

# Poetry City, USA, Vol. 4



# Poetry City, USA, Vol. 4

An anthology of poems read at the  
fourth annual Great Twin Cities Poetry Read  
plus essays, interviews, reviews,  
and other prose on poetry

[edited by Matt Mauch]



Lowbrow  
Press

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Meeting, in the middle of the day,  
the first thing when we saw each other  
we opened our mouths.

– *Sharon Olds*



## **GTCPR IV**

*On 4-20-13, the fourth annual Great Twin Cities Poetry Read was held for the second year running on the campus of Hamline University, in St. Paul, Minn., after being held for two years on the campus of Normandale Community College. George Takei and Crispin Glover celebrated birthdays. An earthquake shook China's Sichuan province. Iraqis cast ballots for the first time since the U.S. military withdrawal. The Central Texas town of West, following a fertilizer-plant explosion, had a confirmed body count and began moving toward recovery. Neighbors applauded and cheered after authorities captured the remaining Boston Marathon bombing suspect.*

*The poems found in the pages you're about to turn to were read that night or at Maeve's Sessions readings held either at Maeve's Cafe along NE Mpls's in/famous Poetry Row, or at other locations when the readings weren't just "Maeve's Sessions" readings but were co-hosted by some of the other amazing, Twin-Cities-based purveyors of live poetry thanked in the back of this book.*

*Both finding and making good company with the poems are reviews, interviews, essays, and other prose on poetry. The Mgmt is always seeking good prose on poetry.*

*In poetry we trust.*

*The Mgmt*



1





**IF . . .**

IF . . . you want to be considered better than other people . . .

IF . . . you expect to be greeted with unusual deference . . .

IF . . . you want your judgment to be considered before that of all  
others ...

IF . . . you wish to affect a commanding air in every situation . . .

IF . . . you want to be believed no matter how many times you have  
misled . . .

If . . . you want fame and instant recognizability . . .

If . . . you want celebrity and a pounding feeling in the hearts that hold  
you dear . . .

Don't write poetry.

Do get a dog.





# Thressa Johnson

## from GAIA

Your name was conceived in my mouth  
When you became I pulled the clouds lower in the sky  
to calm your heightened brow

I taught you the universe is a giant game of cat's cradle  
strung together we trade always back and forth

Young one, you have taken missteps  
You have been amazed at your own cleverness  
You have heaped the largest portion when you were not the most hungry  
You have commanded attention with wrist flicks too often practiced

I have watched your toddling laughter and flooded  
I who has given birth to volcanos  
I who claims you every spring as the frost flies off your windowpanes  
my fingerprints in the bottom right hand corner

You have grown into your mortality  
You do not feel beyond your borders

You will remember me not by name  
or the weather lines drooping around my eyes  
You will remember me by scent  
when you scrub rainforest-infused Clorox  
when you spray yourself with water from floral glass bottles  
when you simmer apple orchard candle wax  
like a memory of an itch

Remember before the waters come  
Remember before the hushed trees

Our ligaments do not link our bones only to our bones but to each other's  
Every time you take a step it reverberates through the entire thread

**MEANWHILE,**

my old friend, her face taken over  
by grief, talks  
with such sweetness to a stray cat:  
I rest my case.

**Microreview of Anna George Meek's *Engraved***

Tupelo Press, 2013; 34 pp

In “Vampire (True Vampire), Vampire (False Vampire),” Anna George Meek writes of how frightening it is “to identify the kinds of intensity, / [to] give them names, examine their shapes. This, however, is precisely what Meek does with *Engraved*—a tiny book that somehow manages to contain the intensity the poet feels toward nineteenth century Webster’s Dictionary engravings. Meek begins by imagining the fastidious engraver himself: “Sun & Planet Wheels, Buddha, / Bridge of Sighs, Passenger // Pigeon. These lines, a love letter to the dead. / Atlas bends his head.” In one fell swoop, Meek uses this man to both illuminate and complicate familiar concepts—from human teeth and hair to ducks, gargoyles, and toboggans. The speaker finds comfort in objects, how they assure us both of our resilience in the face of history (“A century later, / will you know me by my teeth?”) and of our ultimate interconnectedness:

“I am grinding the gristle  
to clarity—such the instinct to carve.  
Even the queen masticates.  
The enamel, we call it the crown:  
but then, the canines.”

She can’t be certain, however, that things are as recorded, wondering in “Ribcage” if the scapula was “formerly wings,” if once, planets may have “extended long tentacles, / claws on the end of each.” The ultimate question Meek deftly prompts the reader to consider throughout is one of the self, musing sadly over the fact that she can’t “crouch next to [herself] / to see what the differences” are. Though the engravings serve as the catalyst for the speaker’s realization that “The heavens are grotesque, or perhaps we are,” Meek gives the reader a clue toward how to read, reminding her that “yes, I do read / a small happiness clasped here.” The small happinesses Meek finds are fully apparent in this book, packed with quietly striking poems that, like her rendering of the *Pediculina* louse, “buzz with beauty.”

**TRAIN INTERIOR, WITH UMA THURMAN**

A man sits with music in his ears, and my ears echo like sound off the top of a glacier. I only want to be very cold and sit very still. Uma Thurman stares at me from a Swiss wristwatch ad. *What are you made of?* Uma, I'm made of glaciers. I think this man wants to take all your clothes off. He is listening to improvisational jazz. An instrument will make sound no matter where it's touched or how. This man wants to suck the diamonds from the face of your avant-garde watch. He is not supposed to eat on the train, Uma. If you could see outside the train, you could see moss and weird plants sprout from concrete in our subterranean light. It makes patterns like aerial photographs of Alaska's wildernesses. After a while, your face begins to seem very tired from looking. Or maybe it's my face that's tired. Or maybe it's his.

**PRAYER: HOPE, SCREAMING**

A poet with clipped silver hair  
and a long pink skirt  
speaks into the microphone,  
tells us, the audience,  
of how hesitant she was when  
her daughter became  
pregnant because she didn't  
want her grandchild  
born while the country was  
at war. She clears her  
throat and says, "Now I realize  
all babies are born  
during wartime." Every mouth  
in the auditorium stops  
slightly open like soft, wet  
flowers, a bouquet  
thrown at the foot of the podium.  
She continues with a  
poem and we listen without  
listening. We are thinking  
of our children, born or not yet  
sculpted, of our parents  
and the times of war in which  
we became. Was it  
desperate fear that caused  
our parents to reach for  
each other in the darkness and  
pull out a voice? Or,  
were we created as an act  
of protest—our parents'  
lucky number, their favorite  
prayer: hope, screaming.



**Because I Am Weak. Because I Am Alive.**

*The following is a series of excerpts from my memoir manuscript **Uncovered**, about my thirty years among the Lubavitcher Hassidim (ultra-orthodox Jews) as a closeted lesbian, and mother of seven. Poetry saved my life.*

One day, I dare go to the Morris Frank Branch Library near home. I step out of summer glare through sliding double doors, through the lobby and past a sleepy-eyed Hispanic mother sitting on the floor with her two children and a stack of picture books. I've been secretly writing fiction through long sleepless nights and then hiding it all under my bed, but haven't yet thought I might need to read fiction, haven't read a novel since before meeting the Hassidim at age fifteen. I don't yet have a sense of rules for writing. But I know stories. Life is stories, dreams are stories. My fiction characters are so real to me that it seems all I need to do is put my hands on the keyboard and then watch the characters try to live. But I want to write poetry.

It seems the more I try to let my characters be simple and alive, the more I grow tired of the posturing and admonishments I hear among the faithful in my closed community. I don't understand the connection. Now I want to write poetry. I think every word in a poem should be an act of raw honesty, every line should cut deep to the core of something. Unlike the careworn poetry in the prayer book, I think a real poem should demand my attention without dictating how I attend, or what I feel. *I don't want promises of immortality any more.* I want simply to write poems that make me open myself to being human. Flawed and human. The problem is, I try to write, and fail. I think I might need to read published poetry to see how it's done.

Instead of the wig, I'm wearing a scarf that keeps sliding back, exposing inches of hair. I think, smiling, funny that I'm risking much more serious gossip in the community because of two inches of hair than because I'm in a secular library. Few of the Hassidim will bother to gossip about one of *their* women reading secular books—just devalued literature read by devalued people—as long as she trains her children to be proper Hassidim and helps her husband stay pure of influence. Which means that within the community, I'm taking

advantage of the “freedom” of being just a woman.

I locate the poetry section—two dusty shelves at the end of a row at the bottom of the stack—then glance up the aisle. Just past the stacks is a revolving stand of periodicals and beyond that, four vinyl chairs where an older man squints through trifocals at his newspaper. Another man sits across from him who looks disheveled, maybe damaged, maybe homeless, asleep with his mouth open. Library as refuge. My long skirt billows around me as I sink to the floor in the narrow aisle.

A half hour later, I’ve laid slim books out all around me, on the skirt, on the floor, and against the bottom shelf, but that’s okay because no one has come through. I know nothing about the poetry I’ve chosen or the people who wrote it. I’m simply taking home the ones that speak to me, all new meaningless names: Elizabeth Bishop, Gertrude Stein, Amy Clampitt, Maxine Kumin, Charles Wright, Muriel Rukeyser, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Rita Dove, Adrienne Rich. I notice I’ve chosen mostly women’s voices, although I can’t explain why. I know I’ll be back for others, but I have to get back to the kids. I check out the books and leave the library for the mom van in a rush, with arms full.

After the kids get home from school, Libby comes looking and finds me stretched on my bed lost in a book. I look up with a blank-eyed stare that isn’t grounded in place or time, still within her grasp but slipping. I’m wondering how I can make up for all of the lost years of not reading. “Mommy?” Libby says. When I do hear and look up, when I actually see her, I have a pang of regret like the pang of parting.

Later, I read in the bathtub as the water grows cold and children bang on the door. I read in bed, only to find the book splayed on the floor, pages bent, when I wake before morning. I pick up the book, try to smooth the wrinkled pages, thinking, *I am going to become a faceless plague to librarians.*

I get up in the dark house to wander, and wonder.

I thought the dreams, the visions, the demons would go away  
if there was enough love to put them down.

—Sylvia Plath

Let her be let her be let her be to be to be shy let her be to  
be let her be to be let her try.  
Let her try...

—Gertrude Stein

If the mind were clear  
and if the mind were simple you could take this mind  
this particular state and say  
*This is how I would live if I could choose:*  
*this is what is possible...*

But the mind  
of the woman imagining all this the mind  
that allows all this to be possible...  
does not so easily

work free from remorse

—Adrienne Rich

When we belong to the world, we become who we are.

—Adrienne Rich

Now, Sabbath quiet, no electricity, car, phone or computer. In the afternoon after the troops return from the synagogue, after a four-course meal, out-of-tune singing and Levi's ponderous lessons, the guests leave and Shalom goes down for his nap. Itzik, Sarah, Avrami and Mendel spread books and toys through the den and playroom and get busy with their plans. I vaguely supervise from the old orange recliner, tired, leaning back. With the backdrop of bookshelves just behind me, a restless nostalgia comes over me for our old texts. It's been a long time since I read the daily Bible passages with Rashi commentary. I take a Hebrew/English Bible and turn to Genesis, which I used to teach.

I begin to read, but I've been learning to read critically and I discover I can't simply turn off that critical eye. Now it seems a scrim of holiness that once softened and justified every Biblical message has been pulled away. But the standard commentaries, accumulated over centuries—Rashi, Ramban, Ibn Ezra and the others—they are the Voice of the Sages. They state who we are. I page through, alarmed. A surge of remembered lines seem to speak from the pages all at once. I pause over the commentary that charges Eve with responsibility for the great sin that taints mankind. Then I turn quickly to the places where they criticize Sarah for laughing at God's blessing (but maybe it was joy!), denounce Leah for desiring her husband, blame Dinah for her own rape, and then on to Exodus, I pull the next volume from the shelf, to the place where they insist Miriam was punished with leprosy for speaking her mind. *Do not speak overly with women*, the Sages say, because women are a source of inane prattle. Women steal a man's

time from Torah study. I think, but we look to the rabbis' image of those women as our foremothers, our role models. What does that make us see, in the mirror?

I sit up, dropping the book on my lap. If *their* image of Sarah and *their* Leah and even their Dinah is holy and true, then we women *should* cover ourselves. That legacy could make us want to hide ourselves, as if, by obeying the rabbis' demands we redeem ourselves from Eve's sin, Sarah's laugh, Leah's desire, Dinah's beauty, Miriam's mind.

As if, in a world that holds this book, this Bible, as the story of who we are, women needs redemption.

I look down at the long skirt and stockings and think, *why, we carry shame that isn't ours*. I close the book, shake my head. I can't do it, can't humbly engage in study, no matter how beloved. I can't stop the flood, can't go back to where I was.

I launch out of my seat, kids still playing, head to my bedroom and return in no time with the first secular book I've ever bought as an adult, by Adrienne Rich. I was out shopping across town the other day and ducked into a bookstore where I found people browsing without reservation, without censors. So I browsed, too, as if such freedom was nothing. Along a short stack featuring new work, I found this now-familiar name. I glanced sideways as I made my purchase, heart racing.

Itzik climbs into the recliner with me and puts his head in my lap. He was up late at the Sabbath table and still needs his naps. I sit very still and stroke his shoulder hoping he'll doze, until my own eyes grow heavy. Languid, I turn pages, pick out a few lines at a time, scanning new territory without enough focus to delve into the essays. The poetry begins to seep into a half-conscious place like the slow deep spread of spilled ink.

*The rules break like a thermometer  
quicksilver spills across the charted systems.*

Avrami and Sarah haul in wooden blocks from the playroom.  
*A woman's voice sings old songs  
plucked and fingered by women outside the law.*

Is that what I'm doing? Singing old songs even when poets outside the Law seem to be pulling me away from the rules? Plucked and fingered.

The pile of blocks on the floor has grown. Avrami gets up to go get more. I point at the mound, my gaze on him. "You can bring them if you clean them," I say. Itzik shifts on my lap and sighs. I read.

*This is the law of volcanoes  
eternally and visibly female  
no height without depth  
without a burning core.*

Something is waking me up, as if I've been cold and dead a long time.

Libby comes in the front door with a friend. The two head to her room.

I read on. There is a lot I don't understand. But, I think, *I can take years over this if I want. The book is mine.* I turn the page.

*Your body will haunt mine  
tender, delicate your lovemaking.*

I sit up then. *Tender, delicate*—I think she must be writing to a woman. I decide she's writing about making love to a woman. I grip the page. My face flushes.

Mendel dumps the bucket of Legos onto the carpet. The room is covered with toys, the playroom empty, children at my feet. "Clean up the blocks before touching those Legos," I say.

"No, Mommy!" Mendel says. "We're *doing* something. We'll clean up later. Promise!" Avrami and Sarah are nodding. Itzik is asleep in my lap.

*Your traveled, generous thighs between which my whole face  
has come and come the innocence and wisdom of the place  
my tongue has found there.*

Levi walks in, his face puffy from his Sabbath nap. He goes into the kitchen to get a cup of coffee.

*Your strong tongue and slender fingers reaching where I had  
been waiting years in my rose-wet cave.*

I slam the book closed. Shut my eyes and take a breath. Let out a breath. Take a breath. Forget to let it out. Sarah glances up, a second's notice, then away.

Face hot, I stand with closed book and lift sleeping Itzik, settling his head on my shoulder. I keep my expression impassive as I glide to his room to lower him into his bed. The last words of the poem stay with me as I move down the hall:

*Whatever happens, this is.*

\*\*\*\*\*

**Conversation that never happened, with the Community—  
Greek Chorus with a Yiddish Accent:**

*in which I finally talk back*

**me** (*pointing an accusing finger*): Now I know you showed me only what you wanted me to see. You said the world was full of filth and lies. You made me miss living.

**GCWYA:** *We told you, we told you, about the pig that shows its cloven hoof to fool us into believing it is kosher. In the world, nothing is as it seems. Be careful, we said. Evil is mixed with good, good with evil. Don't claim we said otherwise.*

**me:** Then you claimed reality was just a bad dream, and your dream of perfection was reality. You did that to make me turn my back on the world and accept your Torah.

**GCYA:** *But we did say truth has many facets. Don't accuse us of simplistic ideas.*

**me:** That never helped. You warped my mind, pressed it flat.  
(group fades away)

\*\*\*\*\*

I read Robert Lowell's poetry and note his despair when he lost his faith. I write Rosellen. "Someone should have warned Lowell that developing himself as a writer would demand such brutal self-honesty that he would never be able to embrace religion wholeheartedly again," I write, "I wish I could have warned him. I would have told him that the degree of critical thinking writing requires of you is going to break down all of your illusions, your props against the wind. *Stop!* I want to tell him, because faith is our most precious illusion, impossibly fragile when the screen obscuring the world is removed. *Stop!* because you can't stay happy if you don't stay blind. Lowell didn't stop believing in God," I write her. "He lost his ability to find Him."

I pick up a book of Lowell's poetry and find this: "Hope lives in doubt. Faith is trying to do without faith."

But I need to pray.

Lowell, raised in the church, lost his faith and expressed his grief "over hymns that sing of peace and preach despair."

I think, I hear hymns in that two-toned way now, too. But I still need to pray.

But Lowell was also "drawn back to the hymns...because of the way they gave darkness some control," the way that they offered "a

loophole for the soul.”

“Listen to the bells!” he wrote, meaning church bells drawing in the faithful. Regardless of faith, or lack of it, I can’t help but hear the bells.

The God that I want to defy is the same God I still think has control. How hypocritical, how farcical, how typical I am: The Jew who shakes her fist at God yet never doubts that Presence, who ascribes God control so great that nothing is left but to confront how small our efforts and how mad our superstitions.

But I have lived too long in orthodox religion, in Lowell’s “sanity of self-deception.” Besides, I don’t know how to sit in a terrible moment and do nothing, just accept it. I can’t give up at least the possibility that if I hope hard enough and call hope “prayer,” my hopes will come true. But I also can’t mouth rote prayer words any more, can’t believe that simply reciting words can change terrible facts.

And yet, I’m still drawn to the bells. One bell is my husband, Levi. I am forced then to reconsider my religion and marriage—they are one—before I leave them, even though, as Lowell writes, “It will bring no true tenderness, only restlessness.”

The familiar cadence and poetry of the Hebrew prayer book tug at me. The blissful then yearning tone. I cry over the words. But it doesn’t help. I stand apart.

The need to pray remains. It stays until I go to the mikvah, the women’s ritual bath, and stand in the water, defenseless. In the water, there is nothing left but blue tiled walls, echoed drips, the blurred image of my own limbs and torso. There will be no sex after this, no hope of it, either. There’s no desire left in me, in either of us, but here I am. Wet, naked, I am filled with the need to confront an unfathomable Will.

Ancient prayers have long been my poetry, and now poetry has exposed the empty words, and offered to replace them. But I need to pray. I need words that make the immeasurable finite, that chip the overwhelming down to size, words to lift me from anguish. It doesn’t matter that my need for connection with forces buffeting my life is no proof of God or of the efficacy of prayer, or that my need only proves me a miserable, wet, naked human being who can’t accept circumstances out of her control. None of that matters. I don’t believe in prayer any more but I need to pray, because I am weak. Because I am alive. I immerse and succumb.

## **CAN WE GO OUTSIDE TODAY?**

The apple tree appears to be dying.  
Now I am being a teacher.  
I count the students.  
They are shy about expressing love.  
Sometimes I hear them whispering.  
When I am bored I imagine them as babies.  
When they are bored they reach for their phones.  
I have gone ahead to scout the next age for them.  
They expect a blurry afterlife to emerge in me.  
They are addicted to their phone screens.  
I could not successfully count the leaves on even  
    the dying apple tree  
and I have no idea what is a hornet and what is a wasp  
and summer has ended.  
bell hooks says we are always being teachers, all of us.  
I hear the warning signal of a construction vehicle in reverse gear.  
I can't go back but I can go on.  
I want to have a good death.  
One of the students sleeps in the sun; I'm happy for her.  
Overhead a crow calls out.  
Blue that goes on and on, no clouds.  
I tried to start but I was already started.  
Once I saw three angels of death in white dresses along the frontage road.  
I turned to write but the page had grown dark.  
When I dream I don't think of the end of the dream; I am free of death.  
This is a red world; it is mostly red.  
How do I measure it?  
Dreamers pass by in daytime, unmarked.  
The land of dreams is free of death.  
Please come in.  
Sorry to disturb you little dragonfly.  
Every shining leaf has had its summer.  
Miles above us the itchy pilot drinks his coffee.  
To be free of death doesn't mean I won't die.  
I guess there's a punch line.



People say it's *calculator* as in *calc-u-later* but I don't get it.  
More birds, more lawnmowers.  
The students check their phones.  
They tip over in their chairs.  
One girl juggles three apples.  
It's my own hollow place that allows me to be here.  
One girl chants the *k-i-s-s-i-n-g* song.  
*It's so heteronormative*, another says.  
I am instructed to account for this time in a grade book.  
These are called participation points.  
They reach for their phones.  
The apple tree is a little deader.  
Two curious geese walk closer to the sleeping student.  
Soon enough she will be surprised.  
It's not the land of dreams.

## Cullen Bailey Burns

### 3,200 PPM

Here is the water. The tub. The last breath.  
Here is the body, the other body. The water.  
Outside, rain. Outside, the tiled roofs  
of a European city. The gas.  
The bodies. The fault. The way

sleep comes. The skin. The spell  
cast. The strand cut. The sleep,  
the water, the bodies.

Here is the mother. The airport  
floor. The box of ash/daughter.  
The floor. The men in uniforms,  
lifting the mother, helping her stand.  
Outside, rain. Outside, taxis and farewells.

Here is the story:  
The gas. The water. The tub.  
The skin. The body. The bodies.  
The ash. The mother. The rain.  
The spell. The strand. The cut.

**RAIN TALK**

She said I spoke like rain  
which is nice.

    She was nice.

But rain, no matter it's rhythms,  
or cleansing abilities  
is as common as all weather.  
Rain is just small talk for old men in coffee shops.

    I am small talk.

When responding,  
all I could muster was honesty.  
Saying that she spoke like forgiveness  
spoke like second chances I had forgotten were possible  
I had forgotten so much.  
She spoke like hope that some people only find  
in religion.  
Her voice is what raises tides  
and levels cities.  
She spoke like something worth talking about.  
Smiling  
she finished whatever she was eating.  
the rest of the night was silent.  
    It was the last night we spoke.

**FOUR DIRECTIONS**

North

His face points north  
when he moans. A moment my lips  
enjoy. Temporary relief  
from sanded down words,  
double-vowel sounds  
planed by the stubble of his chin.

West

The map of my body  
means he is California, Alaska,  
Australia.  
Any moveable last frontier.

East

A window to rise up  
into a body. A sunrise.  
Pale body beneath the sheets.  
His prehistoric curves,  
I'm paleontology.

South

His feet, the arches,  
the toes, a march of penguins  
maybe doves, in any case, cold  
In the depression between the Achilles and ankle bone  
I rest my tongue  
and taste our weakness.

## For Want of a Comma

I've just finished reading and grading the last of the portfolios of poems written by students in my Poetry Writing II class this past autumn semester at The Ohio State University. It was a good class, and I love my students, but all semester long I feel that I've been haranguing them about their lack and misuse of punctuation in their poems. Some of my students, of course, use punctuation well, eloquently even, but others seem to take it as a point of pride and of their right of personal expression to eschew the use of commas, periods, and the other tools they have available to them in their grammatical toolbox.

I'm all for their right of personal expression, of course, and I've told my students so. And we've talked about poets who eschew the use of punctuation and who write beautiful and extraordinary poems that have no punctuation at all. For example I've shared with them poems like this one by W.S. Merwin, from his book *The Vixen*:

### Vixen

Comet of stillness princess of what is over  
high note held without trembling without voice without sound  
aura of complete darkness keeper of the kept secrets  
of the destroyed stories the escaped dreams the sentences  
never caught in words warden of where the river went  
touch of its surface sibyl of the extinguished  
window onto the hidden place and the other time  
at the foot of the wall by the road patient without waiting  
in the moonlight of autumn at the hour when I was born  
you no longer go out like a flame at the sight of me  
you are still warmer than the moonlight gleaming on you  
even now you are unharmed even now perfect  
as you have always been now when your light paws are running  
on the breathless night on the bridge with one end I remember you  
when I have heard you the soles of my feet have made answer  
when I have seen you I have waked and slipped from the calendars

from the creeds of difference and contradictions  
that were my life and all the crumbling fabrications  
as long as it lasted until something that we were  
had ended when you are no longer anything  
let me catch sight of you again going over the wall  
and before the garden is extinct and the woods are figures  
guttering on a screen let my words find their own  
places in the silence after the animals.

One might even say that the lack of punctuation in Merwin's fine, fine poem is crucial to what Frost called "the sound of sense"; that is, in this poem in part about the slipping away from the "creeds of difference and contradictions" that separate the "I" in the poem from the female fox s/he espies in the moonlight, part of that process of becoming a part of that something greater beyond the self is to slip away from the halts of punctuation, that peculiarly human invention. Punctuations, with its pauses and divisions, plays no part in the more interconnected world that the "I" in Merwin's poem desires, a place where his/her "words find their own/ places in the silences after the animals."

But such was not the case for some of my students. Too often the lack of punctuation hindered the sound and sense of their poems. For these students, as they talked about it in class, punctuation was a hassle, a bother, something that, because it needed to be attended to, prevented them from fully entering the unfettered worlds of personal utterance that they so ardently desired. These students kept to these beliefs even as I pointed out what they were giving up by avoiding punctuation: the ability to create and control the meaning of their poems, the ability to create more nuance, to be more expressive in their tone, to have, in effect, an even more powerful personal utterance.

As an example of how punctuation, even at the level of an addition or deletion of a humble comma, can make a difference in a poem, I shared with my students Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." Here's the version of the poem that you can find on the Poetry Foundation's website:

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

To the Poetry Foundation's credit, this is the version of the poem that was printed most often during Frost's lifetime. But after his death in 1963, Frost's publisher, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, brought out a collected edition of his poems, *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, edited by Edward Connery Lathem. This was the edition that most general readers of Frost encountered in the years after the great poet's passing, and the edition from which many anthologies took their texts of Frost's poems. However, as the poet Donald Hall wrote in a now famous article, "Robert Frost Corrupted," which first appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in March, 1982, "the text is corrupt: the editor has altered the rhythm of Frost's poems by repunctuating them."

Hall cites Lathem arguments that he was regularizing and tidying up the punctuation in Frost's poems for the general reader, but Hall is still critical on the grounds that Lathem messes up the music of Frost's poems. Here's an excerpt from the sixth paragraph of Hall's article:

*Frost cared for the sound of verse. He went so far as to claim that words existed in order to make noises: 'Words are only valuable in writing as they serve to indicate particular sentence sounds.' Frost seemed not to have cared much for assonance, lush vowels rubbing against each other. He cared most for the cadence of talk, with the nudge and thrust of intelligence in pace and pitch. In his work he continually referred to a semantics of noise. 'Remember,' he told us, 'that the sentence sound often says more than the words . . . . 'There are tones of voice that mean more than words.' Another phrase he liked was 'the sound of sense', the way cadence makes sense and sense makes cadence.' . . . if one is to be a poet he must learn to get cadences*

*by skilfully breaking the sounds of sense with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the metre.'*

Nicely put, but Hall is most critical of Lathem's changes to "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," particularly of the comma that he added in line 13 of the poem, not so much because the sound of the line was altered, but because the meaning was. Hall writes,

*"Frost wrote the line 'The woods are lovely, dark and deep'. We do not find this line in The Poetry of Robert Frost. Instead we find: 'The woods are lovely, dark, and deep'. To say that the woods are 1) lovely, 2) dark, and 3) deep differs considerably from claiming that they are lovely in that they are dark and deep. In Frost's line, the general adjective 'lovely' is explained by the more particular modifiers 'dark' and 'deep'. In the editor's line, the egalitarian threesome appears to be parallel, but of course it is not -- it is as if we proclaimed that a farmer grew apples, McIntoshes, and Northern Spies.*

In other words, Frost meant "dark and deep" as an appositive, "a word or group of words that renames the noun or pronoun that comes before it," as Lynn Quitman Troyka and Douglas Hesse write on p. 341 of *Quick Access, Reference for Writers*. "Dark and deep" are what "lovely means, Frost tells us; they're not separate from it, as Lathem's grammatical change claims. Big difference!

I think it's precisely the *lack* of that comma between "dark" and "and" in line 13 that helps make "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" so great. It enables the poem to rise into the realm of deeper, more profound meaning. To be "Dark and deep" is to be "lovely." Lovely. Happily, Hall's article had an effect, and, as the Poetry Foundation's example above shows, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is now more often than not printed as it was in the poet's time. Also lovely.

And so I've been thinking of my dear students, and of Donald Hall and Robert Frost, which has led me to be more aware of the punctuation in my own work as well, as in this little poem that I've been working on recently, as the cold has descended on Ohio and much of the rest of the country these past few weeks:

## MIDWINTER

Since noon you've sat  
on a sofa's pillow,



like a drowsy cat  
by a sunlit window.  
You stretch and purr  
and walk about,  
inmate in stir  
who can't get out.  
Outside it snows;  
the wind bends  
its touchless touch  
toward what it knows:  
the endless ends,  
its hush-less hush.

Just as that comma in Frost's 13th line in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" caused such consternation in Donald Hall, I've been fretting on the comma in the 13th line of my little poem. What indeed does the wind know in midwinter? And is what it knows truer with the comma, or without it? "The endless ends/ its hush-less hush," or, as the comma suggests, is "its hush-less hush" that which comprises "the endless ends"? Not quite what the definition of "lovely" is perhaps, but still beguiling I hope.

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## **IT'S THE MAYAN APOCALYPSE AND I LOVE YOU**

I.

What a planet we could have been hold  
Your eyes steadily we move ahead there  
Is no forecast would ground us

I carry these county roads strapped  
To my chest look you gasped  
The needle was in my palm all along

A bale of hay unstirred what moons  
May move us tonight no matter  
I will stay I will cover our black eyes.

What a dangerous city you are all of  
The lampposts faded like moons my mouth  
Could try to swallow the whole sky

My throat is clogged with ways to keep  
You as you are lie down in this ditch  
And tell me what is up the funnel cloud's skirt

What unimportant particles we carry  
Inside us the difference between secrets  
And dreams is when we let them go

If only I could build a galaxy  
For us all to swim I would place  
It underground next to our dead pets

You would fan your floral self  
And stare at the sun until you went  
Blind you are a piece of pretty music

If I stutter consider it the ocean  
Between the countries that we live in  
Where there is more to see and talk about

You are the greatest city in the universe  
A throat full of headlines you read to me  
Sounded like gasps that divided our highway

The sections spilled onto your lap like ashes  
Of our best pets nothing to do but pat  
Each other off and wander toward home

Nothing to do but curl our fingers toward  
The ground and practice how to use our new  
Claws before we turn against each other

**Microreview of *The First Four Books of Sampson Starkweather* by Sampson Starkweather**

Birds LLC, 2013; 328 pp

This volume allows the reader to track Starkweather's evolution from playful young deconstructionist to high-caliber prose poet. The four books track Starkweather's examination of the bounds of prose poetry, deconstructionism, and fractured narrative. His poems are all personal and always pull away just before telling the story outright, a deconstructionist habit born from the theory that a poem cannot tell itself exactly the way it wants to be told, leaving instead vivid images of domestic items and pop-culture icons. Starkweather succeeds in this volume to create a language of his own word-images which, in turn, actualize their own story, "permanent season/ of elegy/ here comes/ a thousand doves/ apparently we/ need love/ coo," ("La La La," 113).

"King of the Forest," book one, is a four-part prose-poem gallery skirting the edge of lucid narrative. Starkweather, while lacking at this stage the prosodic exactitude of his later work, makes up for this with full-color, far-flung snapshots of rabid wolves, basketball games, Mediterranean travel, and dream interpretations more surreal than the dreams themselves. These poems vascillate between diary and epistolary, averaging out to a sad, guilty man in a confessional. "More than ever we are surrounded by moths. They light/ on the ceiling, silent and still. They have no concern/ with the living," begins page 47, exemplifying the precision of Starkweather's best images.

"La La La," book two, reads and looks like an unremitting cataract of images collaged together in tightly enjambed lines. It's daunting on the surface—each poem assuming the same river-like form—until read aloud, when the river begins to sing. It is an elegy for realism, an announcement of the death of the poet's faith in realism. Page 116 admits "Everything is more beautiful/ out of context," a self-fulfilling prophecy. Deep within "La La La," Starkweather sends a postmodern torpedo straight into transcendentalism: ". . . tiny birds/ stuck inside JFK airport/ chirping like a ringtone." These poems are rife with pull-quotes and name-drops of poets—and websites—you know.

“The Waters,” book three, is Starkweather’s “transcontemporation” of César Vallejo’s *Trilce*, following the forms and motifs of Vallejo’s work but twisting some turns of phrase back onto themselves and plugging in pieces of his own personal narrative. Starkweather exhibits a highly-evolved syntax and a style as modernist as it is postmodern, incorporating deconstructionist techniques like the repetition of fruit, “Manzanita. Manzanita.” (164) a la Robert Hass and Gertrude Stein—also a pun on Vallejo’s *Trilce II*, “Mañana. Mañana.” Vallejo’s fans will delight in seeing the modernist master get his own tricks played on him; Starkweather’s fans will enjoy watching this next chapter of his narrative unfold. “. . . Who saves us/ from so many hushes and screams/ so many waves/ of why? Who shakes free the trembling rivers of moths?” summons an image born back in “King of the Forest.”

“Self Help Poems,” book four, is the culmination of Starkweather’s exercises through his previous works. It returns to the paragraph-by-paragraph form of “King of the Forest,” but moves faster and with greater purpose. It calls forth symbols from the earlier books and puts them to greater use. These poems are more obviously personal but more expansive, moving through skies, deserts, and late-night television. “I saw Mickey Rourke on Charlie Rose last night. He was/ being held back by his naivety that art is about artistry.” Starkweather announces on page 255, begging readers to question what Mickey Rourke has to teach about art at all. These poems are daydreams and nightmares of a poet planted in a cubicle somewhere in New York, blooming in all directions, striking a beautiful balance between storytelling and sound-play. One of Starkweather’s most telling lines lives here: “. . . What does/ a poetics of shame even mean? A manifesto of failure.”

## **Heart Throb**

Alex is the art that matters. Alex is a heart throb. Every headshot is about: what can I do to get the money, to get the life. Alex runs a hand through his hair and all the fans scream for the luster. When they try to Get The Look, their hair swoops terribly. Deep in the throng, every heartbeat bears the name of Alex. I love to feel my heart throb while other hearts stop. Alex gathers lives around him and takes from them what he needs. Red red lines grow out of everything, streak across the room. Beautiful arcs of blood in the soft sunlight. It's like Hollywood light coming through the hair. It's like Hollywood blood arcing from the neck. It's like Hollywood feelings when the chillwave streams and swells. It's like a Hollywood wound when my chest pumps and throbs me out of it. Men, women, and children die all over the set. Now Alex is speechless—now Alex is ready for the photo-op. Alex is so money, his suit pressed and blood-spattered and lint-free. I take glamour shot photos of bullet wounds like they mean something. Classic shades keep the light inside me. It's like the glamorous life I lead. I am standing on the red red carpet, at my premier, covered in the blood of Alex. Cameras, get close. Pop & Throb. Alex “cares” about “important” things like “gun control” and “human rights” and “making sure everyone has the chance to be oppressed sometime” because Alex is a good person, whatever, sure. I put my finger in the wound of Alex then fix the stageblood on his forehead. Alex shimmers in the flashing lights and gives a winning smile. So many people are dying all over, for which Alex is responsible. When the paparazzi ask for a “heartfelt” soundbite, Alex puts his finger on his wound and says: “I feel this wound for us all.”

## **What Poetry is Good For**

When my college roommate called me after I had gone to bed for the night, nine years after I had graduated from college, I knew something was wrong. He told me he had been diagnosed with HIV. The first words that came to my mind were not a prayer or a verse from the Bible, despite the fact that I am a Christian. Instead, the first words were the final lines of Alastair Reid's poem "Curiosity":

And what cats have to tell  
on each return from hell  
is this: that dying is what the living do,  
that dying is what the loving do,  
and that dead dogs are those who do not know  
that dying is what, to live, each has to do.

Whenever my students ask me why poetry is worthwhile, why we write or study it, essentially what good it does in the world, I tell them this story. Reid's poem is not one I had taught, nor even one I had really read. It was on the facing page of a poem I had taught several times over the past few years, though, and those lines somehow became etched in my mind. When I was faced with awful news, they came to comfort me, unbidden. The students might not understand when I tell them the story, but I teach them poetry regardless, just in case they ever need it in the middle of the night.

**DEAR,**

I turn the pages in a book of words  
falling from the mouth of a girl in Brooklyn  
or Indiana  
or across the street on the seventh floor

she is sitting on a fire-escape  
or a stepladder  
or a land-mine.  
she is smoking  
rolling her own history  
and poems.

she french-inhales  
the latest magazine cover  
and rolls the smoke across  
blush-red lips.

She hands me one delicate line and I run  
into a laundry room  
I take that line I make it mine  
I nurture it and shape it and take the images  
for photographs of my childhood and turn them over and over hoping  
that it changes the stories I will tell my children  
when they crawl into my lap and ask me,  
*Why?*

and then,  
I forget the line  
and the girl from Brooklyn  
or Indiana  
and I am on a plane  
or busking in an alley  
or welcoming strangers to a gate  
or making eggs or sunshine



and a couch curls around me  
and the television falls  
takes the last dream  
the last time  
the last breath  
and I want to cry for her  
and for me  
and for nothing  
ventured and  
absolutely  
nothing gained.

**[I DIDN'T COME HERE TO MAKE FRIENDS]**

I didn't come here to make friends,  
I came to astonish you  
with this oversized African parrot.  
Specially trained parrots  
detect cancer by smell  
meaning what fiend laced  
these pralines with cancer?  
Or lightly misted cancer in your hair  
after the Jeff Goldblum marathon?  
Prepare to be disappointed  
by Sr. Nutmeg swooping in  
like the Rockies intruding  
through the sun-stained window.  
In the scene where Jeff Goldblum  
stands over his own  
cannibal-eaten doppelganger  
and says in his most machismo voice,  
you've only grown more lovely  
in our time apart,  
I always shed a tear for evil  
doubles around the world.  
No one talks to them at the office.  
What motherly arms extend  
to scold them?  
Pry those talons  
out of your scalp.  
The kitchen has done you  
some great wrong.  
We're infected  
with the pathogen  
called Unbridled Hope.

**NOVEMBER**

Tonight the wind is a white devil, scraping  
his teeth against our skin. The trees can't promise me anything,  
and I wish I could say I don't need any promises.  
I wish I could eat six small meals a day and go to church once a week,  
wear a cross  
around my neck and spend my days putting flowers in the windows of  
homeless shelters.  
I want to be your homeless shelter, grow a vegetable garden and  
make the shooting stop. Is it so terrible  
to want people to love each other more?  
Nights like this I love everyone but myself and wonder which pill  
would let me into my own heart. I just want to rest, to stop  
under the sky and feel its blue drip down into my throat like  
some futuristic honey from God's everlasting mouth.  
I've spent the last six months building a field  
of light to tuck my bones inside of but  
lately the light isn't enough. Lately it's been getting dark at 5  
and my brother is a veteran of war. I keep brushing my teeth but  
my mother is still lonely and all I want  
is to bake a fucking meatloaf and stop  
thinking about the fact that your body  
won't always be a body, that you won't always be.  
I'm picturing your hands in a jar next to my bed and it's not  
that I don't believe in heaven but that I'd rather  
go on touching you forever. Fuck the church. I want to reincarnate as  
the tree  
that someone carves into your coffin so I can hold  
your bones as they crumble into the star  
dust they came from, the space that mouthed you.

## **Manifesto: Aphorisms on Poetry**

The world is a continually-unfolding dream made of desire, never complete, never to be completed. Endless voyage. The world is poetry.

\*

We are worlds, are worlds-within-worlds made of dream, made of desire. Endless voyagers. We are poetry.

\*

Art is born of a place beyond signification, beyond words, and communicates to a place beyond words. Poetry is the struggle to say the unsayable, the use of words to reach beyond words, into the heart of an experience, into the heart of being. Poetry is the primordial song—or cry, or shout—of the human soul. Or, to put it as Yves Bonnefoy does, “Poetry is that which tries to make music of what occurs in life.”

\*

Before everything: silence. Then the ache of being, the cry of being. And then the singing.

\*

I have always felt keenly aware of the limitations of language. The composer Claude Debussy wrote, “Music is the silence between the notes.” Likewise, poetry is the space between the words. Just as a piece of music is not reducible to the notes that compose it, a poem is not reducible to the words on the page. Poetry comes from the void and reaches into the void, the Openness that is overflowing with infinite possibility, infinite meaning, and infinite life—and with numinous, ineffable experience.

\*

Art is of the Moment, not of time.

\*

Poetry is when thought becomes action, word becomes existence,

image becomes experience, silence becomes song.

\*

To do now, rather than wait. Only poetry can save at all times. But we must believe in it.

\*

To give life to stones. Whether stones are inherently alive or we ascribe life to them does not matter. Our power to create gives life to stones. Stones also give life to us.

Living, in all its brokenness, incomprehensibility, meaninglessness, and chaos, is the greatest gift and sacrament. In its difficulty lies its wonder, and in its chaos and resistance to meaning lies its potential to encompass every meaning. Poetry is meaningless, as life is meaningless. Poetry calls upon the universe itself to create its meaning according to the Moment and weather.

\*

The meaningfulness of all things—that they may be filtered through myself, and become my meaning.

\*

Art's emptiness: in its uselessness is its highest use.

\*

To think with materials, to let the universe be without ideas. To allow form to happen. To make magic with the things of the earth. The poet as shaman, the poem as experience itself, not a presentation of it. Art not as mimicry but as Newness itself: what was once an uncreated nothingness suddenly becomes incarnate, embodied. Poetry as existence made manifest in words.

\*

The poem as sky, not mirror.

\*

Poetry, the sacred wilderness, the always-present Eleusis, the void out of which tumbles the world.

\*

Poetry, the Openness in which swim the minds of the gods.

\*

Poetry, whose remembrance frees the body, whose forgetting chains the mind.

\*

Poetry, vestigial human wings, forgotten.

\*

The act of creation is not always simply positive. To learn the patience to let the voice lie silent until its time—for in silence the soul lies in the stillness and tumult of death, that is, the death that is really life illumined. To learn that to be silent is to create silence. It is better to speak one word that is right and then wait for that word to die in the air, that it may be changed into the sky and infinity, than to speak a thousand words without awareness.

\*

Bathed in darkness, we can continue on in the light.

\*

Artaud proclaimed: “The body has invented the soul.” We must work to create a life in which it is possible to believe in what we desire to believe in. The physical nature of faith—the birth of god through the body. We must labor to bear the dream incarnate. This is the Work.

\*

The possibility that a life may be lived that has never been lived before, that a world may be created that has never existed—this is our gift, every day.

\*

Nothing has been completely revealed.

\*

A prison only reveals the truest freedom—it does not bind, it releases.

\*

The universe broken is still the universe; the empty sky contained in an open window is still empty forever.

\*

To be blessed by being shattered.

\*

At the end of all work, all striving, we must know that nothing is greater than to exist, to be in the living air a meaning, a deep sky, a season of the cosmos, a world within the World. To say, with Ezra Pound:

“Do not move  
let the wind speak  
that is paradise.” (Canto CXX)

\*

Poetry, the impossible eternity of momentary and disappearing gestures.

\*

The Moment, healer of time.

## THERE BUT FOR

Sprinting across the roof of the sun porch,  
a squirrel that's never seen a horse.

If it were a country squirrel, mountain squirrel,  
rodeo, circus, or cartoon squirrel, not a center of the city squirrel,

it might hear its own sprinting and brush out on the easel of *hell yeah*  
itself galloping like a horse with wings,

which would put us in competition with each other,  
building up to takeoff speed.

The squirrel leaps safely from house to tree.

It's not that I haven't dreamed of spontaneously combusting into a bird,  
but when my scapula itches

I scratch it, use my fingernails like farm implements,  
plowing furrows into my skin.

It's soothing, sure, but what if the itch is a wildness?

What if by scratching I've tamed the bird portion of the half-bird/half-man  
I was meant to be?

Must suck to be born a squirrel that's never seen paintings of angels.

Must suck to be a church squirrel that's never seen comic book creatures  
which put the angels to shame.

Six cups of coffee is one way to build up speed. Maybe

I shouldn't have saved that boy  
from the open fields of his carefree youth,



pushing him into the safety of a trench,  
as though a not quite lethal dose of the youth I saved him from

would transfer to, and reinvigorate me, and I could jump  
all the way to Asia Minor

if that's where I wanted to be.

I can say *flame on*, and do, but apparently not with enough conviction.

Sinatra sings *come fly with me*  
like it's no big thing.

Now my other scapula itches. Now my thighs. My face.  
Maybe *scratch where it itches* is a leash, hot off god's tongue.

Maybe if it sounds like somebody's afraid of a little competition  
they are.

Maybe I'll have my fingernails removed.

## **A WIND OF SPICES**

1.

Fill in the blanks.

Your favorite smell is \_\_\_\_\_.  
\_\_\_\_\_ is the scent you've always hated.

Your \_\_\_\_\_'s scalp has the fragrance of \_\_\_\_\_.  
\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_,

conjure your \_\_\_\_\_, their \_\_\_\_\_.  
Olfactory travel memories of \_\_\_\_\_

and \_\_\_\_\_ spring from \_\_\_\_\_.  
The \_\_\_\_\_ exudes the stink of \_\_\_\_\_ when wet.

Odors from \_\_\_\_\_ remind you of working  
with \_\_\_\_\_. \_\_\_\_\_ is your \_\_\_\_\_'s aroma.

Don't forget.

2.

You, a woman raised in an Eastern  
Europe of Soviet satellites, wear

the scent of being watched, fought  
to direct your new country's clinic

for victims of human rights abuse.  
Do you remember our first interview?

I pressed record; asked, "why did you start  
a treatment center for your region?"

Your mezzo-soprano meandered through motives:  
your mother's generation forced from their homes

by Russians, packed into trains that stank  
of urine, excrement, after-birth,

exiled to work camps, Siberian snow, bodies  
in rivers, meals of stolen carrot peels.

Stalin's orders to his soldiers: rape  
their girls, steal their grain, organize

their starvation. Two hundred thousand  
dead from hunger. Your mother's whispers:

*don't speak about our past.*  
*Don't make trouble.* Her generation,

tortured and forbidden to say Anything.

3.

Recorder off, you giggled: *Oh, yes,*  
*my husband came back from the Soviet-Afghan war*

*with post-traumatic-stress-disorder.*  
*One night I woke with his hands*

*at my throat. He said he was sorry. The dreams*  
*were back; he offered to sleep on the floor.*

He drank. You wept. He bellowed:  
shut the fuck up.

Under a blanket of bricks, he passed out, alone.

Your weeping tripped a combat memory:  
trapped behind a brick wall,

he heard rustling on the other side,  
imagined a rifle pointing at him.

He leapt out and fired first. A weaponless woman collapsed at his feet, sobbing,

emitting the odor of fresh blood. *Why do all women cry*, he wanted to know.

You smiled for a non-existent camera.

I breathed in your silence's odorless poison,

memories of my father, drunk again, punching my mother, both blaming me, swearing

it never happened. Mutes in the land of Oprah.

Interviews two, three, first week to last, I pressed record: "Tell me what really happened."

You echoed your mother, your government: *Don't speak about it; my husband won't understand;*

*we haven't the right.* You built a wall of martyrs around your life:

innocents arrested to satisfy monthly quotas, beaten with soft, heavy objects

so injuries wouldn't purple their skin with maps of abuse. Under a surface of bone, the damage hid

inside their skulls. Memories were shaken loose, ability to speak their minds, erased.

I cobbled stories about you as advocate, therapist, caretaker.

Every time I wrote about why your life intertwined with theirs

you insisted: *Don't Write my story; it makes me sad; my husband won't like it.*

My editor wondered why  
I left you out of your own existence.

4.

I wrote, brain bloated  
with odorless silence until,

one evening, the walls spinning,  
I fainted. When cranium hit

concrete, gray matter bounced and snagged  
on the ridges inside my skull,

swelled traumatically, mimicking  
your region's native-born and immigrant

women and men whose heads are  
beaten wordless—senseless—blank—

by scapegoats under orders.

When I woke in the ICU  
I had no balance, spoke in whispers—

forgot. My sense of smell was silent.

No fruit, no city, no animal odors—

Flavorless exhaustion. Sleep.

5.

At home, my husband tried to feed me  
rice, toast; I vomited out

every meal. He called the hospital,  
pleaded a spoonful of applesauce

into my mouth. I swallowed, inhaling

my husband's love and a dense perfume

of cinnamon, cardamom, cloves,  
but more so, an ancient incense:

balsam sap perhaps, and onycha, galbanum,  
frankincense—scent of an extra soul.

I began to walk, talk, eat again,  
breathing in a perfume of sparks,

inhaling cinnamon, cardamom, cloves,  
generations of knowledge, devotion,

in every sniff of gasoline, apples,  
shit, sweat, cement, coffee.

I exhaled secrets, dry bones,  
tasted the particulars of musk

melon, safety mixed with cinnamon  
cardamom, cloves—a wind of spices

I wish for you, Eastern European  
daughter, owner of crushed senses.

So breathe deeply cinnamon,  
cloves, cardamom, memories

of potash waters, witnessing  
harm's way, candle wax,

melting, father's closet  
of mothballs, the fur coat

of your grandma mixed with \_\_\_\_\_'s  
pungence on a steamy day, fear

gone sour, the mildewed bathhouse,  
\_\_\_\_\_ soaked in algaed water,

fried eggs, \_\_\_\_\_'s essence,

\_\_\_\_\_ on the fire, a full diaper,

the \_\_\_\_\_ that you share with \_\_\_\_\_,  
\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ after \_\_\_\_\_.

Breathe out—don't forget—tell.







# Caitlin Bailey

## LITTLE PIECES

At night you imagine  
the way he might hold

a piece of fruit  
on his tongue,

pressing down —

the inevitable burst  
before finally pulling it in.

You will fail  
in the most spectacular

of ways, cling to the root of this  
and the brash screech.

The lead veins of the window.

Here is the answer —  
the cracked cuticle,

the broken binding.

The whole of the town  
deforested and cleared of shade.

**POPULUS [From *Arboreal Figures*]**

So many painted windows one leans out of,  
looking for someone else

whose dress in white-  
held emptiness

or doubt,  
and fallen from a cloud trunk,  
is leaf.

A remedy while outside the operatic birds  
lean forward into canopy,

half-  
notes of the bower  
who receives.

While you and I have no sadness here  
worth looking for,

only eyes bathed in river light,        tremulous figment.

**Microreview of Matthew Lippman's *American Chew***

Burnside Review Press, 2013; 86 pp

*American Chew* is unapologetically American. It makes no pretense of being timeless, of playing to the future. In a hundred years, some editor might go blind jamming in footnotes to explain Sears, Saran Wrap, Facebook, Glad bags, Crate & Barrel, Valerie Bertinelli, Mountain Dew, 7 Eleven, Exxon, Play Dough, Fed Ex, Led Zeppelin, McDonalds, YouTube, Al Green—maybe even Twinkies. Lippman peppers his poetry with today, with the immediacy of now's language. At times nakedly personal and at times purposefully psychedelic, Lippmann cannot be chloroformed and pinned to one acid-free backing with a neat little label underneath.

Lippmann likes to start at a certain point then veer like a boomerang to come back to the reader as an uncaring sea or a boat made out of computer parts into which trout, elephants, kangaroos, and even green grass can jump.

He chews the fat, gnaws on old memories, chomps down hard on his own vacillations. He is at his best when illuminating the effects of loss, both individual and monumental. In "Voyeurism," he goes on a seeming tirade against Stephen Spielberg's vivid depictions of the Holocaust only to dissolve into an impossible dream of a family lost to the Nazi ovens coming back to life in a clean kitchen with a friendly white stove—making the loss of so many achingly personal. In "You Got to the Sea," he begins with the promise of love and happiness for two women who marry as the sea forms into a character that defines their love and the ultimate devastation they face when one of them is dying. Both poems pack a decidedly powerful gut-punch in their poignant ending images.

Some of his poems send me right to Google to find out if there is some secret code that will help me make sense of his magnificent slush of interesting wordcraft. I find that there is such a thing as a rhino window (although the window is undetermined—it's a JavaScript thing), but that does not get me out the Wonderlandish construction that is "Random Acts of Violence." Still, I am fascinated by this new world of a rhino crashing through the kitchen window and making the children laugh. It makes me laugh and turns me into the adult who is really a child at the dinner party in "The Carnivores Serve Brisket" because I do not own a home when everyone else at the table does. It

is the failure of the American dream. Perhaps most of the book is the failure of the American dream, and America is chewing us all up, then spitting us out into a cosmic cuspidor.

He brings ideas back into disparate poems at unexpected times. In the title poem (the opening poem of the book), Lippmann's voice says he wants to work in a slaughterhouse but has to face the reality that he has no stomach for actual slaughter. This theme comes back near the end of the book in "The Earth in There" in which the man in the poem finds the placenta from the recent birth of his daughter in the freezer (probably being kept for burial in the fashion of ancient Hasidic traditions) and considers various gourmet options for cooking and eating it, but leaves it there when he realizes, "because when it comes down to it / I don't understand slaughter / and I'm afraid of the whole sweetheart human race."

These poems are not empty pictures, not churned-out blogs or TV shows of blogs. Most of these poems create strange little rooms of ideas that are best experienced alone without traffic noise or background music, letting the formulations spin, dissolve, reconnect without trying to force them to make mathematical sense.

**READING MY PALM**

finger the sloped curve  
name the feathered creases:  
dead father  
ignited moon  
haloed green farm road  
the first thing i learned—percussion  
then summer  
night  
how to be held  
zuma beach, 1996  
the stars—gone  
sounds of the waves—gone

each branch, a path  
abandoned

i search my palm for the face  
of the first lover i actually loved  
turned into a note in my journal—  
*today the bougainvillea pinked up the garden wall*  
a line in a letter—  
*come anytime, i live here every day*

i look for the future, but can name nothing  
close my eyes—  
a rhythm of someone else's blood—  
time mixing in my hand

## Language Can Be Hefrier Than You Think

### *I - Chaucer Stirs Things Up*

One evening I sat in the audience at a poetry reading, waiting for it to start. Other people were talking quietly, but I wasn't conversing or paying attention to individual words, only aware of the general hum. Then from directly behind me a voice began to speak slowly in a hoarse whisper:

*Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote  
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,  
And bathed every veyne in swich licour ... .*

The first three lines from the "Prologue" of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* was recited in such beautiful dialect that I felt as if a black hole had opened briefly and accidentally into another room some 600 years earlier.

Immediately my body began to shake beyond my control and my eyes filled with tears. I could hardly breathe. This was a very different reaction from the one I would soon be having when I listened to two poets read their contemporary lines.

I didn't turn around to see who was behind me. The uncanny whisper ended abruptly after these three lines and never resumed for the rest of the evening. But I was stunned by the simple, almost brutal physicality of my response, as if I had been actually *touched* by these words, and I felt a need to think about the experience after I got home.

In what way can words alone become so physical? Daily we exercise our human capacity to emit, absorb and shape a variety of sounds with our ears, mouths, chests, stomachs; we are physically involved in regularly altering air. Words themselves are not objects. Yet listening to three lines of Chaucer at that particular moment, was for me the same as being struck in the solar plexus by a stone. It was like being *rubbed down* all over my body, inside and out, with something uniquely

rough and prickly. I had a physical reaction to something about those words that did not come from their meaning, nor from some passing resemblance to noises of predators, weapons or the mesmerizing rhythms of drum beats. Several persistent questions refused to go away:

*Was this just a fluke brought about by an odd combination of circumstances?*

*Did this used to happen quite often? And if so, where, when, why?*

*Why doesn't it happen any more?*

Mine was not a *secondary* reaction, first processed by the conscious mind; it had little or nothing to do with meaning, rhythm, meter, assonance, alliteration, rhyme. This felt much farther down the brain stem ladder towards the visceral—and yet more refined at the same time—than that.

I had been unaccountably catapulted into to some kind of earlier human relationship with language. And it was neither a simple nor an unmindful one.

Chaucer's words had to do with spring. Therefore my response may have been pre-conditioned to be stronger than if he had been talking about a divorce or a fishing trip. Nevertheless, some combination of meaning, sound, rhythm and the particular situation had conjured for me an original emotional experience, not simply evoked the memory of a previous one.

Speaking as a poet, I have come to recognize that raw emotions are like rare natural resources: They must be actively mined through some extraction process with tools. They do not obey ordinary verbal commands or cues any more than volcanoes and hurricanes do and, like weather gods, their powers should not be fooled around with. Not surprisingly, humans seem to be constructed much like Earth itself: We have a seething central core, well insulated from the surface by various levels of relatively opaque matter (our brains, for example!) But there are vents through which the steam is regularly allowed to come up. I believe the ritual of oral storytelling and poetry was one of those vents, and one of poetry's original functions. It is a function now basically obsolete.

And yes, my brief experience with the first few words in Chaucer's



amazing poem was related to spring, and, through the propelling ‘juice’ of this season, I came into the rhetorical space that ancient poetry used to carve out for itself whenever people gathered for important rites and ceremonies. I could feel a seething in his words; I could feel the ancient, collective urgency and “riddlic fire”<sup>\*</sup> moving through his lines. I was connecting with the enormous tradition in ancient myth and story in which words, *under the right conditions*, can have actual power to bring up new matter into the world, rather than simply serving as a stamp of identification and approval afterwards.

So, the first thing I settled in my mind was that my physical reaction was not because I was remembering some event in my own past, one that the words had almost brutally yanked from my poor quivering unconscious mind. Poetry can do that too. But this was not about me—this was much older, like the language of original naming.

## *II - From Syllables to Names*

If we’re going to treat words as if they were physical objects instead of mere puffs of air, we need to go way back in time to when people actually believed this sort of thing. In the ancient Hindu mythology of India, for example, the huge crossover from Nothing into Something was brought about by an “object” that resembled the sub-atomic particles of modern physics—that is, it was so “small” that people couldn’t perceive it with their senses, but only with their imaginations. And that object—too small to see with any magnifying device, too teensy to finger-roll like a grain of sand—they called “the syllable.”

In the typical paradoxical fashion of Vedic myth, the syllable – the very first physical object in the universe – was refined into existence by listing everything it is *not*:

*... it is neither thick nor thin, neither short nor long, neither flame nor liquid, neither colored nor dark, neither wind nor ether; it doesn't stick, is without taste, without smell, without eyes, without ears, without voice, without mind, without heat, without breath, without mouth, without measure, without an inside, without an outside. It does not eat and is not eaten.*

Here, mythology and science are in agreement: this “basic object” is

impossible to imagine, much less talk about, without resorting to metaphor. You have to make a second thing before you find out what is actually there first. It's like kids with mud pies. Fueled by the energy of a mindless enthusiasm, they start digging into the muck and scooping stuff out. Then they pile that stuff somewhere else. The place they started with, turns into a hole. The hole is different from the new pile they have made. There's no way to *make something* new without having two things going on at the same time.

Then what happens, of course, is that we all lose track of what is "first," because it never really was the issue. So we're left forever with both metaphor and whatever else we have also discovered – or made. This is the gods' dilemma as well as ours.

Flash forward to our own era, and we have achieved a full separation between the physical and the spiritual, between the hard and the soft, the real and the imagined. Our syllables have glommed themselves into words, and these – although they have motivating power – we place firmly on the non-physical side of the spread-sheet. For us, words possess only the relatively soft and temporary power that comes through meaning – or, at best, through the sounds and rhythms we might hear from preachers, politicians, poets and the like. While words might *incite* physical action, they do not possess the heft of the original syllable, which in the Vedic myth was also the footprint of an enormous cow.

Yet words are not totally non-material, are they? Spoken and written they involve breath, shape, volume – and the weight of our hands.

As early humans huffed and spewed syllables and other vocal noises into speech, something like a word-attention capacity must have grown inside us until it swelled into a small appendage. Maybe we came to count on our words so much that we forgot how the rest of the world also has a language.

At the very least, the new requirements of listening in a different way to one another (shall we say, talking more and more about less and less?) would have privileged the latent and subversive power of passive voice in our language, going back to the time when we stood in the Garden of Eden *being named*. This is the part that has fallen out of our origin myth: that initial moment when "we" felt the weight of our own name come gently down upon us like a

cloak of office. I like to think that this act occurred with all our senses simultaneously combined into an enormous symphony of receiving – a kind of full-species epiphany.

Soon enough we stepped out from the flat background of our former existence into a resonant space. We became anointed ones, beings who could simultaneously listen to and speak – words.

So stunning was this awakening of human consciousness that it hovers as a persistent theme in various mythologies, especially as a tale in which a creator god builds a set of living beings (like mud pies!), only to recognize, belatedly, that these creatures know as much as he does. Reluctant to destroy his beautiful creatures, he has to figure out a way to dumb us down. In many Central American native mythologies this is done by clouding the eyes of humans so they can no longer see as far as the gods, metaphorically expressed as “breath on the mirror.”

Eventually, we newly-anointed word-wielders began to *name* everything that was not us.

But naming was not as simple as it sounds. We didn’t just line up all physical objects into a row like soldiers and bark out a single noun for each. We all know there is more to language than just nouns. Words can shape-shift back and forth from verbs to nouns to adjectives, and everybody who has ever tried to learn a foreign language knows that people speak in phrases – in “clumps” of sounds – not in individual words.

And finally, here comes metaphor again. In early times people apparently did not separate their language from their mythology. If a man in Siberia mentioned a branch near a fire, he might use a word we’d translate as “gnarled stick.” But the term he was using referred *simultaneously* to the kettle hanging from the branch and the whole surrounding area; its full meaning would be “the hearth of the horned mother-universe.”

A Tzutujil Maya talking about a thirsty jaguar would refer to the animal as “a woman’s child of the Old Complete Being searching for the mouth of Our Mother because of the sharpness of Our Father’s Teeth.” Names were not abstract; they were connected to an entire worldview with its long trail of stories.

This “packed” quality of words is beautifully expressed by the poet Osip Mandelstam:

*Any given word is a bundle, and meaning sticks out of it in various directions, not aspiring towards any single official point. In pronouncing the word ‘sun,’ we are, as it were, undertaking an enormous journey to which we are so accustomed that we travel in our sleep. What distinguishes poetry from automatic speech is that it rouses us and shakes us into wakefulness in the middle of a word. Then it turns out that the word is much longer than we thought, and we remember that to speak means to be forever on the road.*

Our language began as a bundle – with *simultaneous* built into it, physically. Every named object contained, curled inside, the enormous nuclear-fission power of its story. In their way of speaking, people in early societies acknowledged that certain fragments of that story would remain concealed and potent, like a compressed spring hidden by cloth or stone.

I believe language continues to conceal much of itself in exactly the fierce, bristling way described above, but in order to release the catch on its sprung powers we probably need to treat it more like a wild animal than a pet.

### *III - From Hand to Mouth*

*Sticks and stones may break my bones  
But names will never hurt me*

To regard language as physical, we need to notice our own weight in the world. We are more than the mere lumps we would be if “being” were the only verb and “doing” did not exist. For humans, developing the capacity for language involved additional ways of doing – with both our voices and gestures.

A common assumption is that human language was oral long before it was written. Many mythologies privilege “the Word” as the origin of the universe, by which they usually mean a sound as well as a meaning (a different idea from the Sanskrit syllable). If we assume language is a thing that can have a beginning, and that humans existed for a while without it, then at some point a unique human attention capacity was mysteriously activated by something we were doing with

our bodies, not just our voices. We began to feel the tension between the “soft power” of meaning and the spontaneous daily physical acts of bellowing, grunting, clapping, gesturing, jumping, grimacing, pointing, hissing, etc.

For some reason we began to want more specific results from these familiar gestures and noises. Gradually we worked them into a full-bore language. Our voices especially seemed to intrigue us, so we taught ourselves to sing and to pronounce. At the same time, though, we were dreaming up new tasks for our hands.

So far as we know, humans have been making meaningful marks with their fingers dipped into various gooey mixtures for countless eons. We’ve also used tools to scratch marks onto sticks, bones, and rocks; we have drawn lines in the dirt but also onto just about any surface that would sustain the impression, including of course, our own bodies.

Peoples all over the world who do what we call “rock art” (in Australia, going back at least 50,000 years, and possibly of a similar age in parts of Africa), have generally called it “writing” rather than “art.” There is no consensus among archaeologists, art historians, and the participants themselves as to what these marks signify, but it is generally assumed that they were, in most cases, not random doodling exercises.

Rather, people were communicating something either local and practical (“Here is a dangerous whirlpool”; “There’s water in a little tunnel nearby”; “This is where the landslide happened seventeen moons ago”) or were speaking a kind of pidgin-code that allowed adjacent groups to exchange information without speaking the same language. They may also have been communicating with the spirit world.

All of this was language, but it was silent – analogous to sign-language perhaps – but in any case a visual code to make complex connections with other people, with the larger world and with the cosmos. I believe that writing and speaking developed simultaneously, neither “emerging” from the other, but superimposed, intertwined in a huge variety of ways. This allows for a kind of whole-body understanding of our language development rather than confining it mostly to our heads.

Besides rock writing and other meaningful marks on objects hard and soft, there exists an entire language of gesture that we inherit and practice from our pre-hominid ancestors, which we loosely refer to as “body language.” Gesture is refined into a highly articulate speech called sign language, and who is to say that humans with full hearing capacity did not communicate this way, deliberately and with great complexity, in many early cultures? Dance, mime, the martial arts, and entire sets of specialized, coded motion patterns (tea ceremonies, for example) offer ways for humans to extend the physicality of language beyond the vocal.

The silent part of our speaking, though, especially involves the hands, with their huge complex of nerve-endings, tendons and skin sensitivities. Axel Munthe, a Swedish physician who wrote a best-seller in 1929 about his life, was awed by the mute healing power of the human hand. Speaking of his dying patients, he said, “Why, even after the power of speech had gone and the terror of death was staring out of their eyes, did they become so peaceful and still when I laid my hand on their forehead?”

And then, this wise physician continued:

*One day, one of my best friends [then in the lunatic asylum] hit me on the back of the head with a hammer he had got hold of in some inexplicable way, and I was carried unconscious to the infirmary. It was a terrible blow, my friend was an ex-blacksmith who knew his business . . . . As I lay there in the infirmary a whole week with an ice-bag on my “head of a bear” and no visitors or books to keep me company, I began to think hard on the subject, and not even the blacksmith’s hammer could make me abandon my theory that it was all in the hand.”\**

At this point I feel myself wanting to shout “from hand to mouth!” and here’s why: The human hand is amazingly sensitive in both giving and receiving the highest and most concentrated of human energies. Dumbly it moves across surfaces, and inside our bodies explosions take place.

“Things have their secrets,” said Heraclitus over 2000 years ago. “What you touch knows what you think,” says Vancouver, BC poet Daniela Elza in 2013, as if in reply. If we assume Heraclitus meant *every thing*, then that includes us. Through a variety of finely practiced acts of

touching, the healer's hand, the lover's hand, the artist's hand can act as a transformer, taking in the unvoiced secrets of things and transferring the shape, form, force and full body of them into an emotional response within us. We are then able, with our minds, to translate that response into words. Voila! We have changed one element into another; we have made electricity from coal and fire; we have translated the physical world into language.

#### *IV - Chaucer Has the Last Word*

*For this was on Seynt  
Valentyne's day  
When every foul cometh ther  
to chese his make,  
Of every kind, that men thenke may*

So Chaucer says, midway through his poem *Parliament of Fowls* as he launches into a kind of naming frenzy, or catalogue of all the birds who have come together to choose their "makes" (mates). The last line has been translated as "all kinds that have a name that men can say," and also "of every species that men know, I say." In any case – and looking back to the original above – it seems to me the words contain a tantalizing ambivalence, an implication that *naming is a limited power*. Which could imply that there is more to language than just an endless telling of names.

Here, in the final section, I want to return to the original conclusions I allowed myself to jump to after reacting so strongly to a few lines from the opening of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: (1) Words sometimes seem to bypass the mind, and effect a person as if they had been touched, shaken, punched, lightly stroked, etc. (2) That language can, will, and should routinely have such a direct, hands-on power is knowledge that humans once shared, but lost somewhere in either history or pre-history.

Let me address these issues again with a final question: When do words become a new *experience*, instead of simply evoking, narrating, describing – a previous one?

For such an experience to happen I believe the timing needs to be exactly right. A crack needs to open between what is spoken and what

is understood. This, of course, happens almost every time people talk to each other, but mostly we shrug it off because we assume language will smooth over the cracks. Now and then, though, we need to *notice* that crack just at the moment it's closing, and to be puzzled enough to keep it open just a fraction of a second longer than usual.

During that brief time two possible outcomes tremble in the balance: We relax and figure, oh well, once again we've mis-understood (I thought you said "a searing man," when of course you must have said "a seated man"); or we recognize that a new arrangement of events has just occurred ("Yes, my ex-husband did have a certain kind of vigor, come to think of it") and seize a rare opportunity to expand our precious cache of experiential knowledge.

This can be painful, like getting a shot or even a blood transfusion.

If you think about it, how often do you actually learn something that doesn't involve simply connecting another link to what you already know? Once a person grows into adulthood, the "tacking-on" way of learning has become so ingrained that we easily fall in with it, not realizing that it carries as a side effect, a kind of numbness.

Hearing the opening lines of Chaucer's "Prologue" allowed me to re-experience an initial connection with the world. I felt as if I were being offered a gift, neither despite nor because of how I had led my life. I heard these words as the first way that something essential would be spoken. The words filled the crack like a physical continuation of what they were speaking about, and I could fully *take it in*. It was like a beautiful embrace; no, it *was* a beautiful embrace.

Well, of course there is no way to experience something for the first time more than once! To realize, even briefly, an original physicality to words after so many centuries of developing a more distant relationship, must involve the prefix "re-" (as in "remember," "renew," "redundant," "repeat"). But blessedly since the "we" that each individual person embodies, since that "we" is historically prone to spells of communal forgetting, I believe humans have lived for centuries in a chronic state of depletion – call it spiritual, imaginal, visionary, all of the above – without realizing it. Almost as if we grew up too fast, or came out of the garden too soon.

So easily, if we allow ourselves, can we drop into a childlike, "Garden of



Eden” frame of mind. I believe each of us harbors such a “place” deep within ourselves. Yet this is not the same as a *tabula rasa*, because each human does come into the world already possessed of an enormous “basic education,” a set of structural and topographical intuitions we’ve imbibed, and even honed while in the womb and continue to develop at a rather wild rate for at least the first few years of our lives. Because this part of us has never named anything, it holds the innocent power of perpetual readiness. In order to learn something truly new, it is probably necessary to find a way back to this place where a passionate curiosity consumes us utterly, yet we are not impatient; we’re ready and willing to keep reconfiguring the world. This theme occurs in many stories and legends (for example, the Parsival tales of medieval Europe).

By luck or by accident, we can find our way into that place of wildness inside ourselves and hear old words spoken as if for the first time. And although we are accustomed to consider “language” to refer only to spoken and written words, which in themselves pack a wallop less than a wet noodle, a person might yet seek out and feel the sparking that happens each time the crack closes between worlds. It is in this split-second range of almost-not, not-quite, just-before, could-have-been-something-else-just-as-easily (didn’t I just fly for three seconds?)—where the marvelous hammer-blow of essential enchantment lies.

**FUNCTION OF THE HEART, AS DIVINED BY THE BODY**

The heart is divided—

nerves thread cold rivers, wrap intervening space—

catch hold of the wandering ether—

& in the absence of the carriage of the ear,  
organ of the voice,  
anterior fifth of the globe of the eye  
the vesicular murmur—

light may fall empty, resolved, become imperceptible

so that act of expiration, so familiar on the rib, reels—

stalls—but the slight presence of summer heat fevers

the indeterminate principles of structure  
and the thready, stellate effusions

fox their way back—

Hello. The wireless customer you have called is unavailable.

To leave a callback number

press 1.

Just blogging to scare my loved ones

about carving out a niche in the rock face of romantic poetic lineage is all

and furnishing it with shit from skymall. I'm on the couch and I haven't

paid the bill

so the cable's out. I hate being forgotten about.

Really I miss you

and want to lay around and watch TV together and drink cake flavored

vodka. A smoke.

I'm a super supreme.

I have a new manuscript handshake. I plaid the beer thick head glasses.

Spun no signal.

Kill the lawn grass hot computer tired. I lust to blow shotgun holes in

designer clothes.

Fields

I'm sorry for my life in Facebook status updates. I just get tone lonely.

Wireless unmoored I could go tumbling up broken printer cartridge ink

desperate animal claw-like last

stand stainmark blots of smoke into the void. The void is super funny.

Take me to this as-seen-on-TV paradise.

This ammo car window hill prone body county fair analog air.

This multi-aisled inferno.

These stock noise livestock toys.

This sexy aluminum can hole in the sky wherefrom the light can piss itself

wild.

This serenely new hell.

1.

## **In Search of Duende: 7 Explorations Using Zuihitsu**

I.

Duende is not disembodied rational logic. Nor is it simply emotive poetic logic.

Imagine metaphors rising, lingering, demanding not attention, but sympathetic attentiveness. Each image a structured reverie suspending belief.

Federico Garcia Lorca: “Duende is the roots thrusting into the fertile loam known to all of us, ignored by all of us, but from which we get what is real in art.”

Not a map, not a discipline, it rejects, it breaks. With it we confront the edge, the wound, the visible expression, the constant baptism. Duende “rises up through the body . . . courses through the blood and breaks through a poet’s back like a pair of wings<sup>1</sup>.”

If duende is the wound, what is the conduit? The liniment?

II.

Zuihitsu, meaning *miscellany*, meaning *miscellaneous essay*.

The form of zuihitsu or “running brush” produces a poem that resembles the form of a journal, a record of the mind’s movement, the boundary between order and disorder.

Order within disorder. Nostalgically modern impulse to recover. To dig and find compunction in the slivers.

As a critical term, zuihitsu transcends its own amorphousness, annihilating and nourishing the usual boundaries for forms and constructs.<sup>2</sup>

Restrictions of the fictive and personal are gently annihilating each other. Search for fabula and find the syuzhet, poetry’s sweet geometry.

Duende’s murky antecedent.

---

1 Edward Hirsch

2 Linda Chance

### III.

Historically, the *zuihitsu* is closely associated with pre-modern Japanese classics from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, such as Kenko's *Tsurezuregusa* (*Essays in Idleness*, ca. 1330), the Bunka-Bunsei era (1804-1830) and the two decades before World War II.

Kimiko Hahn's reckless truth, *Narrow Road to the Interior* is confessional, the self on the page finessed to form. It has none of the bad rap of the Confessionals. It is electric, soul-level eidetic memory.

[Kimiko Hahn, From *Narrow Road to the Interior*]

*Scratch the surface, uncover rage. A new emotion, not unlike a toy though not always a pleasure. I feel differently in control. Rather than a candied comment, I hear myself saying ohfuckoff and am amazed. I once saved this stuff for metaphor. For a volatile tension in each line*

...

*Zuihitsu, "left up to the brush," is a poetic text usually in prose that utilizes disorder as its general strategy by employing such tactics as fragmentation, juxtaposition, contradiction, variety of topics, variety of forms, and variety of lengths.*

...

*Zuihitsu captures the associative, visionary shards of attentive living, like duende.*

*Zuihitsu is circular, messy, and hedonistic, like duende.*

*Zuihitsu's contradictions are mosaics of closure, like duende's.*

### IV.

The ability to recognize our pain in other's truths, to recognize ourselves in another's story, is a brand of empathy severely lacking in contemporary poetry.

Still, I'm grotesquely fascinated by all of the ways Confessional Poetry has been both maimed and indulged in. Contrasting versions of lust. The dual landscapes of narcissism, melodrama, and self-indulgence? A wasteland or verdant pasture?

"Confessional Poetry" (*Longman's Dictionary and Handbook of Poetry entry*): "an autobiographical form of poetry whose name was created by twentieth-century literary critics."

Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and W.D. Snodgrass.

*The Oxford English Dictionary's* definition for confession: "the declaration or disclosure of something that one has allowed to remain secret as being prejudicial, humiliating, or inconvenient to oneself; the disclosure of private feeling; a plea of guilty, an admission of what one has been charged with; a formal confession made in order to receive absolution."

*Prejudicial. Humiliating. Absolution.*

In "First Person in the Twenty-First Century," Claudia Rankine suggests that "the writer's attempt to insert into, redirect, juxtapose, or interrupt the first person, demonstrates a desire to write with awareness and integrity within the knowledge afforded us in the twenty first century. The construction of self, then, becomes a process in motion determined by indeterminacy."

The self ricocheting—messy, inscrutable, and fully alive.

Write *zuihitsu* and find the self amongst white spaces, formless, no longer inhibited.

V.

Poet Judith Harris, on the question "Why should we care about the private suffering of others?"

*Why should we not? We read them not because they are brave, or scandalous, or masochistically enthralling. We read them not because we are, or they are, voyeurs or missionaries. We read them because they impart truth about cruelty, about the need to unify aspects of the self,*

*and because they show the inscriptions of collective pain as the language that can be uttered, received, and transcended. We read them because they plummet through the surface, break the code of silence, and yield wisdom, these poets touch irresistible pain, pain that unites us or tears us apart. They recognize the gravity of human history that is a succession of atrocities as well as a progression of accomplishments. And we should come to recognize ourselves in them, our own vulnerabilities, in the human truth they speak.*

VI.

Two versions of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's sense of the imagination:

1.

*The living power and the prime agent of human perception*

2.

How the poet *idealizes, unifies*

The agent of perception and the organizing principle, codified.

VII.

Some poets speaking of this conflicting surge between form and restlessness:

Rilke, from the first of the *Duino Elegies*, which he said seemed to come to him without premonition or forethought as he paced the narrow path along a cliff overlooking the Adriatic Sea:

.....For beauty

is nothing

but the beginning of terror, which we still are

just able to endure,

and we are so awed because it serenely

distains

to annihilate us. Every angel is terrifying.

Collette Inez, "Every Sense Corrective Ink Is Running Out": "I write it down to get it straight, to redeem my life."

"Alas, I can only tell my own story—," –Robert Lowell, "Unwanted."

Isn't it true that beauty is as much thesis as anti-thesis? As much imagination as obsession in languor?

Was it Hemingway who said, "Art is a lie that tells the truth?"

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**L'AVENIR EST QUELQUE CHOSE**

All day for too long  
everything I've thought to say  
has been about umbrellas,  
how I can't remember how  
I came to possess whatever weird one  
I find in my hand, like now,  
how they hang there on brass hooks  
in the closet like failed actors,  
each one tiny or too huge,  
like ideas, always needing  
to be shaken off and folded up  
before we can properly forget them on the train.  
Most of my predictions are honestly  
just hopes: a sudden sundress in March,  
regime change in the North, the one where Amanda  
wins the big book award from the baby boomers.  
There's that green and white umbrella  
the cereal company interns handed us  
outside the doomed ball game,  
the one just for sun,  
the one with the wooden handle  
as crooked as the future  
that terrifies me whenever one of us uses it  
as a stand-in for a dance partner.  
You once opened it in the living room  
so Scarlett could have a picnic  
beneath something that felt to her like a tent  
as it felt to me like my prediction  
we would live forever was already true.  
When I want to try to understand now  
I tend to look up and how  
truth be untold, I might see nothing  
more than a few thousand pinholes in black nylon,  
it's enough to get you to Greece and back,  
or something to kiss beneath,

who knows how this is going to play out?  
I know you won't ever be able to say  
exactly what you're feeling either,  
the way worry might pop open overhead  
like fireworks oozing pure midnight —  
will we ever see the sun? —  
the way we're sure to pull closer  
to whatever's between us, the rain playing  
the drum that's suddenly us.

**Microreview of Keith Montesano's *Scoring the Silent Film***

Dream Horse Press, 2013; 77 pp

After reading *Scoring the Silent Film*, I was tempted to a regiment of film-watching in order to catch up with the poems. This could be problematic for Montesano's follow-up to *Ghost Lights*, his excellent debut collection, but it also marks a more ambitious undertaking—a collection that sets out to challenge the aestheticization of violence on film.

The poems are short and formally tight—14 lines apiece, though not exactly sonnets in terms of the turn—with evocative titles that find “The Author” in the midst of a cinematic happening:

What I could do was cower behind a bench, their guns  
still firing, as women—far away but never far enough  
from the one second & trajectory & fortuity that could  
end an existence—still ran, holding onto children  
in their arms...

So goes the opening to, “The Author As Man Who's Walking A Few Blocks From The Bank During The Robbery In Progress In *Heat*.” Montesano's decision to frame each poem this way usually does the trick—it allows him to exploit the energy of the scenes in question, which in turn frequently springs a poem into something conscious and enduring, as in these final lines from, “The Author As Man Who Runs With The Others As They Try To Escape From The Monster In *The Host*”:

...I go the opposite direction, crawl  
under a bus in the parking lot, unable to hear anything  
but the roar coupled with screams, feet still pounding  
the cement before followers do the same, saving  
ourselves, not able to say we're doing it to go home to the one  
we don't deserve, the one we really want to live for.

The inspiration for this “score” might be a slick, intelligent Korean monster movie about toxicities both environmental and psychic, but

the monster we end with is ancestral fear: of being alone, of not having risked for love all of one's worth.

The array of violent backdrops lends *Scoring the Silent Film* an anxious, elegiac feeling that works more often than not, but there are moments where that feeling threatens to exhaust itself. I found myself wondering more than once how a poet as skilled as Montesano would score other scenes: of joy, pleasure, even the ridiculously comedic. Something like, "The Author As Man Who Overhears Brian Fantana Talk About His Cologne 'Sex Panther' in Anchorman." A poem for another collection perhaps...

For now, with this collection, Montesano has managed to rescue—like the heroic imagination of film itself—violence from violence-as-style. In doing so, *Scoring the Silent Film* invites the reader-via-"The Author" to grapple with violence on a level that is potently intimate.

**REQUIEM FOR A REVENANT (IN MEMORY OF JOHN FAHEY)**

There's no job description for the position  
"Spiritual Detective."

Being the "Resurrection" is no life either.

Maybe we're becoming too cynical about our nostalgia,  
but here weird America sits, mute for a change

in a sepia-toned haze, listening at the mouths

of train tunnels from Portland, Maine, to Salem, Oregon,  
waiting to hear from your true heir.

As if there's an underground railroad for crank geniuses.

Witches nod as they pass, then give us the stink eye.

We've tied to the arms of our aluminum lawn chairs  
giant, colorful bouquets

of balloons — only to watch them turn brown, too.

That they're deflating goes without saying.  
The turtles nestled in our national lap, these ancient turtles,

are destined to inherit this cursed country. Soon.

Our children, the supposed future, we've sent to put their ears  
to the dirt down at Robert Johnson's crossroads.

Here's hoping they don't find their way home.

Our hands are full with our own souls.

**Microreview of Emilia Phillips's *Signalitics***

University of Akron Press, 2013; 72 pp

In Emilia Phillips' *Signalitics*, the collision of antiquity and modern poetry arrests the reader in an uneasy haze, not quite here or now, not quite there, but unstuck in peculiarity. Her poems find themselves in all sorts of unsettling situations, many things happening and happening relentlessly, much like life and its seemingly endless circumference. In the opening poem alone ("Subject in the Position of the Soldier with No Arms"), a porcelain Christ has lost a finger, limbs and joints are disassembled and reattached, and weather is not only humanized, but religiously compelled: "You must hold still. There's a storm in the western sky. / Beneath God's empty shoulder socket, you're a hailstone / of nerves, the fist clenched at the end of a phantom arm."

Some of the content, however, takes sufficient excavation—varying degrees of research—to illuminate context in imagery. In "Sublimation" (a dedication to the "Turba philosophorum," an ancient European alchemy text dating back to 900 A.D.), Phillips carries the reader through prayer, in and out of restless sleep ("You once thought an earthquake the neighbors making / love upstairs, but the berth of the tremor was in the heart's / ballot box, the precincts of night."), dusts over marriage, and ends on a boy soldier realizing death as he watches, pocket revolver in hand, a hawk circling and devouring its prey. Though it is a satisfying kind of intimidation that underscores Phillips' lines (her stanzas full with lives lived and forgotten), the images might just as easily be lost on the reader rather than appreciated due to the reader's contextual ignorance.

Perhaps that is what is most admirable about Phillips' collection: her ability to take the historical, the scientific and rigid, and manufacture something more human, something alive and quick-witted and breathing like a newborn emerging from a small bath. In "Cuspis," the speaker explains, in verse, the process in which dental technicians use soap to practice crafting false teeth. Immediately following, she delights in the idea of the false becoming real:

Theorists  
say that to know human anatomy  
one must recreate it, little  
by little: porcelain tooth,  
glass  
eye, artificial heart.

Though some of her lines could easily be lost to the skimming Sunday-reader, Phillips' poems are an open archive to a fragmented past. They are one part visceral nightmare memory, one part scientific journal illuminated by candlelight, and they'll have the more astute reader dog-earing nearly every page, ready to return again and again.

**ODE TO ODES**

Not Grecian urns nor nightingales  
Not west wind nor Aeolus's harp  
Not melancholy nor solitude  
Not immortality nor shoes  
Not duty nor Aphrodite  
Not drum nor Confederate dead  
Not joy, nor spot, nor Billy Joe  
It's odes themselves I'm grateful for

Laughing, clapping, wave-you-in odes  
Awesome, reverent stand-back odes  
Love-drunk, moony, proposing odes  
Fancy, playful, imagine-that odes  
Iambic, rhyming, schematic odes  
Freewheeling, hop-on-the-bus odes  
Busting-out academics' odes  
Whistling, wouldya looky-this odes

O Odes!  
That something works for someone somewhere  
Right now, works for me!



**ODDLY ENOUGH**

what rises to the surface  
when the mind idles  
are words,  
musical shapings  
of time and space,  
units of magic  
lining the path  
from capital to period,  
small bits  
of breath.

# Saymoukda Duangphouxay Vongsay

## OLD BONES

She stands over the sink rinsing oriental vegetables  
crying silently in a loud body.

If I train my eyes on her  
I can see the rise and fall of her bosom  
the rise and fall of her neck muscles  
as she swallows shameless resentments.

She doesn't know it but I'm falling apart for her.  
Her bony hands clutching a bundle of chinese broccoli  
shaking gently under running water.  
It's difficult to tell apart the droplets from her hands  
and those from her eyes.

So after awhile, I wanted to give up,  
and because of this, she's falling apart in front of me.

Disappointments exist in excess to her:  
the gathering of dirty dishes unsoaked  
dust took up residence in spills that weren't wiped up quick enough  
pungent smells of spoiled foods in the refrigerator  
unsorted laundry  
dried piss on the bathroom floor  
her husband's need to litter his complaints daily --  
she vacuums them up --  
her son insults her in front of his friends --  
she feigns a laugh to entertain them  
and her daughter -- her daughter is the worse --  
her daughter is killing her the most  
because her daughter becomes a bystander,  
says nothing,  
does nothing,  
makes no interjections.

She wonders where the matriarchal unity is  
and I want to tell her that it is in my hands

and these hands make fists that aren't strong enough to break anything.  
When she wonders where my compassion is  
I want to tell her that it is caught in my belly  
and I am not dilated enough for the birthing of any type of resistance.

I don't want to give up  
but I'm too ashamed to keep my eyes trained on her  
and because of this, she is dying silently in a loud body.

## **INTO THE AETHER**

Now the mountains you climbed call us  
toward turquoise lakes, the chalet,  
places you described as *aether*.

When the park was young  
and you were young and wild, you came  
here wearing a velveteen jacket  
and slight shoes as if in a fairy tale,  
as if for a dance. When glaciers  
were still many and large.

When you came to the park by train.

Insubstantial air made you and Lenore  
pant as you hiked. You had eaten  
huckleberries picked in alpine meadows,  
your mouths dark with juice.

You drank water from one  
of a hundred silver streams.

Near the grand U of Gunsight Pass  
a storm gusted around the cliffs  
unloading hailstones and rain,  
cold and fog. You'd gone up  
into the mountains. You got your wish  
to walk in clouds.

**IMAGINARY SUNS\***

A thunderstorm of commas bears  
Our histories flicked out the window  
Searing the eyelashes from the trees

You are my beautiful heat wave  
I press my ear to your bandaged ribs  
And hear a lifetime of radio fuzz

How could my heart have so many  
Hangnails dangling lifelessly  
Not a drop of blood to be tasted

Spread a salve over my split lips  
All of the tumbleweed agrees we  
Could have been an important city

Could have mummified our favorite  
Buildings and waited inside for all of this  
To pass over we could have used flashlights

To burn our imaginary suns in effigy  
Tell the police we don't know a thing  
It would be as true as everything

I am in the future now and breathless  
All of my clothes are filthy I am carrying  
Our secrets with a timer strapped to my chest

I have trusted you with the code  
In exactly one hour we might all be laughing  
Our cracked hands covering our faces

An hour after that I might be alone with  
A throat full of ellipses you will be tired  
Of torching the narrative nothing else

Of all the scissors in my neck this one  
Is my greatest lullaby perhaps  
A holy scorched birthday present

I'll cut the ribbon for the grand opening  
A vein is as easy as a new door  
To a room where you could talk to me

It is so lonely there are so many more  
Miles to tarp I only hope I die with  
Some audience I hope the weather is nice

*\*Based on the multimedia artwork of RO/LU, "The Sex of Art is Narrative. Narrative is Water. The Light of Design is Space" and "Here There, There Here," displayed at the Soap Factory for an exhibition titled, ",,,," which ran from September 7-November 3, 2013.*

## THE LAST SOLDIER

the easy descent, frame by frame  
the cataclysmic floor beckoned  
warm and cold and fast, the last night we ran helter-skelter  
into the tall waves of being delightfully loaded

our cave heads full of high tides, our knees useless

like lightning you are the last reflection of you  
mixed within the rare shine of flattened dirt

just enough to begin stirring up trouble with ancient resolve  
memories of fresh bread and sweet red dust  
to dilute the endless black smoke

we are learning to fly, awkward and unstable  
from above we follow the oddly fast runner  
the escaped bird, the speculators, their red wagon  
hooked to the flawless silver  
of a terrified stray bounding through the shallow water

to prevent a crash we pretend to pretend  
but know the others well, those soldiers falling  
from the static rain

some falling like you with candy and pistols and used cars  
the promise of white hair  
and brand new trash bags  
seams pressed, flat and patient due to an endless supply

others fall with magazines and square plastic tubs  
that protect their lungs  
and for storing their favorite books

others dance, a far away dance like a competition  
sinews of grass singing silence into bone  
some made for TV

some falling into photos fastened to a gentle blue  
with nails or rope or tape or anything  
that smells like ash and love

some soldiers have four and forty mothers  
have a million thirty seven red tool chests  
have five thousand and three children who can see in the dark  
have trees growing from their mouths

and some are trying to teach me to laugh while able  
like only the last soldier can laugh



## **The Russian Must Not Die: A Modern Fable**

My arms have been up for half an hour. Vance, the academy officer, allows only the names predetermined, each reading from their drafted speech on how Russian is dead, and why the department must go. Pauline shouts, "Vance, let Ping speak!" Vance chooses not to hear her. The vote will begin any minute. I take off my red velvet shoes, and walk to the "mountain," barefooted. I stand three inches away from his face. He can no longer pretend not seeing me.

Vance sighs. "Ok, Ping, you're the last. Three minutes, then we vote."

"Thanks, Vance. I'd like to share a story how Russian saved my life, twice."

The stand-only boardroom becomes quiet. My voice quivers from the tension. I have three minutes to get the swing votes to save Russian.

"I grew up without books or schools. Everything was banned, burned, buried...one day I unearthed a box under the chicken coop. I pried it open, and pulled out *Journey to the West*, *Dreams of the Red Chamber*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Great Expectation*, *War and Peace*, *Dead Souls*, and *Pushkin's Collected Poems*. A whole world opened up. I read them over and over again, until the sound and story imprinted into my genes. That is my education throughout K-12, taught by the world's best masters, three of them Russians. I was beaten many times for reading these books. I was sent to the countryside to farm for three years for my stubbornness. But they made me who I am today, these books, the earth and sky as my teachers. You say Russian is old, useless, out of fashion. Well, Shakespeare and Dickens are even older, perhaps more useless in terms of moneymaking. Can we imagine letting them die?"

I scan the crowd. The King and Queen sit in the front row, eyes gleaming with anger. Since their first failure to eliminate Russian, they've been preparing hard for the second try. They're about to succeed. Now this maverick! This big mouth! This yellow plague! After Russian, she must go.

I take a deep breath. My big mouth is going to cost my second try for promotion. I've come here to vote, not to speak. After I listen to the arguments for a while, my hand shoots up as if it had its own will. I want to tell a story, a human story, to the wall of statistics, history,

theory... My career is already in the doghouse. To speak or not speak, well, same difference between the teeth of a Pit Bull or Rottweiler.

"In 2006, Russian saved me again, also our colleague Tim. We were interviewing refugees displaced by the Three Gorges Dam. In a remote village on the bank of the Yangtze, we found an old man and his old house, the last one standing in the ruins. The cofferdam was about to be blasted in two days, and the river would rise 76 meters high, the mountains, the village and the old man's house would be under the deep water. But he refused to leave. He was born in this house, so was his father, his grandfather, great grandfather. This was his root. He was ready to go down with it. We talked for an hour in the house without windows, doors, electricity, water, all taken out by the authority. As we were leaving, the cops surrounded us in their shiny Landcruisers and pulled us into the station. When the iron gate shut, Tim shouted, "I'm a professor and a human rights lawyer. Who are you? Give me your name!" He tried to rip the nametag off the officer's chest. I stopped him. The light in the cop's eyes said he'd do whatever he needed to stop this foreigner's aggression, professor or lawyer. This is his territory. Nobody else knows we are here except for the cops and villagers. We could be stuck here for weeks, months...Soon we were taken to the interrogation room to be searched and questioned. I told the cop we were here sightseeing. Of course he wouldn't believe us. As we were talking, I found out that he was born in the border town near Russia, and he learned Russian in school as his second language.

I pointed to Jim. "He's a Russian professor."

His eyes lit up. "You sing Two Jolly Geese?" Before Jim could answer, he started singing in Russian.

*Once there was a grandma  
Who had two jolly geese  
One was grey and the other white  
Two very jolly geese*

*The geese washed their feet  
In a puddle in a ditch  
One was grey and the other white  
They hid in a ditch*

Jim's eyes also lit up at the sound of Russian, and he joined in singing. His hands had been shaking like aspen leaves, now they waved happily as he and the cop waddled around the room playing the white and grey geese, singing at the top of their lungs.

*The grandma cried  
I've lost my geese!  
One is grey and the other white  
Geese, my dear geese*

*Then the geese came out  
They bowed to the grandma  
One is grey and the other white  
They bowed to the grandma*

When the song was over, we laughed and the room became a jolly playground. The cop continued his questions and search, now only half-heartedly. He picked up my notebook. My heart jumped to my throat. It was filled with my interviews with the dam refugees and could have thrown us into jail for a long time. He fanned through the pages, and put it down as if he didn't see the content.

"What's wrong with him? Hungry?" he pointed at Jim's trembling hands.

"He has diabetes. If he doesn't eat, he may go in shock," I said. Tim's hands shook for other reasons, but a little white lie might earn us some food, perhaps?

The cop picked up the phone. Five minutes later, two giant bowls of beef noodles arrived. They were delicious, and free. A silly Russian song turned prisoners to guests.

We chatted about life in America, China, Russia as if we were old friends, until the custom police arrived to interrogate Tim. They spoke English, and meant serious business. They would not let us go until we confessed and signed our "crime" to nose around in the sensitive area to get sensitive information. I refused, knowing it was a trap. After many hours' bargain, we agreed to confess our "mistake" of entering a sensitive area. And we were let go with a written pledge that we'd never return to the village."

I look at the big clock on the wall. 10 minutes have passed. But Vance seems to have forgotten his order. I know the story is sinking in. It's going to swing a few voters.

"Colleagues, I could be still sitting in jail somewhere in China instead of telling you this story. Who would have imagined that a silly Russian goose song saved our lives in a remote Chinese village now under the water?"

The King and Queen are glaring at me now. Just you wait, just wait, I hear them say under their breaths. I raise my voice.

"Please save Russian. It may save your life, some day."

Russian is saved. By one vote. Tim, the Russian chair, is all smiles. Gina is in tears. She's been refusing to retire in fear of losing the program. Now she can go home in peace. The campus erupts with joy. Students and faculty sing "Two Jolly Geese" as they pour out to celebrate the Russian victory. Within a minute, the room is empty. The King and Queen walk out slowly, my penalty inscribed on their backs: DEATH.

UH-OH, Ping, you're in big trouble. Is it worth it?

Absolutely! A silly fable, a children song, has just opened a common ground for us to be human again. What more could you ask for?

**WHIRLED**

morning fills my head  
with smooth staples  
that don't catch

the fingernail of the moon  
can still bring you to tears

sometimes the sound of the wind is enough

acting like you knew what you were doing  
like two women coming out  
of the same bathroom stall

your breath  
hard  
the whistle of a midnight train

like not knowing what's worse:

living  
in this one place  
your whole life  
or always moving  
(always searching for home)

trapped  
like the smell of cigarettes  
in a parking garage

light  
on its way  
like headlights  
passing through a bed room window  
like lovers  
or broken stones

on someone's metaphor

or perhaps yellow

like the moon

on a winter morning

hushed

like the sound

of an old woman

struggling to rise

from the depths of a memory.

## **Review: Matthew Dickman's *Mayakovsky's Revolver***

Compared to his first award-winning book *All-American Poem*, Matthew Dickman's second book reveals a darker, more pained poetic voice. *Mayakovsky's Revolver*, taking its name from early 20th century Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky whose life ended in suicide, is built around the genre of elegy, and more specifically, poetry as elegy. Woven into this collection are frequent ruminations about Dickman's older brother, who took his own life. This brother makes many ghostly appearances, often materializing out of the speaker's psyche like a shadow. In a poem from the middle of the collection titled "Field," the speaker is

standing in a field  
trying to figure out if there was a difference  
for my older brother, the first time he cut himself,  
between his body as the beginning  
of a long, drawn out, war and his body as the end— (48).

These ponderings are a key component of the collection, as they often serve the purpose of directing the speaker's thoughts about his own life and his relation to the world around him. It's not all darkness, though; there is a degree of playfulness akin to that found in *All-American Poem* that seeps in. Also from "Field:"

...The moon  
is wearing a white kimono that covers most of her  
legs. I always knew she was Japanese! (48)

But the darkness soon returns to complicate that sensual moon. Often, a delicate balance is achieved between these light observational moments and the darker, heavier meditations on death that showcases one of Dickman's most impressive talents: the ability to combine contrasting elements into a whole, even if that whole is oblong and strange.

A shining quality of *Mayakovsky's Revolver* and Dickman's work in general is his sense of candor. Much of his work resonates so strongly

because it feels so honest. Dickman, like Koch and O'Hara before him, rebels against what is viewed as the inaccessible and stiffly academic poetry coming from many established poets. Indeed, like these poets before him, Dickman's poetry feels comfortable and colloquial, confessional in the best sense.

This candor can't help but work its way into Dickman's form as well, drawing out the lines and filling them with breath. Like poets that have utilized the breath-length line before him, Dickman's lines sometimes spill over the constraints of the page margins:

...In this life  
nothing inside him wants to pull a knife, load a gun, open a  
package  
of pain killers. In this life he has a day off  
and is going to see a movie and buy some popcorn and sit in a  
darkness  
he can rise from, and walk up the aisle like a groom, walk  
out into the air again, and down the street, and whistle maybe,  
and go home. (36).

Aurally, these lines read beautifully, but on the page, this spilling over can make for a slightly awkward presentation. In this way, *Mayakovsky's Revolver* is a refreshing break from the focus on the visual effect of the poem on the page. Dickman, or perhaps his editors at Norton, are amassing a small attack on an established aesthetic with this prioritizing of sound over form. Either way, the overall effect of the poem is not lessened by this formatting constraint. Dickman's imagery is still delivered with all its eerie potency.

There are moments in *Mayakovsky's Revolver*, though, where Dickman's voice becomes swollen and overly naïve, almost pompous in its courage to flaunt. At first glance, this seemingly sloppy excess can be excused as Whitmanian democracy trying to encapsulate everything, but even this generous reading cannot overlook lines like those in "Morning with Pavese":

one morning the angel of God will be a woman  
masturbating in the shower while I fix her eggs with basil, one  
morning only love will crawl out of bed  
and everything will be wet and swollen and open windows  
with picnics below them... (59)

At first, the image of the angel of God as a woman is lovely, but then the



image is sexualized in a cheap, expected way, with her masturbating in the shower. After this easy move, the lines that follow feel virginal and amateur in a way that's tiresome rather than refreshing. Dickman does save the poem, though, when Pavese returns to life:

...One morning  
Something even better will happen, Pavese will be alive  
again. He'll cough up his barbiturates,  
wipe his mouth and not be sad. He'll still be a communist  
but that's ok. (59)

In many ways, "Morning with Pavese" serves as a cross-section of this collection. In his democratic eagerness, jaded in a way that's appealing, Dickman meets us where we are; we're even included in the book's darkness, which is terrifying without being grandiose. Especially for young readers of poetry, Dickman represents what's possible. He's breaking the rules and looking good doing it. In "Field," the speaker declares "I want, I want, I need!" and we believe him because we want and we need. In his romps through the personal and the painful, he commits a faux-pas now and then. He drunkenly stumbles into the wrong room at the party, but we can forgive him for that because we're there with him and we're all having a great time.

**WHY, WHY, WHY**

Where was the weather I could alter?  
I told myself snow's just water

inventing something softer,  
slipping on a little feathered dress.

But it's always taken pestilence  
to rearrange us, the world throwing

a fuss, some frogs, throwing the switch  
so we're left to feel our way

for three days in the dark until  
the sun, flung back on, publishes

its sudden record of our regrets:  
I'm sorry for mocking my high-school

psych teacher who showed us  
that seemingly endless VHS

reel of live births, sorry  
to the girl we'd tease

into serenading the cafeteria  
with Celine Dion numbers

when the worst we could conceive of  
was releasing our own voice

and believing it beautiful. Of course  
we were beautiful, even then

in our evil--the way I'm helplessly  
charmed when I turn my back,

then return to find my toddler  
niece has nipped one bite

from every apple in the bowl.  
Of course beautiful, the way

as it gets colder water  
begins weighing next to nothing,

levitating, the air becoming  
a frantic, mezzanine galaxy.

Beautiful even knee-deep  
in snowbanks, in locusts,

in losses, in taking the world  
as it is, as it stands, as it falls.

**Microreview of Mary Biddinger's *O Holy Insurgency***

Black Lawrence Press, 2013; 91 pp

What is most interesting about Mary Biddinger's collection, *O Holy Insurgency*, is also what is most often overlooked in the lap of life: the dizzying specifics, a man watching a newspaper slide into a lake, a "roof [collapsing] / under the weight of its squirrels." Biddinger dazzles with the ordinary, often reveling in images that are both familiar in content, while still remaining unanticipated by the reader. In "Naturalism":

...I slipped my arms up  
the front of your shirt for comfort. Old

fears reignited like a dinosaur sponge  
exploding out of a capsule to terrorize

the bathtub. I just wanted to be home.  
But a pair can't spend all its days

in bed. Hours before we were feeding  
each other torn shreds of deli turkey

at the edge of a retention pond. How  
else to spend a Saturday?

And again, in "Where You Store the Gun at Night":

If there was a wooden box  
big enough for the both of us, we could hide it  
on the top shelf, next to the kidskin wallet  
and fingernail adhesive my grandmother

left behind.

In this way, many of Biddinger's lines delight in the playful, dancing briefly around absurdity, but usually just within reach. This is a tightknit collection of depth-in-recollection, and when it shines, it

shines bright.

That is not to say every line will resonate with every reader. While poetry, fundamentally, is a guessing game of tastes and hyper-personal reaction to each particular body of work, Biddinger's poems may leave some readers on the outside looking in. Often addressing the unnamed You, Biddinger's lines sometimes falter while trying to accommodate for character inclusion. In "A Gauntlet," the speaker jumps from the arresting image of two lovers tied to a tree, to a tame conversation built around phrasal familiarity, before landing on a vague assertion: "You asked how many days / until we could, as they say *throw / down*. But we were born fighting." In the poem "A Very Hard Time," a town is confronted with unexpected environmental complications ("A man on the television noted / difficulties, the new trouble / with air, schoolgirls loosing / their braids in directions / that could only mean evil."), and just when the poem seems to be hitting its stride, it snaps back to average by addressing the safe, familiar *You*:

Someone was stealing all  
of the lawnmowers, rolling

them across the highway,  
but you tangled your hands

in my hair.

While Biddinger does a great job manipulating the line break to flirt with the image of hands tangling in a lawnmower's blades, one can't help but wonder where the poem could have ventured if not tethered to the anchor of the distant You.

Though she may have sacrificed untilled soil to fit narrative constraints, Biddinger always explores the complexity of stories and landscapes in profound ways. There is no physical way a reader can leave this book without feeling wholly enveloped in its narrative. In "Heresy":

Every day I would peel one  
strip of vinyl siding off my

house. I started at the back.  
There was a shimmery tar

on damp wood underneath.

I did the same thing with

myself and called it purpose.

Here, we are walked along a house to the rear and given the tools to remove its skin. The speaker then shifts, subtly, into a personal and reflective wisdom. In each timeline laid out by Biddinger, there is a story deeper than the gravel pit beneath every storm-wrecked porch.

**from TOXIN TOCSIN! OR THE ORIGINS OF KELIN LOE!**

I went down to check on Kevin and Emily, and Emily was sober.

I grabbed an impressivish book. I rested my back on the cabinet under the sink.

My husband still wasn't vomiting, just confused coughing.

I read him Ovid's tale of Ajax.

The dentist tapped my tooth.

I felt the hook, and I felt the drill. We stopped and needed up.

I lied and said I couldn't feel the drill.

I SAID, I DON'T GO DOWN.

I FALL OUT.

FALLING OUT IS A WAKE.

My pediatrician taught me to lie on my hands so I wouldn't hit her.

*why you babysitting only two or three shots?*

*I'ma show you how to turn it up a notch.*

He clamped the dam to my tooth. He stretched the plastic over my mouth.

My fists shot out and I fell out and I shoved the hygienist into those rubber tubes.

My husband crawled into the hallway and passed out in his doorway.

My husband and I are talking about having children.

I took a deep breath and we tried again.

This time I started crying.

We pressed forward without the dam. I tasted tooth as it sprayed across my tongue.

He was lying with his head on his arm.

At this point I had only been kissed by drunk men with half-intentions. I had never been touched.

Tannenbaum is a teddy bear we took out at Christmas when I was a kid. He was close to my size. I brought him to bed with me to feel what it was like to sleep next to a man.

SHOULDN'T EVERY PARENT PREPARE A JUSTIFICATION FOR MAKING LIFE?

I lay down on the carpet, set my back against my husband's chest and breathed in.

I want to have a baby so part of me can learn to fall.

After my mother had my brother, there was a squirt bottle on the back of the toilet.

She leaned over and explained she had to spray hot water on her privates to pee.

WHAT FALLS OUT?

DO YOU KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS?

IF YOUR ASS ALWAYS BLEEDS, CAN YOU WIPE IT CLEAN?



## **HEARTS AT SCHOOL**

At school we dissected the hearts  
of deer, gifts

from hunters, mostly our fathers.  
Hearts frozen

and thawed, glistening on blue dissection  
mats. They reeked.

It was the stink of old death. But how  
did we know? We knew.

Looked at one other, pretended  
we didn't want to pull

scalpels along ventricles, the hair  
on our arms stiff

and no spit in our mouths. It wasn't  
like the sheep's eye,

or the pitiable frog, pithed for us  
out of sight.

Blood implied a living thing, even one  
gone from this world.

All that remained was its four chambered heart.

(II)

They asked us to envision medieval surgeon  
William Harvey

standing over the living doe belted  
to his table. We tried

to imagine the thrill of discovery  
at her open chest,

the way ventricles sucked his fingers  
like women

or infants did. He named the domed  
structures atriums: rooms

filled with light; but we were thinking  
about heat;

what the doe's body transferred  
to his hand, the tarry dark

of her blood. The hearts we opened  
were long cold and held their own surprise:

thickets of clots, pearls of blood  
like blueberries from a tin,

lumps like buckshot.





**IV**

**I'LL BE THE ONE WEARING TINY WHITE BOOTS**

In hell,  
in hell there's one  
season. It's called cold  
cruel oatmeal but it's never  
too soon to wear white slacks,

white hats,  
white socks, white jocks.  
Sundays we fling our javelins  
into the mystery down by the river  
while the feted ferries come in. Toot Toot.

We're concerned  
less with accuracy than distance.  
May this toss take me elsewhere, may  
the breeze off Fire Lake carry, may these boots  
move me and if not, make me happy here.

**Pigs and Poems:  
On Tim Seibles' Open Letter**

Tim Seibles is very much a take-a-step-back-and-really-look-at-things kind of poet. He backs up from what is assumed, cocks his head, and says, "Really?" In writing about what he "hope[s] for poetry and for people in relation to words," he uses the open letter that begins his collection *Buffalo Head Solos* (Cleveland State 2005) to counter the notion that, as he says, *Poetry shouldn't be political or argumentative. Poetry will not succeed if it's excessively imaginative. Poetry can't change anything.* He calls that attitude "a small-hearted justification for the writing of a hobbled poetry," a slighter poetry than the world can handle or deserves, in fact than the world needs.

It wasn't long after reading Seibles' call to challenge an "ascendant social order [that] permits nearly every type of corruption and related hypocrisy" that I began to write protest poems. Seibles writes, "What the hell happened to the notion of poet as town crier, rabble rouser, court jester, priestess, visionary, madman?...in stirring the words with our tongues, our paws, our long nights, and the smoldering tangle of our brains, maybe we could move our general kin to listen."

I found myself putting pen to paper in a different way. I'd always been political—in my work life, I'd gone from union organizing to advocating for victims of sexual harassment to teaching in maximum-security men's prison—but none of that entered my poems. It was as if I'd drawn a subconscious curtain between writing and activism, and Seibles was yanking that curtain back.

Poets are prone to look closely. A poet can use that appraising eye on a leaf, or a social dynamic, or a relationship, but she can also use it to explore political moments and motives. What I realized I wanted to examine was the way we humans treat the other animals with whom we share the planet.

This is partly because I don't see the sharp line many draw between our species and others'; the notion of "dominion over" doesn't make sense to me. But I'm also drawn to writing about our dynamic with other animals because so many people seem to ignore or reject them, often in the process unwittingly supporting cruelty.

This poses an interesting question with respect to the assumptions

readers might make to Seibles' letter. A lot of protest poetry is a call from one community—poets, progressives, critical thinkers—to another: people in power positions, a general public. But I also want to examine the assumptions we make *within* a progressive, critical-thinking community. For instance, progressive poets are most likely against war, against oppression. It's comfortable for us to talk in an "us-vs.-them" way on such issues. But what about the issues we ourselves might be divided on? When we read Seibles' letter, do we think of rabble-rousing *within* our ranks?

I've felt at odds with many in various justice communities when it comes to the way we treat non-human animals. I'd find myself, for instance, in complete agreement with a fellow labor organizer with respect to how workers should be treated, but not on how we should regard other species. Or I'd feel simpatico with someone dedicated to prison education, but then find them tight-lipped when it came to animal issues. I'd march alongside anti-war brothers and sisters, people shouting against senseless violence and suffering and mistreatment of those we don't know or understand, then watch them eat a cheeseburger without a thought. In responding to Seibles' clarion call, I wanted to write poems that would make people committed, as the great Albert Schweitzer implored his fellow humans, to "extend his circle of compassion to include all living things."

Schweitzer, a committed vegetarian, declared that until we extend that circle, "man will not himself find peace." He was by no means the only thinker or activist to understand this connection. Leo Tolstoy said, "As long as there are slaughterhouses, there will be battlefields."

Cesar Chavez cared about justice for all those who suffer, including animals, and he felt that his veganism was essential to living nonviolently. His successor as president of the United Farm Workers, Arturo Rodriguez, said that Chavez "took genuine pride in producing numerous converts to vegetarianism over the decades. You're looking at one of them." Coretta Scott King was a vegan until her death, as is her son Dexter. Fellow civil rights activist Dick Gregory said, "Martin Luther King taught us all nonviolence. I was told to extend that to a mother and her calf." And of course Gandhi famously declared, "The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated."

So why do so many human rights activists ignore or shy away from caring beyond their species? Why are others selective about which animals they deem worthy of care (e.g. dog yes, cow no; canary yes, chicken no)? Back to Tim Seibles. In his letter, Tim sheds light on the



overwhelm and fear that can overtake us when we think about societal ills:

The intricacies of our various travels between optimism and cynicism are utterly shaped by the society we inhabit—and the delight or rage each of us lives with hour by hour defines our style of travel, the tenor of our lives....for many, it's simply better to be deaf and blind than to respond to the world that surrounds us.

Lord knows I feel that way on a near-daily basis. It can all just be too much, and something's got to give, so why not other species? And the fact that they can't advocate for themselves may serve to make it easier to ignore them—it's hard to hold a picket sign when you don't have opposable thumbs.

But Seibles' words speak to the fact that it's these very hour-by-hour issues that can make us feel most empowered. I feel a connection with non-human animals, but I don't think one needs to in order to decry what's going on. (You don't have to want a houseful of kids to work against child labor.) At a certain point, it's just about basic compassion, basic standards against cruelty.

It feels extremely satisfying to be able to advocate against cruelty just by picking up a fork. Every time I order at a restaurant or wheel my cart to a check-out counter, I am making a peaceful choice, a statement about non-violence. But now, inspired by Tim Seibles, I advocate through my writing. Seibles' essay says, "Doesn't a working *Democracy* require a full-hearted willingness to voice everything?"

The first poem I wrote on the subject was about a dairy cow. I was in my mid-thirties—and had been a vegetarian for many years—when I first heard the real story on dairy. I'd had no idea that, like any other mammal (say, humans), a cow needs to be pregnant and give birth in order to generate milk. And that if we want her milk for ourselves, we've got to take her baby away from her. And that for boy calves, that means ending up in a veal crate. And for girls, an equally lonely and miserable life until puberty, at which time they are artificially inseminated (via human arm) and the cycle begins again. And that once a dairy cow is spent, she goes straight to the slaughterhouse, like her beef-cattle cousins, to become hamburger. And that all the land, water, grain, and energy we spent feeding her, watching her waste fill lagoons, slaughtering and packaging her and her children, could have fed many more people if it was put to more efficient use.

I couldn't sit with that and not do anything, so I changed the way I ate. That felt wonderful, inside and out, but it wasn't until I read

Seibles' letter that I brought that into my notebook. I wrote this:

## LOVE THIS

If you permit  
this evil, what is the good  
of the good of your life?  
—Stanley Kunitz

The body floods with chemicals saying, *Love this*,  
and she does, and births it; it is a boy  
she begins to clean and nose, but he is dragged  
away by his back feet. She will never touch him  
again, though she hears him howl and calls back  
for days.

Her breast milk is banked for others. Her son  
is pulled away to lie in his box.  
He will be packed for slaughter. How ingenious  
we are! To make product from byproduct:  
make use of the child,  
kill and pack and truck him to plates.

And when the gallons slow, we start over,  
and her body says, *Love this!* And she does,  
though in a moment she will never touch  
him again. His milk is not for him.

And when the milk slows too slow,  
she will join him on the line, pounds  
of ground. How we will dine!  
And talk of our glossy dogs! Her body  
will break up on our forks, as mothers  
beg us for the grain we stuffed her with,  
and children beg us for the water  
scouring her blood from the factory walls.

And when her wastes and gases and panic  
heat our air so hot our world stops  
breathing—then will we stop?  
Then will we grow kind,  
let the air cool and mothers breathe?

Gandhi bemoaned the Westernizing and industrializing of the east because it distanced us from moral demands. If we don't hold tight and guard fiercely a moral center, if we do not allow our ethical convictions to guide our actions, who are we? As Tim Seibles says towards the end of the letter, "The dim-witted drowsiness that remains so pervasive is proof of the gradual asphyxiation of the sweetest human yearnings, a kind of spiritual anorexia." A "spiritual" person, to Tim, is one who is aware in the world and is moved and motivated by that awareness. I want my awareness to enter my poetry. And as the great Lucille Clifton wrote,

human is neither  
wiser  
nor more blessed

Not that issues involving humans and issues involving animals are mutually exclusive, as the previous and very partial list of veg human right activists attests. One deeply affects the other. All the land, water, fossil fuels, swaths of rainforest, and human labor we exploit to create animal products is an embarrassing statement about the value of wealthy nations versus poorer ones. And workers' rights? These jobs, as Human Rights Watch can tell you, are some of the worst in the world. If I boycotted grapes in the 80's, lord knows I should be boycotting meat and eggs and dairy now. As a former labor organizer, this issue's very close to my heart, and led to a poem:

## THE WORKERS

An undocumented worker,  
an illiterate mother,  
a hungry thirteen-year-old,  
and a sadist  
walk into a slaughterhouse.

It's the first rung  
of the American ladder,  
says the first.

Wal-mart's done hiring,  
says the second.

School's not working,

says the third,  
and neither is dad.

A place, says the last,  
where I won't be  
punished.

The first sees the cow's  
leg dislocate as she's hung:  
Physics.  
He feels it in his own leg.  
He feels her blood  
down his neck.

The second feels the chick  
tremble as she sears off  
his beak with a hot  
blade.  
She feels it in her  
face.

The third did not know a pig  
could make that sound,  
the death sound he now  
knows he will make one day.

The fourth slams  
a chicken against a wall.  
And again. The fourth sits  
his weight on a calf too sick  
to stand. Shoves his  
finger up into a turkey  
again and again.

The first has his arm caught  
in a machine.

The second has a finger cut  
off along a beak.

The third can't leave  
his room.

The fourth slams a chicken  
against the wall. Grinds

his heel into a turkey.  
Shoves his fist up

into a calf again  
and again—

Change is frightening. James Baldwin made a chilling point in his 1964 essay “What Price Freedom” about Americans’ specific brand of unwillingness to change. He said, “Americans are the youngest country, the largest country, and the strongest country, we like to say, and yet the very notion of change, real change, throws Americans into a panic and they look for any label to get rid of any dissenter.” Even progressive artists feel comfortable with habits, traditions, paths of least resistance.

But should convenience and habit underpin our moral choices? Most people agree that it is not acceptable to inflict suffering on another being for pleasure or convenience. For me, then, embracing that anti-cruelty value, embracing the principle of nonviolence, means embracing veganism. And I choose to make these issues part of my creative life because writing a poetry that communicates these ideals is, in Tim Seibles’ words, “proof that dynamic awareness is alive and kicking, a constant reminder to ourselves and to our fellow citizens that being alert, both inwardly and outwardly, rewards each person with *more* life.”

**ELEGY FOR THOMAS KINKADE, PAINTER OF LITE**

Last week in an upscale hotel  
restroom, I saw the light

from the round windows of cottages  
touched up with snow. I stood

at the urinal, holding  
your pastoral image, yellow

splashing from the sunny clouds  
on the sunny river

and the sunny town.  
My head tilted

to the side, I leaned forward  
and felt the light

on my black shoes.

**THE APPARITION**

*Petals on a wet* went right  
before *black bough*,

but was it *these faces* came  
first or *the crowd*? It's funny

what some days is enough.  
Blown bulb filament flutter,

a page's well-placed corner  
crease. I'm tired of how I talk

and talk and call all hours  
other hours. Hum drum drawn

dawn. The refreeze thaws.  
Someone folds her pjs up

and puts them under the pillow  
upon which all ghosts dream

of our dark: moon gouged window  
rivers without water white cotton

lower case pillow case breakfast  
okay coffee. I want one

more day I won't hush up about  
while in it still. Is there enough

to think? Look at the lake a little  
longer, stranger. The geese

quiet and drift. The lapped-at  
ice edge sharpens and dulls,

while down in my notes  
it seems until I've said

everything there is to  
say about sky, I cannot

die. Closest it comes  
to cloud's how it combs

its contrails out, marbling  
this blue February afternoon,

a bruise from inside the body.  
So I sit and list the nine or ten

things I can here until parts  
of it feel part of something

else, this picked-at strip  
of perceptual shorthand,

this glyph description, flask  
inscription, how after that

every page makes it clear.  
The reason I talk all the time

is if I ever shut up, I'm going  
to have to say something.



**GRAVITY**

There were no dogs. The air was not  
filled with barking and yapping  
and yowling.

Something scratched at the door. I went  
down to see, and the dog  
did not beg to be let in.

Even so, some-  
thing had been let in at  
the door. The moon

wandered full-faced and smug  
into the western sky, loose  
from her leash.

Sirius and its faint  
white dwarf companion reached  
the meridian

at midnight  
and passed from  
the looker's eye.

## Notes Toward an Essay on the Meaning of Art

I was driving to pick up my friend for a fishing trip. I had previously told him: *Bring your own gear*. Fishing poles, tackle, extra line, clothes. When I pulled up to his apartment, he was sitting on the curb. He held a brown paper sack. It contained only two things: a pack of pornographic playing cards and a map.

\*

I went to the doctor. He first observed, and then discussed, a fleshy mass—rogue tissue on my body that recently had grown. I will always remember the phrase he used to describe this aspect of my own cartilage. He called it: “cartilage without a mission.”

\*

When my son was two years old, he would point at objects in a room and say: “Talk to dem.” By this, he meant: “Use your voice to make *those* objects talk to *me*.” So I would pick up an insensate plastic duck or a telephone with wheels, adopt a high-pitched voice, and engage him in small-talk. During these times, if I broke character and “spoke as Dad,” he would cease discourse and repeat the first order: “Talk to dem.” So I would pick up a diaper, and the diaper would ask, “And how is *your* day going so far?” And he would look thoughtfully at the diaper and say, “Pretty good.”

\*

Georges Braque, the creator of cubism, said: *I’m aiming for realism*.

\*

A photograph in my grandfather’s album depicts the interior of a cabin or a wood-paneled room at night. Throughout the room, men are laughing. Men are doubled over. Men are caught wheezing or in mid-spasm. The photograph evidently captures some kind of party. They are laughing, it seems, at the man in the very center of the picture—a man who is holding soup ladles up to his chest, pretending that they are breasts. This man’s face is devoid of expression. He simply stares at the camera.

\*

I once tried to curate an exhibition of art, music and literature that consisted entirely of artworks created by controversial / criminal heads of state or political figures.

\*

Hitler was a painter. Goebbels was a playwright. Benito Mussolini wrote bodice-ripping romances about the sexual affairs of Catholic clergymen under the pseudonym, “Giovanni DeFlore.” Kim Jong-Il composed six operas.

\*

Saddam Hussein wrote four novels. One is called *Begone, Demons*. Another is called *The Fortified Castle*.

\*

It is unlikely that Kim-Jong Il composed operas—or made preparatory architectural sketches for the Ryugyong Hotel—as was once claimed by North Korean state-run television.

\*

It is true, however, that a song was created expressly *for* Kim-Jong Il, in his honor. It was first sung in 1992 by the KPA State Merited Choir, and it is called “No Motherland Without You.”

\*

I once toured an art crawl held outdoors in the city at night. Young men and women strolled freely, drinking beers out of paper bags. From a distant art tent, I overheard a woman crying. She said: “They wrecked it... they’re too wild... they’re crushing my bio-luminescent works of art....”

\*

I once saw a movie in which men played volleyball without shirts, and my girlfriend at the time said, “I like that part—those guys are hot.” Thereafter, I contrived to play volleyball near or around her without a shirt.

\*

A friend commented to me that a movie star who was popular during our youth, and who was naturally admired for his looks, suddenly “looked old.” This throwaway observation for some reason lodged

itself in my brain. It stayed there for weeks. One day, I found a picture of the actor on the internet. I looked at the image. I said to myself: "It's true. He doesn't look good."

\*

I walked into a small hardware store. The proprietor was eating a Lean-Cuisine-brand Fettucini Alfredo microwavable entrée. Above him, on a perch, above the key-cutting machine, was a nude or shaved parrot—a parrot without feathers: a bird with pink and pimply skin. I said, "Why is your parrot shaved?" He said, "It's not shaved, it has a disease." I said, "What's wrong with it?" He said, "It's over-anxious."

\*

A local gas station advertised a new food product. The product resembled a breakfast burrito in that it consisted of rolled flatbread with sausage, eggs and cheese inside. The brand-name for this food product was *The Breakfast Tornado*.

\*

A man at the airport jogged down the concourse, talking into a cell phone. He said: "I just wanna tell ya, you're not alone... *Jason's* here, he's gonna help ya... *Mom's* here—*she's* gonna lend a hand. Were gonna go all the way here... and I just wanna tell ya, and I wanna make this clear... the one thing you aren't gonna be is alone."

\*

In 1979 the artist Chris Burden asked a friend to shoot him in the arm with a .22 caliber rifle while filming the proceedings. The friend agreed. In the film, Chris Burden stands at attention. His friend aims. Then, at the moment of discharge, Burden jolts. He looks quickly at his arm. He presses his hand there. It looks as though he has been stung by a bee. He looks at his friend, then down at his arm again. He quickly walks out of the frame. The film is called *Shoot*.

\*

Two girls in a park sat on swings. Sprawled nearby on a bench was a shirtless young man with his ballcap askew. He looked utterly depleted: legs splayed out and his chest burned red from the sun. A cigarette clung to his lips, wafting smoke, and he appeared to be sleeping. One girl said, "Is that your dad?" The other said, "Yes." The first girl said, "He looks too *young* to be a dad." And the second girl said, "He is a very young dad. We live in a house is over there." And

she pointed, vaguely, to a place in the distance where I could see no homes.

\*

It's worth remembering that the Target Corporation, via the Nielsen / NetRatings research firm, once sent out a consumer profile survey—later retracted—to some of its online customers that asked the following questions:

*When you hear lines of poetry, do you experience a “swoon” or “a surge of electricity?”*

*Do you experience the sensation of “gooseflesh” or light-headedness when you look at a painting or a timeless work of art?*

*Do you ever think about the vastness of outer space?*

*Do you care about your appearance?*

*Do you think anyone will miss you when you die?*

\*

When I was a child, our family owned a tropical bird—a cockateel. Its name was Juliet. Every night, my brother and I would “put the bird to sleep.” This was done by draping a quilt or a thick blanket over the cage. The blanket was meant to simulate darkness—“night coming on.” The bird, in its turn, complied. It entered a state of rest. It fell asleep. It entered a state very similar to sleep.

**WITHOUT**

There is a stage in early childhood development  
when a baby realizes for the first time that  
they are not, in fact, part of their mother's body.

That their heartbeats don't float together  
down the river of her arm or pass each other  
like corresponding voices along telephone wires.

One day, when she leaves the room, the baby  
will comprehend for the first time that they are alone.  
Such a heavy thought for something so small.

And, yes, perhaps it is strange to describe  
myself as your child. Perhaps it is problematic  
to compare you—once my lover—to my mother.

You, who have painted my body with your body.  
You, who have startled the crows of my heart.  
You are not my mother but we have lived

inside each other for months. Perhaps  
this is a bit of a stretch, but it is the only  
adequate way I found to describe it. One day,

long after you left, I finally realized you were  
actually gone. The suddenness. The spark.  
Learning a new word for without.

**Newfangled Androgyny, Existential Grace:  
A Review of Stacey Waite's *Butch Geography***

Stacey Waite's debut collection of poetry, *Butch Geography*, interrogates the notion of self in a world made of byzantine precincts. Through stunning narrative drenched with anaphora, litany and parallelism, the speaker questions what a gendered self can encompass in a world where hybridity battles and cleaves to allusive and changeable boundaries, and neither wins by losing.

This collection is ultimately about transcendence—of social configuration, familial pattern, and the speaker's desire to comprehend desire. But really, this collection is about what gets left behind from pursuing crucial knowledge—necessary and aching wreckage. Like Benjamin's Angel of History, the speaker envisages a life bursting with disappointment and barrage, and contemplates formative events with poignant nostalgia. But like the Angel of History, the urge to understand desire thrusts her forward (at times) against her will. Divided into four sections, this book charts the speaker's progress under the influence and weight of epigraphs ranging from Modernist guru William Carlos Williams, to Japanese Proverbs, to feminist powerhouses such as Judith Butler and Virginia Woolf. The vigilant reader charts the speaker's epistemological state through the sway of the epigraph on her entrance into self-knowledge.

The first section opens with a definition of hybridity, as encapsulated by Williams:

I do not come to you  
save that I confess to being  
half man and half  
woman.

Williams describes the relationship between the different sides of the speaker—masculine and feminine longings, as interdependent:

. . . this is to say  
if she to whom I cling  
is loosened both  
of us go down.

This section, rift with mistaken identity, explores how identity becomes a nexus of shame and deliverance. Composed of "occasions,"

self-portraits, elegies and the book's first "Letter to Gender," we meet a speaker who understands that her identity is interdependent on traits prototypically masculine (durable, risk-taking, and stoical) and feminine (vulnerable and tender), without understanding how to live in a body split by stratification. In the opening poem, "On the Occasion of Being Mistaken for a Boy by the Umpire in the Little League Conference Championship," the speaker facing the disgrace of mistaken gendered identity by the umpire realizes that "know[ing] better/than to cry" and "learn[ing]/to live in halves" is essential for survival. But she knows that this can't occur without severe repercussions. For instance, in "Self-Portrait, 1984," the speaker meditates on her mother's depression, which the speaker attributes to her mother's inability to accept her "dyke" status. Or in "Letter to Brian Nelson, Who *Chanted Boy or a Girl, Boy or a Girl* at Me on the Playground During Recess," she addresses her bully with an empathetic wisdom that can only come from straddling both sides of gender: "I know how hard it is/ to protect masculinity, its skin as thin/and fragile as the holy playground air." And she shows the consequences of this wisdom in "About Ben," a poem recounting a deceptive relationship, where the speaker cross-dresses and dates Janie. Out of fear of being caught, the speaker breaks up with the girlfriend, though she "dies a little, even at fourteen" because she knows she "has lost everything." The section ends with her first letter to gender, where she pleads with the notion to "tell [her] again the girl [she] should be."

The second section concerns reversals and risks associated with personifying "Butch Geography" (the section's opening poem)—a space not only full of "bravado," "chivalrous motto, and "silen[ce]," but what endures across populations and ecosystems. It is a section of firsts associated with accepting androgyny and homosexuality, where gender "f[alls] to pieces in [ones] lap" ("Dear Gender"), and lovers "fell through" the speaker "like wind slipping through a screen" ("Poem for my First Girlfriend"). This section describes "coming out" to a mother who fears for her child's safety ("Coming Out in Porch Light"), and regrets associated with the transition between "tomboy" and "butch" ("On the Occasion of Being Mistaken for a Man by a Waiter While Having Breakfast with My Mother"). Through the section, a reader discovers a father who is taciturn and absent, a mother who is sad and avoidant, and a child who is left as confused at the crossroads of what she inherits from them as she is standing at the crossroads of her gendered body.

The third section, preceded by an epigraph by Judith Butler,



examines the gendered body's "public dimension," and the enacted role that emerges. The speaker explores how a "refurbished" body ("To a Woman Who Has Never Been My Lover") can find contentment existentially and societally. In poems such as "XY" and "Love Poem to Androgyny, the speaker explores her "chromosomal mismatch" that leaves her yearning for in-tact masculinity and beaten up at rest stops, "piss[ing] on the shoulders/of highways" silently in the night. Toward the end of the section, and exemplified "On the Occasion of Being Mistaken for a Man by a Pregnant Woman to Whom I Have Relinquished My Bus Seat," the reader encounters a speaker who doesn't want to "owe anybody anything," whose "body will have learned to speak for itself."

But isn't the desire for a body to exist on its own in sacred space a paradox in itself? Waite takes this to task in the final section opened by Woolf's discussions on the virtues of the androgynous mind. She addresses it in the section's opening poem, entitled "Butch Defines Feminism under the Following Conditions" as a chiasmus: "What's so wonderful about equal anyway, or/so equal about wonderful?" She personifies the concept in the hybrid body of "The Clownfish," a fish that undergoes "sexual plasticity" to "maximize fertility," an animal always "push[ing] at/ the boundary between the water/and the threat of the open air." What is liminal is exotic, eccentric and prey to those desiring to silence its difference, Waite seems to tell us. What is liminal must grow tougher in order to forge its song of difference.

When the body's gestures and expectations are unlearned, it can become anything seems to be the hard-learned lesson of Waite's exploration of self—that this body "made up of long lists" can learn to love its "ill fitting scraps" ("To a Woman Who Has Never Been My Lover"). Through this ruthless, beautiful and evocative collection of poems, Waite describes a body not only singing its own anthem, but forging its own existential grace.

## **AFTER THE PINES**

All the whiles waited  
collect like cords  
gathering snow  
along the line fence.  
You've cut pine all fall.

The while I waited  
for a look  
not forgotten  
nor the one passed,  
years like January shadows  
leaning on trees,

wandering in blue  
groves either.  
And the one now  
that waits hard

counted by nail taps on a tin cup  
aches marrow deep  
as though frostbitten toes  
have been dropped in hot water.  
Moisture in log veins  
snaps bark at these temperatures.  
Cold as it goes,  
a beating forge smelts iron.  
The smiling ax blade, intent  
on splitting knots,  
burns orange.

**17. (from *Conservatory*)**

The truth is that memory is a horsehair fern brushing the glass roof, taller than a tree in prehistoric times, named for an animal that did not exist when the plant came to be.

The truth is that memory is the path worn through the conservatory by the girl and a woman who loves her as the girl outgrows her shoes and her cells trade secrets and die.

The truth is that memory is the mandarin orange on the tree, perfect and enclosed, with no beginning or end.

If the truth is that memory is the conservatory, then we must believe it is also the argument in which the conservatory takes part: What is natural, and is what is *natural* always what is *good*? How hard should we work to will a thing into being? Above all, what should we do with the problem of *time*?

The truth is that memory is a glass dome with plants growing inside, the largest crystal on the bed of clean snow.

It is mist from the misters. The ancient bonsai figs, manicured into submission.

The truth is that memory is two old women side by side, one wearing a beret, both painting watercolors of the fountain in the middle of the Palm Dome. They're using a quart-sized plastic yogurt container to clean their brushes. The renditions look nothing alike.

The truth is that memory is the fountain's water, recycled through its electric pump moving. Or is it the tile pool that catches the water? Or the spackle of pennies across its bottom? The half-hoped wish that put them there?

The truth is that memory is a staghorn fern, which does not need soil and can grow from the sides of trees and buildings.

The truth is that memory is not the truth.

**Microreview of Mark Leidner's  
*Beauty Was The Case That They Gave Me***

Factory Hollow Press, 2011, 94 pp.

Today I shut my driver's side door and the rear windshield inexplicably exploded. Today, which is not the same today you read this, rather December 16th, 2013, the day I wrote this, the same day I stood in the cold laughing, knuckles red, poking out the remaining shards of what once was window with an ice scraper. It was cold, probably too cold to be wearing a t-shirt, but I hadn't expected to be doing maintenance on my car window when I left the house. I hadn't expected the bitter wind on my ribs or my fingers feeling like frostburnt cocktail weenies, but still I laughed.

This is how I feel when I read Mark Leidner's collection, *Beauty Was the Case That They Gave Me*: simultaneously in shambles, and inflated like a dumb, happy balloon. Glancing at the cover, I'm thinking New York and I'm thinking Ruthless collaging and I'm thinking One man dunking where no man has dunked before. And the poems often open up and unfold in the same way a well-spun joke does, quiet and elegantly stated:

They say Einstein had no tear ducts.  
They say he cried straight from his brain.  
They Say he had a small family,  
about four inches tall.

But where many "jokey" poets would launch hysterically into orbit and never quite come back to earth, Leidner possesses the subtle finesse of staying in tune with the beautiful, the meaningful. In "Yellow Rose," Leidner loads up the first half of the poem with offhand dick jokes. He touches on arousal via public transportation, snowstorm-induced erections, and different words like "apricot" or "foliage" that are seemingly in control of his libido. It all feels rather middle school and juvenile, which makes the abrupt shift in tone on the following page that much more jarring:

and yet there are some things

that do not give me a boner:  
the level of tranquility  
a Jeep of body bags achieves  
jostling off along a twisting gravel  
path, bound for home;  
the bracing red and white of flags  
crisply creased,  
handed over.

As the poem evolves from harmless joke-template to anti-war, anti-pain ode, we are left with scenes of decimation, “people being / shot like dogs, like nothing, / nothing slumping / on the ground, nothing blood / is just a pool around.” It’s no easy feat to arrange these two distinctly disparate moods side-by-side and not only get away with it, but also own it like a birthmark or a birthright.

While Leidner excels in uniting the absurd with the absurdly passionate, he seems to, at times, get carried away with his initial topic. In “Memoirs of a Secret Agent,” we are introduced to a Bondesque international spy, who struggles, for most of the seven-page poem, with what to call his nemesis (an accumulation of scars and faces and scarred faces), as well as finding time to make love to his Hollywood-beautiful cohort and lover, Gabrielle. The poem in many ways is clever, Leidner pointing playfully to spy film tropes like deep, subterranean super-hideouts and the bullet hole-ruptured iron pipe that never runs out of steam: “Also I remember thinking / whatever drugs these druglords are selling / their manufacture sure requires a lot of steam.” The content is charming, sure, but also at times exhausting, skimming through it and feeling like the payoff might not be worth the close reading of an extended joke.

But if drawn-out, unapologetic banter is where Leidner’s poetry occasionally sags, his ability to effortlessly cover grand lapses in time is a true strength. In “No One,” the speaker unfolds an entire life in nine lines:

When you sneeze it sounds  
like you’re having an orgasm.  
When you’re having an orgasm  
it sounds like you’re having a baby.  
When you’re having a baby  
it sounds like you’re dying.

When you're dying  
it sounds like someone sneezing  
somewhere far away.

And again, in "Charismatic Ambulance Driver," the poem drifts naturally from medical care in WWII, to tilling fields in Poland, to literal moonwalking, moving in and out of deserts, Texas, and Atlanta, and ending, thoughtfully, on a wife "heavy with child," while the two characters test-drive a coupe and ruin the interior as her water breaks.

Leidner's poetry is expansive and exciting, traveling across large fields and even larger timespans, and for the most part it feels right, feels like we are riding along with him in his hot air balloon with attached jetpacks, his time-machine made of antique silverware and kitchen ceramics. And maybe the most rewarding part is that he knows we are right there with him:

It was an old story. All true stories are.  
It wasn't complex, and it doesn't even need to be told,  
but I'm telling it. Because I have to say something.

## **ALL THE FRENCH PRESIDENT'S NON-WIVES**

Somewhere in his twenties is the one  
he seeks now, not so much the face of her  
but the feel of his own animal pushing  
through a lush wetland, every kind of condor

lifting from his heart. They lost track  
of how many had been choked out  
by the old female, then of which had even been  
the original old female. Maybe the same tom

had knocked them all up. It was never  
a question of whether he liked it or not,  
the shrieking deep in the wood that woke him,  
the bloody trail to the box in the closet

lined with towel and crusted placental slime,  
they were all his responsibility now. They grew  
and shat on every surface in the house,  
peed in his shoes, tore the curtains

from the rods, leapt into cups and staggered  
toward the hands that came to claim them.  
Like ladies of the night they endured  
the dark and licked each others' eyes

of crust. They slept, they ate,  
they replicated more. They caught  
their requisite rodents as they could  
leaving only rusty tails and toes.

It isn't that he's pushing you away, the eldest,  
most finely featured of the pack, but that  
he's bringing you back as your lovely  
younger selves, sneaking out for croissants

before there were more than he could feed.

## Laura Madeline Wiseman

### Interview with Poet Margo Taft Stever

Laura Madeline Wiseman is the editor of the anthology **Women Write Resistance: Poets Resist Gender Violence** (Hyacinth Girl Press, 2013). Forthcoming is her second full-length collection **Queen of the Platform** (Anaphora Literary Press).

**Laura Madeline Wiseman:** In **Ordering the Storm**, Liz Rosenberg writes in her essay “Journey without a Map” that she likes collections of poetry “to open outward. The more personal and particular poems tend to come at the beginning of my books, and the more public and larger poems toward the end” (17). I’m curious about the personal and confession in poetry and why there is a tendency to talk about poetry and poems as “truth,” fact, and/or autobiography and not as fiction, creative nonfiction, and/or creative exploration. I think of how often I hear interviewers ask interviewees—Sherman Alexie and Li-Young Lee visited here this past spring at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and I asked my students to read/listen to several recent interviews they’d given; likewise, Richard Blanco was interviewed by Terry Gross on “Fresh Air” after he gave the inaugural poem—to talk about their personal life and especially their childhood as the way to talk about their poetry. Why is that? Does the audience for poetry interviews expect “truth” as a way to understand poets? Is craft a too difficult topic to address in such interviews? As the editor of the oldest chapbook press, how do you approach the truth/persona aspect of presenting a chapbook you’re publishing?

**Margo Taft Stever:** With all due respect to Liz Rosenberg’s essay, I do not believe that following any particular recipe or dictum can lead to a good collection of poetry. At Slapering Hol Press, the editors search for the most compelling work based on a holistic vision which includes meaning, spirit, and art.

In the history of the English language, the words “shaper” and “maker” stand in for the word “poet.” What the poet shapes or makes is a container for a refined linguistic expression of the truth, very different from prose narrative or dramatic literature. All poetry tells a truth—about the spiritual world, dreams, visitations, the souls of the dead, enlightened communion with nature.



Craft—the shaping and making of the creative container—is critical. At poetry conferences, poets may attend endless talks about craft, but craft and artifice are useless if the poet has no truth to communicate. The poet must have something to say. The poet must write out of passion and necessity rather than an attempt to showcase the latest craft trend.

Often, the poet's childhood provides the key generative force for creativity. As one of our editors, Peggy Ellsberg says, "Literature does not exist in an existential void—it is an organic manifestation from an organic creator." In my view, the greatest poets work from childhood memories and experiences generally inaccessible to most people. Many poets use these memories as a springboard to assist them in transcending the purely "confessional," to write about more than themselves alone, linking their vision to the broader world.

Poetry should inhabit a wider field accessible to general humanity as it has through most of human history. Many poets today, relegated to the university and coteries, become like twins talking to themselves in artisanal languages comprehensible only to themselves. As the founding editor of Slapering Hol Press, the oldest chapbook press in America, I can state that there is no easy formula to determine what makes the best chapbook. In my experience, a body of poetry, well-shaped and well-made, which communicates something fresh and true deserves the attention of the widest possible audience.

**LMW:** *In a recent issue of **Poets & Writers** in his article "The DIY Author Tour: How to Sell a book in America," Ron Tanner describes his process in managing his CNF book tour, that included hiring an assistant, buying and outfitting a camper van, sending queries, networking publicly, and developing "a comic monologue" because as his subtitle notes, "readings aren't sexy" (80). He asks, "Do people go to readings anymore?" and "the question we must ask ourselves is, How many people do I need at my event to make it worth my time?" a question he follows up with "How many books did I sell?" (81). Certainly, memoirs are different genres from poetry collections and chapbooks, but I wonder if chapbook poets ask (or should be asking) the same questions as they give readings. Sherman Alexie spoke/read here at UNL in late January at a free event at the Mary Ross Theater. It was snowing. It was cold. At one point, the event was listed as taking place in the student union. At some other point, it was moved. It was a Tuesday night. The tickets were free, but the theater filled up so quickly, people were turned away and half the audience was quarantined in a second theater where the talk that was happening a few hundred feet away was projected onto the movie screen. I was in that theater—it was live,*

*sort of. People obviously go to see/watch Sherman Alexie. Did he consider the readings successful? Likely. Did he sell books? Certainly the campus bookstore had a table there with books and merchandise. But for an author whose primary “ware” is chapbooks, how many people have to attend an event for the event to be successful? How many chapbooks must the poet sell? Or are these the wrong sort of questions? Is a chapbook poet’s goal something other than attendance and sales? Isn’t reading aloud enough? Isn’t sharing poems enough? Isn’t the microphone (or bull horn) and stage (or music stand) enough? If as Bryan Bower says in his **American Book Review** article “Articles of Chap” that “the chapbook is simply a tool for the poet, which ultimately becomes inconsequential if the poet fails,” what counts as failure (and success) for a chapbook poet—audience, sales, a following? As the editor of a very important chapbook press, what do you tell your poets?*

**MTS:** With all due deference to Ron Tanner and his ideas on how to promote his memoir, I am concerned that this kind of commercialization of the poetry chapbook would portend its death. If poets are not visionaries, seers, makers, shapers, then they are nothing; they should not primarily be salespeople. Centuries ago, itinerants in Scotland, England, and later in America, carried the first chapbooks filled with stories and news of the day from place to place by horseback. Building on Tanner’s model, harkening back to the chapbook’s past, and ratcheting up opportunities for collaboration, I would suggest that chapbook poets form small groups with musicians and tour the country or the world as modern troubadours. Performances would be pre-arranged, and to create greater potential for connection with audience, I would also recommend teaming up with local poets.

Po biz, the celebrity poet, the poet as promoter—all this mimicry of a larger, meaner society—can add only to the meaninglessness of poetry. Rather than viewing the chapbook as a commodity, I would suggest envisioning it as a gift. In the late 60s, when I took a poetry workshop at MIT with the great poet Denise Levertov, she published a poem about each of the workshop participants in her chapbook, *A New Year’s Garland*.

On first holding that chapbook and others that Denise shared with us, I understood the tactile sensation of the paper and type and the potential for shared textual and visual artistic expression. The chapbook of today remains an object of art transcending the quick fix of the convenient e-book. In our high tech world, the chapbook

is quirky and “high touch,” often with embellishments such as hand-stitching and letter press printing. This is the anti-mass market where print runs typically number only in the hundreds. The most compelling element of the chapbook is that it is not bound by strict definition. More than anything, the form is defined by its length, resulting in structural requirements that can produce a work more concisely wrought and more crisply to the point than a longer collection; the compressed form encourages innovation.

Most poets in America do not make a profit from book sales. For better or worse, they make a living through teaching, or like William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, and uncounted others, they earn their keep from professions and write poetry at the same time. If books sales and profits comprise our highest expectations, then the airport novel would be a better risk. Rather than scoring sales, the point of a chapbook reading should be to hear the poet’s voice, to meet the poet, and to appreciate the chapbook. Poetry readings, with some notable exceptions, are generally small gatherings. For many years, poet and former NEA Executive Director Dana Gioia, Bob Holman, and others have suggested including music to enhance audiences’ appreciation.

Of all the many cities where I have lived over the years, perhaps, the most exciting one for poets was Washington, D.C., during the late 70s and early 80s, when the poetry community was open to and interested in new voices. My own involvement with the Bethesda Writers’ Center, at that time located in a dilapidated amusement park, and my yearning to create a similar community, inspired me in 1983 to found the Sleepy Hollow Poetry Series; in 1988, The Hudson Valley Writers’ Center; and in 1990, Slapering Hol Press, the Center’s own small press imprint.

From its inception in the 1990s, the mission of Slapering Hol Press has been to publish emerging poets and to provide them with as much knowledge as possible about how to develop an audience for their work. We encourage chapbook authors to become engaged in the process of getting their chapbooks out in the world through poetry readings, conferences, and reviews. This creates a balance between the inner and outer world, sharing wonder and delight in the ordinary and extraordinary.

**LMW:** *Your chapbook **Reading the Night Sky**—winner of the 1996 Riverstone Poetry Chapbook Contest—and your chapbook **The Hudson Line** (Main Street Rag, 2012) both give readers a vision of motherhood, the latter Denise Duhamel calls a poetry that is “brutal and tender” and*

*the former, the late Denise Levertov notes is from a “gifted and serious” poet. I’m wondering if you can talk about mothering, about care. How does caring for those in your life translate into nurturing your own poetry, supporting The Hudson Valley Writers’ Center and Slapering Hol Press, and guiding young poets into the wider world of poetry? You write in your poem “Stepmother” that “a stepmother is always evil” (Hudson, 29) and in the poem “The Cello” you write, “How everyone is looking for love” (Reading, 17)—I want to know about that balance—the evilness of certain mothering and the lovingness of other mothering and how the poet goes about loving well what is important to her.*

**MTS:** Denise Levertov and Denise Duhamel for different reasons have exerted powerful forces on my life as a poet. When I entered Harvard as an undergraduate, in keeping with the national trend, I was an alienated, idealistic adolescent with rebellious and semi-feral instincts. After cross-registering at MIT and getting accepted into Denise Levertov’s workshop, I encountered a set of paradigms that would change the course of my life. While I had served as co-editor of my high school newspaper, president of my senior class, and mainly expressed myself artistically through photography, I had never thought of myself as a poet.

My own mother, a beautiful, intelligent manic depressive, had managed to accumulate six of her own children and after my father and a stepfather died in a space of six years, and she married a third husband, she added a total of nine additional stepchildren. Her last husband, Robert Taft, was my father’s cousin and a U.S senator. By everyone’s account, my mother was not a “good” mother, and she was an even worse stepmother. Throughout my adolescence, I lived in a laboratory of bad mothering. Nonetheless, since she was my mother, my observations were necessarily subjective. Multiple factors propelled me to write about my experiences as a backdrop for commenting on the broader issues of humanity. My youngest brother would later die of a drug overdose, and all fifteen children and stepchildren moved out of Cincinnati at their earliest possible convenience.

Denise Levertov mothered her own son, Nick Goodman, and also embodied a powerful mentor and role model for me and others in the MIT workshop. If I had not taken that workshop with Denise, I would never have become a poet. She instilled in me the belief that I could write a poem. I was also involved in the anti-war movement, attended many demonstrations, and got arrested during the Harvard Strike. Visiting us in Maine and staying with us when we lived in D.C.,

Denise remained a close friend and corresponded with me until her death. Her views on the life of a poet, the poet as witness, the poem as prayer, all combined with her boundless energy and sense of wonder, her anger at injustice, her light and airy humor indelibly etched her spirit upon my own life. She is the rare kind of person who can never truly die, so strong are her powers and abiding presence. Denise read for The Hudson Valley Writers' Center, and she served as a contest judge for one of our Slapering Hol Press chapbooks.

Denise Duhamel is a friend whom I met at the Sarah Lawrence College MFA program in the early 80s. I watched her persistence and hard work take her from a graduate student to a well regarded poet. Her desire to be a poet was so great that I remember when she lived in the Lower East Side, when it was dangerous, and she put a neon sign—POET—in her window. Denise was the first employee of The Hudson Valley Writers' Center, and we would work on grants together in my family's attic. When the phone rang, we would try to intuit when to say "Hudson Valley Writers' Center," and an important funder was calling, or when it was the school nurse calling about one of my children. For many years, Denise helped run the HVWC reading series, and years later, she was the second master poet whom Slapering Hol Press published in the "Conversation" series. In this, a well-known woman poet chooses an emerging woman poet to appear in the same chapbook with poems in conversation and a conversational interview at the end.

These two poets, both Denises, exemplify for me the nurturing feminine spirit in that they have served as mentors for many people, and they have had the courage to shine a beacon on the path of poetry, which is often shrouded, a place difficult to otherwise find for poets living in America's consumer and celebrity-driven society.

Throughout my life, one of my principal endeavors was riding horses in the hunter division of competitive horse shows. So many principles apply to the disciplines of riding and writing such as "less is more," "seeing a distance," or "getting into the zone." When jumping a course of fences, the possibilities abound for losing balance through lack of vision, inadequate collaboration with the horse, and/or allowing external stimuli to interfere. When a rider and horse are perfectly balanced, the sense of union, of being one with the horse, offers the same kind of exhilaration as writing a good poem.

Just as a rider can become as one with the horse, so a poet can become one with the poem. But as Denise Levertov pointed out, the poet must be the medium through which the poem comes forth; he or she must also allow the poem to take on a life of its own. Creating

a balance in the process of mothering so that the child is supported but has the freedom to become an independent being in this sense is similar to the writing of a poem, or the bringing of a poem into the world. The poet must nurture the poem, but must also allow the poem to stand and breathe on its own.

In my poem, “Stepmother,” I engage the various mythologies that have described the pitfalls of a fraught relationship in which the stepmother must begin as a failure, since she will never be the real mother; but to become a good stepmother, she must eventually evolve out of the failed state, or she will remain in the mythological abyss. “The Cello” was written about my first son when he began to study the cello, and it is an allegory for creativity.

After experiencing what it is like to live the poet’s life in America, to understand how few people read, comprehend, or have any interest in poetry, and how difficult it is to get one’s poetry published by any kind of press, I developed a desire to provide publishing opportunities for emerging poets. My first intention was to found a press, but I never discovered any grants for small, small presses. In 1983, a grant of \$3000 from Arts Westchester (then named Westchester Arts Council) allowed for the beginning of the Sleepy Hollow Poetry Series which later morphed into The Hudson Valley Writers’ Center. It would take ten years of planning before it was possible to found Slapering Hol Press, the Center’s small press imprint.

The main way that I have attempted to find a balance in my artistic life is to alternate writing poetry, which is solitary, with engagement in creating collaborations through readings, workshops, special events, and the Slapering Hol Press. Balance, which is an illusory goal, provides a mirage of hope. To my surprise, more times than I anticipated, the effort to find such equilibrium brings out the instinctual energy of that person who first fell in love with poetry, to whom Denise Levertov first provided a place for validation, where Denise Duhamel brought insight and humor to persevere in making a place for writers out of a family attic.

**LMW:** *Slapering Hol Press produces beautifully made and varied chapbooks. In my short stack are Katie Phillip’s lonely and reflective **Driving Montana, Alone**, (2010), Mary Armstrong’s honest and working conscious **Burn Pit** (2011), Michele Poulos’ lyrical and mystic **A Disturbance in the Air** (2012), and Lynn McGee’s fierce and narrative **Bonanza** (1996), though I’ve also interviewed other SHP poets here — Susana H. Case and Liz Ahl. I’m wondering if you could talk about the materiality of these chapbooks. Size, shape, layout, design, binding, paper,*

*cover art—there is nothing cookie cutter, nothing a reader could point to and say, “Ah, this is a SHP chap,” unless of course **that is** what makes SHP titles so unique—the individual, material creation of each book. Though I run the risk of asking what you’ve likely been asked before, I’m going to ask it: Why recreate the template with each new chapbook that SHP publishes?*

**MTS:** The main challenge for Slapering Hol Press is to publish the best, most artistic chapbooks. As an undergraduate at Harvard, I concentrated in Visual and Environmental Studies, and the visual part of chapbook publishing has always been of interest, riding just behind the meaning and music of the text. Over the years, the literary leanings of the co-editors have been eclectic, and SHP contest winners are sometimes traditional and other times experimental.

Several years into the Slapering Hol Press publication cycle, I invited Robert Creeley to serve as a member of The Hudson Valley Writers’ Center Advisory Board. Having met Creeley through mutual friends in Cambridge during the 60s, I reconnected with him when I invited him to give a reading for the Writers’ Center. In our consultation, he eloquently stressed the importance of choosing type and design to showcase the text, the poetry, without creating distraction with what I have termed “ornamentalism.” While Creeley was not opposed to using visual elements or experimenting with different design or designers, he strenuously emphasized the text as the most significant element of the chapbook. After our discussions which spanned 1999-2001, we changed from stapled to hand-stitched chapbooks; we started using more vivid visuals; and we moved to a different designer.

Another consultancy in 2000 which changed the course of Slapering Hol Press was one that Stephanie Strickland and I initiated (through the Council on Literary Magazines and Presses) with Coffee House Press. Before that, SHP had invited guest editors including Denise Levertov, Billy Collins, and Dennis Nurkse to choose the winning chapbook. To create more identity for SHP rather than having the winner reflect a totally different aesthetic each year, the co-editors decided to become the final judges.

The choice of the designer is critical, and during the entire history of SHP, the press has contracted with only four: Dean Bornstein, the late James Laird, Dave Wofford of Horse and Buggy Press, and Ed Rayher of Swamp Press. For the annual Slapering Hol Press chapbook contest, the design element that has represented the greatest continuity is its standard chapbook size of 6” by 9”. Because 2010 represented SHP’s twentieth anniversary and because Katie Philips

had shot exceptional photographs of her trip through Montana (alone), we decided to deviate from the usual format to create a photo diary to accompany the poems.

For *The Scottish Café*, by Susana Case, Dave Wofford chose the visual of a composition book for the cover to represent the very kind of notebook in which the mathematicians who met at the Scottish Café wrote their theorems which they buried during World War II to save their intellectual property from the Nazis. About SHP chapbook design, Lynn McGee, SHP's 1996 chapbook contest winner stated, "*Bonanza* looks like a book that a publisher took really seriously. It looks richer, with that contrasting matte and foil cover, than many perfect-bound volumes out of big publishing companies."

Our designers or co-editors have researched the visual element for the cover of SHP chapbooks, but in one case, our 2012 SHP contest winner, Michele Poulos, author of *A Disturbance in the Air*, suggested the stunning photograph by the well-known photographer, Kiki Smith, and Poulos obtained permission for its use.

The artist we chose for the cover of the second "Conversation" chapbook, *Enjoy Hot or Iced*, is the late Kentaro Fujioka, a brilliant young Japanese-American artist whom I had met while working with him on a photographic exhibition. His painting, "Elements," provided the perfect backdrop for the collection. The designer Ed Rayher featured the painting through die cuts, several windows and layers unfolding, which brought textural quality and a sense of mystery to the narrative course of the poems.

For our special chapbook series, we have published two "Conversation" chapbooks and one chapbook, *Hudson River Haiku*, to celebrate the Hudson River Quadricentennial. For this project, we disbanded restriction and have published chapbooks with widely divergent sizes. One of the main ways to create a unique chapbook is to find the right visual for the cover, which can often end up as a treasure hunt. For instance, after receiving the manuscript from the first "Conversation" chapbook by Elizabeth Alexander and Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon, I went to the library and checked out a book of paintings and prints by Romare Bearden and with a tremendous amount of effort, tracked down how to gain permission to reprint "Reclining Nude," which is also one the titles of the poems.

Through use of the same designer and through keeping the contest's winning manuscripts to the standard 6" by 9" chapbook size, the editors have attempted to create continuity. Beyond that consistency, to which we do not adhere for the special chapbook series, we view each chapbook as unique with distinct possibilities for



visual expression. SHP chapbook contest winner David Tucker said about SHP, “Slapering Hol Press has a national reputation for doing it right. The editing of manuscripts is as professional as that by big publishing houses..., the presentation is elegant and meticulous, and the advice and support for writers are extraordinary...,”

**LMW:** *I love the idea of poets talking about their work, perhaps that’s why I love **Lofty Dogmas: Poets on Poetics, Menacing Hedge’s** Poet-on-Poet interviews, and interview features in other literary journals. So of course I adore the SHP series “poems in conversation and a conversation,” especially **Enjoy Hot or Iced** (2011) by Denise Duhamel and Amy Lemmon and the inaugural chapbook by Elizabeth Alexander and Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon in 2008, chapbooks where Clief-Stefanon says she’s trying to “write towards mystery” (26) and Lemmon talks about writing “with my students” and the importance of “deadlines” and of “being in a poetry group for several years” (28). Why did SHP decide to inaugurate such a series, a series that makes real for writers the writing life and how poets make time and space to make their poems.*

**MTS:** When I first proposed the idea of the “Conversation” series, I already had Elizabeth Alexander in mind for the first “master” poet who would choose an “emerging” poet for the same chapbook with an interview at the end. Alexander was clearly a good choice since President Barak Obama, following our lead, picked Alexander soon after the chapbook publication for his first inaugural poet. Alexander and Van Clief-Stefanon decided on the title, “Poems in Conversation and a Conversation,” which became the title for the series.

Rather than imposing our own standard for what comprises an “emerging” poet, the SHP co-editors decided to allow the master poet to create her own definition. Because we believe that opportunities for women poets still lag behind that of our male counterparts, we decided to create the series only for women poets. This is a women’s own series, one to provide space and time for women to show how valuable their relationships are to each other as poets.

One of the current SHP co-editors, B.K. Fischer, has said about the first “Conversation” chapbook, “When Alexander and Stefanon scrutinize the variegated surfaces of Romare Bearden’s art, the intensity of their gazes give way to speech. In the blues of “Reclining Nudes,” Stefanon’s speaker discovers, ‘I could hear / her breath.’ Alexander finds images that transmute into sounds: ‘Flowered dresses. / A woman’s holler. River of guitar.’ In the hands of these poets, ekphrasis is an act of inquiry, a mode of poetic transformation as well

as cultural analysis. For both, lacunae inherent in acts of reading and looking are openings for empathy, uncertainty, discourse.”

For *Enjoy Hot or Iced: Poems in Conversation and a Conversation*, Denise Duhamel, instrumental in the early Writers’ Center history, proved an exciting choice for the second “master” poet, and she selected the poetry of the talented Amy Lemmon to publish in the same chapbook. Duhamel said of their “Conversation” chapbook, “At the humble beginnings of The Hudson Valley Writers’ Center, before the train station restoration, before Slapering Hol Press and the chapbook series, before the workshops, and before email, when the Writers’ Center was located in a small attic room, I was one of the first workers for what has become one of the amazing art centers of America. Now, after so many years, I am delighted to be one of the first in the Slapering Hol Press Conversation Series for a small, small press that has accomplished much more than its size belies.”

Second to none, the most exciting aspect of serving as the SHP founding editor is the possibility of providing a small stepping stone for young and/or emerging poets, and to mark the growth of their careers after the publication of their chapbooks. The “Conversation” series has allowed us to broaden SHP’s impact by sticking within our mission of encouraging emerging poets, but providing another avenue for discovering and showcasing the mentor/mentee relationship for women poets. For this series, the poems themselves, and the interview at the end, give the opportunity for the reader to understand the poets’ writing processes and some of the issues inherent in their writing.

*An earlier printing incorrectly identified Margo Taft Stever as the interviewer and Laura Madeline Wiseman as the interviewee. This corrects that.*

**NIGHT OF TEN THOUSAND SMALL MISTAKES**

I trip over extension cords cables high wire  
acts suspended between two tall buildings  
vibrating in the wind bodies abuzz  
I am the reason for falling and I am falling  
turned the pillow over and over no good  
left the bathroom light on and all the silverfish  
have snuck out the drain oyster tails chucked aside  
and on the lookout for better tasting grubs  
did I say oyster tails I meant lobster snails  
which came to me in the dream between  
the wall and the river two deep places  
I love unless chained to pilings sunk  
in mud the tide rising inch by inch barnacled  
shackled bare-knuckled brawl the loser takes all  
the guts it takes nerve to cut off your hands  
in order to free yourself knowing you will not fight  
again and swim goddammit you should stay afloat  
at least well I got my wits and I got this idea  
I wrote it down and stuck it in the pages of  
now I cannot recall if it was a river or an ocean  
and it matters in the end if the author intended  
the main character to show no remorse  
or if the main character really doesn't care  
I misread words I mistake rhetoric for action  
for instance how do you cut off your hands when chained  
and who chops off hand number 2 if you are alone  
it is highly improbable unless you got an attack fish who helps  
and then you got to focus its bite on the correct place  
too much trouble finally see where I come from  
there is no difference between inaccurate information  
and a fucking lie so which is it what will it be

**RECURRING DREAMS**

cities key poverty vow mylips mudslide dayton all indiana left  
docket who ordered monte cristo cut heavy machines nasty shoes  
cardboard turkey lunch assistance go home my name bearded  
bound cabin atlas tinge backwood dress threw us home daily  
wear claws scout machines dominate family tree indiana frontier  
final boonville circled county courthouse chicken coop meantime  
wagon standard practice turn red night kidnap good whip around  
bend creamed corn everyone else wiped out tornado inspect horse  
mouth sweet hay forget wichita blizzard tar exodus instead swing  
tennessee roughshod rode blood unused relief watch gunmen paid  
oust group bonanza holiday red brick parents house forked chose  
left shutdown hunt crops beat cloak kick away that man hank  
williams looks like irish setter so lonesome ventilator dashboard weeps  
like pillow left memphis hours ago box car drank instant coffee  
from raincoat pull one day into tulsa roundtree levee untouched five  
dollars stolen fellow passenger stuck out pocket backpack beneath  
head trick silence trick catch-up sated roast turkey wonder bread  
universal forget noise stone afforded purge look you vulture old  
room coca-cola gas mask pump iron road gone gravel halfway highway  
to house slow to crawl baseball flies slid-open door pick apart  
steel iron bauxite pile rafter-hung plough west undisturbed earth  
forty years under grass dissolves left roads fork landslide neither  
happy return overnight outside tuscon bus head west water  
inhale bridge drop requires apology loiter catch catfish rods  
out bus window plastic milk cartons halved hamburger hook lipstick  
catfish exposed ambulance bodies step into body diner raincoats  
drip continues showdown vagabond daddy miss you boat flops  
oppress buttes encounter western women sidestep temper red  
coat woman california cede land around cemetery hogs cattle barren  
hillside houses earth houses beauty bear peering into parked car  
wonder pioneer electrify farm suspects subsist irrigate dress  
dinner troop west pony populate boom what's next shield factory  
growth grandfather two roads intersect citrus groves traffic sprawl  
snakeskins hang branches ducklings deboned shat out the other end  
hat acts value properties fence gun slung dollars pathward roots  
chipped go free into fields into fire log lady left to garden irises

**NOTES FOR APPLE PIE, THE BREAST EVER**

*for Carolee Schneemann*

you have to be adaptable  
utter confusion is a real occupation

a recent edit fuses snow Marx accordions lemons late-arrivals cinnamon  
disaster seminal destruction  
Gaza all over again

disorientalism, how can I trust you?  
a tribe intensifies scenes causing whole buildings to fragment  
some new element implodes flesh and we are rubble  
our own information often hidden from us  
the text is an actual recipe  
there are just sounds

tool tool 2,000 years suppressed  
an apple offering, a good breast  
baking overdetermines the pie  
another kind of pie shows you men becoming breasts against conformity  
hammered apple-people prefer archaic feelings  
kinetic goddess process butters the skin to transform it  
you're gonna like this pie  
it could go on forever  
laughter  
lard

little wings sprout from messes  
a century of social contractions  
pushing out dread  
that's chaos  
everyone, come  
see how far it goes

**ROADKILL**

In glare that hid more information than I thought had been lost  
I guided deadly weight over a creature that didn't guess right.  
An inch or two either way and I'm sipping coffee  
and turning pages of my favorite magazine,  
not having noticed anything in the mirror.  
Its last slant leap was under, not away.  
Stupid squirrel, tail rotoring, back legs  
thrashing, forelegs flopping a bit.  
It's head didn't move at all,  
stuck to the ground by the brains.  
How did I appear to it?  
More plain than a predator,  
undazzled by the rodent waltz  
of scurry, feint and dodge?  
A turtle I thought to straddle,  
the skunk that stunk, name-  
less things that came away in  
parts. There have also been  
some people subject to my art.

**COMPOUND EYE**

- Wind is old. Thoughts blow away through the dry gorge.
- I'm making out with the Angel of Depression, and putting a little tongue into it.
- A jigger of pith, far flung, and thirsty.
- As I scoop out the litterbox, I think about the Titanic at the bottom of the ocean.
- The holiday is a haunted house.
- And sea level must intuit how the fog holds together.
- Sometimes beauty is as precise as the pattern on a peacock.
- Sometimes beauty is a mineral.
- When the Eiffel Tower elopes with a common hat rack, both their fathers are disappointed.
- At the bazaar, the caravan leads its trained elephants elsewhere
- Buzzing flies know: the world is here, and there. And there. And. There.
- A Muslim woman in her burka rides the elevator with me. I'm wearing a bra because, dammit, I just don't feel comfortable without one.
- The room is so airy, I rise. Peaches pulsate with light.
- I take to heart the difference between blades of lawngrass.
- Look here, to think ecstasy is old-fashioned is
- old-fashioned. The persimmon ruptures at its ripest seams.

## Dustin Luke Nelson

### The Final Word

*the last word of 117 essays on poetry and practice as I encountered them*

writing die time power poetry is unicorn ecstasy experience bandleader  
spring composition all living alone desire of world myself blood for  
follow affairs fools them affection out discovery man writing kinsfolk  
great reviewing else reconciled attractiveness part place shall survives  
itself me nothingness industry poetry forms it belong always God soil  
listening hear create consuming Arizona here poet time again born  
now concerns skibbereen alive splendor Break old done alone out wait  
pursues again start hand go words existed? tear lift stay school was  
desolation cat there said to doorknob letter happiness Ether Kafka hell  
instrument precise Swinburne things darkness experimental world  
knick-knacks innovation lengths fir humanity ourselves developed?  
poems swiftness nevermore Public thing else is *that*?



**FLUTTERING IS FLAT**

first your name digits the space  
behind my ears then sinks to the top  
of my throat to die.

i can always tell what role you're giving me  
by how you position me in the room.

what i am now forgetting is being  
replaced by a framing of my face and  
a look that says, "i'm going to eat you."

first it makes me feel inversely, then conversely,  
and finally opposite.

**WHEN THE GHOST IS NOT A GHOST**

*No, we'll always be okay,*  
he said, and then nothing.  
*Conversation is inevitable,*  
he said, and then no  
conversation. There is no  
romantic way to tell you  
that my closest ally in this world  
disappeared one day.  
I saw him once, a year later,  
at a bar in Minneapolis.  
I was drunk enough  
to touch his shoulder  
and cry about it in the bathroom.  
No, I was lost enough.  
When the ghost is not a ghost,  
he can haunt you from the next table,  
just by looking right through you.

## SKYSCRAPER

A sword thrust  
into the city.

From inside  
the café, the letters

on the window  
look like a new

language. It's this  
simple: There is

nothing within us  
like what we are

inside this window.  
Colossal seppuku,

you are the sky  
before the sky.

# What they call acknowledgments, we call these people/places/things rock

The institutions, organizations, and individuals that made the fourth annual Great Twin Cities Poetry Read, plus this book, feel like the doorbell announcing that the pizza you ordered an hour ago has finally arrived, are, in no particular order:

Lowbrow Press

*Water~Stone Review*

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Red Bird Chapbooks

Paper Darts

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•

Meghan Maloney-Vinz

Anika Eide

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