

Poetry City, USA, Vol. 7

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**A journal of poems
and prose on poetry**

POETRY CITY, USA, VOL. 7
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FOREWORD

Scientists say we are in the midst of the sixth mass extinction, often referred to as the Anthropocene Extinction, in order to emphasize the role humans have had, and continue to have, in bringing it about. At a book fair recently, I chatted with another editor of another poetry journal, the next issue of which will feature an interview exploring the subconscious effects that living in such an age, and being the primary cause of it, has on individuals of the species. What malaises do we suffer unbeknownst? What does climate change resulting from human activity that has warmed the planet like a gas burner warms a pot of water do to us, known and unknown? How do hurricanes and fires and floods like we've never seen reconstitute our constitutions?

I tried to look up "kilonova" in Merriam-Webster's this week. I was unsuccessful, because it's not there. Neither is it in the OED. A kilonova is what forms when two neutron stars collide, and light from a kilonova 130 million light years away from us reached us recently, and that's the second coolest thing about it all. The coolest thing is that humans were able to ascertain the kilonova light's arrival in advance using gravitational waves to see with. The advanced noticed allowed us to observe it from multiple locations with multiple devices all around the world. One of the things we learned is that the collision produced platinum and gold, just as is contained on our Earth, meaning we may have witnessed a birth much like our own. Einstein's theory of general relativity—*that* old saw, again—predicted gravitational waves in 1916. It took until 2015 for scientists to first observe, and prove the existence of, gravitational waves. Two years later, we're using them to usher in what is being called "a new age of astronomy."

New ages abound. Neuroscientist Matthew Walker's new book, *Why We Sleep*, purports that the secret to what ails us—a kind of fountain of youth and good health—is a good night's sleep that few of us are getting. His research is already having an effect on schools, where districts are moving to later start times to accommodate teenagers' biological clocks. As fasci-

nating as his findings are, when I heard him interviewed on the radio the other night, driving home from class at the community college, what stuck was something else. While discussing popular sleeping pills (which Walker says either don't do a thing or sedate you, and sedation has none of the benefits of real sleep, so he recommends sleep therapy rather than the currently available pills, because the therapy produces real and lasting results), Walker said, "The placebo effect is the most reliable effect in all of pharmacology." I repeated that—*the placebo effect is the most reliable effect in all of pharmacology*—until I pulled into my driveway and could write it down. It's still sinking in. We've got the super-est superhero of all time ensconced in each of our skulls.

Are there no new things to say, only new ways to say them (we've always looked up the sky in wonder, we just wonder about different things)? Are there actually new things to say (I know of no poems that survived the fifth mass extinction)?

Which came first, the chicken or the egg?

I got an email the other day from a friend who was my roommate in grad school. We used to sit in the same room, I at my card table, he at his desk, each against the south wall, the apartment's sole source of heat—an ancient, blue-flame gas furnace as big as a commercial cooking range—between us, apprenticing ourselves to the process of making poetry. We did that from 8 a.m. till noon each day, sharing passages aloud, helping each other with comments, celebrating the successful lines downstairs at the bar (our favorite) that we lived above. His email contained the first poem he'd written in 18 years. It was set in Puerto Rico, where he'd recently returned from. I asked what he meant about having been "deployed" there. He wrote back: "I was there, along with many others, to help the people of PR. They are resilient and beautiful, and so is their island. I was a visitor." Here's his poem:

Chasing Maria to San Juan

We travel like poison through the gut, absurdly
foreign, a slight sting where food meets
body, the road ahead and behind dark

as waste. The birds have gone mad
for lack of leaves. The gray rump
of a farm horse, three days dead, waits

for saddle and tack, head-lamp glass spread
the way diamonds fall from a heist, a stagecoach
door heaved open, the urgent smell of black
powder. Somewhere not far away, Richie

takes stock of his booze. Tonight, it is rye.
He will rock slowly in his hammock, laughing at Manhattan
tales, while his boys—we are all his boys—cheer
a preordained loss at dominoes. He will ignore

the ash burning his fingers, his free hand
like a nesting wren in his waistband. I have come
this far for something close to love. The surf is due west
and, even without sextant, without compass
or sled-dog, I can divine my way clear
to krakens at the wild, ragged edge of blue.

- Damion Higbie

Before I wrote any of this today, I read in an article that, four weeks after Maria hit Puerto Rico, 80 percent of the island still does not have electricity.

Are there no new things to say, only new ways to say them? Are there actually new things to say? Does it matter that we use our brains, etcetera, in the saying and saying and saying of, predicting without the evidence to prove?

Yes, yes, and yes. *MM*

20 October

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I

Allow us the unclenching of hands.

- Matt Rasmussen

POWER

I.

Tell me a story that begins with a tree swallow skimming pond water.

Tell me about the distant sputter of construction trucks in springtime
and the sky that wants so badly to be new.

Tell me the distance from winter's gray to this blue.

II.

I do not want to talk about what can be held in the hands.

Now is not the time for banjos, river stones, seeds, feathers,
dictionaries, pens.

You play the tune this time, you hold the guitar, and I'll sing the word
power so many times over that I become a train for whom the night
rearranges itself.

Tell me how to speak myself into being.

III.

I would prefer to begin with an afternoon of blackbirds and a little
moving water; at the minimum, a whitetail's tracks in the sand
or the fiddlehead's green hood still untrampled.

But every night I undo the fitted sheet with my circadian tarantella of
open palm and closed fist.

Hands—confused flowers in half-darkness—ask, *Does relief lie in the
furled bud or the blossom?*

IV.

Tonight, I would.

Would what?

All of it.

I would allow the night doctor to bring out the bone saw.

I would rinse my hands in acid until they dissolved.

Clean, clean wrists.

I would allow prosthetics of silicone and steel.

I would.

To accept this perpetual pain is not a choice available to me, tonight.

Tell me a story.

V.

Story of the dawn: *Ink and coral weigh the same. They trade
places mutely.*

Story of the bone: *Pain is language. Any slight movement, a word.*

Story of the sand: *When rain falls, the memory of yesterday's stag rises
like steam.*

Story of the swallow: *We are, each of us, a knife.*

Diannely Antigua

from SONGS OF BABYLON

I want to write a song to that jean skirt
past the shinbones, to nylons with sandals, to
bare earlobes, to days when I said sorry
to the Bible and the Bible listened.

If I could hold that decade in my palm,
I'd grip it like a teacup, apple cinnamon
burnt tongue. Or a pie cutter from Sunday dinner,
the Lord's work of licking frosting from a finger.

Were my wrists the song, rolling silverware
in blue napkins, prayer to the balance of things
that were touched for a moment and tucked away?

If god were a scent, let Him be the Simple Green
diluted in the mop bucket, or the Ajax
in the sink, how the men's bathroom always smelled
like coins jostled in a boy's pocket, on a plate.

I want to say a prayer for that girl
sitting in the front row. I want to tongue my way
into *Amen*. How to re-enter a body that never held you.

Kalie Havener

A Review of Hanif Willis-Abdurraqib's *The Crown Ain't Worth Much*

A head that wears a crown historically holds more authority. A crown of gold is a regal attribute to any leader, but what is it about this item that alludes to power? Is it the item itself fused together with heat (heart) and metal (blood), or the idea that the head that holds it becomes an elevated being? Someone who cannot be touched by the law of the land, so to speak.

In Hanif Willis-Abdurraqib's *The Crown Ain't Worth Much*, the crown symbolically represents the heavy grief our speaker must carry around, the loss of innocence that comes with losing a loved one. That grief is made up of longing for his deceased mother: "I don't know what makes men like us except bound to our loneliness, crawling on our hands and knees through the southern mud that women we loved once pushed between their black toes, until we reach the river." The grief seems universally felt, and yet the speaker delivers it in a personal way. *The Crown Ain't Worth Much*, Willis-Abdurraqib's first collection of poetry, explores the themes of power, death, grief, and love's powerful memory through the eyes of nostalgia. Our speaker must deal with the increasing tension of a changing neighborhood where barbershops and friends disappear overnight.

Willis-Abdurraqib uses music to give voice to his feeling of powerlessness. He finds comfort in listening to hip hop. Here's an excerpt from "The Summer A Tribe Called Quest Broke Up":

... & they was all empty
'cept for maybe the bones
of the last woman
to hold them in her arms &
call them by the
name they blessed the
earth with & all the horns
on my block crawled back
into they cases & marched to
new mouths & fathers

had nothing to press
their lips to & make sing...

For a speaker who finds solace in music, A Tribe Called Quest breaking up is one more crack in the windshield. The speaker grew up in an unstable neighborhood, and it was the music that kept them sane. The speaker longs for their mother, knowing the only thing proving that she even walked this Earth at all is the flesh and bones and blood keeping our speaker alive at this very moment. The neighborhood was once held together with a mother's heart, and as the old neighborhood crumbles her heart breaks along with it. "The Summer A Tribe Called Quest Broke Up" gives the impression that the world around the speaker became his beaten and bruised heart. It seems to be a poem of acceptance as well, as there is imagery of musical instruments crawling back to their cases, almost parallel to a person being laid to rest. Then we read that the instruments move on to find new mouths, which could mean the person laid to rest is no longer there to call upon when needed—that the music dies, both in the speaker's world metaphorically, as well as the band breaking up. There is an emptiness that fills up the neighborhood, and the people there are merely existing as skin and bones—the very skin and bones as made up the woman who brought them into this world. The band is used to represent our speaker's broken heart. Our speaker is abandoned.

We see the neighborhood turn into a ravenous and sinister beast. The beast chews on the crown, and is assaulted by the taste of metallic blood running on his tongue. Still his thirst is not quenched, and so the beast resorts to swallowing up boys whole in the middle of the night, littering the streets with chalk lines and gold bullet shells which bear resemblance to broken pieces of a crown. Again, this parallels the loss of innocence and all that is familiar and safe. Dark and ominous imagery fill the poem "All Of The Black Boys Finally Stopped Packing Switchblades." The speaker lapses into a memory, and we can see the world changing from the safe space only a mother can create to a place filled with uncertainty: "and isn't that what we've always been fed? that it is / just like the nighttime / to rename everything that moves / into a monster?" Our speaker learns early on what fear of darkness can mean, and the teeth

of a creature called hate will only sharpen its teeth as long as it continues to be fed. The monster of racism that the speaker deals with on a daily basis, combined with the skin-and-bone he has inherited from his mother, is addressed in the poem "1995. After the Streetlights Drink Whatever Darkness Is Left," where Willis-Abdurraqib writes: "*I guess this skin we wear expires with the sun / says we were born into curfew & I think / what a way to be young & alive.*"

The final poem in the book, "The Story Of The Last Punk Rock Show Before The City Tore Down Little Brother's," is a flashback to the end of summer past, where the speaker sits in a hazy diner joined by his mother, who is still living. The neighborhood has not been taken over by the strip malls and new barbershops that put the ones he loved out of business. The speaker lapses into a sort of mournful lament and begins to say, "Forgive me father, for I have made a suit of all these names I refuse to speak, and gone dancing in it. I have let all of my soak through until it is a dark mess, falling from my shoulders." This lament shows the speaker being stripped of all the ones he's lost, and the metaphorical crown becomes too heavy to carry around. The grief will no longer weigh him down, hence the shedding of a memory-soaked suit. Our speaker chooses to move forward, and leaves behind his past a crumpled mess on the floor. He no longer wears the crown, accepting that for all its power it cannot bring back the deepest desires of his heart.

AFTER EVERYTHING

The trees were awkward
teenage boys, collapsing,
skeletal, praying for
the echo of thunder.
Mountains, pinked with
lights, clutched their breasts
and cradled their dissolving
pursuit. Clouds assembled
into a neon stampede.
A pulse sang all moon long.
We were hoping morning
would shower porcelain,
so we could call the gods
liars, but we could feel
the earth reverse, flamingos
flying north, and all other
oddities stroked in the folds
of our brains. Things,
we knew, would never be
that strange, but who could
predict this much color
diluted from our
thawing landscapes, our hunger.
The rain eventually came.
No music but the wind
existed. We forced our
bodies through a hole
in the sound, and the walls
crumbled like a mob.
Windows beheld the ghosts
of bloated ships and sighed.
Not even the city's
eyes told the truth.

Nancy Huang

QUESTIONS I GOT WRONG ON THE TEST

10/ the cold makes me alive

& i am hungry/ i think i have nothing left to lose here/ my mouth is made of gummy worms & toothpaste/ static crackles around me & my professor tells me to use first person/ i hurt (present), i hurt (past), i will hurt (future)/ if cold is life then what are corpses?

09/ one day i will breathe out my soul

it will float and mingle with the tree/ i think it will taste like instant coffee powder/ sunset blush boxed wine/ something cheap that does the trick/ but i hope i am not smoke/ i hope i have wings/ i hope that people will miss me/ why change when you can become?

05/ i am in the kitchen with a killer

he is uglier than i remember/ can you picture ugly eyes? is that even/ possible? he is probably better in my memory anyway/ probably best to keep him there/ i lock his name behind my teeth & keep going/ i am finally out of the party & the wind eats me up.

04/ there are cats in my building

that i am allergic to/ they slink under windows and doors/ i cannot cook because they are sleeping in my pots & pans/ curled up in my microwave/ they stay on my bed all night when it is raining/ i have gotten used to them/ now whenever it rains i sleep in my bathtub/ who is to blame, rain or cats?

03/ on the other side of the world

someone wants me to die/ one of the things within me is shaking so hard it vibrates/ i've only ever heard my heart do that/ to what extent should i care what people say?/ no one ever told me it is okay to be broken/ no one ever told me it is okay to suffer/ that it is okay to hurt, hurt, hurt

Kari Gunter-Seymour

THE DAY YOU FOUND OUT HIS DIAGNOSIS: SEVERE BIPOLAR DISORDER WITH MIXED STATES

Even the pigeons look cold today,
lined up on telephone wires,

huddled in private caves of breath-
clouds and dark winter coats.

Golden hilltops watercolor across
a dusk marbled sky, explode and spread.

I walk to clear my head, a cauldron
that not even this considerable sunset's reflection,

now quivering in shades
of orange and magenta, can match.

Words I utter catch in the branches
of winter treetops, each breath a puff of frost.

There are no angels living under the freeway
overpass, no colors where you are from,

your body a poem of condescending neurons,
stretched and hiccuping.

Soon snow will come, fill the negative
space of your body's landing, erase

all evidence that once you painted
a blank canvas with your fear unbuttoned.

Now a pink horizon crests an underside
of storm, urges me — turn back,

forfeit these ponderings, these unfoldings,
this moment of rightness in which

I say no to words
being the only name you go by.

Or this — a voice, less heard than felt,
holding out for just one snowflake of hope.

Kevin Nelson

The power of retrospect: A review of Jon Pineda's *Little Anodynes*

If poetry is meant to communicate emotions and experiences in a way that gives readers access to a new perspective on the human condition, John Pineda's recent effort, *Little Anodynes*, has hit the mark. This unpretentious and intimately crafted collection of narrative poems focuses on common life events using language and imagery that gives the reader a sense of walking with a close friend. The characters deal with real life issues and discoveries—with points in time that mold the *versions* of the characters.

The common themes of relationships, growth, loss, and grief moved me to reflect on my own loss and discovery.

The last time I knew her was moving day, a sun-soaked morning in late May. While grown-ups staged furniture in the front yard, the children were confined to the back. Balancing between us and them, Aunt Sarah, a popular and gregarious seventeen year old tomboy with golden hair and an infectious smile, distracted my younger sisters with games of gray duck and tag. The youngest of my mother's siblings, Sarah was slender and athletic, a star tennis player and gymnast with aspirations of a scholarship to St Cloud. Though my grandmother discouraged her from wearing it, her thick woolen letterman jacket was overloaded with chevrons and shiny trinkets.

Despite her age and popularity, she always had time for the younger kids. On weekend mornings during the summer, she and I would walk to the junior high tennis courts. There, with an old wooden Wilson racket to defend myself, she would pepper me with serves, laughing when I became overwhelmed, teasing me for not being able to returning anything. As I improved, even regularly returning her balls, she became more encour-

aging, more like a partner. I was twelve, but when we were together, on those quiet mornings, I lost track of age.

On that May morning, bored with the yard games, I snuck away from the group and crept alongside the house to spy. Peeking around the corner I watched as two of my uncles negotiated the large thick plate glass tabletop from the dining room. Once in the yard, there were suggestions and demands about where it should be placed. Frustrated, the men brought it down to rest across the long, floral-patterned couch.

That afternoon, after the first truck load left, and the tempo slowed, a game of tag moved from the back yard to the front. On the run, and tight with anticipation, I peeked around the corner of the house, but the sun's reflection off the glass tabletop nearly blinded me, forcing me to look away. Then I heard Sarah's laughter, looked up, and watched as she emerged from the opposite side the house. She was running fast, back arched—just tagged. Exhausted and still laughing, she moved forward, legs wobbling as she approached the couch then turned and threw herself backward into the sun.

I remember her hair framing her face, her eyes wide open looking at me, a frozen expression of fear, surprise, and confusion as the golden light yielded to her presence. There was an explosion, then shards of shattering glass, gold and yellow glitter dancing around her body. In my mind I reached out, I spoke, but there were no words—my breath was taken from me. Then there was red, instantaneous and unbelievable redness. Suddenly the women, screams piercing the air, scattered and began tearing through boxes in search of towels

It would be weeks before we saw her again, both arms casted as she sat in a family visiting area forcing a smile. She looked tired and old. My grandfather explained the surgeries that attempted to repair ligaments in her elbows. But even after months of recovery and physical therapy, she was left with bent arms and curled pinky fingers.

When she returned home, Sarah became withdrawn and serious. A distance grew between us. That fall, while visiting my grandparents, I went to the basement in search of my baseball

glove. In my search I saw the handle of the old Wilson racket sticking out of a bag. I retrieved the bag, opened it, and discovered the tennis rackets, balls, and Sarah's letterman jacket.

That evening, as we ate dinner, Sarah barely spoke. We made eye contact, each time smiling, not like before, when we used to have secrets, or when we smiled in agreement that something was dumb or funny. These new smiles were regardful, polite, like strangers at a bus stop. When my grandparents left the table, I searched for the courage to ask about the bag, about what had happened. I wanted to ask her if she was ever coming back. Instead, the silence was shattered by the sound of silverware being deposited on her plate. Then she was gone, back in her room.

Years after the accident, I struggle to understand the impact of the event, the way it changed her, changed us. I hauntingly referred to it as *the day that took Aunt Sarah away*. The phrase wasn't intended to be poetic or philosophical, just a simple expression to convey a child's confused perspective on something lost and unresolved. There was a presence of grief that lingered like a shirt never worn hangs in a closet, slid from side to side, intentionally skirted.

Though I had long since moved past this event, it was Jon Pineda's focus on "versions" of people that reminded me of the loss. His simple observations and reflection on the memory of his sister put my grief into perspective: Sarah's accident was life altering, her change was inevitable, but what I grieved was the *version* of Sarah I could no longer access, and a version of myself frozen in time, left to wonder what might have been.

Pineda's collection reminds us that real life is complex. Events, even subtle, rarely stand-alone but rather run parallel or intersect in ways that have both positive and negative effects. This intersecting is illustrated in the collection's first poem, "First Concert," in which Pineda uses growth and sibling connections to foreshadow the loss and grief the speaker still feels. It begins with a rite of passage, in which the speaker, an eleven-year-old boy, is staring at the "shoe polish black Mohawks" of older boys in the front row of a Stray Cats concert. The older boys "pass a joint" as the music starts. The "Bass lines

filling our chests / hearts pulled taut plucked amplified." In this moment there is a sense of exposure, of leaning over the edge. He knows he is out of his element. He is "grinning with a contact buzz" both from the marijuana and this strange and dangerous new world. Afterwards, on the ride home, not knowing how to deal with the emotion of the moment, the boys "punch each other." In this common rite of passage, a line is crossed, it is an experience that cannot be undone, unknown; a version of the boy has been left behind, but won't be forgotten.

At home however, his otherworldly experience is pulled back to earth as he ascends the stairs. At the top his older sister is standing in the hall, arms folded, appearing motherly. She breaks the silence with a knowing observation. "You're high," she says, "Then/ laughed quietly and went/ back in her room." The speaker is left there, in the hall, in the silence, her presence, I imagine, lingering. They have a connection that is unspoken; he knows better than to deny her accusation, and she knows better than to wait for it. Then, as the speaker reflects back on that moment in time, it becomes an earmark of loss: "In another year a car/ accident would take away/ this *version of her* sometime/ I like to go back to this brief / moment in the hallway the/ two of us there sharing what/ we both knew and would/ never know"

This retrospective awareness and honesty suddenly turns a simply "coming of age" prose poem into a complex web of loss and regret. The grief for his sister is further realized in "Notes for a Memoir," in which the speaker writes:

"I found / the name of the young man / who drove a dump truck / filled with warm sand ... Just one day / the way he carried / the small burden before / touching the car a window / pressed my sister's raised hand"

In this passage, the imagery of warm sand, small burdens, and a raised hand pressed to glass gives a muted view of the event and a sense of surrender and sorrow. It also gives the speaker a connection to the accident, and an understanding of something only imagined.

Loss is always a catalyst for change, but loss isn't always

about death. As Pineda shows us in both "Silence" and "Sealed Letter," loss can be the result of absence or void. In "Silence," the speaker notes the father's absence on military deployment. A reminder of the father's ghostly presence is felt in the speaker's description of the small hutch the father constructed to hold his daughter's pet rabbit. The speaker then describes his early morning discovery of blood stains in the grass, broken and discarded pieces of the small animal in the yard, fur and then "its small / silly head the eyes were / frozen each a pale yellow / twin suns in a universe of our lawn."

One can only imagine the shock and dismay the speaker must have felt when discovering this horrific sight. It would have been natural to run, yell to his mother, and expose the brutality. Instead, he is silent, angrily cutting the hard clay ground to bury the animal before his sister could see it. In that moment he becomes a new version of himself, the protector. Then, reflecting on the event in a way that accentuates his understanding of the effects it would have on his sister, the speaker laments, "years later I think of those / boys & of her yet to wake / unchanged by it all together."

In "Sealed Letter," the loss of the father's presence is accentuated by family's expectation of a letter. His absence here is a catalyst for another kind of stark and immediate change, as an unhinged neighbor, unhappy about the family dog's wanderings "slid / the barrel a 12 gauge across / our wiry fence it wedged our / dogs head against burnt / grass." Stunned, the speaker whispers to God, and we imagine him also wishing for the presence of his father. Then suddenly his mother appears. In one motion she pulls a revolver from her purse and places against the neighbor's temple. The speaker notes, "I swear my mother didn't / care who saw her do such / a thing there was one law & / then another." In this blunt and violent confrontation, the speaker's relationship with his mother changes forever.

We often take life for granted, assume relationships will remain as they are. Then, during moments of clarity, we think, "If I only knew then what I know now." This is our prayer for a do over, a chance to go back and soak in a moment, or make the connection.

In my mind, I see Sarah, freckled face and smiling eyes as we sat on the picnic table the day before the accident. She playfully taunts the younger girls, stealing chips from their plates and dropping them in her lap, as I pretend not to watch, not to study her face, or the contrast between her tan shoulders and her sleeveless white blouse. I remember her looking up, wondered if she'd caught me. In that moment, she is unsullied by the events that will unfold in the months to come, the loss of her arms, her father, and her future as she knew it.

Memories can connect us to something precious, allow us to reflect on what we were, and what mattered. But this can also be a cue for us to soak in the moments in our lives. In "Strawberries," Pineda's character takes time to live in the moment, to acknowledge the connections, both physical and metaphysical, to his new family. Here the *version* of the speaker develops in response to fatherhood. Lying with his newborn son, the new father speaking directly (whispers) to his absent wife, "downstairs rummaging the dark / for the breast pump." He hears her movement, opening the refrigerator, and imagines, "by now / you must have found those / blood red strawberries." He then turns back to his son, still lying on his chest "I lean / as close to him as I can / I smell you on his breath." In the moment, the speaker observes, "I think of / the man my son will become / & kiss him softly / on the mouth." Small quarters, a newborn's breath, breasts, and blood tie the three of them together. In the breath and being of the infant, the three are perpetually connected, present.

Years after the accident, at a family picnic, I watched Sarah from across the patio as she sat with college friends, head tilted back into the sun, eyes closed and smiling. Her blouse sleeves fell just above her elbows, leaving the now thick, wide scars along her elbow and forearm exposed. The scars brought me back to the version of her before the accident, her energy, and the way we were together, playing and laughing, and the extraordinary feeling of her hand touching me as she taught me to hold a racket. Then she moves and suddenly I am a child

staring at an women I once knew. She looks my way, smiles. I smile, then nervously looked away.

In the collection's final piece, "Little Anodynes," Pineda combines his understanding of intersecting life events and awareness as a means of accepting change. This acceptance is accentuated in the first line: "My friend's suicide waits / next to a memory of my son." The speaker sits in a park watching rabbits move about. In his mind, his son is riding his bike alone for the first time. He notes "the endless / paths to the ground / he could have taken." Then he fusses the memory of the friend, "If a life could be reduced to / words let my friends be / the line in a song a stranger sings." As the rabbits scurry about, he contemplates his art of language, his little anodyne. Near the end, "as one star goes out at a time," he returns to the friend "still studying the thin / small mouth of a barrel," then back to the son: "I should have / looked away stared / at the trees & listened for / signs of joy as he rode off / It would make a better / story but I chase after him / don't let me go / he says laughing when / I realize I already have."

An anodyne. Something soothing or aesthetic. Something that comforts us and provides relief. Clearly, for Pineda, a little anodyne is the ability to use retrospect and art as a means of holding on to something valuable, to memories. "We're collectors," his writing acknowledges in a way that gives life to the versions of his characters and reminds us of how our collective experiences alter our understanding of self. But we're not alone. As his writing suggests, and as I discovered reading it, we share vulnerabilities but can take relief in knowing that life moves on in spite of challenges and changes.

Sarah is a nurse in California now. She has three grown children and a husband of more than thirty years. We talk often. Once I told her about my crush. She laughed, thought it was cute, but couldn't recall that *version* of me, or her.

Thor Macklanburg

danseur

she got ma(h)le
r, she listen n to
ditties, no wordies,
big tiny voicees
insuch a
small head. she dolly
shoes
blushy, spun uppt
spint to unitard.
she got
clothes she never learnt
to take off

I've been waiting for my landlord to mention the spike in the
water bill

I have found a temporary religion
Holding the shape of a boy
Verbing well in his living room adjacent

To the water grave
I am pouring into porcelain

The faucet is touchy he had said
And i thought good, good; we will be fast friends
Ha ha ha
*The difference between swimming and drowning is the capacity
to struggle*
I read somewhere, probably in my own depression notes.

Totally submerged in his tub
My hair is carving trails and I
I can hear the rumped voicebox of an elevator
Moaning like a wolf with a boot pressed on its larynx
Carrying invisibilities up through old space

Lately Underwater is the only place I'm feeling okay
Someone online recommended a weighted blanket and I thought
Well i'd never get out of that
At least with water
Your skin will rumple and the heat will escape and you will be made
to feel
Ridiculous
You will go from clean to far from it. To despicable which is worse
than dirty.
And at least with another's water, you are a borrower
And you can only stay slipped from so long
Before he knocks softly on his own door and asks are you swimming
laps in there or what?

Christos Kalli

FLESHING

Night's light breeze spills into a bruise:
cherry breath-steam slithers over the O

of her ovoid lips & the portion of skin
purpled by my mouth seems now stone

calligraphy, carved by a savagely still
hand. The evening's remaining light—

a spoonful of bitter medicine swallowed
by the shadow-black, in the rhythm of

a tired pulse. Now the rhythm of someone
spitting a dab of moon on the sky's hard

palate. A silent moan sprouts on the edge
of her palm: the drip drop of a fatal pause

breaks the eyes into half-horizons. Her lips
surprised by the taste of the last pavement

I kissed. Understand now that to the night
we are nothing more than buildings resting

on all fours, understand that to fit a fist
of psalm is my God-given gift not given

by God, understand that I am the smell of
every single cell that I have ever nested

inside, understand that part of me was spat
and the rest of me was spat on by people who

just didn't want to create friction, understand
that my bruises were not carved on the skin.

Sandra Youngs

Interview with Matt Rasmussen

Matt Rasmussen's Black Aperture won the 2012 Walt Whitman Award and the 2014 Minnesota Book Awards. The author himself is one of the founders of Birds, LLC, a poetry publishing press based out of four American cities that focuses on the collaboration between author and editor.

SY: I read in an interview with Kathleen Rooney that you said your brother's suicide "informed all of [your] poetry," even though you hadn't been consciously writing about that event and its repercussions in particular until the workshop with Bill Knott. Can you elaborate on how, exactly, you knew your work was being influenced when you weren't directly writing about the tragedy?

MR: I basically began writing poetry after my brother committed suicide. It originated as a sort of cathartic exercise, but not in a direct way. Meaning, I wasn't writing about him or his suicide, because I think I was too afraid to, but his death gave me license to explore poetry. A professor at the college my brother was attending (Art Przybilla, he was also a friend of my father) wrote a poem about his death that was published in the school newspaper. I think it was that poem that made me a poet, honestly. I read it over and over and over. It was so simple and moving. I had never experienced anything in my life up to that point that resonated so deeply with me. I think my whole poetry career has been an effort to rewrite, in my own way, that one poem. The imagery from Przybilla's poem is featured throughout my book, actually. To answer your question directly: I don't think I knew at the time why I was writing poetry, but when I look back, it seems like I was delving into the poetry in order to write about my grief even though I wouldn't directly explore it for ten years or so. I think also after my brother's suicide every thought I had was altered.

SY: What an incredible thing, to be so moved by one poem as to seek to recapture it in your own words. When you say you think every thought you had thereafter was altered— outside of the obvious grief and shifts in perspective, did it also prompt a literary change for you; that is, were you writing at all before his death, either fiction or nonfiction?

MR: I was writing a little bit, but I think his death really pushed me into poetry. I think it's the genre most suited to expressing grief (although I wasn't writing directly about grief at the time) and it also just jelled with my aesthetic, which is basically: images and music and brevity. I had read mostly fiction up to that point in my life, but poetry is what made me want to write. I love reading fiction but I'm not very good at writing it. I thought/think this about poetry too, but it seems like poetry is more accepting of failure, so its easier to write. Also, if barely anyone is reading it in the first place, you have a lot of freedom to fail and almost no expectations placed upon you. Perhaps this is why I've had difficulty writing poems I'm satisfied with after my first book was published.

SY: What are the challenges following the recognition of your first book?

MR: I think there are challenges, certainly, but the positive aspects of recognition outweigh the challenges, in my experience. I think it's more difficult to feel like you're writing into a void than it is to live up to some intangible expectations.

SY: You say you're not writing much lately. Who do you read? Who influences you, or who has inspired your writing?

MR: I'm not reading as much as I'd like either, but I hope to dedicate more time to reading a bunch of new books I recently bought. Everything I read influences me in some way or another, but answering this type of question always leaves people and influences out, so I'll just mention a few "new" books that come to mind: Sun Yung Shin's *Unbearable Splendor*, Morgan Parker's *There Are More Beautiful Things than Beyoncé*, and Bill

Knott's posthumous collection, edited by Thomas Lux, titled, *I Am Flying Into Myself*. I should also say that I largely gain inspiration from things outside of poetry—things like art museums, music, podcasts, movies, etcetera.

SY: When you do write, what's your process? Has it changed much from when you were consistently writing? Do you find yourself most productive at certain times?

MR: I guess I don't really think about my process as a process. I write lines in notebooks and on my phone and record ideas in a few other ways. I mostly compose on my computer, but otherwise, I don't feel like I really go through a certain process each time to create a new poem. I tend to write and rewrite and rewrite, whittling down and revising the original idea/poem. My early drafts are usually much longer than the finished poem but sometimes a poem begins as just a few lines and expands. Sometimes I sit down with the intention of writing a poem, other times something strikes me and I only get a small bit, but I try to get it down somewhere so that I can return to it. Most of what I write down goes nowhere, but who knows what images must be conjured or lines must be written to unlock future poems.

SY: How do you balance being a poet with being a father?

MR: I'm trying but I don't think I'm very good at it. In order to write well I feel like I have to allow my mind to wander into weird places. Being a parent doesn't allow me the time/space to allow my mind that wandering because you nearly always have to be present and ready. When I get time away/apart, I can usually write a little bit, but this introduces other conflicts and problems. Not spending time with my family in favor of grinding a few words into dust is its own kind of absurdity. When our youngest daughter reaches school age, I believe I'll have more time to dedicate to being a poet. Right now, I'm just doing the best I can.

SY: *Black Aperture* is such a strong collection of poems. I've been a fan since I was first exposed to your work as an undergrad at Minnesota State University, Mankato and attended a Q&A and reading, and have kept an eye out for any forthcoming publications. What are you working on now (or thinking of working on)? What's next for you?

MR: Thank you so much for your kind words about my book. I've been working on some poems about malls/indoors and exploring some elegies for dead objects/ideas. I've also been trying to write a children's book, but I'm pretty bad at it, so I'm struggling. I'm not good at finishing things.

SY: Malls, and indoors, are such physically different environments from the natural world, from the deer and trees and fields you wrote so much about previously. Have you experimented with different formats as well, or do you still favor the couplet?

MR: I think I'm interested in the idea of being indoors versus outdoors. I just like asking myself stupid questions like: if you are inside a building that has no doors, are you indoors or outdoors? Why are doors crucial to this concept? I also think there's a lot of romanticizing the "outdoors" (especially in poetry, see my book as an example), as though the "outdoors" are somehow superior to the "indoors." This is largely about privilege, in my mind, as most people on this planet who actually live and work outdoors probably don't consider themselves "outdoorsy." When people say they "love the outdoors," it always makes me feel uneasy. I'm trying to explore that uneasiness. I am still writing in couplets, but now that you've asked me this question, it makes me wonder why I've continued it. It just feels comfortable at the moment.

SY: Family is important. I've heard children can be weird: do you ever draw inspiration from what your own say or do?

MR: The children's book I'm working on was inspired by something my daughter said. I also wrote a poem for a reading

organized and hosted by Chris Martin called Rad Dads. We read poems about our children or poems that were inspired by them. I don't write much about my children, to be honest, but for Rad Dads I wrote a poem, which is an ekphrastic exploration of my daughter's artwork over the years. It struck me as an idea which was both terrible (who wants to hear someone talk about their kids' drawings?) and intriguingly strange (kids draw, write, and say weird things).

SY: Your poem "Love Poem for Optimus Prime" appeared in *Poetry City, USA, Volume 1*. The surrealism in it is as surprising and mentally eye-catching as many of the poems found in *Black Aperture*. Do themes such as sentient characters on tubs of butter or a person existing as a robot's nonmetal heart crop up in your children's book or the poems you've been working on lately, or have you chosen to look through a more realistic lens with your upcoming projects?

MR: My children's book idea revolves around the relationship between imagination and reality, which is what we consider perception. I'm interested in exploring how altering our perception can alter our world in significant ways. At least that's how I think about it, but who knows what it's actually about. It's also about a girl with an overactive imagination (whatever that means), though I've been thinking about it and working on it for so long, it now feels less like a book and more like an idea again.

SY: I came to poetry after about a decade of dedication to fiction, though through very different circumstances than you. I am always curious as to what draws other writers to the genre, and am so pleased to have had this opportunity to discuss with you both your work and your process.

MR: I too am curious about what draws people to poetry, although I often have a hard time understanding why more people aren't drawn to it. What is it that drew you to poetry?

SY: I was drawn to poetry in an unusual way: I realized one day that I completely disdained poetry, absolutely hated it—but I felt I didn't have any legitimate reasons to feel that way. I'd been writing fiction since I was ten years old and loved that more than anything, anything in the world, but I hadn't read much poetry. Most of my exposure to poetry was in high school, all classics written by authors who had been long, long dead and whose work was often composed in formal verse. I associated poetry with badly chosen end-rhymes, obscure imagery, and overly emotional romanticism. It seemed unfair for me, now in college, to have such a harsh opinion of something I knew next to nothing about. So I signed up for a beginning poetry workshop class at Normandale Community College and was very up front with my instructor, Kris Bigalk, about how little I liked the genre. But I was also up front about wanting to know *why* I didn't like it, and I think the answer I found to that will satisfy some of your curiosity as well.

I hadn't been exposed to poetry I liked, and I didn't know how to write poetry well.

This is not to say the classics don't have their merit and aren't classics for very good reasons. However, having never been exposed to any contemporary poetry before that class, and struggling so much to compose poems for assignments in high school with no real time to seriously explore the craft elements involved in it beyond metaphor and simile (I think we spent a week total on the poetry unit in one class in four years), I found it extremely difficult to relate to and engage with any of the material. That frustrated me. I had no desire to seek it out again (until college), dismissing all poetry as old and boring, or relegated to nursery rhymes for children via Mother Goose and Dr. Seuss. At the time I don't think I even realized that people alive today were composing poems, and very successfully, too.

I think too few people are exposed to poetry that sings to them, and that's why fewer people are drawn to the genre than expected. Once I learned to identify what made a good poem—that is, a poem written with intention—and how to write a

poem of my own deliberately, my whole view of the genre changed.

Something I appreciated the most about that class I took with Kris is that she recommended a book to each individual student based on a short quiz identifying what we did and didn't like in poetry, and we were to study, review, and imitate the author she selected for us. She gave me Lee Ann Roripaugh's *On The Cusp of a Dangerous Year*, and oh, I fell in love. Hard. Poetry was suddenly a beautiful, delightfully challenging thing, and the more I studied it and discovered poets I admired, the better my own writing became. One of my favorite things now is constructing poems. They're like little puzzles, with so many different ways to build each one. It's very different from fiction, and yet I find a lot of crossover between the genres when I write in each one. I really dig that.

MR: Thanks for sharing your journey to poetry. I think many people begin with an apprehension toward poetry, because they feel like they don't get it, or that there is some big secret they're missing. You are fortunate to have found a teacher like Kris who took the time to help you discover poetry that resonated with you. Thanks again for interviewing me and for your thoughtful response to my question.

Michael Bazzett

OKAY

Let's kill everyone, they said. Okay, said the boy.

Let's make it clean, they said. Like the outside of an egg. Okay, said the boy. We'll give you the haircut now. And this neck-kerchief. Here's the salute. Okay, said the boy. We'll make

the whole enterprise smell of mint and sell it in embossed tins. Mmmm, said the boy, I love mint. Yes, they said. Of course you do.

II

**Each of us is the subject of our own
great experiment.**

- Kyle McCord

Christos Kalli

Insert title here

- Or a bird's plucked wings where they used to be.
- Or a sliver of light in the black room lit only by sapphire eyes.
- Or this oversized April moon on the sky
without making it a wrecking ball for whatever
structure the clouds formed.
- Or a roof over the perimeter of a crater to call home.
- Or a prayer that doesn't begin with *please, God, Lord*
or *forgive*, but with a song without words or notes.
- Or an echo to the howls of all the bodies lost in the sound
of bombs.
- Or a sinking boat brimming with screams out of water's reach.
- Or a word to fill the white of the page until there is no such thing
as empty.
- Or your face on my face, where it's supposed to be.
- Or a confession on the lips of a son
transformed into a king by whatever
magic the midnight brings.
- Or a blooming bud under the thin-lipped soil of a house
no longer a house.
- Or the blue of an ocean across the wind-scattered
Constantinople and Kyrenia.
- Or the yellow of a sunflower on the fingers of a child
playing with a grenade instead of saying
She loves me She loves me not.
- Or at least an exit into the night for all the lovers to empty
shame-less rooms with the hope of finding dawn
before the blinds are drawn.

Peter E. Murphy

ERASED

I fell in a manhole in Central Park and woke up in a gutter in Wales.
I didn't know there was a manhole in Central Park.
Because it was a manhole, I believed I was a man.

A man left Wales to build a city in Ukraine and gave it his name.
After the Revolution Hughesovka became Stalino.
After Khrushchev Stalino became Donetsk.

In Ohio a boy shot a BB gun at the last passenger pigeon.
In Ukraine a man shot a rocket as a passenger plane.
Every falling thing leaves a hole in the sky.

A man left a hole in his family when he left his family in Wales.
My mother believed that man was her father.
Born in shame, she never knew her real name.

My mother fell in a hole she could not climb out of.
Why does she still appear in my sober-sweet dreams?
Why do I believe she will say something that will change my life?

Someone airbrushed Wales off the official European map.
Instead of a hole, a bloated Irish Sea

where Wales ought to be.

MOSAIC

We were betrothed late instar.
We crawled through childhood.
We rubbed fuzzy bodies.

We pushed our broken
pieces together, our
mountain for scaling.

We wanted portraiture
from bits. A mosaic,
sparkling.

Together we rolled
kaleidoscopic,
mixed media,
man and woman.

We cut fingers
handling edges,
blood formed
template.

The picture
disordered.
He saw a boat and
I saw falling.

We fell asleep and
awoke wanting melding, like
alchemists prophesied,
but the elements
were incompatible.

We could not agree
on transformation and
departed searching.

FIGURE 2.4

The instruments shown here [INSET] were made of steel with ebony handles, and used mainly for amputation.

It is your
average
suburban
house

FIGURE 2.5

Under a small table immediately in front of the pulpit was a heap of legs and arms.

The
visions
take place
exclusively
upstairs

FIGURE 3.1

We are repeatedly told that these images are independent of any effort of the imagination. They aren't imagined at all, but entirely outside [the subject's] mental action.

at the
end of
the long
carpeted
hallway

D.G. Geis

A STOCKYARD LITURGY

For Temple Grandin

O Lord—
If history is a slaughterhouse,

May our paths always curve
And be trod without diversion.

Let no sharp angle impede our progress
Or uncertainty give us pause.

Permit us to stream freely
Down the conveyer

And grant us one final hug
Before we are stunned.

As blood flows freely
Along the path

Of least resistance,
So may the meat hook

Of inevitability
Lift us high above all butchery.

And our ending,
God willing—

Be both sudden
And humane.

Exploring Girlhood and Womanhood: A review of
Opal C McCarthy's *Surge*

In Opal C McCarthy's debut poetry collection *Surge*, she explores many of the same themes and images that she did in her self-published hybrid collection *SURGE: An Oral Poetics*. This repetition of images and themes across McCarthy's works shows how dedicated she is to bringing these matters that matter to her to her readers. She is writing about themes and images in a way that few other poets are addressing in the way that she is. The reader is lead into the sometimes unspoken, yet common experiences that women and girls face in their lives. McCarthy explores girlhood and womanhood, bodies, the violences enforced on those bodies, as well as a guttural, animalistic nature that women and girls have. A passage in the first section of the book quickly introduces readers to her hybrid images of girls and women with nature and animals: "My girl scowls at me and cries and cries/ As I rinse the smoke from her hair/ As I wash the blood from her cloven feet/ bandage put her in warm socks satin slipper," writes McCarthy, breaking down in image the cultural narrative that girls are delicate, breakable things.

Surge is divided into five sections, beginning and ending with sections called "Girl." The book is unlike most collections of poetry in that it has wide pages that can encompass McCarthy's formatting. The large margins allowing space for McCarthy's playfulness with lines breaks and stanza breaks, the full page becoming the unsung star of the collection. In the first "Girl" section, for example, the poems aren't individually titled and there's a constant shift in formatting from page to page, with each break in the narrative. The first page has short lines, with only the first three lines being left justified. After that the rest of the piece moves into the middle of the page and to the very edge of the page. On the next page there are longer lines broken in the middle, making an alley of space between

the lines themselves. On the third page are the longest lines that the reader has seen, only there's considerable space between the lines themselves. Three stanzas are centered in the middle of the page on the next piece, like a column. This shifting goes on for the whole collection, showcasing McCarthy's ability to use the page to her benefit and enhance each piece. By having some many poems formatted so differently, it almost resets the reader at the start of each page, keeping their attention fresh for McCarthy.

Throughout the collection, McCarthy both hints and bluntly speaks about the violence that women and girls face simply by living. The girls and women in the book are subject to "giant hairy hand[s]" stoning them. Then "they sank, girls, back into the scrumptious muck," and they are "raped by the bushel basket and... became the basket". One of the most memorable images of violence against women's and girls' bodies is when McCarthy describes a girls storing her rape in her neck: "Now, my neck gapes open and out she floods as thunder." This particular image highlights how rape survivors are left to deal with their trauma on their own in our society, until there's a release and they have to deal with the version of themselves before the trauma—the version before and the trauma itself.

McCarthy pulls the whole collection together at the end by pulling her readers, mostly women, into her world. A strong example is the following passage:

My

girl

you & I

we are all in-breath ecstasies of being:

thunder silence devout carnivores

slut prophets of the transformer

gifts of tails and hillocks and almost possible desire

This passage ties together McCarthy's image of wild girls and women and the idea of acceptance at the end, signaling to the reader that they too should accept McCarthy's wild girls as they are.

This passage precedes by a bit the conclusion of the collection, which ties many of McCarthy's themes and images together:

We are: bastion, bitch, bumper crop—we are flooding spawn and—

My girl you do not belong to me I have no right to deliver you
& no hope

I have no duty to love you (as I
do)

No—only to let us be she & she & she & we & in this wild our
voice come

McCarthy finishes on a collective note that women and girls experiences unify them while keeping them independent. *Surge* is raw and gory, all the while being feminine and emotional. McCarthy succeeds in tying together the five separate parts to create one long, book-length poem that gets her point across while keeping the readers engaged. She leaves the reader with strong images that leave the reader wanting to dive back into *Surge*, picking up on the tiniest of details that McCarthy has scattered throughout the book. The reader is able to take these details that McCarthy has laid out in the book to build the full image of women and girls that she's had in mind from the beginning: strong, feral beings that encompass more than has been represented in narratives before *Surge*.

Andrew Luft

OHIO POEM

There's this scene from before I could drink: a drive-through worker bends a fake ID that claims New York as its home, adds it to a list of lies the white boys jitter from their lips before one of them punches the gas. My sister was stuck in the mud a lot back then. All shout, no soul. Sometimes I still see that twelve-year-old writhing in pre-teen bliss, performing for kicked-back cousins before she knew not to scratch at bug bites. There's something about seeing your backyard empty that makes a mother want to cry. They say this is the middle of nowhere but you have to go somewhere to get to the middle (the center?) goes like this: center is where blood rushes without any want or command; middle is when you spend ten years picturing yourself starting a fire, its shape as it dances from the crumpled shape of brick-bone, like a cure you can no longer ignore. There's nowhere to get lost here and you don't understand disco but you know it must feel like this. Home-cooked mayhem. Flea market forgers. Modern boho fix. Ohio. Who among us isn't willing to make history? My writer friend works for Nationwide, imagines canyons in the center of her desk, eats lunch alone and everything else that can be conjured with the thumb of a lighter. Can be found at the heart of a well-lit parking garage. Someone may say, at least you started a family once—folded a dream under the roof of your tongue. I can still see that twelve-year-old sometimes. Can feel that soul inching up all of our throats. Once, my father told me I should set myself up with options: escape routes from my own life in case I don't like the town trying to memorize my name. But sometimes there is enough of this place to make my engine sing. When *the cops are coming*, son becomes a kind of flower pressed up against the ceiling of my ribcage. That familiar place we're able to drive to even when our minds click off at the wheel, our bodies so quiet, so ready to deliver us back.

WHEN, OVER BREAKFAST, MY FATHER TELLS ME THE CAT'S
GONE AWAY

Well the cat's gone...

he said, over a bowl of slivered peaches.
Making conversation isn't his forte.

He'd been going out more and more...

I hear they do that before they die,
they just stop coming home.

Never liked me much anyway...

I could tell. Which may well be true,
but I told him not to take it personally.

There are things to take personally, such as
when your wife of thirty-some years insists on
building *this* house and painting the bedroom

this shade of taupe, purchasing *this* furniture, and
arranging it just like *this*, and then she leaves it all—
leaves you and your sons— for a new project.

And you lie inside the shell of her,
a skin of dust over family portraits and knickknacks,
collected from Cape Cod and Laguna Beach.

You water the gardens dutifully in her absence,
prune the boxwoods, wonder when the crepe myrtle
will bloom again, defend against the encroaching bamboo—

It would be a metaphor if you hoped for her return,
but maybe you've convinced *she never liked you much*
and that this is better, absence means avoidance.

If we don't say it out loud, maybe it isn't real,
but what will you do when, tomorrow, you notice
orange fur, motionless, beneath the holly?

Nancy Huang

catcalling women will give them strong skeletons

but if i wanted to be a monster, then here: i molded the steel
that would become my new self, my favorite self. i look
in the mirror and steal a suit. i look in the mirror and sew

a dress. i look in the mirror and build a mask. these are all uncorrelated.
these are all soft truths. last semester a girl on campus became
citrus pulp, became seed. *body as fruit rind, body as trinket*. in dreams

when someone asks me to smile, i turn around and grin at him, except
my teeth have grown into fangs, and they are bloodsoaked,
and he is the one screaming. i am told this is monstrous.

woman; sculpted flesh. i am ugliness refined and everyone
turns their head away. *body as pond dripping rare,*
gorged. this body is a forgetfulness. there is a day after

tomorrow's tomorrow that i have forgotten about. when i walk to
school i am followed by birdsong cacophony
and some days i want my eyes to fall out of

my head. i want my body to be a puddle with organs
flipped inside out. i want my cunt to explode. is it so bad that
i don't want my body to be my body anymore? i am

walking down the street to another bird singing,
don't look at me. don't look. i can feel when it happens.
i can feel it everywhere, even underneath my fucking fingernails. it
makes bone

crystallize. it tears open a skin crater, and i feel the acid rise.
it will have its use someday, a glass grinding into wood. like
when the sky chugs a storm, takes skeleton sips: a lightning echo.

Clemonce Heard

BLOOD/MOON

September 28, 2015

Not since 88—not since both infinities stood straight—not
since Golgotha—not since my mother was milked for all

the fat faith she shed. Once again moon is/means commun-
ion wafer & the earth has bled/bad dreams & run down

a black holeway to squeeze snug between its parents. 8
o'clock they say, they say—I'm tying bows, big bunny ears

to crown my myrrh smelling garbage bag—drag it thru
grass/ground trash is/means cross—toss it, tear it down—

we is/means I—wanna see a solar miracle. I'm risking skin
scatting mosquitoes is/means needle. Miss them carrying

off, my blood ferments inside feminine abdomen—moon
is/means ornament—blistered & bloodshot we is/means

guys/gals gather at moving mirror & gander, God's what
we're watching wounds for—overflow over floor, moon

is/means coaster—cork screwed from the bottle, hollowed
be our wine skins—ferment our prayers fervent, venting

& reinventing our salves, our selves, salvation is/means
salvation—nearly howling. I'm sure the shear weight of

wool would melt if it ever touched is/means laid hoof on
my tongue, like cotton candy, no, the sweetest of swine.

Brian Baumgart

FAMILIAR POLITICS

Frost licks syrup from the cracked lips of jelly jars:
we are glass we are porcelain we are scrap metal

Hair roped, and we're seasoned with pepper, barely
perceptible, so we see through our own brilliance

like the miscreant sunbeam peering through stained
windows, a beggar gorgon, eyes both frozen

and alight, but here we are crueler than folklore,
unforgiving and preoccupied with sweet nothing:

the prejudice of invisibility. We cut our tongues
in two, a blood-flecked schemer, or maybe a crossbow

aimed at our peculiar hearts, this meaty corpse inside,
censored like a tangled sentence cracked wide open.

Kevin Nelson

Thoughts on identity and acceptance: A review of Sun Yung Shin's *Unbearable Splendor*

What is it to be foreign, to be a stranger in a place you belong, or should belong? Initially, we may not fully grasp the concept of self as stranger, apart, unclaimed. However, in at least a microcosm, it is something we often experience; we arrive late to a meeting, enter a tiny café in a strange town, or appear at a gathering in which we are invited, but find no familiar faces. In these fleeting moments there is awkwardness, a moment in which, because we assume we belong, we expect to feel connected, and yet there is a distance, a foreignness that leaves us feeling like an outcast or invader. For just a fraction of a second, our chest tightens and we are torn between holding and fleeing. Then, maybe someone smiles at us, or comes across the room to greet us, and our balance is back.

Is it possible there are those among us who experience this kind of awkwardness and foreignness all the time? To imagine this we might imagine our current selves waking from a nap in a strange bed, opening our eyes to a strange room, but as we look around, we notice the walls are filled with our art, the closets and drawers with our cloths. We might leave this room and enter an unfamiliar interior passage whose walls are filled with pictures of us with others, strangers posing as mother, father, or sibling. They look different than us; we are not from them. We continue on to the kitchen where this strange mother is standing over the stove, she smiles, calls us by name, asks how we like our eggs, but we can't remember. When will you become a daughter or son in this family? What time would pass before you leave your history and become another?

In her latest collection, *Unbearable Splendor*, Sun Yung Shin uses a syntax tornado to explore this concept, exposing the complicated and delicate layers of presence, identity, and acceptance by exploring ways in which the balance of *self-concept* is altered when one is moved, like furniture, from one life to

another. The collection is defiant in its form, a strangeness that delivers a shifting sense of brokenness, separation, and tension, yet builds coherence as her characters dislodge and dismantle conventional understandings of identity and presence of self. This is accomplished by examining the *self* as many, as few, as nothing, as machine.

In his thesis, *Self-knowledge and Social Development in Early Life* (1990), M. Lewis suggests the first stage of *self-concept* is an awareness of the *existential self*, the point in which a “child realizes that they exist as a separate entity from others and continue to exist in both time and space” (McLeod).

Shin’s collection unfolds as life: reflecting on a “two-year-old” (in Korean time where time in the womb is counted as age and experience) with a “Train of black holes,” “Holes of smoke/ of water/ of rice milk,” her possessions, memories, and experience as luggage, coming to “Beautiful Country” (America) from the “Uncanny Valley.” She is an “Uncanny guest / a kind of star / Burning.”

I can imagine her history, a tail of light, dust, and smoke left behind to linger. In this journey the character must start anew, a “rebirth in the water” and boat as she makes her way through the process of detaching from the self that existed as part of a family, before a dead brother, a self before arriving in this place where “holes of water, holes of rice milk” are met by a new brother who asks “when she is going back?” But the narrator is aware that there are “too many holes to go back,” that “There is no *there* there.” That the trail of a life “like the travel of light, upon arrival / may be dead.”

As I imagine her journey, I recall a foreign package arriving at our home in 1969, its plain brown grocery bag wrapping, covered with red “FRAGILE” and “AIR MAIL” stamps, and blue/black ink-stained foreign writing and symbols—a gift sent by my father serving in Vietnam. I watched as my mother took it from the postman as if it were alive, delicate, looked it over in such a way that I expected it to suddenly breathe. In the dining room she set it down carefully and then left to retrieve a knife. I moved closer to it, ran my small hand across it, felt its textures, the ridged stamp edges against my fingertips, leaning in

examining the alien ink marks and symbols. Although it was a common package, somehow this was different—almost alive—out of place—foreign. Its journey had begun in another land, on the other side of the world, and its presence made me aware of how small my world was, an insignificant speck of small white boy in a small house in Minneapolis, a million miles away from my father, from this Vietnam.

My mother returned and, with great precision, cut the seams of the wrapping to expose the oddly corrugated box. Inside it was filled with packing material, straw and longhairs of wood. Buried within, a beautiful pearl white vase with intricate gold and silver inlay and spidering red lines on its neck and base. Around the body, delicate green strokes of grass and bulrush nearly hid a sleek black Egret holding its bill skyward, a fish struggling within it. My mother gazed at its beauty, motionless, tearful again. Finally, she takes it up in her hands, draws it close, turning it as she runs her fingers over its smooth surface, then pulls it to her breast as if it were a newborn.

Like the vase, Shin's character has been plucked from her native land, packed up with her ghostly memories and "a black hole surrounded by light that pours in and down." There is a moment when she exists both as history and future, yet belongs to no one—an assignment, data. The character reflects on her presence as "a nameless two-year-old self and a nameless adult self" making a trip across water to a new place in time. Here she will be delivered, a new package.

As my mother built a prominent place for the new arrival, I moved closer to the now empty package, examined the roughness of the paper and ran my fingers over the black specks. This was the closest I'd ever been to something foreign and while the beauty and intricacies of the treasure was beyond my understanding, this package, this rudimentary preparation to safeguard the vase, I understood. I understood the life of the box, the straw. They were a part of the people in this strange place, the farmers, people like me, like my parents, government workers collecting government subsistence, bringing the boxes of government food home at night so neighbors wouldn't see. I

imagined the fields in which the straw had grown, pictured the fields of sweet-smelling green hay on my uncle's farm, compared it to the black and white rice patties in the background of my father's pictures, the ones in which he and his buddies wear combat helmets and hold machine guns.

I open the box, marvel at the vase's imprint in the bed of straw and woody hair-like strings, imagine a small shop far away, an old man, setting the vase inside with his foreign hands. I watch my small hand pick out pieces of the packing straw, I lift them to my nose.

What was I hoping to smell? Something foreign? Something familiar? Maybe I thought I'd smell my father, anyone's father. But there was nothing, only a hint of dry grass, a black and white picture. Still the packaging filled me with wonder about this place and its people. What it would be like to travel there, if they thought about traveling here, or wished they could, if they wanted to come to this new country.

From *Antigone* by Sophocles: "I have been a stranger here in my own land: All my life."

Shin's narrator has an image of person, a memory of being plucked out of her destiny, dropped into a different time, adopted "adoptee / a word that sounds unfinished," a word that causes "The skull to vibrate for just a moment after the sound itself is gone." "One taken voluntarily / taken up (practiced—used) transferred to a strange new life, "a Guest" – She loses her name, "stepped into this corner, this half frame, the axis / empty in the moment / my face, my feet, my duration in time." Like the vase, there was a plan, an acceptance in another time and place: A place prepared.

According to M. Lewis, the second stage of *self-concept* is an awareness of the "Categorical Self" in which the "child becomes aware that he or she is also an object in the world which can be experienced and which has properties." During this stage the self begins to be categorized with such concepts as gender, age, intelligence, beauty, size, or skills (McLeod).

In Shin's "Valley, Uncanny," the traditional concepts of adoption are put aside as existence becomes a scale between "human likeness" and "familiarity" when compared to "Humanoid robot / Industrial robot / Stuffed animal / Corpse / Zombie / Prosthetic hand," or, I imagine, a delicate vase. On this chart, 100 percent of human likeness can only be achieved at the intersection of "Uncanny Valley / Healthy person."

In this travel the poet recognizes the hospitality of strangers, "considering all doors." She considers the difference between Guest and host, the difference between strange and stranger, of "all the shipwrecks sailing within us." She "disembark at every coast inside (herself)" In this layover, the hospital, the transplanted are like vines digging into the ground, "long stem roses in the box from Mexico for everyone." Then there isn't room for everyone "Who was here first." Then there are "16 years living with American parents. They are inside me now, they are my guests. They are my holes, like babies, like stones." She wonders "does my day stalk me or do I grow it within me."

Over time, the vase became a part of our home, our family; the box lay under my bed, a souvenir. One day, during play, the vase's stand was bumped and it fell heavy to the floor, shards of razor sharp porcelain scattering everywhere as the vase disassembled. When my mother saw the broken body of the vase on the entryway floor, it was as if she had the wind knocked out of her. she moved towards it, stopped, and then placed her hand on her forehead. She began crying, tried to wave us off, and then retreated to her room.

Once gone we stood staring at the broken body, at the broken pieces of white porcelain scattered clear to the doorway. I thought about the clay, the paint, the potter. I imagined the piece the way it was, now apart. Then, without a word, began scurrying about, collecting up the pieces and placing them in a towel. With all the pieces we could find, my sister and I retreated to our room and began a painstaking effort to reconstruct the vase with white glue. Only then did I see the small black symbols. Six of them, like tiny houses or boxes in a single line in a side area of the green bulrushes. I wondered if the symbols may have been the potter's mark, or the place where the vase

was made, the vase's name. I did not yet know that these marks formed letters in another language.

Shin's narrator sees the family suffering "The Big Bang / Particles drifting away from one another / Drifting lines / this triangle will never be re-assembled. All of these ghostly relationships." This brokenness and separation can be a source of anonymity. After all, a sense of belonging and connection is an essential part of the human condition. This connection starts with identity, belongingness through name and lineage. I image a process of losing a name, becoming "white space, cousin to the black hole."

By the following evening we had completely reconstructed the vase with all but two pieces that were never found. Those pieces included a small portion of the beautiful crane head, which, from a distance, now looked like a small black hole. When we presented the repaired vase to our mother she glowed with pride at what we'd accomplished, but I could tell by the way she held it out and looked at it that there was a distance from what had been. It was broken, and mended, but still broken. Still praising our effort, she returned it to its stand, turning it so the black hole didn't show, now showing it off to visitors not for its exquisite beauty, but rather as proof of an act, an effort to bring something back, or forward. To do well.

I think about this vase when Sun Yung Shin describes the "kind of hole" she sees in the valley between North and South Korea, the "island." When she says, "I was a hole" and "I brought it, myself, to beautiful country, America." I think about the small hole in the side of that vase, how, at one point, like Shin's character, it had once been a perfectly formed object, a treasure that was sent to us, to care for. I think about the "Uncanniness" of these black holes, the connections leading back to the "Valley," the way the potter of our vase pulled clay from the Vietnamese earth to give life to form, only to send it away, to sign it over to another. I think about the shelf it might have sat on in Saigon, a small café in a corner, its holes open to everyone. Now, as an adult I think about the changes in my own family, about the vase and how it had occupied a place in our world. I think about the different between me and the vase,

me and the place it came from, how I could never be that place, even if I visited, moved there.

We all have misconceptions about adoptions and its effects. We might know someone who's been adopted, maybe they've searched for their birth parents, or maybe they haven't. Maybe they were given over to a family of luxurious means, or maybe their new family is poor. Maybe they wonder what life would be like if they were never adopted, or maybe they don't.

Shelly, a junior high friend, was a beautiful biracial girl who was quiet and demure. One day she shared with me that she'd been adopted by a white couple before her birth. I immediately assumed that she would, at some point or another, seek out her birth parents. Even when she denied any interest in doing so, I was sure she eventually would. Like many I had the misconception that being adopted was like having some kind of exciting mystery waiting for you, as if losing your history and the chance to regain it were a sort of delayed Christmas present, something left behind for you to open at a time of your choosing. We might imagine pulling back a curtain to reveal a fairytale ending, filled with love, regret, hope, and reconciliation.

Shelly helped me understand how naive that concept was and how complicated the issue really are. She was a realist. For her there was a certain comfort in accepting life as it was: The story had been written, and the prospects of going back to page one and rewriting it terrified her. What if her birth parents really didn't want children, and didn't want her to connect with them? Or what if they were extremely poor? Would she feel guilty, feel the need to help them? Or for that matter, what if they were rich now? Would Shelly feel entitled to the wealth? For her it was far less complicated to leave well enough alone, to accept life as it was, the only life she ever knew.

One might assume that Shelly would find it easy to put the past behind her because she was introduced to her adoptive family days after her birth. There's an assumption that there are no memories of her history so there's nothing to miss. But Shin's narrator reminds us that "memories begin in the womb," the same way the memory of the vase's clay is formed the second it is pulled from the earth.

Of the things that construct our identity and sense of self,

none seems more critical than memory. It could be said that memory is the *essence* of identity. When we lose our memory, we lose our history and the connection to those around us. We lose our measure of time and the distance between ourselves and others. Without your mother, who are you? Separated from another, in the blackness—floating. A daughter? A son? Our understanding of identity and self is the yardstick by which we measure the distance between ourselves and families, ourselves and history, ourselves and what we have become. For this reason, the thought of experiencing Alzheimer's terrifies most people. There is an understanding that the loss of identity through collected community, tribal connections, and through time and space is the loss of purpose, or meaning to life. A senior suffering from dementia may suddenly walk away from their home, and find everything one block away as foreign as another country. People who walk up to them seemingly speaking another language, family members, unrecognizable, attempt to help them and yet they resist because of their confusion with presence.

In Shin's "Harness" there is an acknowledgement of a birth and the connection between the "Facts" and "Flesh Ghost." The poignancy of "It's nice to meet you" and "how should I address you?" begins this examination of what it takes to become orphaned, what it takes to be "a person of the barest of social identities," to lack "the basic requirements of social personhood / family lineage / genealogy history," the "Orphan Hojunk" as a process of constructing a registration for a "family of one." Female. "Shin."

"Sudden / We are colony of one." A female "overturned — a sudden end." In this dream travel there exist levels of *self*-colonization, "The dark age of subjugation — Cultural accommodation — Assimilation."

In her new existence, this *categorical self*, she begins to understand herself as other with others, Asian, woman. Her existence is now "relative to the age of a life, or star." And her return to the original life would come only through a metamorphosis of dreams and comparisons as she begins to see herself as human and machine, as "disobedient," daring "not to be born a man," like Antigone, suffering womanhood, aware of her

own limitations, coming out of her "Cave."

Our narrator begins to see herself suffering under "Asterion" only to "become Asterion." Master becomes slave, becomes master. She comes to understand that there is "a second person inside us." She is a clone of the person left behind on a journey for "paradise" that consist of nine spheres in which our character has "beginning light all around us / body a room of lamps, every wick lit as though it were the world's last birthday." Inside nothing is held back, "indifferent to / illegitimacy, disinterested in / grief, pierced with / joy./ a second, better person furnished with perfect recall, my convict, my ward, and my guest, my host."

Shin's character, like Shelley and the vase, has been separated, broken, and reconstructed. They have been sent to new places, have accepted new destinies, yet their seams will be forever present. In a search for a sense of belonging, we may find ourselves going towards the known or searching for the unknown. I can't imagine myself traveling to Vietnam in an attempt to return the vase to its potter, or the Potter's family—to put things back in order.

What is it to be lost, to search without end for ourselves? To examine and explore one source and then another, all in hopes of answering one question: "Where do I belong?"

For those whom history and memory of presence is well documented or experienced, they may never think about their "place" in the universe. However, we are a community of immigrants, of broken people, of *other* people to *others*. Whether we are male or female, white or people of color, we are a complicated collection of carbon borrowed from another time, adopted atoms. Our understanding of life may be constructed of fragmented memories, puzzle pieces of misplaced history that lead to enduring questions about identity, presence, or potential.

It is impossible to expose oneself to this *Unbearable Splendor* without a perpetual process of self-examination, almost to the point of distraction. The ideas and concepts come so fast one barely has the opportunity to fully absorb them. As Shin's character contemplates her own history, inventorying her "black holes," I too am compelled to examine my present, my past, my

understanding of how it all impacts the self I experience.

I contemplate my own construction, my clones, and ones I've left behind. In the end, the more I examine this collection, the more I question my understanding of the world, the depth of being, Shin's character, the first cyborg, Antigone, child, woman, man, sacrifice, acceptance, belonging, oneness.

Su Hwang

SUNCHOKE

i.

Never a green thumb—I can kill
perennials without much guilt,
allow them to wilt slowly, twist
into desiccated rinds along sooty sills.
Certain plants can be grown
in a cup of water, no need to pit into
soil, exert any human will. So I cut
the ends of wens—their transections
a tableau of latticed histories like centuries
scribed into rings of gargantuan trees.

ii.

I stare absently at family portraits: old
frames resting on the mantle & wait
for an echo, but ivy has grown over
unfamiliar faces—braided through
eyes, ears & noses like flowering
weeds. We each suffer alone in
tandem—maybe I read this somewhere
on an engraved placard on a bench
lost in the woods. I don't know
what else to say about guilt & love
& life & dying & loss & time.
Maybe it'll come to me soon.

iii.

As I linger in my Lilliputian kitchen
(one in a series of miniature kitchens),
distinct scents of rosemary, sumac,

& thyme emerge like a smattering of rain.
Golden rivulets break through the late
haze of morning—a sudden invitation.
Before suspending root into liquid
tomb/womb—phantasmagoric starburst
on my palm—the southerly prism
shone a galaxy. I trace the eye within
an eye within an eye in perfect, concentric
circles, awaiting its succulent growth.

Tara Betts

THE BODY IS NOT THE BULLET THAT CLAIMS IT

The scream is peeled from myths
of banshees, a too familiar chorus,
folded staccato. Newspapers confuse
this as the only sound—as if reports
claim there is no music, no giggles,
no birthdays, no soul claps, no moans,

only compounded griefs released
from an opening torn by projectile
and velocity erupting with fevered
ripping of a ragged mouth in body.

Bullets have always been justification
to take away a sense of human, to say
the dead bare claws, even as a mother
emits the blade of high, hollow pain.

William Doreski

SMALL BLACK RAIN

All night small black rain filters
and purifies the dark. You ask
how black can purify black,
and I respond that only black
can understand the nuances
of moonless acts of desperation.

We lie together and apart.
Stones creak as brooks quicken
after months of drought. The drip
off the eaves suggests a language
birthing itself without help.

The night isn't as dark as the rain.
It sways in its thick cat's cradle,
half-lit by its innocence.

You wonder if bombs are falling
in Aleppo at this moment.
You wonder who counts the dead,
who counts as dead and who counts
as wounded in that typhoon
of fire, dust, plaster, and scrap.

Our fragrant little night deploys
its resources for the benefit
of owl and coyote and fox.
We're hardly present. The chirr
of crickets blends with the murmur
of rain, creating and creating

with gestures too subtle for us
but literal enough for plant life

to understand. The rain is black
because it absorbs the brightness
the moon would have endowed if
cloud cover hadn't intervened.

Black can be braver than crystal,
and tonight it washes the whole world
in the idea of a single tear
large enough to punish us
and black enough to redeem us.

place to another place. What is it anyway
about the ruin of a heart that causes us to steal
the sky from itself? Because it is the only mouth
big enough to allow our gift of screams?
To drink the blood from the withers

of beasts, the bent
backs of grief?

Autumn Cooper

A review of Donika Kelly's *Bestiary*

You might wish, as the speaker in Donika Kelly's *Bestiary* does, "You'd rather be a simpler animal," one that is contented with its place in the world, clear of what it must do. This sort of musing-as-exploration is the foundation of Kelly's beast poems, in which the various speakers become a menagerie of bears, birds, minotaurs, and mermaids. There are creatures containing a world of raw emotion, and there are myths to be viewed, admired, and even slain.

In *Bestiary*, abstraction is the centaur to Kelly's Heracles, as she opts for simple, yet poignant adjectives and intense landscapes to show what she is wrestling with. Kelly excavates the crooks and edges of her past and future: "Oh, little and/ larger ones who guard the little lock of/ your peace." This is what good poetry does best.

Never in *Bestiary* does Kelly tell you when the poem is supposed to be sad, triumphant, or filled with longing. She urges you to be the archeologist, to study the rocks and the myths and all the beasts inhabiting them at the same time that she does: "I squint against/ my own light/ which is my father's light/ which is me/ I am an archaeologist/ sifting the grit of my muddled blood." Even when filled with subjects such as sexual abuse, sexual orientation, and the crooked path to healing and love, the poems are straightforward and numbing. Just as Kelly slays all abstraction, she also demolishes any expectation one might have of the subject matter. Werewolves sift out whimpers instead of howls, satyrs trim their beards and file their horns.

Though it is profoundly emotional, *Bestiary* is not meant to stir emotion. It is, rather, a map to understanding and a sobering analysis of the complexity of life and every creature that dare gallop or fly on this Earth.

Devon Miller-Duggan

SEVEN

Wrath

I have set the mountains on fire.
Smoke crawls into the lungs of infants miles away.
The red-orange-gold-bright-black ragged line feeds itself,
only itself. It wants the roots, but takes the bark
and the animals, who scream as I swallow them—the bark
and grasses and those too young for flight from their dens
and nests. I am a sawblade at the throat of the mountains.

Gluttony

I am Ouroboros. Am the tongue that cannot bother to taste
and the tongue that never finds the perfect taste.
My hunger screams colors you cannot see. I am black hole.
My gullet is razors, my gut the caverns beneath cities where excess
spills into lakes of waste so large they require fleets
larger than several nations' navies to keep things stirred
and moving. Am infinity. Infinity the ditch in which you have died, will
die, are dying.

Sloth

I didn't do it.
Nothing wanted me to do the thing.
Thing didn't want doing. Doing didn't want me.
I am purposeless as unrotting garbage,
am rotted to dust long since. You're breathing me in
as you read, twice busy. I am the cashier filing her nails slowly, slowly
while the bank's robbed. Resurrection's too hard. Leave me alone.

Avarice

You're mine. And you. And you. Every inch of your skin; tattoo it with
my name. I'll take
your bodies. All trees. All water. The beasts of the land and the birds
of the air. All that which

has breath or gives growth. I am gilded 20-foot letters on everything built. I cannot be large enough.
I fill jars & jars: green Tang dynasty ginger jars, Roman amphorae, milk cans from Warsaw Ghetto, gallon jugs, all the pots of Maria Martinez, every kintsugi tea cup, the man-tall Arita vases in "The Daughters of Edward G. Boit," Pueblo wedding jars, elaborated jars from Congo, moonshine Mason jars, Viking jars for meats preserved in soured whey, Aboriginal dream-jars—
I fill them with debts, IOUs, promises, offerings. I collect. Give.

Envy

I should win this competition because I want it so much. You can't imagine how much.
It's ALWAYS been my dream, my dream, so I should win. Winning will guarantee my business succeeds like wildfires in drought, not hers. I've worked so hard
Winning will make me give her thicker, her flat stomach, her tall husband,
her dahlias the size of dinner plates, her perfect, her invulnerable teeth,
her car that runs on air, her unavoidable lure, her unbeatable chess (2-D & 3-D). I deserve
so much more than she/he/she/he has. Because I want so hard.
I'm choking.

Lust

I will tongue you there, where your folds swell, there where your entrances clench,
there where your tissues rise to my tongue, there where your body curves or hinges.
You. And you. And you. Come to my hand. Lie down. Open for me. Fill me.
Lie with me, against me, beneath me, above, behind.
I blur between preposition and proposition, between proposition and position.
I opera your openings, chain your shudder. All your napes bend to me and the smell of lilies.

I have covered every cell of my skin with sugar. Salt-lick every crystal.
Swallow. Swallow.

Pride

Forsake all other voices. Hear me. My voice is Only. My heart is Only.
You are not. You are never. My hands for kissing. My hands for filling. My
hands for oiling.

I am enough&more.

I am Siberian tiger. I am Gigantosaurus. I am Blue Whale. I am
ocean, sky, stars, all mountain peaks, Arabian dust-storms,
tsunami, gold.

I eat superlatives. I am where all eyes turn, direction for all genuflection.
Cymbal and symphony, clang and quake. I am every.

III

Time is what turns kittens into cats.

- Caroline Cabrera

POST-EBOLA

circa 2014. we launched cold war against the bats. they did not know and still continued to hang disgustingly on the almond trees looping; their bisonar bodies in the air above our roofs. we let them be in peace as long as they did not touch our bodies. for cold war is fought in silence. i dreamt i was a space bus blowing them up in a country called Batavia. we were waxing stronger against the misgiving of the fluids in us. we would not listen to birds that sing of death. cold war never matters again with your old enemies hanging like bags of fluid on the same tree at your verandah without the fear of death.

Emilia Phillips

ONE YEAR AFTER CONTEMPLATING SUICIDE

—after Erika L. Sánchez

Admit it—
the end returns to you

yet, like a stitch
meant to dissolve

that works its way
out, that blistering

worm—

Once you think
you're healed,

what heals turns
against you—

a tourniquet left on too long.

But you know how close
you could still come,

don't you? Last night you saw
it in the mirror

where you held your head

to your shadow
and saw

your eyes seeing your eyes

seeing. Sometimes it comes like desire,
the way the smell

of some soap turns you
back into a body—

the body that wanted that body
that needed only

an idea of you. Sometimes the light

scours away the future
into which you survive still,

a dirt road
milemarked by loss, loss

in your idea of the scar

your cheek shrugs. How ideas fit
you, weight

and itch, like a slip

of shame under your skirt.
Yes, it was

a gun—
because it's how your father

taught you all things end.

Although you imagined
its pull easy as that from the wetmother

gin,

you saw something
didn't you? It burst

from you bloodblister
bought and paid for by
the heedless flesh
selfish to keep its

demise locked compacted
slowed by the very matter
of you close
like an enemy close
like a child inside but its trajectory
greys the divide

between you and those you love
those few who love you

barreling into them
maybe not bullet but its babel
breaking open like the sun
of notion to its internal
bleed yellow

CENOTAPH

When I consider
the suffering

that life occasions,
I remember the stars.

How badly they must sleep
to turn continuously

in their vast beds.
The gratitude they must feel

to have given themselves
so completely—

and finally collapse
in heaven's arms.

How when their fever breaks
and the light goes out of them,

the light still reaches us;
and that what we see

is not the star itself,
but its memorial,

a luminous confession
of what is no longer there.

And while we worship the light,
the stars themselves

prefer to reverence darkness,
for whom distance is love;

and endless praise,
a canticle to emptiness.

QUESTIONS

I. How much wheat grows in a large bowl?

I grew up on a dairy farm. The cows had golden ears. It seemed always to be spring. My sister scythed the wheat until she died by her own hand when I was fifteen. We only made whiskey when my father lost money in the market. Then I'd have to kill a buffalo to ease his temper. I often felt a burden to my family, and to the country. The only thing I enjoyed was writing letters, asking for donations for a new research center devoted to qualitative physics, which I had started in third grade, and which had shrunk each year since.

II. What were the first words uttered by Chac, the Mayan god of rain and lightning?

Perhaps, like Cortez: I am a god. Bring me gold and jade.
Or: Please ignore my temporary Earthly intrusion.
I am plotting to break open that mountain on the horizon to bring forth maize, which will produce great wealth for our people. Or: hundreds of years from now a man named Diego will be born near Palenque. He will be struck by lightning and killed. The wife he never married, although just a girl, will convince her father to build a pyramid over his tomb. Diego will be forgotten until he is exhumed by an anthropologist in the twentieth century, when the world will learn his name. An American writer will become rich selling an embellished account of Diego's life. I tell you this only so you can prevent such indignities from taking place, and maintain the nobility of our people.

III. *Why didn't Jackson Pollock paint scenes of the Cuban Revolution?*

He might have, but instead crashed an Oldsmobile killing himself and Edith Metzger. He never walked the Malecón, drank rum under a ceiba tree, consulted Oshun. He was thought to be bipolar, and treated his alcoholism with Jungian psychotherapy rather than Santería. If he had met Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, the famous Cuban filmmaker, perhaps he would have quit painting and moved to Havana before 1959, in which case, he could have carried a rifle and helped defeat Batista. After the Agrarian Reform Law, he might have cut sugarcane, painted Party offices. Whether he would have missed bourbon and cigarettes is unclear. The stacks of Lenin biographies paling in Havana sun might have peaked his interest—vodka distilled in communal vats, crates of banana, papaya, a young *compañera* who worked sorting mail, who wore nothing but a lace slip around the house. If his wife in New York found out, she would have crossed the border to Canada, flown to Cuba and pushed Jackson over a balcony: a more artistic death for a man of his kind.

How to answer questions on post-coital rituals at sea

On Jupiter, there are six nights for drinking rye. This leaves
only nine hours for beating, unfolding, and mouthing

what we think we know about oceans elsewhere. Burdens
for the sake of having means we stay half-woken, digestible

tremors symmetrical, a treaty made before Eurydice ensured
our favorite blindness. What is left inside my pocket seeds

nothing further than corset stains memorializing what comes
before Mimosas, after rubbing telescope rings from both sets

of eyes. I have sold my way of speaking for shallows, sandbars
dotted and egg-thick. Every shell underneath is a hook and fuse

marking return, saying so few make it to the first tide intact.
These bodies, nets cast to collect wreckage, to mimic Esmerelda's gold.

Lois Marie Harrod

IN THE MIDDLE DISTANCE, THE TREE—

arthritic parasol stripped of birds.
The dancer wears weeds:

I know nothing next-to-crooked
Christ, believe it.

Maybe I can get by on gestures and beads,
come to me ye heavy maidens.

Can't say who stole the black feathers.
Strippers dance lewd, showgirls elegant—

and the be-bop stopped kicking years ago.
Nothing now but a desiccation of wild carrot,

dry goldenrod with its ostrich spikes dropping.
So much punishment in the potter's field—

Once I was down and lost,
now I am out and found.

We are each our own twisted umbrella,
our own fraying sun.

Jeanne Emmons

REFLECTIONS ON THE RIO NEGRO

On a calm morning like this,
the light from the horizon makes of the dark
surface a mirror so smooth you are aware
of how the two hemispheres of air and water
meet and merge. Everything is duplicated,
the water line an invisible
fulcrum
a thin spine, a fissure drawn fine
as a hairsbreadth, barely detectable
except that on either side
the whole
blessed world arranges
itself in symmetry,
as a leaf folds around its
central vein, as a sphere curves from its
equator
as the white flesh of a fish feathers
from the bone. As inked
paper doubled and
creased, makes of itself a
replica
wet, ragged, unreadable.
And you in your small boat, rocking
on the surface, are left to
wonder
how much the impression of depth
is the play of weightless light, how much of
what sways below is masked by out projecting
onto the dark and still parallel (the wide
latitude of mystery), such perfect reflections
of our bright, bicameral brains.

Christopher Carter Sanderson

ELEGY #61857

So, yeah.

him.

They put bag of my dad's ashes
In my hands.
It was made of heavy industrial plastic;
Hard to tear open.
tag:

I wasn't expecting it/What to do?
It was the middle of the funeral/I was his son.

I tore a hole in the bag.
No easy feat.
And drew a picture of him on the ground
with the ashes pouring out.

Everyone was nervous.

Because the ashes spilled out heavy,
Like conte crayon
And oily, and he would say "a material,"
Like some powdered ash-grey pastel.

Well, fuck it:
I learned to draw watching him draw.
on
Watching his hands.
So I drew him, I guess you could say,
With him. And also with him,
As I had.

In the drawing, his hand was waving.

I guess I kind of am a drawing of

Later, what to do with this bag?
Heavy, and still covered with ash.
Zip-tied with a big, chunky metal
tag:

CREMATION TRACKING
DISK #61857

I carried it all for weeks
Rolled up in a bright scrap of
Children's birthday wrapping paper.
No idea where I found that,

So, yeah.

Benjamin came over and
1. I got a big bowl.
2. And a pitcher.
3. Cut the zip-tie, took the tag off.
4. Washed the ashes from
the plastic.
5. Said "this is just trash now."
6. Threw it away.
7. Poured the water with the ashes
8. The tarragon plant, and the basil.

Benjamin didn't comment.
He put strong-smelling
cedar-scented oil

On my hands.

Candace Black

THE END OF THE BRITISH ISLES

Wind shears everything

close. No trees. Were there ever trees?
Just tussocks of heath. The machair,

dotted with flat rosettes of butter,

grows cropped as a putting green.
Long ago ice carved hills round, cirques

broad and hollow. Wind continues

the flensing, daily and cellular. Anything
upright gets stripped. We walk to the edge

of Hermaness, where whatever you say

gets sheared away too, swirled north to the last
stacks, added to the gannet

chorus of praise for the wind, for fish, for a rocky

ledge. For the alliance of feather
and air that moves, pelagic and constant.

Nick Christian

In those caves where gypsies crush their bones

the flamenco dancer bares her wrist, breaking
ribs: *if we are hollow, it is to make louder
this distinction of sound.*

I am outside swallowing boukha in the shade.

Siddhartha is drunk. Forty-nine days pass: *this is the way
the world ends—*

with a lot in the mouth, and little said—*this is:*
oak trees laying broken lungs inside burrowed eggs.

A wild man comes perched on his own lips, weeping
he is full of ducks but cannot fly. I mean
to tell him he is Enkidu looking on a kneeler, dying;

over and over again, I say nothing.

Rachel Cawthra

Waiting for a spaceship: My experience with J. Otis Powell?

[00:54:54] You have said repeatedly why you were attracted to my work. How did you find it? [6.0]

I stepped into Pangea World Theatre alone, slightly out of breath with my cardigan gently clinging to the underside of my arms. Unsure if I was in the right place, I approached a woman with dark brown pixie cut, bright eyes, and a soft smile. Her name was Debra. Her handshake was warm and delicate.

Once into the theatre we quietly departed as she met with friends and I began scanning the room for an empty seat. My throat was dry. I walked past a water cooler, and the only cup available: clear plastic with a long crack down the side. Slightly annoyed, I pressed onward towards an open seat in the third row next to a woman wearing teal eyeshadow in her brows. I had noticed her as I stood in line and knew that she was also there alone. Her hair was short and tousled, her eyes rounded behind her glasses, hazel. I knew before asking that she'd welcome me to sit with her.

I sat with my back against the black plastic of the chair. The room was small, and dimly lit, except for the stage and few lights left on the audience. He wanted to be able to see us. It was hot, I was thirsty. I complimented the woman next to me on her teal eyebrows and cosmetic expeditionist spirit. Her name was Caspian. She explained to me she had chosen the name for herself. She had grown up with a twin, her name used to be Brittney. She asked me my relationship with my name, and I couldn't say much against it, except I'd occasionally wondered the ways my life would have been different had my parents instead named me Jasmine. She had a playful uniqueness about her. I had bought a book as I had entered and later during the reading leaned towards her so she could read it with me. As an unwelcome shiver rolled down my spine, I shared

that a recent bad experience with edibles had left me slightly and occasionally on edge and she was quick to express concern for me. However, I could tell by the distant look in her eyes that she wasn't sure the appropriate amount of sentiment to extend, not being able to relate to the experience herself. She was sweet.

I was cursing myself for not bringing in a water bottle, knowing only too well the way in which my ADD meds dry out my mouth and throat. Groaning inside, I dragged my feet to the water cooler and drank, holding the cracked cup at an angle to keep the water from spilling out its slit. As I sat back down, a man came out to address us. I recognized him from not long before, when I had followed Debra inside. She had introduced me to him. His name was Dipankar. He coached us on pronouncing "J. Otis Powell?" as J.Otis had coached him moments before. And while his emphasis surrounded the vocal execution of the interrobang, it did remind me of something J. Otis had said to me not a week before.

"Well, believe it or not I have a lot of trouble with how people use my name. I won't answer to anything. It's a simple enough name, but people act like it's from another language, you know?

They haven't even gotten to the interrobang. They just having trouble with "J. Otis".

Some people just want to call me Jay.

Some people just want to call me Otis.

And then other people want to act like it's hard to pronounce. "What is it?" And I said, "it's just a first initial and my middle name." and then they say, "Well, what's your first name?" I said, it's a name I don't like, that's why I abbreviated it." "So what is it?" You know rather than to call me what I want to be called, they want to get the scoop on the name I don't like so they can call me that."

Being that we had just recently discussed our relationships with our names, I leaned over and whispered with Caspian

about a recent blog post of J. Otis's in which he had touched on the importance of his name, and more specifically the importance of the interrobang he chose to spell it with. Caspian wasn't familiar with J. Otis or his work, so I felt obligated to introduce her in ways I'd hope she'd connect to. Of course, I was curious to why she had come to the reading without knowing who it was. She told me on Thursdays there was always something going on down here, and she'd made it a custom every now and again to come check it out. She had come alone to this place, not knowing what to expect, with teal green eyeshadow in her eyebrows, carrying a name she had given herself.

The reading was about to begin. Dipankar created a moment for us to clear and open our minds, to prepare for the performance. Together we took a deep meditative breath. He cleansed the air with a chime. Though I can't remember if it was bells or a small cymbal, I remember the atmosphere that followed, like the last water ring that clears the surface.

J. Otis stepped out with a warm smile on his face, the light reflecting off his glasses. As he walked the braced himself with his cane.

He seemed to know everyone in the audience, greeting a good number of them by name. The air was glowing. The room so full of love and open souls. It felt like a family.

As he began, his voice was raspy, hummy, bluesy. With each word the performance took on life. The musicians appeared to play without sheets and without having had rehearsed, as if they were playing whatever came into their mind. This had mixed results. At the best it was alive, constantly shaping, reforming, and surprising. Like wind or crashing water. In moments, I thought maybe the ceiling would crack open. At other moments the sounds clashed awkwardly against each other, the saxophone squeaked screeches splitting my eardrums.

J. Otis did not simply recite his poetry, but held the words, breathing life into them as if they had just been birthed into the universe. It reminded me of something he said to me in our interview at the end of last month, "ultimately if we practice art enough, we become art ourselves." He was not reading his poems, he was becoming his poems. Though I had his book split open in my hand, there was no predicting where the perfor-

mance was going next. At will, he changed words, drug out syllables, repeated, held and stretched, unfolded the lines in between. The music followed organic and somewhat erratic.

In a moment in which every instrument and word collided into a stunning display of mutualistic symbiosis, I closed my eyes to see if I could find what the poem looked like. Cradled by the warm air soaking into my skin, I let the vibrations being generated in the room move through my body. In my mind, maroons and deep purples dove to the floor, thundering clouds cracked through the ceiling, and my bones turned heavy in my chair.

J. Otis Powell? moved to Minnesota in 1987. He spent the next thirty odd years as a poet, writer, mentor, performance artist, curator, and consultant working in the Twin Cities. He was a founding producer of KFAL's Write On Radio! And a program director and community liaison at the Loft Literacy Center. Most recently he worked at Intermedia Arts in many ways including as a mentor to emerging spoken word poets in the Verve Program. In 2009 The Minnesota Spoken Word Association awarded him with the Griot Innovator Award and inducted him into The Minnesota Spoken Word Hall of Fame.

J. Otis's fourth book, *Waiting for a Spaceship*, was published in June 2017 by Spout Press. It was at the launch reading for this book that I was able to meet J. Otis Powell? in person. The first time I discovered J. Otis Powell? was inside the pages of *Blues Vision*, a collection of African American Writing from Minnesota which, in addition to appearing in, he helped to edit in February 2015. It happened to be one of the required books for my poetry class the fall semester of 2016. What began as an assigned reading turned to more in my hands. I flipped to page 78 and the words stuck through me. The title at the top of the page read: "Tongue Swallow" by J. Otis Powell?

"This thang do me like/ I don't belong/ This thang hang around/ Like weather fronts and stall/ Above me making it/ Rain and storm/ Making rivers/ Lakes and seas rise up and reb-

el/ Against land and everything/ And everybody on it”

Often when I write about poetry I hit the same wall. I struggle with how to articulate, how to summarize how a poem touches me without simply recanting the lines themselves. “Tongue Swallow” resonates. It resonated even before I could completely comprehend its significance. And now that I do, I can’t help feeling I have no right to it.

J. Otis’s language, frustration, and angry water imagery drew me in. As I type and am reminded of the long struggle it has been to get all of these words in this order in these pages, I connect especially to these lines: “Too often my words won’t dance into/ Something that feels like grace.”

This particular poem J. Otis had me read to him over the phone after I’d expressed my liking for it. It was my first time reading it aloud. I was nervous, but I obliged. Though I rushed it, and no doubt botched entire stanzas, he received my impromptu performance kindly.

[01:01:42] I like to hear other people who read my work because I like to hear how they hear it, and how they hear it is often very different from how I read it and so I mean it’s important that certain things happen in that regard. [27.3]

He did have one observation he needed to share.

[01:02:12] I noticed that you unconsciously translated it into more grammatical words and I had intended the un-grammar in it, because grammar is political and if you will indulge me and you still have it in front of you I would like to read it for you since you did it. [30.1]

It was a kind offer and I welcomed the opportunity to quiet my brain and listen.

[01:02:45] Because the subject and the title all talk about how I’ve had to swallow that language in order to appear assimilated. [9.4]

[01:02:56] And the word I used is not

“thing.” I used “thang.” And you said it “thing” every time. [8.0]

He read it slowly, taking care in each gap and expression. I took note of the way he gave life to his “un-grammar.” His voice took on a rusted smokiness. When he finished I thanked him for the private performance and we spoke on the significance of grammar and pronunciation.

J. Otis: [01:07:46] Language plays with me and writers who don’t love language shouldn’t be writers and not just grammatical language but all lengths because of said language is political and a lot of areas. [15.9]

The poems of his I’d discovered in my class readings were only the beginning of my curiosity surrounding J. Otis. Admittedly, the interabang intrigued me from the first time I read his name. In particular, what struck me about him were the common threads of philosophy, truth, authenticity, and spirituality he wove throughout his work.

It was at the end of May when I had an opportunity to interview J. Otis, and by then I had found myself more interested about the interworking of his mind than the interworking behind any one of his individual poems. A large part of me feels that poetry speaks for itself. A poem has a beautiful ability to shapeshift and reform and present to different people in different ways. Though it was his poetry that brought me in, my focus now was on the poet himself.

Though truthfully, when I called him late that Monday evening, I hadn’t intended to interview him just then. I didn’t even have my questions fully drafted. Had I known that in the next thirty minutes I’d practically be shitting my pants, I never would have ever dialed the phone.

Perhaps I should lend a little background. I’m 22. I have never interviewed anyone before. I’ve had some pretty interesting conversations in my lifetime and I had hoped that this wouldn’t be much different. I work as an unpaid intern at *Poetry City, USA* (see cover). Though to say I work is somewhat of an understatement. The meetings are only once a month, and I still

manage to put off every task until the very last second. It's fair to say I live with a certain amount of anxiety that makes new and daunting situations overly tempting to avoid and often I indulge in my urge to procrastinate as long as I can.

The night that I called J. Otis was because I could not avoid it any longer. I didn't feel fully prepared, but it didn't matter anymore. I'd reached my time limit for sitting and twirling my thumbs. Truthfully, I would've much rather communicated through email where I can carefully craft each sentence. However, this was our initial email exchange:

Dear Mr. Powell?,

Hi! My name is Rachel Cawthra, I am an assistant editor for Poetry City, USA. I discovered your poetry last fall in *Blues Vision*. After reading more about you, more of your poetry online, and having looked over your blog, I must say I'm rather intrigued by you and the way you think and create. I find your quest for truth and authenticity as well as the very spiritual relationship you have with your art enticing. If it would work out for you, I'd love to interview you for the 7th edition of our journal. Is this something you would at all be interested in?

Looking forward to hearing from you,

Rachel Cawthra

Greetings Rachel: I'm intrigued by your interest, however emails are monologues and two way conversation allows more clarity of communications. I can't commit to anything until we talk. Please phone me; [REDACTED]

J. Otis Powell?

So, it was only at his request that I was calling him. I laid out my notes in front of me, picked up my phone, and dialed his number. Focusing on my breathing, I rehearsed what I was about to say over and over in my head. I told myself to relax, *he just wants a general idea of what I'm looking for, he just wants to know that I'm serious*. At least that's what I thought. It seemed the whole purpose of my calling was to touch base with him

and maybe to schedule a time to do the interview later, *if* he was interested.

The moment he picked up I instinctually began to ramble nervously. He wanted to know basic details, like what the interview was for and what sort of questions I'd be asking. I stumbled quickly through my notes, giving my best answers, though forgetting to breathe and stopping in awkward places to fill my lungs. His voice carried a certain level of annoyance despite my hopes that my youth and inexperience would inspire a small amount of pity of his part. I'm sure the shakiness in my voice didn't instill much confidence.

"Will there be honorarium?" he asked. He couldn't see it, but my face flushed red. Somehow, I had gone through life without ever hearing or encountering the word "honorarium" before. Even if I had, it hadn't even occurred to me to check before calling him to see if we offered any.

"I - um - I'm sorry, I guess I don't know. I can call my mentor quickly and call you back to let you know."

He sighed, "You know, if you're going to call up a professional, that's really something you need to know."

My years of customer service slowly constructed an automated response, "I'm sorry, you're right. Thank you. I'll make sure to be more prepared next time."

"Well, you're lucky," he said. "I've just eaten dinner, and I have some time now."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"*I said*, you're lucky, I've just eaten dinner, so I have some time now to do the interview."

My heart clogged my throat. "Uh um no, I was calling to set up a time to do the interview. I didn't mean we'd do it right now."

"Well," he says, "I'm going to be busy the next two weeks with my new book release, and I don't know how much time I'll have. And considering I'll be *donating* my time, I'd rather just do it now."

I wriggled around trying to explain how unprepared I felt without portraying myself as completely incompetent. "It's just, I'm not sure I'm ready..."

"You sound ready."

"Yeah, but I uh, I told my mentor I'd let him overlook my

questions, I uh I just really don't feel ready"

After more back and forth of my hesitation and his persistence he finally cut me off mid ramble.

"Stop polishing your rifle and shoot it."

I saw there was no way to wriggle out so I opted for buying time.

"Okay. Since we're doing this over the phone, if it's okay with you, I'd like to find a way to record it. Can I call you back in a little while when I figure out how to do that?"

"How long is a little while?"

"Fifteen minutes. Just give me fifteen minutes."

"Okay."

As soon as I hung up the phone a string of frantically whisper-screamed swear words fell out of my mouth. I paced my back porch, hands shaking. I forced myself to breathe. I didn't have time to freak out. I had to focus. I'd managed to buy myself 15 minutes and it was all the time I had to prepare. I gathered my notes and thundered downstairs to my room. I still live at home. It was the only place I knew would be quiet enough. I spread the papers around me as I sat cross legged on my bed. I unlocked my phone and thanked God I was in the twenty-first century. I had to figure out how to record a phone call. I turned to the one I knew wouldn't let me down, Google. I followed a lead to the app store and 15 dollars later I had everything set up that I needed, at least I hoped so. I didn't have any way of testing it out or time to. I could only pray it would work, because if it didn't, I was not calling back. I let my family know not to disturb me. I had five minutes left. I took a final glance over my notes and scribbled out some questions. I typed in his number. I tried to pretend everything was okay. I could hear my shaky breathing echoing back through the receiver.

He answered.

Still trying to make sense of the personal hell I'd been thrown into, any shred of confidence I had about that moment shrunk inside of me. Suddenly unsure of everything, I spoke cautiously, probing for some guidance.

Rachel C.: [00:00:24] All right, do you want

me to just start asking questions or does it matter to you-? [4.8]

My voice dribbled out of my mouth dwindling into nothingness.

J. Otis: [00:00:30] We are already on. We started when you sent me the email. [3.9]

His words were biting. My insecurity stirring irritation. I forced myself to swallow it. I looked down at the sheet and pretended I knew what the fuck I was doing.

In my life, the most peace I've found has often come from moments of discovering new truths and perspectives that provide clarity and light. As a self-proclaimed seeker of truth, I was curious to know if what bit of truth J. Otis had discovered that brought him the most peace or contentment.

J. Otis: [00:00:58] Well truth is a multilayered thing so I don't assume that there is a single truth. I don't assume that I know what truth is. I just assume that I live in the throes of and the throes of it has to do with how reality--how factual reality and spiritual consciousness collide and the life of Job I'm living the life of Job right now. I don't know how many other people feel like that's their situation but that's how I describe my situation right now. [27.4]

[00:01:42] And a lot of religious people have ideas about suffering being noble. I don't have ideas like that. Suffering just hurts so I am philosophical in that I don't give up on there being something else I need to learn, so I stay open. I stay open to what else might be out there because every painting that's on the canvas is relevant. Even the ones you can't see. [38.4]

I was glad he was giving long answers full of content. He seemed to enjoy the topics I had chosen to discuss and the more we talked, the less irritated he became. The less irritated he became, the more I could relax and speak like a normal human being.

(I was not familiar with the biblical story of Job, so I looked it up. It's supposed to explain why God would allow good people to suffer and furthermore to show that as humans we are often clueless as to God's plans and are unable to comprehend God's reasoning. It is a story that really only works to present God as a giant asshole. To prove a point, God allows Satan to torture good and innocent Job, killing all ten of his children, his workers, and his livestock. Then, while Job is in mourning, God tells Satan to go ahead and lay it on thick, so he afflicts Job with horrible skin sores. To top it off, all of Job's friends theorize that Job must've done something pretty horrible to deserve so much suffering. They, of course, tell Job this to his face, basically placing all the blame for his suffering on Job himself and even go on to allude that his children were probably asking for it, too. Eventually God does intervene and rewards Job for never giving up faith in him by giving him new children and twice as much property as before, but all the while he's also making sure to assert to everyone how powerful and all knowing he is. All in all, it just seems like really shitty behavior. I'm sure there are other and opposite opinions on this fable, but to me it paints God as this egotistical douche who allows himself to be easily manipulated by Satan, and is willing to let all of a man's beloved children be killed off. Never mind that he replaces them at the end with new children. If anything, that makes the story worse. Imagine your children are murdered and then the guy who prompted the murderer and watched it happen came over with new children for you to take care of, like they are lamps or vases that you can just swap out at random, not living beings with dreams and unique personalities. If anyone but God acted like this we would consider them to be cruel and evil. Anyways, I digress.)

In my research, I found myself enticed by J. Otis's use of the words "authenticity" and "original aesthetic." Like many artists my age, it is a continued struggle to discover what I really have to offer the world that is completely myself. While authenticity and originality may seem easy, college is a time in which one learns that practically no idea ever birthed exists in a void. We are constantly surrounded by influencing forces. Additionally,

in a world of 7 plus billion people, it's rare that you are the first person to ever think of something. It can be difficult to feel like we have anything to offer the world that is completely original.

I needed to know what these words meant to J. Otis.

Rachel C.: [00:04:43] I like that use of the word "authentic." And I remember in reading some of your work, you talking about trying to live authentically. What does that mean to you, living authentically, or to be authentic? [14.7]

J. Otis: [00:05:00] It is speaking your own truth. It is finding and expressing your own voice, which is cultural, it is spiritual, it is cosmic, but it is not the repetition of what one has absorbed. It is the hewing out of what we have learned something that is different. And until we get to a place where we can say and do things differently in the world, we are not authentic, we can be mimics of great people and quote very smart people. But until we become courageous enough to be original, which is what authenticity expresses itself as, then we are not being true to ourselves or the world. Our responsibility on planet earth is to be who we are, but before we can be that person, we have to learn who that is. We don't come here with that knowledge. I mean it's about how our community shapes us into an identity, and how we learn from our environment what our role is. [1:11.8]

Rachel C.: [00:06:14] So does that sort of play into original aesthetic and an artist, in discovering their original aesthetic, is that, sometimes, to figure out what exactly is different within you beyond just what you've learned? [10.9]

J. Otis: [00:06:27] Well it's not so much about figuring it out. It's living it out. I mean I read a lot. I read a lot in my life and I quote people . . . but when I quote them I give them credit and distinguish that from my original voice. But my original voice is built on all of that. I've had some great mentors in my life and they taught me a lot about being a human being. And so when I want to share what they have shared with me then I give them credit for it. But there are other times when I just say what I need to say based on what has coagulated out of my learning, what has come to fruition because I have learned. One of my mentors, Imamu Amiri Baraka, said, "It is not what the thing is, it is what it makes you think and our art comes out of that." It is the "what it makes you think" part that gets you to originality. You can quote, and that's good. You can have all that in you, but you have to think something else because of what you just learned. And that something else that you think is originality.
[1:18.1]
[3:07.4]

As he spoke about our responsibility to discover our purpose, I thought about what I had read of his beginnings. J. Otis Powell? came from three generations of ministers. "That's as far as I know. There may have been more, maybe called something else like griots or you know elders or you know poets maybe." Pursuing his passion meant going against his family's dreams and expectations for him.

[01:35:28] I grew up in a church for 16 years when my grandfather was the minister and then the district transferred him to other parishes after that. But I was under his wing, and he thought I was going to be a minister,

and it really broke his heart that I wasn't.
[9.1]

[21.3]

I tried to imagine what it would take for me to pursue my craft knowing it would come at the cost of my family relations.

Rachel C.: [00:13:06] Did it take a certain amount of courage within you to pursue something else? [15.8]

J. Otis: [00:13:22] Oh yeah. I had to threaten to go to Navy to go to a secular school after high school. They didn't want me to go into the Navy so they released their grip and allowed me to enroll in my alma mater. [19.6]

Rachel C.: [00:13:43] What drove you to do that? To create and to write seems very important to you. What within it drives you? [16.6]

J. Otis: [00:14:01] My first art form was theater. I was working in theater since kindergarten, literally. And so I was already active. In school in church in community plays and such. And so by junior high school the acting went further into writing. And by the time I got to my high school graduation, after looking at what it meant to be a minister according to my environment, because my grandfather and my mother were ministers and they hung out with ministers, and I was--I had a lot of access to how ministers live and I was in church all the time and I realized that what I wanted to be I couldn't describe it yet but I knew it wasn't a minister. I knew that being a minister was too small a box for me and I had to break down the box and recycle it so that I could become who I wanted to be. I was not able to articulate it that way at the time. At the time it was, "I got to get the hell out of here," you know? Now I've become a little more eloquent than

that and getting the hell out of there was
the best thing I could do. [1:24.5]
[2:20.0]

J. Otis: [00:16:02] My grandfather died dis-
appointed in me. My mother died still hoping
I would become a minister and for the most
part at the end of their lives our relation-
ship was pretty dysfunctional. I haven't been
home, which is Huntsville, Alabama, since my
mother died and I don't have a meaningful or
functional relationship with anybody there
anymore. [33.0]

One poem in particular at his launch reading in June he read
with such heavy sadness and deep sorrow that it became
anchored in my memory. Channeling ancestors abandoned and
forgotten at the bottom of the ocean, he cried as he read it.
The room shook with it. The air turned heavy like brine, like a
bloodied sea.

Holy Ghost Dance

Ivory bones at the bottom of the Atlantic
Ghosts dance to water music nobody composed
Dancing to holy Tragedy
Captured
Shackled
Sold
Bought and Shipped
Our bodies are home
Connected to stories evergreen
Our bodies are home
Immortals dancing to faint memories of
Ohm boom bah boom
Lost languages and historic
Legacies detached like appendixes
Libraries of origin burned and left
We began in soil
We began in rivers of spirits

In meditations of movement
We began to heal through dance
Holy ghosts dance
Our bodies trembling
Gyrating
Copulating in prayer

How many Africans pray
We were dreamed in Ghana
Songhai
Timbuktu and Mali
Ripped and torn like weeds
Traumatized
Captured
Shackled
Sold
Bought and shipped
Our bodies real estate
Our dance evergreen

“I grew up in segregated America. And so it wasn’t until high school that I actually had regular contact with Caucasians of any ilk. And then it was like the most intimidating two years of my life was going to high school.

Because it was soon after they had integrated the schools, and the schools we were integrated into resented it.

Not surprisingly enough they didn’t integrate Caucasian students into our schools. They integrated us into the Caucasian schools. Which was just another layer of white supremacy as far as we were concerned.

And so we rioted every year, almost every week, in my high school. So I couldn’t really focus on my academics or even my extracurricular activities, because I was too busy trying to be black. I didn’t have to be black

in segregation. I just was, you know. Once I got to high school I had to be black. And not only did I have to be black I had to be militant and black and that distracted me from my personality. But I had to go home and I lived in a black community, because the communities were segregated. And I would rather be in trouble at school than in trouble at home. And so it was the most confusing and traumatic three years of my life at the time. After that I was thankfully able to go to a historically black university which gave me a black education which I am eternally grateful for.”

“And so we carry our history around with us, it’s not behind us. It’s right up next to us. It is with us in the present. You know? And the same can be said for the future. I mean we carry it around with us. It’s what the Ebo called “The Great Time,” which means the past, the present, and the future exist at once and we’re always in it. So to see ourselves in those three dimensions is something that we should strive to achieve because we shouldn’t be trying to leave anything behind and we should always be imagining where we’re going. [1:41.1]

Later that night, after the reading, I found myself on the roof of Moto-I, feeling deeply lonely. And empty. Feeling alive, feeling lost. I sat at a granite counter that extended along the railing, the breeze refreshing, brushing against my face and neck. I laid my hands on the counter and pushed myself up just enough to lean forward and glimpse over the ledge down to the street below. I envisioned myself climbing up to stand on the counter and diving over. I wondered what weightlessness I’d find, I wondered if the rush of the fall would anchor my soul back into my body. I glanced at the ladies left of me. I was sur-

rounded by people. How far could I make it before they reached out to pull me down, or one of them screamed at me to stop?

Of course, even if I was alone I wouldn't do it. I don't want to die, not really. I was just frustrated with that feeling that comes over me, like my thoughts are a cloud I'm trying to tie strings to. Like my brain is a pair of hands that can't really hold on to anything, at least not tightly. Like watching myself disappear. And that night, looking over those buildings, into that sky line, it was all so beautiful and real, as if I could touch it. It feels wrong to look out at something so amazing, and to feel so hollow and sad. You start day dreaming of ways to cause yourself pain. Because at least pain is a tangible ache.

J. Otis had invited me to join for dinner with him and the band after the show. That's why I had been waiting in the first place. But it had been so long, and my soul was feeling tired in my bones. I walked quickly to the refuge of my car without looking back to see if he ever did show up.

I could've gone home and maybe I should have, but instead I drove to the boy. The boy with messy hair and large eyes that I should really call a man. But we've both been young for so long those words don't fit right on us yet. I should've gone home, but I drove to him. Because his chest is big and his skin is warm and his arms wrap around me when I sleep. And it doesn't matter how many times he reminded me that love was only a word that his lips could barely form, something inside me needed to be held together.

As I drove a subtle notion washed over me that J. Otis would understand exactly how I was feeling in that moment. As if my soul had taken a walk outside of me, and came back legs aching, crawled up inside and curled up exhausted, missing something but unable to remember what. An old ache.

As I drove I thought of a conversation I had had with J. Otis about love. An interest sparked while reading his blog post, *Asphalt Sky*, in which he had written, "If love is anything, then love is nothing because we need to decide, we need to affirm, we need to explore, search and seek out what love means in ways that do not conform to the principles of a patriarchal society." Often, I find myself fixated on ideas surrounding the intricacies and complexities of a word that has so many differ-

ent meanings yet holds such a heavy significance to individuals and society.

I wondered what, in J. Otis's "affirming, exploring, searching, and seeking," he had found love to mean.

J. Otis: [00:49:58] Love is about how we learn to navigate the environment we're in without always having to be at war with it. If we're going to be at war we should be at war with ourselves and how inhumane we are before we start to criticize how inhumane our world is because there's enough in us to last a lifetime for what we need to be working on and working towards. But it's easier to blame and point fingers outside ourselves. True love is about the struggle then to become the best human beings we can become and only in doing that are we even credible to love or anybody else. [42.7]

J. Otis: [00:50:53] I'm writing about it now because hardly ever in my life have I read or heard people use the word requited without "un" front of it. [16.1]

At the mention of "unrequited" I went on to share recent experiences that had made me partial to questioning the concept of love. In particular, the passage had stuck out to me because it dealt with the meaning of love, and that's something I'd found myself trying to define. The boy I had fallen in love with the fall before this summer had once asked me to explain what being in love felt like, because he didn't understand it. And if you think you have your head wrapped around the different types and concepts of love, try to find a way to explain it to someone who doesn't have complete access to it. Try to find a way to explain what being in love feels like and have it not sound like a brain parasite or an addiction. Because being in love is more than simply admiring someone or appreciating every aspect of who they are. It's a compelling force, a craving, a type of insanity like a tumor in your brain whispering their name every hour. It's a heart hunger. And when you can't be with them you start to feel the withdrawal, and it hurts so bad

it feels like something is hollowing out your insides. Try to find a way to explain that to someone who can't feel it and by the end not be convinced that they are better off for not having to suffer through that torment.

J.Otis: [00:52:40] Well, a lot of what you just said is a place I used to live. And the reason I'm writing about it is because I have recently discovered a change of perspective in my life about love and mostly was fueled by my history of unrequited love. And I was I was blaming a lot of my issues on unrequited love and I realized recently that I need to reconsider all of that because a lot of my perception of unrequited love has to do with my not knowing what it looks like. I had never seen it before, or so I thought. So my expectations of what requited love is, is something that I was wrong about. It doesn't look like what I thought it looked like and it was right in front of me often and I didn't see it as that because I thought I knew what it should look like and I didn't find that. And often we go through life with preconceived notions about what we don't know about and we can't see it because of our preconceived notions. And so I'm trying to trace back when the perception changed because I'm sure it was my perception because there's always been love in my life but I didn't see it as such because it treated me in such a way that it wasn't like what my fantasy was about. And so I need to trace back when the perceptions changed from feeling unrequited to feeling requited. And I think it's important that I do that at the end of my life. [1:50.4]

"At the end of my life." Throughout our conversation J. Otis Powell repeatedly and nonchalantly mentioned that he was at

the end of his life, and didn't feel he had much time left. He did not say these things sadly, but as a matter of fact.

During our phone conversation, he had me read to him his poem "Body of Work" and within it these last lines stayed with me:

"I'm going to a place beings go to hibernate
And living things disappear under ice, cold and snow
Im going to a place, "I'll have nothing to do," so some say.
Who knows if I'll have anybody to do anything with?
I'm going to a place I know nothing about except
Everybody pretends to know something about it
I don't know if I'm going to a place or just going
I have no bags packed but I'm ready."

Late at night on August 28, I was sitting on my couch exhausting multiple sources of distraction, under the weight of a passed deadline, attempting work on this very prose piece when I got the email from my mentor, Matt Mauch, that J. Otis had died. I didn't want his death to affect what I wrote here, but I never can seem to hold in what I'm thinking. While I was taken aback by the suddenness of his passing, I didn't feel sad. And it's easy for me to say because I had only just begun to know him. We spoke multiple times in the weeks after our interview. He would call to talk on the phone here and there. He saw something in me that reminded him of himself and I think he felt he wanted to leave something with me in our conversations. I'm so used to death being painted as sad, as pain. But what I felt when I heard of J. Otis's passing was peace, for him. In the final months of his life he was in pain nearly all the time. Though I feel sadness for his close friends and family and the writing community that has endured this loss, I truly feel J. Otis Powell lived a full life. He lived it authentically, he lived it passionately. He was ready to place his body at rest.

Athena Kildegaard

“acquire a modicum of precision”

René Magritte, in a letter of 1/17/1966

If only so that you might know
your aunt from a sunfish,

given sunlight, the angle of,
its degree of descent, given

how like your aunt you are,
anyone will tell you, though

you think of her as a battle axe,
kind always, yes, a little proud,

someone who takes things seriously
just as sunfish do the worm,

even a modicum of worm,
a precise twist of lunch.

Caroline Ruby Wright

the real, imagined

a raven

what i am when i am
cloaked in you
breaking for air
skirting the inverted sea
the pales and neons of the water's edge
the scattering of the black veins of trees
over the drapings of the floor of the world

when i chance upon the expanse between
the sheets and your heat
muting the curves of the ceiling
celebrating memories, making
carving the membranes of being
elapsing into spaces, moulding
over the top of the contours of your thoughts

what you were, ready-made to recapture
when I lived in the greys of the earth
when you breathed in the greens of your life
eclipsing through once-occurred moments
feeding you into strains of prior existings
enriching the salt that stung
over the weeping cuts that clung

when I lay, clutching the breadth of your cage
encircling the weight of what it contains
the innate desirability of clasping the gold-twinged
thrummings to share in the metallurgic coursings
bridging the molecular divide
the stability of the compounding
polishing the roughs, the slivers of rouging

Clemonce Heard

God/father

—*for Tuna*

In sundry southernmost churches, when they say laying of hands, what they really mean is whooping ass, which may very well allude to a mule, but is never to be uttered to a child at an altar. For years I tried to resist altering the rear of a brother from another to the point where his mother would find it hard to recognize his backside. I think we all need to have our opportunism exorcised whenever we start acting out, in private or public. In sundry southernmost churches, when a child is to be christened or dubbed with water, dressed in romper & held by a godfather, the faithful behold the young one's blessing into a lifetime of cracked knuckles, as the choir belts out The Blood Still Works. The harm leading harmonize into the wilderness, armor that possesses the ability to ward off deviltry, but is unable to catch the switch before it whips the little one's palm-guarded tail. I've been taught that whooping ass allows a child to prevail, & although, Dr. Brené Brown explicates foreboding joy as lingering over a sleeping progeny holding the feeling of helplessness, I still believe when the morning comes they should not be spared from the rod, just as any man needs an old fashioned beatdown after a barrage of misdeeds against his kin. Matter of fact, my belief is that his feeble hind should get it threefold, be tanned by a braided leather belt. His sin should be purged before he becomes too old or his voice too vain to say forgive me my friend.

THE DROWNING MAN

The pattering rain
that lulled me to sleep
flooded my dreams

until I stood chest-deep
in water watching everything I knew
wash downstream

like felled lumber
or war dead:
chairs, books, bottles, old cars, guitars, shoes.

All of my disguises.
Gone.

Suddenly there was a dog
or goat, then there wasn't.

To locate myself, I looked for the horizon,
but as far as my eyes could see
there were only more words for water.

To recreate my terror
maybe I should tell you how
I can't swim — how in my waking life

I don't even float.

Kevin J.B. O'Connor

CAMERA

At night I see the lily,
even now
the moon is far beyond
another valley, under streetlights
and crimson-tipped steeples,

although the rabbit is dead,
its downy fur bloody
in the maw of the lion;
although the lion is a ghost,
the rabbit a Polaroid

on a coffee table
in a funeral parlor,
and the lily blooms
uncannily in the air: orange-
flecked petals in clouds

streaked with tears,
while the sky drifts onward
as if forever, palms salute,
and ferns are trampled to perfume
on agate paths.

What I hear transforms to bone,
light, candelabra, deluge
of blue blossom
in the narrow hall of the palace.
One leads to heaven,

one meanders along a trail
sifted by shade, to find flowers,
speak to soil—

although no one says a word,
although someone seems to

listen when the wind interrupts
the leaves and smoke
plumes and a congregation
of foxes emerges to drink
the black river.

Tina Gross

POEM I WROTE ON MY SISTER'S CAST

Last night your arm fell asleep
as I wrote this haiku across it:

*So, that happened. But
you've already forgotten.
Here's your memento.*

All your hometown friends
have signed your cast, so Mom
will insist on keeping it.
We watched the TV
sink deeper and bluer
into the ocean. It showed us
a deep sea squid wrapping all its arms
around its body, underside out,
hugging itself into a ball.
Disguised as the moon, it orbited
the nature show's camera,
reflecting synthetic light.
Its suckers looked like craters
made by floating debris.
You said it was like watching it happen
to someone else when you spilled
down the telescoping attic stairs.
It went numb more than it hurt, but
you'd feel it later.
The story of leaving
for college with a broken arm,
later you'll hear yourself
tell it.

This morning, right now,
we're seeing you off.
Most of the water on our planet is frozen,
but you're made of it and still warm.

Your breath is visible.
The car is running, the house lit up,
you're waiting out in the unconvinced
and unconvincing dark.
The next time you're here
you'll be visiting.

Last night, the new bird at the feeder
made us find a book to look up what she was.
She studied us right back
through the window, could have
watched the TV with us, identified
with the dolphins on the screen—
if she recognized her reflection,
she could have seen
her own face
in the squidmoon.

Decades from now, when the time
comes for you and me
to empty this old house,
your sawed-off cast
will be waiting in the attic, saying
So, that happened.

You'll open the door to your childhood
room and the scent of you
on all your left-behind things will engulf you.
We once watched a show on scent signatures—
how a mother identifies her missing child's coat,
what haunts separated lovers.
No one senses their own,
and it'll be lost on you
the second you recognize it,
a bubble that forms
and bursts
in a single motion.

IV

Uma, I'm made of glaciers.

- Danika Stegeman

Hannah Backman

A review of Anna George Meek's *Engraved*

Engraved, by Anna George Meek, takes the reader on a journey into the nineteenth-century engravings that were published as illustrations in *Webster's Dictionary*. Meek makes the artwork come to life through her sophisticated language. In the poem "Spurs of Planets," for example, Meek's speaker looks and sees how "the universe blushes black." Meek has a fantastic way of taking darkness and turning into beauty, and frankly one that I have not experienced in any poetry.

I discovered Anna Meek after having her as my professor at Normandale Community College. I had read a few of her poems, so buying her chapbook, *Engraved*, was a step along the road to new poetry discoveries. This book to me was difficult to read at first. I had trouble with the language. I was used to simplicity, and was stuck in the poetry of the past, my favorites being Robert Frost and Emily Dickinson. These poets got me started in my high school classrooms, and helped me with times in my life where poetry was my only solace. Poetry helped the artist that was pacing around in my brain come to the surface, and simplicity is what I was drawn to. After coursing through the pages of *Engraved* a few dozen times, though, it started to click: Meek was literally bringing these pictures and engraving to life in words. Meek opens her poem "Cephalata," for example ("cephalata" is a term for a large snail or octopus) as so: "Creature, knobby-headed, tilts/ downward; each tentacle/ curls and thrusts in the blank, undrawn sea." Bringing the otherwise one-dimensional to life is a theme in this chapbook.

Meek entices the reader to use all their senses. Through *Engraved* I was able to see images of the engravings in my head, but in her poem "Vocal Organs In Vowel Positions," I started to hear the lines, and bring them forward—another kind of extra-dimensional life—by speaking them out loud. Meek writes, "Say *all*, say *psalm*:/ The hard palate arches up,/ vault of an unlit cathedral./ From the moist catacombs below,/ vespers

rise, enter the cavity,/ then release their notes into the night/
like crows scattering from a belltower," forcing the reader to
say the words, to feel the words move around in the throat and
mouth, to give the beautiful metaphors life.

I have always known poetry is not a closed box, and *Engraved*
helped me—and continues to help me—understand that more.
I followed as Meek led me away from simplicity, sitting in my
bed at night reading line by line, looking up every other word. It
was like I was solving a puzzle or riddle, which I am not the best
at. Meek's chapbook has taught me that poetry is vast, and
that you never stop discovering new emotions and thoughts.
Engraved will have you experiencing images in a whole new
light, one that involves all of the senses, and is its own making.

THE GREATEST POEM THE WORLD HAS EVER KNOWN

sometimes all of your poems are terrible because you tried to make them
into the greatest poem the world has ever known

so then you look at a cloud and realize that even a stupid ordinary
regular cloud is a way better poem than all the poems you have
ever written

so then you just look at clouds all day and it's fine and you're happy and
you like it

so there

Steve Healey

IDENTITY THEFT

I had a thought, after a poem written after Catullus.
After my cat named Catullus. After I stole
all the thinking from ancient Rome. I had a thought
about how I lied about the name of my cat.
My cat's name is Dickinson, and many thoughts
have I stolen from her. She's actually a deer
named Dickinson. I replaced her with another deer
fashioned after, in the manner of, largely
influenced by, working in the Dickinsonian tradition
of that original deer. After Julie Andrews
sang doe, a deer, a female deer, I thought
naming that deer after her would be a good idea
because she brings us back to doe, ray, me,
a name I call myself. Me thinking after the sun
goes down a bit more brightly the day after
the winter solstice. After my neighbor
who survived cancer told me about a neighbor
just diagnosed with cancer. You have to learn
how to speak again. Even after bad "Chinese" food,
I tried to save my body with a fortune cookie.
*You may not get cancer, you may not die
a scary death.* After having a thought after myself,
after the end of my personality and person,
my sadness and hope. After I made a decision—
no more stealing from the dead, not even
from the ancient Roman poet Catullus.
Because I decided to ignore that decision.
Because it was the morning after my cat died,
and I knew I had never been original.
It was time for breakfast, and I was ready
to share my everything bagel
with everyone in the world.

Terry Severhill

Library: a museum of repurposed trees

Storm watching

The library was drenched in words
Every where discarded
The table with four legs, four chairs
With four legs
And for gotten notebooks
The afore mentioned storm
Not with out its
Admirers
The Reconquista of the soul
Where is a foolish question
Not here not now
Was is where we go for refreshments
Kool aids any two of us would check out
What happened to those thousands of little drawers
with their rain forest of three by five Reminders
that history is smaller than we thought?
silver linings can't buy time
time enough to look
for wooden boards
water boards are not used for surfing
surfing the net is dangerous without
a net
storm watching looking in ward
for ward.
I glimpsed you
Between the stacks
The storm of your presence
entered me.

Bill Olson

Admission

I don't know you well, but you seem to be seeking approval. You are ashamed that you still have emotions. You haven't been able to keep eye contact with me for longer than a second. You still have every right to be angry. A colossal man I met at a metal music festival was giving me advice after sharing our stories over many drinks. Eye contact has never been my strong suit. He was friendly, but had a piercing gaze. Correcting myself, I said that everything that had happened was in the past. After all, it was nearing five years since. *You still have every right to be angry*, he said, and I realized that not as much time has passed since I found myself homeless and living in a tent after coming out to my parents.

Entering community college, I never considered myself to be a writer of any sort. Only a year earlier I was detesting college while chain-smoking in the back of a friend's rusty Ford truck. College was unobtainable; it was a privilege people from my town were not afforded often. My first semester was rough, and I found myself wanting to drop out. Not wanting to be seen as a failure, I branched out and took courses in as many topics as I could find. Aimless and frustrated, I found myself sitting in a creative writing class. I was rather skeptical on the first day when the instructor stood at the front of the room, and with grand hand motions, told us to write about a tree. The class needed to envision itself isolated on a beach. Only through walking many miles would we find ourselves standing before a tree of no great significance. We, however, found ourselves identified with that tree, and our task was to get to that tree and describe it within twenty minutes. I believed the prompt was rather absurd, but I decided to give it a try. My head was swimming and I became frustrated. The only words I could muster after twenty minutes of staring at the page were: *barren, sickly, and withering.*

That exercise challenged the way I thought about my time

spent alone. When I was homeless, I constantly practiced my writing to manage the time. The only notebook I could find after being kicked out was a red-faced Mickey Mouse hardcover journal. I took that notebook everywhere I went for almost a year. The only real reason that I wrote was to kill time, especially when I was living inside of the tent. Writing, at first, was difficult, but the act of putting pen to paper was cathartic. In fact, the only way I could sleep was after writing myself to exhaustion. My notebook allowed me to accept that I was allowed to be angry for the situation I was placed in. My rage transformed into word on page that I could hold and twist between my fingers like some precious gemstone that only I could see. It made a difference to know that I could see something materialize from my pain. I had nothing to lose from being completely alone, writing as freely as I chose to.

Nowadays, I often ask myself if I write simply out of spite or if I write because I can't stand being alone, and if my writing is me speaking to the void and trying to find self-validation through words when I can't find validation from other people. *You still have every right to be angry.*

The word "sorry" is too common. I'm trying to make the word seem oily and foreign to my tongue. All of my life, I have apologized for the most mundane things. I figured that if I apologized for things that sometimes were not even my fault, I would be seen as someone agreeable. I wanted to be someone who only made simple mistakes and was forgiven, not a overburdened recording of "sorry" with over-bitten fingernails and anxiety finding the most humdrum reasons to apologize for someone else's actions.

After a month living in the tent, my parents reluctantly invited me back into their home. Our relationship was not easy. I was afraid that I would be kicked out again if my parents came across any of my writing. If they found my journal, they would find that my identity had only solidified. Through writing, I was able to become more self assured in coming out. That journal was filled with rage, longing, and future plans to leave. My journal could not live as long as I lived with my parents. I burned the journal shortly after coming home after both of my parents left for work. In order to seek validation from my parents, I

decided to abandon all focus I had on my writing. I stopped completely.

Burning that journal was an apology. While living with my parents, pursuing my own creativity became something uninteresting. I longed for their validation, so I decided to only do things that I knew they would approve of. None of them quite matched up to the feeling I would get writing away for hours on end, but poetry didn't seem like the right path for me at the time. I searched for other hobbies that interested me so I could make everyone proud of me. In my search for validation, I not only turned my back on one of my only channels to vent, but I also destroyed over a year's worth of work that will be impossible to get back.

I am still angry, but I'm trying to make eye contact with nearly every person that I speak to. I am finding this rather difficult to do. Eye contact still makes me incredibly nervous. If I don't look away, my sentences begin to trail off and I start to have problems recalling what I was trying to say. That is not to say that I don't enjoy talking to other people. I absolutely adore getting to know others, just as long as they don't ask too many questions. If I try to express deep truths about myself, I am still guilty of being vague. Babbling on this way makes me feel like a stranger in my own skin. When I look away, I begin to betray myself. If I continue to look, I feel as if I am a stranger. How do I know for certain that each syllable, each letter smashed together to form some sort of sentence is true to myself? I start backing down. I'm still angry. If I am still going to be angry, I might as well try to express that anger without backing down. Getting out of this loop is difficult, but finding confidence in my writing is the only way that I can break the cycle.

In order to pursue the truth in my writing, I must channel into my rage and become unapologetic. When I start to write about my past experiences with my family, that journal haunts me. There are some facts that I simply won't remember of the time period that I was away from home, and it's not like I have some reliable source around my hometown that I can collaborate with to find the evidence. I shouldn't have burned my journal in apology. I shouldn't destroy anything that I have created through good measure out of apology. I still have every right to

be angry now just as I did then.

But I could also argue that, in a way, the fire was cleansing because I let all of that pain and heartbreak out, and then took the material form of those feelings out of the world through my own means. Why do I continue to write about these events if they cause nothing but pain, and then I end up erasing any concrete details that I feel are too much to keep on the page? I haven't been able to find the answer. I want to share my story, even if it is only creating details for myself that I can look back to. However, when I find this difficult to do, I either don't pick up my notebook or I question the quality of my writing and delete everything out of spite. Any details of my past that I want to keep, I trail off on and make them abstract. This is the equivalent of losing eye contact with my writing so I don't have to be responsible for the things I write. In abstracting concrete thought in my own writing, my subconscious is telling me that I do not want to admit that I am still angry.

Even though writing is still a prevalent force in my life, school and work have taken priority over sitting down and writing for hours on end. I will be graduating with an undergraduate degree in English soon while working an overnight security job to make rent. Even though my writing has been pushed to the sidelines, I have filled the last five years reading as much poetry as I can get my hands on. Poetry still brings me great comfort in times of need. My anger is not as consistent as it was when I first started writing, so I try to let other emotions influence my writing when I have the time to write. It's still difficult for me to write when I am in a good mood; I have problems with being too saccharin. Even though it isn't consistent, the leftover anger still comes into my work from time to time. I have noticed that I still spend the most time writing when I am angry about something. The further I explore my other emotions in my writing, I notice that it is easier for me to talk to friends when I am going through a rough time. With practice, I become more sure of my feelings. I am not afraid to reach out, but I still find myself anxious to do so. I still don't open up to strangers right away, but I have been working on being more confident so I can assert myself more, both in my personal life and in my writing.

Poetry is anger. Poetry is confident. Poetry is timid. Poetry does not follow one linear course. Poetry is contradictory. Poetry is spiteful. Poetry is the selfish child who lies about stealing the last of the truffles. Poetry is a midnight slave, head hung low. Poetry is the flowers, and how they sing in the morning. Poetry is occasionally alone. Poetry is the party. Poetry is an interconnected community when it wants to be. Poetry is maddening. Poetry is release. Poetry is confessional. Poetry is an admission. Poetry is solace.

Michael Bezdicek

A PIER AT DUSK

I want to float with the seagulls.

I want to soar nose-first
in the hovering light.

I know soon
the sun will orange itself
into something.

Then it does. It drops.

Wavers like a mirage and expands,
spreads red

from horizon to crest
like pink-eye, sinks
into an ocean blackening itself
from blue, slowly, like toil
darkens jeans.

Nicole Connolly

LETTER TO CA, FROM OH

If they tell you there is an ocean here,
this is a diversion. Lake Erie is, at most, the sea's toenail
lost in the dirt. If they tell you there is no ocean here,
this is a lie. In December, when you retreat
from the beach breeze gone a little too cold, the Pacific sneaks
into the sky, crawls eastward, and dies. All winter
he decays, falling on us in pieces. Like anything dead,
this makes for good nutrition. After the first snow, everyone
cuts off their pinky finger and buries it. Ohio's ground reddens
like your poppy fields until more ocean-snow covers the blood.

If they tell you the salt on the road comes from labor,
this is a rumor. Each melt unlocks the minerals of the ocean's
shedding. Like anything dead, these decayed pieces stink,
until the whole town reeks of nothing, and we can't smell
the pizza parlors or passer-by cologne. All winter, I hide
from this no-smell in my kitchen cabinets, tuck myself behind
cans of garbanzo beans and creamed corn. I suck my pinky
wound
until my teeth are yellow and I feel guilty for coffee and wine.

When Spring arrives, the ocean melts and seeps
back to your shore. I emerge from my cabinets. The newly
sprouted pinky-person stands from the soil. Every year, to
transfer
memory, we have to let the new us suck on our hand
until we are drained. Yes, it hurts, with a hurt we remember
even in the new body, but it isn't so bad. Our husks make
good nutrition, and each corpse feeds a dogwood tree,
and the new bodies feel the warm as if it were the love
of a new lover, but I can't stop longing for long-soil in my toes,
the way owning only one season means I grow
with roots that don't stop to wait for the dead.

Curtis Perdue

GET INSIDE OF WHAT'S INSIDE YOU

When people look
at my body I feel it

in my ghost, like I'm
on display, an empty

billboard dusted with
moonlight. When

the wind gets all
grabby and full

of continents, I cross
my arms over my chest,

and it is a new letter
in the alphabet.

I am not one to make
decisions, but I do rely

on my hands to parade
my mistakes. Remember

when we used to be seven
digit phone numbers.

What I wouldn't give to be
memorized again.

Caroline Ruby Wright

a year as a thief

a funnel-necked coat, peacocks tapestried in the weave, from the home we stayed in Reykjavik; everything was sour and my asthma acted up. cow-hair flats, spackled with gold; they fit my feet so well. pre-made sushi from the store across the street. a bowtie, handknit from farm-fresh wool, for when you want to feel fancy; an evening out with a friend, maybe, to the opera, maybe. postcards, to tell my nieces and nephews I love you, and Please give your (respective) mamas and papas a hug from me. Hair, Skin, & Nails vitamins. tampons, if I am to bleed from my uterus, I'll really be in no mood. a giftcard for See's chocolates, given to your ex by your mother, regifted to my mom. lipstick so red, the thought of it smeared over your anatomy. a ring bent from the end of a spoon, a mark of remembrance of your birthday spent on a sheep farm in Vermont. a scarf some man left behind at the bar, wound around my neck, accompanied by a distressed large-knit cardigan some woman left the night before. mascara. the bedspread, shredded after bouts of fucking. a book on sorcery, endless staves to reveal all that was taken.

Sharon Scholl

TODAY

—after *Billy Collins*

If ever there were a fall day so exalted
so worthy of a climate expletive

that it made you want to shed
down to cuticles and pubic hair

let wind feast on bones and sinews
glide through blood in a flood regatta

a day when dry, clear vistas are pasted
across the billboard of morning

You'd feel like knocking the hollows of oaks
to chase owls from their day beds

shaking dogs off the SPCA calendar
to cavort in leaf-choked air

cracking the gate of St. Michael's fair
to let pumpkin squads march out

into a whirl-i-gig of blazing leaves.

Kevin Nelson

The power of retrospect: An interview with Jon Pineda

Q: Your writing, characters and emotions (in *Little Anodynes*), feel very intimate and personal. If this intimacy is drawn from your personal experiences, did you ever struggle with that process? What suggestions would you have for writers who find it difficult to expose real emotion in their writing?

Pineda: I definitely struggle. It's tough work. Everything I write seems to come with its own set of rules. But I like the challenge, or I would've stopped long ago. The "real emotion" you mention eventually comes forward, I think, when the writer's intentions for the piece are secondary to what the rendered moment requires. Find out what's already alive in the sentence and protect it, cut away the things that endanger it.

Q: For me, your poems read like a thoughtful journal. Growing up, did you have a habit of journaling your life experiences and observations? Is this something you recommend to writers?

Pineda: I wrote short pieces here and there, but they weren't what I'd call journaling or keeping a diary. Now, though, I'm always keeping a notebook or small notepad handy. Things I jot down tend to be fragments for larger pieces I've yet to write. (Or maybe that's just my optimism at work.) Overall, I've found it to be helpful.

Q: Writers can be their own worst enemies, especially when they comparing the quality of their work to the highly edited finished work of other writers they admire. What processes you go through to come up with a finished piece?

Pineda: My process is one that embraces revision. I believe the more opportunities one has to live inside the constructed mo-

ments in language the better. But mostly, I want to revise beyond the “honeymoon period” of the draft. I want to settle into the rhythms that emerge after I’ve given the draft multiple readings. A poem might go through 20 or so revisions. I’m tinkering mostly, and it can sometimes go on until I stop caring about the poem altogether. When that happens, I’ve made a wrong turn somewhere. I’ll either backtrack or just throw the draft away and wait until it reemerges in a different version.

Q: Poetry is a tricky business that requires economy of words and sufficient thought and development to communicate experience and emotion. Has your ability to do this come naturally, or has it taken a lot of work? What form of writing or writing exercise has helped hone these skills?

Pineda: I feel like it’s developed over time. I like to push the construction of an image, take it down to its most basic form and see what holds. That’s the fun part of the work. I might add some words, or even rearrange the syntax entirely, to help things along. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t. Something that’s helped from the very beginning is to read as much as possible, whether in the specific genre or not. Studying the work of writers you admire is a great way to see how, exactly, those writers negotiate their particular narrative strategies. Write in the margins of your favorite books. Fill them with notes on how you’re reading the work at that specific moment in time. Then go back months (or years) later, read the passages, and compare the work to your notes. See if you still feel the same way. If you’re lucky, you might find that you disagree with this older version of your writerly self.

Q: As an established poet, how do you handle constructive criticism, and how has that changed over the years?

Pineda: I’m grateful for any constructive criticism from editors!

Q: There are times when my walls seem ten stories tall, when nothing’s flowing. How do you deal with periods of distraction or writer’s block, and how does your process today differ from the process you used when you were just beginning to write?

Pineda: When I first started writing, I ran the risk of writer's block by setting the bar too high. I would try to write something "meaningful," and I think that was actually my problem. Things were forced. Stilted. But then there was a shift in how I began to value both craft and intuition. Poetry became an essential way for me to understand my life when I stopped writing to create a "finished product" and, instead, welcomed the ongoing process itself.

Q: Everyone has their kryptonite. What writing form or genre do you find most difficult?

Pineda: I find poetry to be the most challenging, but for reasons I can't quite articulate sufficiently, which is why I probably write poems in the first place. I try to write through the confusion to see if I'll land on a moment that both holds my attention and goes beyond just being a kind of personal anecdote. I admire the hell of out of memoirists and fiction writers, too, and I think such genres bring their own set of difficulties, for sure. But poems have always confounded me. They make me smile when I'm leveled by the surprises they contain. I never know what to expect.

Q: When I mention a creative writing degree to friends and family, they wonder, sometimes secretly, sometimes openly, why I would waste my money on a degree that has such little chance for return of investment. Did you ever experience that reaction from others?

Pineda: Of course! But I'm going to shift this discussion a bit. It's strange, isn't it, how some people don't understand why anyone would devote their life to something as wonderful as poetry, which rarely yields money or any "return on investment"? It makes no sense, right? I'm guessing those same people scratch their heads over other decisions as well. All I can say on the matter is that I decided a long time ago that it wasn't my place to "sell" anyone on my dream of becoming a writer. It's hard enough to write a good sentence, especially one, as James Baldwin once said, that should be "clean as a bone." Those who feel writing is

vital will keep writing no matter what. I have been fortunate that my wife has always understood this about me. If I'm not writing, I'm not myself.

April Freely

WE WILL TAKE ANY MOTHER

2/10

motorists on I-480 are afraid the bridge will buckle
which changes the pressure in a muscle I can't name
in the blind-spot all zero-out I have clamped my peripheral vision down
for safety my body as any lighted screen
to get over this bridge forget infrastructure erosions all
in the near combustion my hand reaches across the plane
of her body in a maternal reflex between my mother and the front
of the plastic cab diastolic against systolic
that slash the full gesture a quality of waking is
I drive down the brake between any two elements
I am the third pressing the body down
in repetitive motion as all mothers now lean
across my hand from this angle I am at her
face blinking for ninety-three minutes my eyes burning into her
left side I know this side well as if restrained
she grabs her commuter cup I try to get her to come at me
head-on stills a microsecond apart my mother is a kind
rain when she turns her head now notice
several radial mistakes as if she's a stranger
neither does the day know Goniometer the confusion
of my own face in the absences of commuters

WE WILL TAKE ANY MOTHER

5/10

a series is real the face does distort this contrapuntal body
muscles underneath the surface pulling in opposite directions
darker and lighter areas like a social studies diagram
illustrating the schema of mesa cavern and town
it is not a real place you know a collection of features
but no real occurrence like my face closed down when I am not
looking at you I make my face a blind I hide all
my guns get back to your mother as a child grabs hold
the soft of mother's upper arm "near" and not "in" maps should
not be conflated *object permanence* is the first mother hidden in her own hands
peek at the mother now lost in a field of—
this is how the landmark works hands you know
pulled back to reveal the familiar face you have
forgotten admit it

WE WILL TAKE ANY MOTHER

9/10

dolls are a kind of practice making them speak
washing their plastic bodies by now I
recognize the numbness that comes upon me in sleep
as I sit next to the mother not speaking
also by touch I keep Sutro to myself like a small midnight
hour I learned from the other dolls seven sisters
show there are seven ways to hold
the breath my mother wakes from her morphine sleep asking
what next this is the warp of day her shock
her sterile room just another white box on earth
where she repeats the horror of waking several
times when the full light hits day is a long labor across
a landscape this is not still even once
the day we are reaching for throws us
down the next sloping drive I would like you to know
now the proper word for this is not
shock a pilgrimage tamps you down makes you lie
flat you follow something I'd call *fear* trying to scan the darkness
for color beneath the red black find the bluer black
beneath sea-foam green and its black that is breaking up black
like a swift exhalation black that exceeds the bound

WE WILL TAKE ANY MOTHER

10/10

even Big Mamma is quiet waiting to see if she is breathing
 I wake like light on a clutch of mirrors shock
 gives us some idea of the relative size of such a large anima
 a landmark is the well - behaved
 reflection in full sight of my ornery one
 no a landmark is the opposite
 of the directions you give yourself you lose
 her you are going to she will fade away in a cold
 fog we have already seen the blunt hand the press of another
 character larger than these after "day" at the hospital I'd fall
 into bed as if rocked then flattened by the laying on
 of hundreds of hands thankfully pushed back
 by the weight of a very thick smoke regarding *object permanence*
 she said *I was afraid the sun would never rise*
I scolded myself *told myself* 'this is a cliché
 this is iambic this fear
 is a known entity' formal like bowing my head
 evening first then morning
 the first day I tore down

Liberty Heise

BIOACOUSTICS

The pebbles, rock scabble moving down
the dry gravel-mined hillsides of those serpentine highways
from one county to another.

Road cuts
the everlasting gobstopper of non-foliated
metamorphic rock
taking us to the core —
where ever that might be.

The strong rustle of leaves take their own place
in the action shot
as needles break and dive. A bird lights and then takes flight
not without depositing her voice in the niche.

A theory emerged from the uninhabited wilds of jungle and forest
that lead scientists to believe that each creature has a sound
fitting within a niche and as the niche fills, the new
evolve to fill a different spot in the spectrum.

Those pitch black evenings when the car was pulled off the road
brother and sister, would stand near the blueberry bush farm
and listen.

Every known herpetological fact would come back to her.
This theory blossomed proof as the richness of the choir grew.
The rights of passage, the metamorphosis, the emergence, the cycles.
Vibration, skin respiration, those cold cat eyes.

THE SHRIKE

My gods were birds
Oh they could soar on wings of grace
But in ones and twos
I called them down to earth
They came all trusting
What had they to fear, being gods
They sat down beside me
And when they began to sing
I listened all enthralled, for a time
Their separate songs began in loving harmonies
but diverged as they expostulated theologies
So very soon there was cacophony,
and a most annoying dissonance
Since I had gained their confidence
and they were unvigilant in their busy dissension
I snatched them, one by one
and impaled them on
the thorns of my locust tree
Oh, they were surprised
They struggled for a time
and then died without understanding

Now when their desiccated bodies
flutter in the wind
their wings snap open
They seem about to take flight
But the thorns hold them
I was careful
Sometimes I pick at the carcasses
but there's no sustenance there
just beaks and horny vellum
and moldering bones

V

**These are nights of hurtling rivers.
Names taken in vain
and cried out of the sunroofs
of Camaros**

- Betsy Brown

THE CITY OF THE FUTURE

There are two kinds of people in the world: those that live above the horizon and those that live below it.

Let's pin our hopes on the blond boy in a speedo fighting a muscle-bound frog in a sub-Atlantic lair. He has swum so far to get here. Below sea level, it is revealed to us that communication is a matter of wires, waves, and hoses. Travel is a matter of wings or fins or flippers. When a puffer fish floats like a balloon in the sky, we know something is wrong.

There are two kinds of people in the world: frogs and ostriches.

We can learn so much from ostriches. When to look down our noses. When to bury our heads, the architecture of asses, the flowers of assholes. The Cold War is an economic engine. Remember, whatever you do, the big ostrich is watching. She is the fire that floats our balloon, the truck whose exhaust outlines our dream cities.

There are two kinds of people in the world: frogs and ostriches, puffer fish and squirrels, bees and flying horses.

Long ago in our history, back when we were stick figures crudely drawn, a frog led us to peace. She stilled the sword-waving hordes. She plugged the great volcano. Dinosaurs were granted another era to live. So we know it can be done.

When a puffer fish floats like a balloon in the sky, we know something is wrong.

Or is it? This is the land of transformations. To pee is to cry is to come. A frog becomes a bee. A man becomes an ostrich. A dog becomes a bird. A mouse becomes a truck. A totem becomes a dick. In an alternate universe, a garden of penises blossoms un-

der a grow-light. "My goodness there's some large tallywackers in there." A vagina is a cactus is a dress with a fringe is a crow shitting is a pair of prosthetic legs is a tongue and a sponge is a carpet of hearts.

The city of the future is built of transparent super-towers, as thin as needles.

While a boob rolls by like a tumbleweed, the frog leader demands that we all recover. A war is fought with signs and banners. A volley of assertions. A bulwark of denials. What are we fighting for? For words and ideas. For signs and symbols. For English and Esperanto. For Nomi Malone in *Goddess*. For sludge fudge. For a lady with lorgnette. Her silence speaks volumes.

And this time, we didn't forget the gravy.

When a squirrel forces gravy down the maw of a frog, the frog defecates honey that feeds Pegasus and pelicans. A feathered dog is surrounded by frog cherubim, like Bouguereau's *Return of Spring*. There's something symbiotic about these frogs and birds. Thanks to them, the world keeps on ending, but never the same way twice.

Kevin Nelson

Interview with Sun Yung Shin

Kevin: I'm really excited to speak with you. It's not every day I get to speak with the author of a book that moves us. But I have to tell you, when I first started reading your collection it seemed very complicated and distant. I mean, it's rare to be exposed to a collection like yours, one that causes me to pause and actually evaluate the style and format of the work. At first I questioned whether I could work through it, but as I continued reading, it started making sense – I could see why you arranged it the way you did. I just thought it was . . . I loved it – the way you put everything together. And so I came away with a different understanding of a number of issues, including adoption and the way we associate as societies. I began thinking about the complications of “being adopted”—about the layered experiences one must go through to become part of another life, and the way these layers can become more complicated based on gender, ethnicity, or social status—being moved from your own history and dropped into somebody else's history. It's it really made me think about movement and transitions in a different way.

Shin: Okay. Well, go ahead.

KN: In “Valley Uncanny,” your narrator reflects, “When are we all going back?” but then makes an observation: “There is no back. There is no there there.” I wondered if this reflects on your condition, an observation borne of experience, a return to your history or country, or was it something more existential or philosophical?

Shin: Well, for me, the word *back* is very interesting. It's something I wanted to explore—I mean it's English, I'm not sure how old—in a comparison to a spatial-temporal language—words that indicate spatiality and temporality—and whether it overlaps in another language the same way that English, which is part of a linear time tradition, in which time is assumed to go, as we express it in English, goes forward, which is a physical

movement. And so, when we say “go back” we’re both talking about, for many immigrants, this idea of going back. That word refers to both interior space, and beyond some other—going back in time. But of course you can’t go back in time, can’t go back to a place you left. It’s not the same place—isn’t the same thing—because it’s a different time.

So that’s something that I always sort of chewed over, consciously or subconsciously, what that really means: How that is such a slippery convergence of time and space. I think that implies—the way that non-immigrants might ask immigrants if there’s kind of a sense of—that you can *go back*. Of course you can go to whatever explicative country or land. But for a lot of people who are immigrants, all throughout “historical times,” all these places, political boundaries, etcetera, are constantly shifting.

So I think that, in some ways, *going back* implies this contemporary American sense that we’re at the end of history. So many Americans, white Americans—people that live in the United States, their families—if they were to go back to territorial times, haven’t gone through all the shifting—political boundaries and just the slipperiness of *place* in that way. I’m trying to raise questions about the word *back*, not make any assumptions about how it is for anyone in particular, just that immigrants get asked that a lot, and it’s just a loaded question, hard to answer

KN: Yes, I see. I suppose that—it’s funny because we sometime just assume that we are talking in linear sense, don’t we? And when we speak about “back as a movement” we begin to understand the different dimensions that exist within that concept.

Shin: Yes. I mean, yes you can answer, “I’ve been back x-number of times to this place,” but it never feels like a very gratifying sort of response to the question.

KN: You use a lot metaphoric symbolism in your writings—cyborgs and other unlikely characters—and I’m curious about your use of the story, “The Other Asterion, or, The Minotaur’s Sacrifice (A Story).” In this piece, the protagonist identifies as a prison guard,

in in an orphanage, in the service of Asterion. But during the story the narrator experiences a metamorphosis in which, if I am interpreting it correctly, they become Asterion. Again, I wondered if this was a way of communicating how you might have seen your own life evolve, becoming the overseer of your own life, or if it was an act of defiance?

Shin: You know, I think it's all of those things. I don't know if you had a chance to read the original story by Jorge Borges. It's quite short, I encourage you to read it. And there's just that one line about the other Asterion that I pulled out for the epigraph. I think—you know, if you honor the piece, kind of, hawking, doubling . . . I'm trying to get at, I think, more of a universal condition brought forth in a person's experience, when they've been displaced or dispossessed, or gone through renaming or re-nationing or whatever: Or even just anyone in their daily life. Kind of the way that we can look at any character or any sort of character in any story as market types, like each of us may have a prison guard in our personalities that is disciplining or watching you and me, other parts of our personality. Or different parts of our personality may serve multiple kinds of policing functions. And then to have this guard who is also caring and loving, because that's all that this character has. I think that's sort of a meditation on the loneliness of the monster, or the loneliness of like whatever is within each of us. Something socially unacceptable that has to be hidden away, something that may die with us, that is abhorrent to one's family. It could be a metaphor for being who you are, for being an artist, for being transgender, for being illegitimate, or like any kind of outlaw kind of situation. Does that make sense?

KN: Yeah. I suppose it could be internal conflict alone—that's something we all have. Your character moves and grows, acknowledges the changes. I don't know that we all notice this happening to us, until we look back.

Shin: Yeah, so one of my, you could say, larger indirect projects is about, not so much eliminating the adoptee experience, but to show how—I guess it's really like a continuation of an exis-

tentialistic project in general. The construction of the adoptee is the one way to explore the facets of identity that are constructed, that are erasable. Just sort of exploring—like cyborg and the border between human and machine. What is human? What is it to be human? That's why highbred monsters like Asterion, who had a Human for a mother and a Bull father— a kind of highbred identity?

KN: Right, I found that reference interesting—the use of the cyborg as a representation—how we are all pieces of the whole, machinelike. We have interchangeable parts depending on our condition, are sort of molded and muted that way.

Shin: Yes. It's true for everyone.

KN: I thought the design and structure of your collection was amazing. One part that really struck me was your use of the scale and graph to delineate an understanding of history and identity. It seemed unusually elementary and yet, from a symbolic standpoint, complex.

On examination, there appears to be a connection between familiarity and human likeness, a scale that delineate an industrial robot and a healthy person. It appears that movement provides for more growth and discovery than does stillness. I also noted that at the highest level is a reference to "Uncanny Valley" and "Human likeness." The graph suggests that movement towards the uncanny valley may provide relief or fulfillment. This is such an unusual demonstration of existence, it made me wonder when, as the author, you first recall sensing this scale existed, and that moving towards the uncanny valley could provide relief or fulfillment?

Shin: You know I don't remember when I first sort of heard of the uncanny valley, but it was really a concept that developed, for me, in the last ten to twenty years. Because I wrote this piece, it started as a piece of fiction, for a series called *The Encyclopedia*—three volumes of experimental fiction formed as an encyclopedia. So I have pieces in the first two volumes, and then I wrote, for the letter "V," "Valley Uncanny." So I think I

must've just happened across it while was reading about robots or something. So my understanding of the moving and the still, because what we're talking about—still—so while puppets are still, zombies are moving, so things that are moving are more stressing. I don't think that aligns with personal growth, unless I'm misunderstanding what your suggesting, and so the story or the poem, or whatever, the essay piece that I wrote, where I reproduce those lines—dotted line and a solid line—I think it's always like graphical, the notation of behavior, and I think like the convergence of this graph or really just any kind of diagram is interesting, like any abstraction or model of something that we're isolating, in behavior or movement or something. It's interesting because of what it leaves out. I think for me it's more about the performance of childhood, and in what ways children understand the performance of being human. What aspects are legible in terms of being in motion, and what aspects are legible in terms of being still? Your appearance as a still object is one thing. How you move is another. Together they create your legible identity as a person within these categories.

As far as the valley, to me it's about a lot of things—what society allows or encourages in terms of violence against different kinds of things. Like who does it objectify? Western society makes dogs, like pet dogs, almost humanlike in its law. But pigs and cows are objects: they're slaughtered, their objectified, and don't get the same protections as dogs do legally. Then there are all these comparisons, like parent versus child, woman versus man—how do we compare? It's basically binary. So someone is like binary, like a transgendered person, or a gay person, or just a woman that doesn't fit into, or far enough away from, masculinity. That person is exposed to violence because the abhorrence is culturally produced against that figure—it's been justified. For me so much of this stuff is philosophical or abstract—can be abstracted into language, like really the base, "Who is subject to what kind of violence? And, what lives and forms do we consider the most valuable?"

KN: That's an angle I hadn't thought about—distance as value. Much of your writing does that: helps me explore different angles of the same topic. While reading I couldn't help thinking about

the way in which displacement affects the way we see the world. Because we know humans have an intrinsic need to belong, I wondered if a profound interruption to that need would lead to feelings of resentment towards those they believe caused that separation or otherness. In fact I wondered if your experience as an adoptee left you experiencing those kinds of feelings—resentments about having things taken from you, being completely uprooted and dropped into a completely different life?

SY: Well, I mean, I think you might have answered your own question. How could you not? You'd have to be a robot. I don't want to—although I feel like I do all the time—I don't want to speak for other adoptees or other immigrants in terms of resentments, because you can always find exceptions to this, but I think there's so many other writers or artists have written about or done work about—I mean it's just loss, it's not even like—if someone you loved just died, it's a part of your inheritance. I don't know. I don't want to be salty about that question, but I'm not sure.

KN: I guess, I'm really wondering—I still hold on to some resentments, let's say, for instance, for being uprooted from the place I grew up and went through school and then, in high school having my parents move me to another place, drop me into a new school, new environment: it changed everything, and I always wonder what would have happened if I were left in my old life, wonder how my life may have been different, but then I think, "Well, things happen—get on with it," but then I think about how much more profound that change would have been if I were pulled away from my entire understanding of life.

SY: Well that's the thing because I think the word resentment is a problem, because resentment is like a judgment about the thing. It's hard to define, too, resentment in trying to feel whatever emotions, but—I don't, I mean hopefully this isn't like the top note of my work—I guess I'll put it that way. Because it's not that simple in terms of trying to connect with other people. I mean it's just complex, like the complexity of life and being—you know, the human experiment in terms of migration,

whether it's forced migration or voluntary migration. What society are you in, and how does it frame human movement? How does it frame human family and belonging and lineage? What's important to the culture? What's valuable? Covering an anthropological sense, I think it's good for us to look at things comparatively. Like what is it about this particular society that helps a person survive, and what type of status helps people get access to resources? What kinds of social statuses are important to that society? So, for me, the political framework is we're involved in looking at cultures, how they treat women, how they value and don't value the bond between a mother and child. How they see carnal responsibilities. How they trace lineage, whether it's patrilineal or matrilineal depends on society. I like to look at war and colonization. I think it's a way of taking the individual experience and trying to understand what it takes for the collective as well as the individual. Then looking at the symmetries in inequalities. I have worked to become part of a larger conversation about the rights and status of women, about reproductive rights. Ultimately it's about what kind of person is disposable in this culture. What kind of person is basically e-commerce? If we look at human trafficking, child trafficking, it goes in all these different directions. We're constantly being told, as trans-national adoptees, we should be grateful. That's something we, collectively, have to deal with.

Politically, it's ultimately about the United States or the Western sense of superiority as a culture. So it really just speaks to Western imperialism, the way that colonialism and financial restructuring, post-colonialism, has imposed economies, systems, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. Just look at colonizations and the vast migrations of children from one place to the other. So I was, in that sense, part of an anti-colonial project, anti-white supremacy project from like white people—or an assumption that brown people can't raise their children. Domestically, you have to look at the history: white destructionists, nations, cultures, families, religion, etcetera—wholesale attempted genocide, cultural genocide, the adoption discourse proved. You note the removal of Indian children from their families and being sent to boarding schools. You know all of that, so when trying to think of, what most Americans would not

think of, or not know of, but if they knew they would say, “Hey that’s great.” Because America is such a great charitable country, taking in these other children and giving them American opportunities. You know, the opportunity to lay waste to the rest of the planet basically, in terms of racial capitalism. And so a lot of us are part of a counter-narrative to the narrative about America – their effect on the the planet.

KN: I get what you’re saying. There are a lot of different angles to these issues, whether it’s human trafficking or the value of relationships between children and their mothers. What you say really make sense. The concept of “being thankful for” seems odd when you question the conditions that lead to an adoption in the first place, but I wonder if, examining the actual motivation, the intentions were based on good as opposed to any possible negative outcomes, or unintended consequences, so it’s interesting that you point out adoptees are expected to be grateful. In your collection you also focus on the significant psychological effect of being an “other” living with others, a guest in your new life. This made me wonder if these feelings ever really resolve themselves, or if a person in the situation always feels like a stranger in their own life. Is there some equilibrium in the end.

SY: Well I guess I don’t really know what the end is [laughing]. The human life is complex. I think any writer is looking at the complexity rather than the . . . I guess I really don’t know how to answer that. I guess there’s a difference between writing and . . . you know the book, the poems, and the essays are a performance. They’re not my real life. As far as my real life—real feelings for various things—that’s a different project, a private project, I guess. I’ll just leave it there.

KN: I feel like I should let you know that I see this work as more than just adoption. It motivated me to think deeper about all of the topics you discuss. While the collection helped me see adoption differently, it also helped me examine the connections, history, and the fragile relationship between guest and host. I am

a much deeper appreciation for the way people interact with one another, both locally and globally.

SY: I appreciate that. You know my project with this book was really, in my mind, I wanted to explore the politics of hospitality. So all that stuff about the Minotaur and the cyborg—I mean thinking about where the U.S. is and where the world is today in terms of borders and armed conflict, a mass incarceration nation, a racist nation, the nation that has a gun for every man woman and child. The U.S. is the world's largest arms dealer. Considering things like political and physical walls and borders, like in the 90s there were only about, I don't know, seventeen walls around the world, and now there are like seventy. So, it's, I mean, you know adoption schmadoption, that's just one technology. We're trying to solve all these different problems—these are Band-Aid problems. The real issue for me is how we create, how nations create foreigners, which create violence. How does the U.S. participate in the process of some people have rights and some people don't. Some people are disposable and some people are not. So it's like all of this—it's really about, whether we want to call it a project or whatever, my real country is still in the Civil War, since before I was born. Quite likely, even if I was live to be a hundred, it's highly possible that things could get worse in the Korean Peninsula. So it's like all of my work is in some ways trying to be this case study or some kind of technology and categorizations that were made in order to expose these things.

KN: It makes sense. We start a conversation about hosts, hospitality, and understanding—about how things are valued and how some things are devalued. It's clear to me that your project is about that. It's about power and influence and who has it. It's about how we take each other in, or keep each other at a distance.

SY: Yeah, so I always try to resist—not that you're trying to do this—but I don't want people to reduce it to adoption, because that's just like one aspect of these topics. It's been a benefit for me, in terms of being inside of these intersections, legal pro-

cesses, and social processes—and we are all of course subject to all of these processes because of the way civilizations have developed now. If your state resists that's incredibly dangerous status. So it makes me think of what kind of privileges my citizenship confers upon me—my U.S. citizenship. And I feel, because these privileges cause so much harm to the rest of the planet—just trash alone, like we're 5 percent of the world population and we create 25 percent of the world's garbage—for anyone who is a reasonable privileged, they have an enhanced obligation to all living things. You need to make time and use of investigation and democratic projects using whatever specialties you have, including whatever civic involvement you participate in. Because you have an obligation to do something about the things that are suffering because of our activities—the way we organize our society, the way we are born into, the way we benefit from, or participate in. What can we do, whatever our roles are, to question that, call attention to practices that are seen as normalized by the rest of society.

KN: I'll think about that in the future. Thank you your indulgence, and for your art.

SY: We are artists. I appreciate your interest in my work.

Philip Kobylarz

FRAMES

Who's to say it's not just rock, water, sand, minerals of differing colors, glass which
is sand, some sunlight, accompaniment
of noises not chosen, but given, quietude of worms. Liquid carries a tune: melody
of blood. Refrain of bile, string
work of mucus. Trees in the park sway and shed few leaves in ablution.
Wood, grained and servile waits in stacks
of sullenness, raped, used, hammered, sawed, wanting to become. Houses built to
be rebuilt.

Salawu Olajide

ELDER ARACHNIDS

Someone will pull this house down one day. Someone who never feels our pulses within its walls will come with spacedozer tearing its neck down. Someone will break it down into debris. This house shall lay like body. Its hands mangled. Its head broken. Its veranda blown out. The lilac tree growing at its from cut off like veins from the body. Someone will fry our eyes with policies of map. We shall watch from afar how yellow monster roars at our grieving faces. The house shall grow again with a front patio and bougainvillea; and the stranger within shall cast us toxic look. This house will have to join its mega member in the city, he says. We shall seek new place beyond the teeth of the city; somewhere within our old house incarnate, old mirror and grandfather are interred.

Barry Herzog

ME

Let me introduce myself he says

Re-introduce yourself you mean I say
gesturing to get it right

Let me introduce myself
not as you remember me but as I am

How you were I interrupt
not how you are
They're different you know

Let me introduce myself he says
how I am not as I was
at which point I blow my nose quite
loudly into a handkerchief I keep
handy for the purpose

Go on I say
how you are not were

Let me introduce myself he says
I was not yet twenty when last we met

Nineteen years I interrupt
seven months four days
a clutch of hours, a festival
of minutes

He shuts his eyes
folds his arms across his chest
head turned to face a window

I was nineteen nearly twenty
writing at a desk when last
we met

In a cafeteria having coffee
and a donut
a chocolate icing donut with nuts on it

I was writing at a table in a cafeteria in
the afternoon

Eleven in the morning
after classes
before the noon day rush

I turned a page that I was writing on
an assignment
stopped work and called the page
Day One Of A Newly Minted Me
In capitals

Just the first letter of each word

All capitals

I put down my age
the day that I was born
what I was becoming
words bouncing along the sound proof
ceiling above my head

Words inside your head
Your skull bone was
the ceiling

I was there he says
I know

I was there I say

I know
and blow my nose into my handkerchief again
quite loudly

Don't interrupt he says

I don't I say
That's you quite frequently

He blows his nose into a handkerchief which
I believe is mine

I wrote I wonder who I am right here
right now
and what I will become

Old and foolish
Obstinate
Self-centered

Kindly wise and fondly thought of
admirers numbered
in the tens of thousands

Don't interrupt he says
Don't blow your nose
however softly
or I will climb those stairs up to the roof
of this very building

Seven stories

and fling myself off that very
roof and turn to mush on the pavement
far below

Or fly off on wind
to Xanadu

Correct for once he says

I die you know

You die quite quietly

An unexpected stoppage
of the heart
Millions weep and mourn

Millions could care less

Let me introduce myself he says
Re-introduce yourself I say
As we sneeze
into our handkerchief
quite quietly

Jasmin Rae Ziegler

Trauma and the Writing Process: Cipher, Sprinter, Toad

It is dawn and I can't write. I hear only the fuzz of whispers in my head. I imagine spinning this fuzz on a wheel into a kind of golden word-thread. I visualize lassoing the rising sun with that thread but the words still aren't coming. The page still sits blank. I am senseless to words. I burrow my limbs down into child's pose. The pose is my tunnel, my channel. My body hums. Where am I? Nowhere. Who am I? No one. I am flat and round. My body is the shape of a yawn. To write is to represent something else. In other words, this body of mine, in the act of writing, is a cipher. The origin of the word cipher comes from the Arabic word, *ṣifr*, which means "zero." As a writer, I need to go to this place where I am zero. Where I am empty and open. This is the place I come back to again and again. Start over, I tell myself. Curl yourself into zero and start over. As a survivor of trauma, this is also the place I would go after a beating. Trauma flattened me out. Made me something else. Made me invisible. Made me see-through. Made me a zero. I am not grateful for that. But recently I am seeing a strange kind of existential value in that for my writing. Zero leaves me open. This openness is full of value. Zero is full of value. Start over, I tell myself. Curl yourself into a zero and start over.

Sometimes I go months without writing. When I return to the page, I hear only the static of guilt in my head. The blank page bears down on me. The blank page contracts. I am at the center of those contractions. The blank page curses me. The blank page tells me it wishes I was never conceived. I fight my way out with raw pre-words. I'm not sure if I'm writing words or hieroglyphs. My sentences will need revision, but the only way to keep the blank page from cursing at me is to just keep writing. Run, I tell myself. I am a sprinter. The Peregrine Falcon is a sprinter and the fastest animal on the planet when in a

dive. It can travel two hundred miles per hour. It sprints because it's hungry and it needs to eat. I am hungry. I need to eat. When I'm writing, I am no longer the hunted. I am the hunter. That power-shift usurps some of the anxiety of my past. It allows me to reclaim and feed something intangible within me. When I write in these sprints, it is a pressure. But I created this pressure. I created the hunger and the need. Run, I tell myself. Words matter. An adverb matters. Run after something. I am not running away.

I am in child's pose. Who am I? I am flat to the earth's heat. I spread my ten webbed fingers. Suction them into the ground, the dust, the dirt. My body warms against the earth's round belly. There is a hot core in there. My bones lay flat but they know what it is to ignite, to be paradox, to press down but go up. These bones know what it is to soar. My totem animal for my writing is a toad. A toad understands the heavy wet smell of the muck and mire. I count myself among the Word Witches. The toad is an ideal ingredient for any witchy brew. I wear an invisible Toadstone to ward off poison. Old voices come back to poison me. You can't do this, they say. But the toadstone protects me. Mr. Toad in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* is a rather arrogant character. I need a little arrogance. I need to open my warty maw and let out the deep hoarse base of my voice. When I am writing, I am croaking. Yes. When I am writing, some of me is dying, so that the parts I value, live on.

Nikia Chaney

very kind of hide

If you or me or us and them
Are bridges then what is it

The softness of my sister-friend, the way
Of the ever omnipresent hide

An unscrubbed house, clear face,
Clean cheeks, the wonder

On her wooly head,
A whole world breaking like an egg.

Focusing always on the him
Walking toward her

What is this wetness

If not a sex, or a callous
Act to hold, a surface

My mama didn't have babies,
My aunty never

Fought a day in her life,
Anger was a foreign thing in these palms

We black girls just wanting to be pink and dancers
But that wooden label

That arching gate, stretches
Wide rubber masks over our faces.

Begging us to rock back and forth
Here, underground safe dry

Wet on the fur spit
Settling on the backside of the hide

Thor Macklanburg

chokeberry

did they dig you deep
enough? why the
rain smell of
still yr lover spit?

in night i, im
brushng choke
berry cheek,
s-s-slurrin' wizprs
to childsrn slippin' by.

you left yr hands
with lil' ones, din't ya?
din't ya left yr hands
on me

Ali O'Reilly

FEINTS

I have tried to find an object of matched weight
To the familiarity of your hand dead in mine during sleep.

I am in the corner booth, dripping water on a straw wrapper
So something else can outwardly writhe.

Someone Nice suggested a therapist
I say there is a crosswalk speaker on Central and 26th that routinely
tells me to wait.

I am leaving a Bachelorette party early
Because there were fake hydrangeas in real water

And if there's one thing I can't stand it's:
People who try and fool Gods and people at the same time.

Philip Kobylarz

ANIMATION, SUSPENDED

Believing is seeing. Immolation, by ice. The scheme of things brought
about some scheming, more things. Saying so,
it is said. A match drops from leaves of a potted plant. One way to go
about it: take a bus, always there, sometimes.
He brings with him a favorite marionette, children notice. Acting like
adults, they have better things to do, like sleep.
Fits and shakes of a dream interrupted by reality. Sounds of someone
crying or a new bird flown in for winter.
They say the wind causes tension among certain people, we say howling.
Spit spat from balconies can be rain.

Kelli Allen

Tortoises are unattached from snow in any city

Think about the second time you were crippled. Myths
cause trouble and stimulate our need for sleeping

all winter. The truth is that what wounds in some forest
slices through maps pocketed, too. Even if the angler

reminds us to keep lights on toward the sea, rounding
hands to binocular eyes, does not make a plenum smaller.

The crescendo is liveness sinking beneath a new address,
letters steeping high, reverence overtaking wrinkled stamps.

There is an anagram for your teeth against my pale belly. Just
as extending one neck out to collect berries for months ahead,

we do not once forget how lashes cling flat over damp January
cheeks. Burrowing through this weeping is how we chew *amen*.

Your head in my lap, afternoon discussing shells long overdue,
and the road just opens white, cold, going on faster, going at all.

ELEGY FOR BREATHING HILL

Before the hill huffed itself flat
we would ride its inhalations
to the top of the utility pole,
coax electricity into our empty forties,
cover the bottles with coats, so copters
couldn't catch us by their glows.
We lived in the darks between trains
that pushed past like a finger
holding open our eyes while their other hand
constricts our pupils with a light. They know,
there are so many ways one can be made
not to breathe again. What happened to Ohio
to make it flat as a lid on a sealed jar
or a prop coffin? Something here
blows against me hard enough
that to walk is to climb, but I cannot
find its mouth. When I think of what
I might not have again, I sip a single strand
of stolen lightning. It sustains
while I wait for this land that holds me
to un-catch its breath.

Salawu Olajide

yellow fever

i spend my nights looking at the nomads of the sky. each of them passing our territory unchecked. each day foreign sun guests the sky. what mother does before the mirror planning for her leave and i for Westminster, i call that whitestaining. how mother sounds while addressing the woman at the embassy i call that expectations. the batting of her eyelids, i call that her mind. the gait of her prehensile legs, i call that bird. the bird never stays in the same nest, she builds her nest where she can find her straws, i call that beak migraine. the tree is the drying body of the country, i call that pale. she flies to the republic where she can find her grains, i call that musing. the pulsing of her breasts, i call that desire, that is actually a raging harmattan fire. the follicles growing of her skin, i call that cactus. the little box to tick at the corner of her paper, i call that freedom. the breaking of syllables from her lips, i call that song. songs are immortal. let's begin with songs and end everything above the sea.

Morgan Grayce Willow

In Front of the Tiger's Smile:
A review of Bill Tremblay's
Walks Along the Ditch
Lynx House Press, 2016

Among the epigraphs Bill Tremblay has chosen to welcome readers into *Walks Along the Ditch* is this from Chinese philosopher Mencius: "When your mind becomes quiet/you can think in front of the tiger's smile." In this, his eighth collection of poems, Tremblay not only faces the tiger, he learns to embrace it.

Having completed a distinguished and fruitful career teaching poetry at Colorado State University, the poet turns his attention inward. "You hand in your keys, and it's over. /Thirty-three years and a gold watch." The title of the poem, "The Larimer-Weld Ditch," names an irrigation ditch near the poet's home where, on his daily walks, he wonders:

... if there's time to clear your
soul of debris before the ditch rider lowers
the sluice-gate. . .

That ditch rider, death, is the tiger – the tiger who smiles just before he pounces.

The speaker in these poems is not, however, sentenced to facing the questions of life's later days without assistance. As the saying goes, when the student is ready, the teacher appears. In this collection, revered teacher becomes student – a student of T'ai Chi Ch'uan. In the poem "Five Principles":

... Teacher says,
"Relax, but be alert," the first of many paradoxes
that make me smile.

To the fiercely engaged student, this is a new stance.

... It's not the world
but that we take it so hard. Can we learn to stop

resisting the charging bull and deflect its power
into emptiness?

The poems in *Walks Along the Ditch* are infused with the energy and language of T'ai Chi. Yet, while practitioners will appreciate terms like diagonal flying, bubbling well, beautiful lady, readers do not need to know the forms of T'ai Chi to understand the power of its centering influence on the speaker, and on themselves. From the rooted, quiet place achieved in these poems comes both defense in the face of life's challenges and poetry itself. In "The Page" the poet applies the power of the centering practice to the writing of poems.

And for the magic blue ink you must brave
the shroud's touch, the everything the nothing is.

The subjects in these poems cover the gamut as the speaker confronts the range of failings from personal regrets to cultural and historical destruction. In "The War" the poet describes an all too familiar scene where police in riot gear press a protesting crowd.

Where have I seen this before?
More than fifty years ago I was a leaf on that tree.
Can the crowd turn its other cheek,

...

Where does the witness stand as between
the many and the few who each have a claim?

In another poem, "Letter to Miguel Hernandez," the speaker asks:

... How could they love
their guns so much? When did the preciousness of
life die in them?

For sustenance – for there can be no answer – the speaker turns again to the Chinese martial art of T'ai Chi:

... I keep doing my upward,
my downward, until my feet take root
in the earth and I breathe, embryonic,
toward the place I was before I was born.

Professor Cheng Man-ch'ing, one of the great masters of T'ai Chi, was also known for having mastered Chinese medicine, painting, calligraphy, and poetry. With *Walks Along the Ditch*, Bill Tremblay steps into the path of the master with at least two of these excellences: T'ai Chi and poetry. For at this time when it so often feels that all hope is lost and all that's left to our imagination is destruction and endings, Tremblay puts his faith in these two practices. In "Imagining California," after the dose of "daily toast and outrage," the poet nevertheless persists because the practice is ultimately our only defense against demise.

Poetry is when you keep imagining California despite everything.

We can do anything in poetry, so why not anywhere?
I will die reaching for a pen.

Kelli Allen

The dilemma is how we crawl indirectly into sun

There is a point between middle finger's tip
and palm's sponged base where the length
of you fits. This holding is our penumbra,
a territory absent. Even Haphaestus, crazed,
her tenuous eyes upward and out, notices
what firms plump from stem to nail. At night

this does not matter. Only brackish afternoon,
when illicit means opening, when mares swallow
apples past their nine square teeth, and I salt
your thigh, disengage from pedagogy, excuse,
justification into the simple, pulled tight closer, want.

There is no ladder to lean against and we have counted
from Apollo to Tarsus in mimicry. We grip, for ill or good,
what's most likely to abandon us. This leaves only
an interstate backing our river. This leaves vinegar
rimming the pot, butt-up to sugar, bent as a face seen first
through beveled glass, a bauble next, tongued fur to throat.

John Sibley Williams

HOUSE AND SAVAGE WIND

Across the façade of morning
a wind littered with old flags

alloys the distant pop and holler
of rifles and children until neither

exists freely of the other. My
breath seems a ghost song

compared to all this living.
All the shadows not yet

eaten by light play at walking
on the water that's keeping

the calla lilies tall and white.
Still a few deer by the river.

Still the suggestion of youth
and the end of youth carried

together through my open
window. Thank god, we've left

the world unfinished. Thank god,
these bones that should come

with a high cost come
with such a high cost.

AFTERWORD

I was in a small, intensive summer workshop—three or four weeks long, three or four days per week, three or four hours a day, as I recall (I really can't remember if it was three or four), rapt as we listened to and learned from Jorie Graham—when I first heard this: "It really matters that great poems get written, and it doesn't matter a damn who writes them." Jorie attributed the quote to Ezra Pound, with the caveat that it may be apocryphal. Whether Pound said it or not, I'm glad it got said and saved and passed along. It's one of those things that you hear said and ever after can't see things the way you saw them before (when I heard Dean Young say, about poets and poetry, *We're not making bird cages, we're making birds*, my world was altered in the same way). What Pound said (or didn't say) resonated and revolved within and without until one day I decided I had to start a journal, and that that journal would publish poems anonymously, and would be called *Anon*. I told an editor and writer friend about my idea over beers, and he loved it. A few days later, he sent me a link to an all-online journal called *Anon Poetry Magazine* that . . . well, I felt shades of what Alfred Russell Wallace must have felt turning the pages of *On the Origin of Species*.

While not anonymous, the "city" part of "Poetry City, USA" is something I think of metaphorically. When we drive or walk or ride through a city, we see neighborhoods, intricate carvings on soffits, signature building with brick or wood or stone, narrow or cobblestone streets, double-decker busses or bridges, the tile or wood or stairwells in restaurants, stores the charm of which makes us want to buy what we don't need, street lights and sunlight, skylines, views, passersby in local garb, loiterers, all that. We take it all in and feelings form. Some cities we like. Some cities we like more than others. Some cities we love. Some cities we don't. Some cities we love parts of more than others.

What we don't know much about when we form these first impressions are the details of the individual lives of the people that populate them. In the case of Poetry City, USA, I think of each volume as a new look at this same city we visit annually.

The poems are what we see as we walk, ride, and drive through. The lives of the people who populate them? That takes a different kind of work. It takes longer stays or relocation. In the case of Poetry City, USA, those lives are the lives of the poets who wrote the poems gathered in this, the neighborhood we call Vol. 7.

Too cheesy? Perhaps. But as Richard Hugo says his colleague Bill Kittredge said (see *The Triggering Town*), "If you are not *risking* sentimentality, you are not close to your inner self" (another of those said things that makes the way I see things never the same again). So I'm closer to my inner self. I'm in orbit around what Ezra said, if not landing on the surface. And because of the internet, you have it within your powers, dear reader, to find out as much as is find-out-able about the lives of the poets whose poems this neighborhood make—to make your own sojourn or move.

Safe travels. *MM*

