and *Spoon River Poetry Review*. She coauthored an article with a historian in the book *Chicana Movidas* (University of Texas, forthcoming). She has published translations of poetry, including *Enigmas*, by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (Señal: a project of Libros Antena Books, BOMB, and Ugly Duckling Presse, 2015), but she mostly translates regiomontana poet Minerva Reynosa (Mandorla, 2012); their most recent publication is a chapbook called *Photograms of My Conceptual Heart, Absolutely Blind* (Cardboard House Press, 2016).

**Wendy Vogel** is a writer and curator based in New York, and is a spring 2018 visiting faculty member in the Department of Painting and Printmaking at Virginia Commonwealth University. She contributes regularly to a variety of art and culture publications, including *Artforum*, *art-agenda*, *Art in America*, *Art Review*, *BOMB*, *frieze*, and *Mousse*. She was editor of the *index* magazine anthology *index A to Z: art, design, fashion, film and music in the indie era* (Rizzoli, 2014). She has organized or co-organized curatorial projects at the Hessel Museum at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College; Künstlerhaus Schloss Balmoral, Bad Ems, Germany; The Kitchen, New York; Abrons Arts Center, New York; VOLTA New York; Baxter Street Camera Club of New York; and bitforms, New York.

**Jeff Wasserboehr**'s writing and poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Missouri Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Passages North*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Field*, and elsewhere. He hails from greater Boston, but currently lives in Columbia, Missouri, where he is teaching creative writing courses at Mizzou and earning a PhD in English.

**Joshua Wheeler** is from Alamogordo, New Mexico. He wrote *Acid West: Essays*, out now from Farrar, Straus and Giroux (FSG Originals). He teaches creative writing at Louisiana State University.

**Lani Yu** is a third-year poetry MFA student at the University of Houston. She grew up in Orlando, graduating from the University of Florida with a BS in Psychology. She was a semifinalist for the 2016 *DISQUIET* Literary Prize Contest in poetry, and has been published in UF's *TEA* literary magazine. She is also a reader and assistant editor at *Gulf Coast*. She spends her time reading, writing, and now, teaching.

**Marina Yuszczuk** is a poet who received her PhD in literature. She works as a journalist and a film critic for the cultural supplement *Las12 of Página 12* and for the magazine *La Agenda*. She has published various books of poetry: *Lo que la gente hace* (Blatt & Ríos, 2012), *Madre soltera* (Mansalva, 2013), and *La ola de frío polar* (Gog y Magog, 2015). With the press Rosa Iceberg, which she founded with Tamara Tenenbaum and Emilia Erbetta, she recently published *Los arreglos* (2017), her first book of prose. Her first novel, *La inocencia*, was recently published by Iván Rosado.

UNIVERSITY of  
**HOUSTON**

The University of Houston offers a graduate creative writing program that fosters the growth of the individual writer as a person of letters in a vibrant community of scholars and writers.

# CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAM

*MFA OR PH.D. IN FICTION, POETRY  
OR CREATIVE NONFICTION*

FALL 2018 APPLICATION DEADLINE: **DECEMBER 31, 2018**

Teaching Assistantships & Fellowships Available Visit [www.uh.edu/cwp](http://www.uh.edu/cwp) for more information

## FACULTY

Alexander Parsons, Director  
Robert Boswell  
Audrey Colombe  
Chitra Divakaruni  
Nick Flynn  
Tony Hoagland  
Mik Johnson

Antonya Nelson  
Kevin Pruffer  
Martha Serpas  
Roberto Tejada  
Peter Turchi

## RECENT STUDENT AWARDS

Fulbright Scholarship  
Iowa Poetry Prize  
Wallace Stegner Fellowship  
National Endowment for the Arts Grant  
Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Memorial Poetry Competition  
Ruth Lilly Poetry Fellowship  
Tabias Wolff Award for Fiction  
Middlebrook Poetry Fellowship

**inprint** MARGARETT ROOT BROWN  
READING SERIES

bringing the page to the stage

# Inprint Margarett Root Brown Reading Series

more than

# 350

great writers  
since 1980

*including winners of*

- 8** Nobel Prizes
- 62** Pulitzer Prizes
- 56** National Book Awards
- 48** National Book Critics Circle Awards
- 14** Man Booker Prizes
- 17** U.S. Poets Laureate

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie	Khaled Hosseini
Margaret Atwood	Kazuo Ishiguro
Anne Carson	Edward P. Jones
Sandra Cisneros	James McBride
Michael Cunningham	David Mitchell
Junot Diaz	Gregory Pardlo
Anthony Doerr	Ann Patchett
Jennifer Egan	Annie Proulx
Louise Erdrich	Karen Russell
Jeffrey Eugenides	Salman Rushdie
Jonathan Safran Foer	George Saunders
Jonathan Franzen	Gary Shteyngart
Carlos Fuentes	Colm Tóibín
Lauren Groff	Mario Vargas Llosa

inprint

[inprinthouston.org](http://inprinthouston.org)

The Brown Foundation, Inc.



National Endowment for the Arts



Houston Cultural Foundation



MM

Win

BRAZOS

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON  
Creative Writing Program



**FICTION BY CARA BLUE ADAMS, KRISTEN ARNETT, TYLER BARTON, POROCHISTA KHAKPOUR, CAMILA REIMERS, & DEBBIE URBANSKI.**

**POETRY BY NADIA ANJUMAN, CHAD BENNETT, ABIGAIL CHABITNOY, CHRISTOPHER CITRO, REBECCA DUNHAM, GYRDIR ELÍASSON, MEGAN FALLEY, REBECCA HAZELTON, PAIGE LEWIS, BJ LOVE, JENNIFER METSKER, JENNY MOLBERG, MARK NEELY, JEREMY RADIN, MARIEKE LUCASRIJNEVELD, LARA RÜTER, SHANE SEELY, ANJA SNELLMAN, MIKE SOTO, ADEEBA TALUKDER, YUKI TANAKA, & MARINA YUSZCZUK.**

**NONFICTION BY RENEE GLADMAN, JEFF WASSERBOEHR, & JOSHUA WHEELER.**

**ART AND ART WRITING BY KEMI ADEYEMI, LAURA AUGUST, M. BARRETT, MIKE KELLEY, TAISHA PAGGETT, & WENDY VOGEL.**

**TRANSLATIONS BY ALEXIS ALMEIDA, DIANA ARTERIAN, MAXIMILIANE DONICHT, MEG MATICH, MAIJA MÄKINEN, MARINA OMAR, & SARAH TIMMER HARVEY.**

**REVIEWS BY CHRISTIAN BANCROFT, CONOR BRACKEN, & LANI YU.**

**PLUS! THE 2017 BARTHELME PRIZE WINNER DJ THIELKE & HONORABLE MENTIONS LISHANI RAMANAYAKE & ERIC SCHLICH. THE 2017 TRANSLATION PRIZE WINNER LISA CARTER.**

**AND! INAUGURAL BEAUCHAMP PRIZE WINNER BRANDON BROWN.**

**ALSO! A ROUND TABLE WITH MADHU KAZA, JI YOON LI, POUPEH MISSAGHI, ADRIENNE PERRY, YVETTE SIEGERT, & STALINA VILLARREAL.**

**COVER ARTWORK BY RUBY ONYINYECHI AMANZE.**