

Poetry City, USA, Vol. 5

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A journal of poems
and other prose on poetry

POETRY CITY, USA, VOL. 5
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Foreward

Poetry City, USA grew out of the Great Twin Cities Poetry Read, which grew out of Lucille Clifton's observation that "it is nice to find your, or actually, what happens is your tribe finds you. and you are so happy." The journal, the annual reading, and the quotation are celebrations of community and poetry intertwining into something different and, we hope, something stronger, in its own way, than either community or poetry can be on its own.

We think of Vol. 5 as another neighborhood in the city we continue to build out. The order of the poems and prose on poetry in the pages that follow are an orchestrated part of the celebration. While we think that reading them from beginning to end produces an effect you won't get if you bounce around from page to page in your own orchestration, the book is in your hands now. Feel free to use the margins and white space for notes.

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I could sit by you on the bench
an inch closer than Americans are
supposed to.

– *Belle Waring*

Finding My Way: An Editor's Note

I came to poetry later in life. To clarify, I came back to poetry. I was married with two young kids, stuck in a job that was making the mortgage and, slowly, making me miserable. I needed something to change and my wife, Ellen, agreed.

I was given an opportunity, out of the blue, to leave my job with no strings attached. I was a bit freaked out. I had been with the company for eighteen years. I depended on the income and I was not sure what I would do. Ellen and I talked about what would make me happy. She simply asked me where my passion was.

I knew that I had always believed in poetry. I wrote off and on when I was younger. I read poetry, though I always tried harder to be a musician (it was, after all, a sexier proposition and one I failed at with style and grace).

After several conversations, we agreed that I would go back to school. Now, school was never a strength of mine. I was a high school dropout. I had taken several classes at several colleges over the years, and was not a strong candidate for getting back through the doors.

I applied at Augsburg College in Minneapolis and, amazingly, was accepted. I decided that I was going to finally pursue my writing, my poetry. I was rusty and I felt more than a little too old for this “young person’s” fantasy. I was 40 years old for Chrissakes. What the fuck was I thinking? Poetry? Really?

After my first few classes, I found I was exactly where I needed to be. I was writing again. I was confident. Most importantly, I was listening, showing up, and going to class. Here was something I had never done: succeeding in school.

I was being introduced to new words and images through new poets and old. I was breathing. I threw myself into the poetry community of Minneapolis. I showed up at every reading and event that I could get to. I was open to meeting people and talking to them. And I was reading my work in front of others, standing on the stage behind the microphone, giving it my all.

The anxiety I had struggled with for so many years was gone. I

did not care if I was good enough, if anyone listened, if anyone really cared. I was simply doing what I needed to do.

I met far too many amazing people. People who gave me new poets to read, new voices and ideas to explore.

I was always struggling. I still struggle, with a feeling of needing to catch up, but that's not a big deal, as I know we are all in the same place. That place of confusion and challenge and worry and freedom and wondering if it's all worth it.

I have learned that, yes, for me, it is. For the first time in forever, I am where I need to be. I read poetry insatiably. I listen to poets read. I talk about poetry over coffee and beers. I am editing work and hosting readings. I am making a life with my art.

There are so many beautiful poems to be read, to be heard, to be shared. Poems to stop wars and violence. Poems to make you cry and make you smile. Poems of memory and pain and hope. Poems of sense from the nonsense.

I hope my part in this journal gives you some new voices and, perhaps, an opportunity to let poetry into your lives, too.

THE UNIVERSE

Two nutmegs may be struck together
to make sparks. You can burn down
a whole cabinet factory this way!
That's why I like to read recipes
or old phone books left on the curb.
Dear Fanny Kowalski or Carl Ruiz,
I am often lonely and imagine the rain
falling on no one as it is wont to do
at sea. Then I become a little less
lonely, but more musical. To compose
oneself in the face of whatever
emptiness sings into the loosening
currents is to be alive. Is to let
wind pluck the cables that bridge
the distance between each rock-ribbed
shore. Is to hold you here in my kitchen,
a window smashed with light.

Alina Gregorian

MANICURED SKIES?

We move keyboards to different locations.

Because nothing exists without mauve in your voice.

It's red, dear.

It's a noun without color, analogies without verbs.

The way you coordinate galaxies using your eyes.

The way you kiss, leaving post-its on my cheek.

What's the weather like in Hawaii?

Blue skies with grey streaks.

Like being on a farm in a computer.

Like taking lemonade to a string quartet.

You sold your clothes and got in bed.

"We make a dwelling in the evening air."

Said Wallace Stevens.

We said hello to the illusion of something there.

Like conditioning verbs to say hi to adjectives.

So many people print documents in the night.

So many people buy bagels in Seattle.

You draw guitars on my arm.

Your lamp is like a bell.

You said.

A thought inside a ship.

Michael Bazzett

WHEN FEAR COMES

it finds your body first

your ghost
exits
running hard
as a dog
through rain-
darkened woods
kicking up
a black spray
of wet leaves
leaving the smoking
carcass with one
wheel still spinning
the crushed
pebbles of wind-
shield catching
scraps of light

it does not turn
to let its tongue
loll and look

does not think
why one leg
flares sideways
and the next
morning hears
its belly speak
of hunger—

the body
may be broken
and bone

heals like
mortared stone
as the new
gait writes
its limping scripture
on the snow
but how
to coax
the ghost
to come
back in
from the cold?

Kris Bigalk

NOTES FROM AFTER

A hole in the ice jagged as a smile, made with sawteeth.
You, gone, slipping underwater through the frozen air.

The sky unrolls itself so I can spell your name with star points.
I can never quite remember where I started.

This sleep, heavy, stuffed with feathers, warm, unfamiliar, close.
I carry it into midnight like a sleeping baby, cradled.

Kelly Terwilliger

BEYOND SWANS

My friend once ate a swan,
the only thing she was ashamed to admit
she'd gladly eat again. She said
it tasted like nothing else, not just another bird:
more like eating a god, I'd guess, sky god,
cloud god, thunderbolts fallen
from its now-slack beak. I could only imagine the body
plummeting down, or pulled
from the water: a huge feathered bugle
curved upon itself, waiting for breath
to sound it. How could you
carry all that silent whiteness home?
The intimacy of weight
lighter, and heavier, than expected. The head
draped over your shoulder, soft as a child's,
bobbing a little as children do when they fall asleep
in your arms as you walk down a long path,
the sky closing and seeming to detach
away from gravity the way the body does
falling into sleep. I remember
almost sleeping in my father's arms
late at night after the bonfire, after the tide had returned.
He climbed up and over rocks,
and my body felt loose and safe:
almost-asleep being almost innocence,
but awake enough to feel
my own limp feet sway
to feel how gently he carried me.
This is how I'd like to carry her,
the one-who-ate-a-swan,
her burdens now
beyond swans. And this is how it goes: the lake
a long way from anywhere and night
already approaching, the uneven ground stumbling

a little beneath you, then rising to meet you again,
your load, a heavy cloud, plucked from clouds,
becoming more and more indistinguishable
from whatever you thought you were
as the grey edge recedes into dusk.

Sandra Youngs

Interview with poet Lee Ann Roripaugh

Sandra Youngs: One of my favorite things about *On the Cusp of a Dangerous Year* is the prevalence of insect imagery combined with sexual under and overtones. It's such a refreshing comparison, I wondered if you could talk a little bit about what influenced your decision to use insect imagery throughout the book.

Lee Ann Roripaugh: I love insects, and during the time that I was writing *On the Cusp of a Dangerous Year*, I was deep in the thrall of a full-blown entomological obsession. The book was conceived as a contemporary pillow book, influenced by ninth-century Heian-period Japanese women writers such as Sei Shonagon, Murasaki Shikibu, and Princess Shikishi. A significant part of the aesthetic of that time period was a kind of neurasthenic hyper-attentiveness and hypersensitivity—an overwhelming emotional awareness or receptivity to changes in nature, shifts in seasons, and an intense focus on tiny exquisite details. Insects are nothing if not seasonal, and they are also tiny and exquisite.

But insects are also marvelously strange! They resemble miniature science fiction aliens—or, rather, our conceptions of aliens in science fiction seem frequently modeled on insects—and insect behavior is absolutely fascinating. So in this sense, I think that I took the neurasthenic aesthetic of ninth-century Heian-period women writers into the twenty-first century by incorporating biological research and employing insects (including the sex lives of insects) as a foil for thematic explorations of the Other, particularly in terms of race, gender, and orientation.

SY: In a similar vein, a lot of the poems in *On the Cusp of a Dangerous Year* revolve around appetite. There is a theme of food throughout the book, and one of my favorite lines among them is the start of the poem “Snow Country”: “Sometimes wet heavy snow delicately / breads the trees in coarse, white batter— /

quick-dipped and flash-frozen into brittle / delicious twigs of tempura.” What influenced your decision to write about “wants” (longing) as opposed to “needs” (survival)?

LAR: I think, for me, this book was so driven by an aesthetic of attentiveness and mindfulness, that this naturally transformed the focus to one of “wants”/longing (which entails a body being fully aware of its appetites and enjoying the desire/pleasure of appetite), as opposed to “needs”/survival (which is a body being mindlessly driven by appetite). Culturally, I feel that we too often confuse wants with needs, and that much of our appetite/consumption is mindless, not tied in with actual “needs”/survival, and is therefore problematically unappeasable. In the poem “Cecropia,” which is about the intense power of silk-moth pheromones, there’s a line that reads “because isn’t desire / what we *desire* to desire most of all?” And so I think desire can be an end, in and of itself—that there’s a sense of being truly *alive* in desire. And I think, too, this awareness of our own desires, wants, and longings allows us to take pleasure in the experience of appetite, as opposed to being mindlessly consumed, or driven by, non-survival-related wants.

SY: Your poems are loaded with concrete imagery. Do you find that you come up with more images during the composition process, or during revision?

LAR: In this volume, particularly, I tended to start with disparate images, which I collected in notebooks, and which eventually started to intuitively gravitate toward one another. So in this type of process, my task during revisions was to find ways of creating elision between these images in order to make their assemblage seem as organic as possible, and also to fine-tune the connective tissue in such a way that potential associations between the images could be maximized.

SY: In this book you have a knack for describing events or situations that are common to humanity but individual to the speaker of the poem, making them accessible to readers while still maintaining an air of privacy, such as in the series of poems

about Things: “Disconsolate Things,” “Things That Leave an Aching Feeling Inside,” and “Marvelous Things,” just to name a few. Is that, for you, a definition of poetry?

LAR: Because I was thinking of this volume as a twenty-first-century pillow book, in the style of Sei Shonagon, I viewed this book as a poetic journal, in many respects. A cataloguing of the quotidian/everyday. Other influences of the journal poem that I took into consideration included Frank O’Hara’s *Lunch Poems*, or David Lehman’s journals in poetry, *The Evening Sun* and *The Daily Mirror*. What I particularly admire about Sei Shonagon’s list (“thing”) poems is how—even though they were written centuries ago from a vastly different cultural perspective—they continue to be fascinatingly fresh and relevant today. This seems to me to be the trick of a journal poem—to transform, through language, mundane or quotidian details common to humanity into something that becomes associationally provocative, mysterious, absurd, or profound. And so perhaps this is at least one definition of poetry for me—to use language as an alchemizing agent to effect a transformation of one sort or another.

SY: Your use of metaphor and simile is masterful, particularly in the poem “Luscious Things” (and even more specifically, “2. Peach”). I think many writers struggle to use metaphor effectively, but it looks like it comes naturally to you in your work. Have you always been drawn toward those literary tools?

LAR: Thank you! I think of my use of metaphor and simile as one of my writerly superpowers—one that came instinctively/naturally to me, and that I subsequently honed and nurtured through studying mistresses of tour-de-force metaphors and similes such as Sylvia Plath or Elizabeth Bishop. I think all writers tend to instinctively gravitate toward their innate superpowers, and that recognizing these strengths and developing them is very important. Equally important, though, is being careful not to rely on one’s writerly superpowers as a crutch. And so I think it’s also important to deliberately work on building up resistance to one’s writerly Kryptonite.

SY: And finally, when did you realize the poems within *On The Cusp of a Dangerous Year* were meant to become a collection— was it a goal you worked toward consciously from the very beginning, or a connection you eventually became aware of?

LAR: Like many poets, I suppose, my first book involved extensive retrofitting of individual poems into a cohesive, book-length manuscript. My second book's thematic purpose and aesthetic direction became clear to me after I'd written about one-third of the poems in the book. By the time I began drafting *On the Cusp of a Dangerous Year*, I'd become fully accustomed to simultaneously thinking at the level of the book, in addition to thinking at the level of the poem, and so this was a collection that I worked toward consciously pretty much from the beginning. I guess I'm a "project poet" in this sense. I like writing toward a specific book concept. It gives me purpose and focus, I feel, and also allows me to challenge myself (and therefore avoid aesthetic ruts) with different conceptual, thematic, and stylistic problems.

The literary kind

As we drank I drew a picture on a napkin—
a sleigh moving across a winter night,
snow falling, a man and woman in the sleigh,
a sick child in the woman's arms
in need of a doctor or a god,
the horse happy to be running,
to feel speed coming back to him
after years of proceeding slowly,
politely across the ground. I drew it
for her, for the woman drinking white wine,
a wine so inconsequential, the staff
felt no need to characterize it
by any other quality than its color.

Here, I said eventually, and slid
the picture over. I told her the names
of the man, the woman, the child, the horse.
Told her the name of every flake of snow.
Told her how old the sleigh was,
who made it, where the tree lived
that was felled to make the sleigh.
I told her how ineffective the doctor felt
who treated the child, who watched
the child die, watched the parents leave,
and heard the story later of a sleigh
going over a cliff, horse and all,
and asked no one in particular,
what are we to do with our hands?

I gave it to her and then told her
the other story. That the child lived.
The child grew up to be the mother
of the woman about to request the bill,
to leave a good tip, to put her coat on

and ask if I thought it strange
that she wanted to learn the tango
at her age. When I would say, Not strange
but majestic. Majestic, she'd slowly repeat,
as if it weren't a word but a meal.

Amy Fladeboe

TULSA TURNPIKE

I don't remember being halfway home
car stuttering from speed and heat
us stopping for cold diner coffee
and sex in cornfields
ticking Nebraska off our list
open highway in front of us

I don't remember being so young
and so naked in the front seat of your car
the broken air conditioner
the smell of freon forced to the air
the skin of my thighs peeling off the vinyl
your thick fingers twirling the hair at the back of my neck

I don't remember my feet
pressed against the side mirror
leaving tiny sweaty toe prints
against reflected asphalt images
Mile markers, melted tar
Sun mirages of twirling heat

I do remember the toll booth in Tulsa
the middle-aged woman leaning over to grab your coins
scanning the length of me with her overdone eyes
her slow smirk, the playful tisk of her tongue
Her words arching out like fishing line
Y'all have a nice day

Tayve Neese

In my first country of sulfur

children count dead possums
lining the asphalt like flowers

in bloom. Shrimp boats
with many fingered masts

scratch at dusk while their nets
drag tires and mercury filled guts.

The sun warms the skin of the inbreds
sent out to play by rusted washing machines,

brackish water drowns anything
that doesn't have gill or scale,

hides scapulae, forgotten clavicles.

Timothy Otte

PLUME

You said, There's a plume in the dirt,
under asphalt, mingled with the infrastructure.
I heard, bloom, and thought a field,

goldenrod and fireweed underground,
forgotten. I heard feather, convinced
you'd carved a quill and buried it. You said again,

A plume, and I heard toxic, but couldn't
understand how it moved, how it got here.
You said, Try thinking of it as a glacier,

cutting a path through the dirt and bedrock,
Passing through mantle, crust, pooling in low places.
Think of it as ice and stone that will

not melt, can't reject this poison.
Wait a generation, wait two, see how it has grown.
Unlike any glacier, this bit of wrongness,

darkness, this blind giant will grow as it moves,
until our species diffuses. You said,
Only then will it too disappear like smoke.

•

You said, Think of it as smoke, molasses-slow,
moving through the earth. I saw a cloud, rain,
but I understood this is nothing so rejuvenating.

I still couldn't fathom it, couldn't think of earth
as permeable nor endangered. You said, It's bedrock
and dirt, porous, not so solid, not immune. I wondered,

What smoke can move through stone? A ghost,
this plume stands beside our beds. We turn again,
restless. I still wondered what it was, what mix

of malices had crept under our homes. Were they
piped or freighted in? How will they leave? What use
were they before their new lives began in the soil?

You know how to translate the terms of chemicals,
their effects on body and earth, but you shook
your head. What matters is the mess, not its name.

You said, This plume will taint the dirt
for millennia, shifting and spreading. Tendrils
of filth, almost alive, that will not disperse.

•

You said, It's almost alive and after that
I could only think of it as a beast. You said,
This plume, this giant plume . . . and I imagined

a giant with feathers whose wings and limbs
had grown weak and shriveled, but showed
the remnants of former strength. It moved

like smoke made solid, the invisible made definite
stretching its neck to turn, like a bird, beak
snapping at the roots of trees. The creature

found its way to the bluffs and through limestone,
burst into the air above the river and screamed
like a pained demon, crashing into the water.

There was no splash and hardly a disturbance
in the air. How stunted and sick, that feathered
thing. It did not move the hearts of my neighbors.

It evoked no pity from me. It sullied the waters

out of spite as it died. I expect it to be reborn,
monstrous phoenix in a fallow field.

Dorinda Wegener

TRIPTYCH DEPICTING AN AVERAGE MORNING, MIRACLES, AND THE CORPSE

It's 11 a.m., a Friday, in boardinghouse bed
I wake to the electronic ringtone of a cell:
 and I am in love with poetry::
 how the body remembers its carbon:
 Christmas in the right hand: 1st kiss about the neck:
 the corpse by my eyes:

I do not turn it off until standing
to avoid backsliding into sleep, yet I
refuse glasses::

I strip to the flesh:
 astounded by my memorylove
 of rot: blue, black, brown, purple, greengreen:: I adore
 the beauty found in wounds:
 the art of decomposition:

don robe, grab key card: lumber to the bathroom:: remember
 my sister used to check behind the shower curtain every trip:

shampoo, conditioner, shave under arms, then legs:
 the body as individualized jazz instruments:
lather jasmine soap:
 tenor sax, bass and drum, the piano
 for a recently deceased man::

I drip back to door # 9:
 striving toward a musical whole

slide ID: punch the access code by rote touch:
top middle, then top right, bottom left, end with top right
enter woodblock room:
 a utilitarian aesthetic: like the break

of an Atlantic wave upon New England rocks:
my sister knew him, too, but only fresh after bath::

I dry my legs:

now: violaceous, under fluorescent lights:
his ligaments rigored, limbs akimbo::

according to weather.com: currently 56°, feels like 56°, cloudy::
I believe in the religion of a cherry blossom,
the taste of saki, plum wine:

his skin cratered from rotbloat,
torso hollowed to an open mouth:
10% chance of precipitation, high of 78°:
warm unagi in oyster sauce,
a capri and sweater day::
my clouds resemble fish
saba sashimi, tako: complete with cups:

praise socks: cotton with arch support::
rib bones as yellowed teeth, hardened fatclump gums,
desiccated viscera, sex dried to a knotted shell::
I don't even know who he is.

Then a child, I asked: *Why won't the man get up?*
Why am I allergic to bee venom,
susceptible to the contagion of yawns?
My sister answered: *Family:: means not asking questions.*

:: means shotgun forgetting: means no, no
recollection: means skinsuit walking: means::

no blisters today.

I am confounded by the color orange:
dumbfounded how this body is our body.

Michael Gould

Barbed Wire: A Review of Laura Kasischke's *The Infinitesimals*

A warm evening. August. The dusk-glow of Minneapolis in birch leaves and birdbaths and the pool of standing rainwater caught in the rim of an overturned flowerpot. I'm in my backyard drinking lemonade. Fresh squeezed. The good stuff. And I'm on my laptop reading reviews of contemporary American poetry when I come across the line: "all poets are, hopefully, obsessed with their subject matter." I take a sip and consider the sentence. Obsession. Fire in the brain. As a poet myself—one who has put off satisfying basic physiological needs in order to spend a few more minutes uninterrupted with my work—I sense a challenge in these words. A call to arms. An exhortation to write with everything you got.

There is a boy. Four years old, maybe five. He sleeps in a bed of flowers. It's dusk and the crickets are alive in wheatgrass and beyond a barbed-wire fence—taut, spiked division—we wait, and we watch. The boy wakes up, lifts his head, night wind hot in treetops, not a moon in a waning purple sky. Blurry eyed, he is alone.

Do questions run through his head: *Where is my family? Why have they left me?* Do the questions scud, like fog, the edge of a consciousness he did not ask for but could not imagine being without? What will happen when this boy—breathing conduit of existential curiosity—lost in the "gentle senility of . . . summer," wipes the sleep from his eyes, rises to his feet, looks around?

From the poem "Barbed Wire":

[the boy] woke from the nap, stood up, looked

around, panicked,
and began to run
with arms outstretched toward us.

When I read this poem, I always imagine myself as standing

on the other side of the fence from the boy, alongside Kasischke's "us"—we learn this refers to her and her deceased mother. I begin to feel unsettled. My feet sweat when the boy starts to panic. He runs toward us, the palms of his hands soft as baked bread pressing into wind, and all I can think of is the fence. Division. The in-between. When the boy gets closer to the barbs, each twisted spike deaf to what must be—if you listen closely—his sputtered pleas, the poem ends. Darkness. The boy will not traverse the fence.

Then there is a bird. Nowhere near the boy. Through the binoculars you can see it: "cold life-light / around its mind which was never / meant to be seen this clearly by a human being." We're in a forest, and the day is well along, afternoon light filtering between gaps in a canopy of pine. Shadows fall like water. And here is Kasischke, binoculars in hand, midway through her life, the memory of her mother forcing its way again to the front of her mind. In the poem, "Binoculars," Kasischke seems to be rift in two, both watching the bird and standing in a hospital hallway, "crying, having run from the room unable / to watch [her] mother die." The juxtaposition of this image with that of the bird is powerful, and the comfort that Kasischke draws from this bird is profound—this bird "pretending / not to be staring straight back into [her] eye."

"Barbed Wire" and "Binoculars" are only two of the many tightly crafted poems in *The Infinitesimals*. Like many others in the book, their subject matter is similar, but the way they approach that subject matter is unique. Whether Kasischke regards death as an absolute division—"Barbed Wire"—or a period of transition—"Binoculars"—her book is intent on exploring the enigma of its being. And here we are again. Obsession. The single-mindedness of a poet who has mastered her craft. Though she gives us no easy answers, let us accept what she will impart: lines of verse, tender but unsentimental—intelligent but not boastful or vain, poems that deal with an oft covered theme, but never slip into the cliché. *The Infinitesimals* is a book of obsession only in the way that rain gardens are obsessed with lilac or honeysuckle or moments of ardent introspection, only in the way that dawn is obsessed with birdsong. It is a book for us all: the human, the dying, the poets, the loved.

Skylar Alexander

ON MAKING MUSTARD GAS IN GRANDMA'S BASEMENT

It's easy for me to believe love is all around for I am a sword, wrapped in a sheath of onion flesh. If the stars were tomorrow, the moon a sliver of Cleveland, and the sun the heir to my indifference, I would say my most difficult muse is making mustard gas in Grandma's basement. I confess: I am lost. I have made poison and breathed it deep, have mammoth-heaved night to milkmorning, seeped in sweat and lemon water. New, and all abloom, I rain my cancered tongue into the searing raise of Chicago's skyscrapers; I gurgle and age, and the base rent of my 1 BR/2 BA/3-piece suit fits better every year. Every year I'm less lightning and kimono, more jargon. Tell me, Grandma, what is a year of anticlimax when there's something sweet cooling on the windowsill? I have emerged from this meteor molten and reforged and hungry. Watch: I will make my lemon water from these foul lemons you gave.

Matthew Lippman

WE ARE ZOMBIE STARS

It's late night up
Tempo
In Syd Barrett
Mind loops

Around my home office
Around my body
Is a purple blanket
To keep me purple

The way when a star blows up
It's a super nova
To keep us going
All that iron and helium

All that carbon and oxygen
In the dead center of us
In the dead star's life
We are born

We are zombie stars
Walking around planet Earth
Dancing singing sleeping
Carrying around

The death of stars
We are
The death of stars
Think about that

I do in my purple super nova blanket
It's enough to make me mad
Syd Barrett mad
Or just beautiful

In a late night kind of way
The whole house asleep
The neighborhood asleep
The dogs asleep

In some late night slow
Tempo
Golden Retriever
Mind loop

That sees in color
The love any man
Can have
For any other man

It's impossible to know
The love one man
Can have
For another man

But it's there
In all the elements
That blow themselves
Into our bodies

When stars explode
You just have to be open to it
So you don't go mad
So you go absolutely mad.

Kate Shuknecht

DROWNING MICE

Glue trap. Hell
of a way to start
the day. Stuck
in someone else's
kitchen. Thin
scatter of ruptured
sound, the scratch
of what's unstuck,
bracketed breath,
tiny heave, chest collapse
-ing.
Savage pragmatism, still
my heart moves sore.
Just yesterday I say
to my Brother: *our details are revealed
by how we deal with dislocation.*
He tells
two choices, ignore trouble or
use two hands.
Just yesterday
I say to my Brother *remember
how the poison was everywhere,
the creature so alive
with terror.*
He tells me *remember how
the gun clicked
empty so I used the rock fitted
to my fist.*
I square myself with this
though no rock or gun. Find a bucket.
Fill it fast and enough.
Use two hands
and whisper *easy darlings* and watch
until the struggle stops

until two minutes pass
until I have to go back

and count
and watch
to work.

Tayve Neese

We do not see the plague we have loosed

upon ourselves, hear wings
beat, beat, marking time.

Without boils, we are still pocked.
Without lesions we covet another life,

anything but our own.
How to make a home in the cell

and bone we've been given?
Settle upon it like dust

until we've coated each fissure,
bulge, hesitant finger,

all sounds from the tongue.
If we find self-love,

it's hastened only by the locust—
their whirl and song.

Larry Eby

BROADCAST

Emergency: your anxieties are a table flipped over in the middle of the street, the legs in the air, the tabletop grinding against the asphalt, crows flying close behind. Behind them: vultures called people, people called ancestry—what does this mean about you? In a closet, you're a boy who hides his imaginary friends from an oppressive father. It's daytime and the stars are out. There is light everywhere, reflecting off chrome-plated exhaust pipes, a shiny sheriff's badge—your mother's teeth on Easter Sunday. Green. Pastel flowers blooming and dying within a four hour work day. Weekends are meant for losing perspective, and this is the only assertion you can make. You're a kite lost to the sun. You're a garage in need of cleaning. You're careful, but not careful enough. Heat: balancing on the hood of a tin shed. Regulate your days to smooth the ripple of a pond in which you lost your imagination. Be the water. Quench something.

Lukas Hall

A review of Neil Hilborn's *Northbound*

Northbound is an exceptional recording of twenty poems by Minnesota poet Neil Hilborn, mostly known for his huge viral hit “OCD,” a video recitation in which Hilborn discusses the hardships of having OCD while in a romantic relationship, masterfully blending humor and grief, strange images and overly-repetitive (as to mimic OCD symptoms) phrases. In the audio version in this collection, “OCD” has the same emotion and humor the original, but doesn’t contain the visuals that really drive it home. For the full experience of the performed poem, one must go to YouTube.

Whether one hears it only or hears and sees it simultaneously, much of the collection reflects the structure that is set up in “OCD”: a mixture of humor with very real, tangible musing about mental illness. In “The Future,” which opens the collection, Hilborn describes bi-polar disorder like this:

When I was young, I broke
both my ankles jumping off a roof because
I was sure a cape would enable me to fly. My parents
attributed this to my strong imagination. Last year,
my therapist called it a delusion

Hilborn sets up the reader in this seemingly light scene of childhood and then twists the knife with the punchline about his delusions. As Hilborn looks back on his childhood he sees the double standard we have with imagination, and mental illness, in our culture. If you are young and believe one thing, it’s okay, but if you are an adult it’s not okay. The punchline succeeds in its humor because of that double standard and the juxtaposition of the two memories.

Hilborn also discusses his transformation after moving from Texas to the Twin Cities and his transition into being a “Minnesotan” and a “northerner” (hence the name of the album). In the poem “Motown,” Hilborn describes his experience growing

up in a white community: “Roger Quenveur Smith said: They like black music, but they hate black people. / They like black music, but they hate black people. / Growing up I liked black music and did not know any black people.” He doesn’t know much about race: the only thing he “knows” about race is what he’s heard through music: “I still sing along like no one ever died, / like I can scrub away white guilt with a soft shoe shuffle.” Hilborn’s admission of white guilt and ignorance is the most powerful aspect of this poem. He struggles with how his family might have been the ones to cause tremendous pain to the black community, but no matter what, he sees the beauty in the art, even if he “cannot understand the pain that made the artist.”

In another poem, Hilborn describes the culture of hipsters. In another he talks about on a long-distance relationship, being happy, being sad, being human. In another he talks about punk rock and suicide. These poems all attempt to tie together through Hilborn’s view of life: a view of seeing the beauty in life, the beauty in art and attempting to feel alive at all times. They are held together by a sense of how people, mostly the narrators, experience their mental illness. One might feel “a tornado in [their] throat,” while another might call their “disturbed cognitive functioning” a superpower. Hilborn extends the discussion of mental illness in modern society.

The poem about hipsters, though, doesn’t exactly connect with the others. It’s funny. It’s a good slam piece. It’ll get the crowd roaring. But I’m not sure what emotions it elicits besides that of laughter. He “posits” that hipsters are just like us, only sillier. The connection being that silliness is a redeemable quality in both life and art, like the silliness he brings to his poetry. The hardships of life, love, and art may be the underlying concern Hilborn contends with in this collection. He shows us what he has experienced with his own mental illness and how it has shaped his life, love, and art. He may be trying to get us to imagine a color we’ve never seen before, like he suggests in the poem “Clatter.” Art and life are about digging deeper into our thoughts to reach something new and Hilborn has done just that.

All of the poems are beautifully recorded, and you hear the same passion he gives during his slam performance. And I think that’s the most important feature of the collection: He recorded

them. If you just read these poems on the page without hearing Hilborn's audio, they don't have the same impact. They don't have that same emotional resonance because I (as a reader) can't possibly give the same quirks and rhythm that Mr. Hilborn does in his performances. Reading his poetry isn't the same experience. His voice creates his poems. It's no wonder he chose this type of publication to deliver to us his first real collection.

Kate Shuknecht

DEATH WISH, A TRYPYCH

1.

When the hurt
surges, he bears
down, curses
as politely
as possible
before assuring
me “suicide,”
an ugly word,
is waiting
for a method.
*You wouldn't
have the guts
to hold
your head under
the water* he says
to himself
and anyone
who is listening.
*And these bastards
don't leave
any other means.*

2.

Fact: the Van Halen
song “Jump” was inspired
by an imagined passerby
perversely urging a man
on a ledge to do just that.

3.

Shortly before
my grandma died,

her last
lucid words
to me: *Why*
don't they just
put a bullet
in it? Meaning
her body,
which was,
as far as we
both could see,
clearly
not her
anymore.

Peter Stein

WHAT WINTER TEACHES

I stay up hours past sun down
which isn't so late
and wait
It's all there is to do
all we ever do
we wait in traffic
we wait in the elevator
we wait while tying our shoes
riding a rollercoaster
or reading a book
We wait in our dreams
for a little more sunlight
then wake grateful
there is something
to wait for

Caroline Cabrera

AS SOLACE, I TURN TO MY BURRO

For my next trick I will perform happiness
in the shape of a double date. Listen, lupine lover,
it will take a field of you to pry the old gold
of this pendant from between my pointless
breasts. I keep my colors close to flash them.
They live in the penitentiary of right now, which says
everything already in motion will continue towards
inevitability. You can ask me to think something
forever and I can choose to forget it instantly.
But in that choosing I mark myself with it. It follows
me. Anything you cannot leave becomes a jail.
Time is what turns kittens into cats.

MANAGING THE DECAY

The day before the reading,
Joe took me to the ruined
train yard in Buffalo.
There's a picture
of us where the rain
brought down flecks of rust.
A picture where the rotation
of the camera slicks
the October sky
into lines of motion.
A mirage.
I think about soup,
and how I crave salt,
soy sauce, heavy broths.
My body wants
to store more,
to prepare for the famine,
which likely won't come.
What has changed
old friend?
You aren't the clock tower
thin as blackbird's bones,
not the gorging tongue of rain.
In Buffalo, I ate
Stromboli, sausage,
salty mozzarella.
While we walked to the car,
Joe talked about the station,
how efforts at preservation
just delayed the decay.
They should just tear
it down, I thought,
let it be
what it wants.

Bob Hicok

Love poem

I only enjoy chess without pawns—
when the two sides go at it like sex
at one thirty seven a.m.—no pretense
that real contact isn't wanted—
similar to the oboe player below us
feeling obviously big things
about the planet and his soul—
about leaves being open mouths—
about all the rooms one has to cross
before someone on the other side
lifts a corsage that smells remotely
like *yes*—if a game of chess
can be over in six seconds,
we can find the time to stand
in front of the statue of Balzac
holding hands—resisting the temptation
to call him Ball Sack—before we realize
it's really Andre Gide—that it's really
unimportant who is dead in bronze
pretending to be alive—more important
which is the best street gyro
of all the street gyros—which pocket
has the napkins to wipe the tzatziki
from your face, more lovely
than any tumbling routine—
each of us not going anywhere
we don't look over and find the other
simultaneously arriving
to the conclusion, "I'm so glad
you're here"—if you were anything
not human—anything
without a pulse—you'd be a bicycle
and I'd be the wind
trying hard to stay on

and not so much succeeding
as never giving up—I'm not sure
why I turned you into a bicycle
but I did—words are amazing—
you are amazing—you are everything
the world has to say

Matthew Lippman

IT WAS FALLING LEAVES

Sometimes you can
Love a woman
From so far away
That it doesn't

Matter
That you've never
Seen her
Or held her

On the side
Of the bed
When she was sick
With fever

Heaving her
Face
All over
Her face

You can love
Her
And be her
Lover

If you've
Never said her
Name
The way two people

Speak some entangled
Truth
After sex
Like rodents

Caught in the brambles
I swear
I have no idea
How it happens

But
There was a wind
And a snowstorm
And a pile

Of leaves on fire
And I knew
What the ring ding ding
In my heart was

For this woman
That I had never
Met
But filled

Up the space
Between my horror
And shame
And radio

And pair of shoes
As big
As any monster
Or gladiator

Had filled up
The fear
In
My heart

For the love
In my heart
It was falling leaves
It was leaves

Falling back
On trees
And I was as far
Away from her

As anything
I'd ever been
Far away from
That's how

Close
We were.

Kyle Adamson

On Liam Rector's *The Sorrow of Architecture*

Few readers are acquainted with Liam Rector's debut collection of poems from 1984, *The Sorrow of Architecture*, which remains out of print and requires a digital Hail Mary to even locate in the far corners of the Internet from private sellers. With Liam's career cut short by his suicide in 2007, his legacy seems to be lacking closure, and the poetry remains largely undiscovered. His poems are noted for their deeply psychological themes and the ability to pierce tender spaces within the reader's consciousness. A few years back, I received the news that I was offered the Liam Rector Fellowship at my MFA program without any background on Rector himself. I felt honored and overwhelmingly curious. To me, there was something fundamentally unsettling about accepting a fellowship in the name of a poet whom few people knew so little about. What I found in *The Sorrow of Architecture* is an elegantly nuanced collection of poems that makes strong statements for the construction and embodiment of the material symbolism of sorrow. It also makes insightful observations of human interaction, of living between a vice of function and dysfunction.

The collection becomes a steady progression of the argument that sorrow will exist beyond these manufactured structures. Rector portrays this sorrow in both concrete and abstract terms by showing an array of examples supporting his vision of how sorrow exists. His style is both very structural and narrative, where he performs variations between tight formal structure and stream of consciousness to create his relationship between order and dysfunction. Rector often creates dysfunction in his poems as a signifier of tone, and to draw the narrator's psychological state out for the reader. He develops the theme of constructing a structure that can manifest itself as sorrow in "The Carpenter":

dimension
of floor.
Suddenly floor
is room. Room enough

here now
dwelling

as if dimension
were near and sudden
as if
taking measure

*Rector, get your ass going—
the pieces, measured and cut—the house, rector,
the house.*

The dysfunction becomes the form and shifting context between the ritual of building the house and imagined message to Rector himself (likely his conscience). A dichotomy exists between the functionality of building the house and the dysfunction of the conscious chatter. The scattered form also reflects the dysfunction through the lack of formal structure in a poem dealing with the theme of building concrete structures. Rector portrays another example of dysfunction in “Showing”:

They showed up for awhile and they died.
They showed up for some while and they died.
They smoked a few cigarettes and were remembered
by others who showed up and died.
They played piano; they sat reading.
They had dinner and went to the ocean.

This repetition and parallel construction creates a monotonous feel. But a relationship is created between order and disorder with both form and content. The parallel construction disassembles towards the end of poem, signaling a break from the order at the beginning of poem. The poem transcends from function to dysfunction as the narrative tightens down on specificity after beginning in abstraction. These examples show the array of avenues that Rector navigates to show the assembly of sorrow.

Rector’s greatest strength in this collection is his ability to create such a strong case for how sorrow dwells within the tangible, which is a difficult argument, yet is portrayed with such

clarity here. In the title poem, “The Sorrow of Architecture,” he finally states how the nature of sorrow is established:

The thing about architecture,
as you’ve said, is that there is no such thing.
The building vanishes back over the line
into prebirth, invisible, as a line
in the mind passes to the pencil and plan,
the blueprint of possibility and need.

Sorrow is brought back to the same origins as architecture. They both exist in the same space before anything physical manifests. Rector departs from dysfunction in this poem and narrates with clarity while portraying functionality. In another display of sorrow, Rector steps towards a poem that shows more allegorical depictions of a narrator’s physiological state, where order and disorder clash in “David’s Rumor”:

I am busy doing drawings
 For the upcoming publication
Drawings of Schizophrenics in Closed Institutions.
I am busy doing drawings
 For the upcoming publication
Drawings of Schizophrenics in Closed Institutions
 because angelic voices will sing
 if I draw lost enough to listen.

As before, the poem begins in a firm structure, which digresses to a more stream of consciousness style of narrative and structure. However, the poem is consistent with the theme of psychological dysfunction, which is represented by the form as the poem continues.

Rector doesn’t just write sorrow and grief into structures, he makes their origins the same by showing that they first are assembled within the human consciousness. But more importantly, a larger question is raised about what constitutes architecture, and can a created concept be built by sorrow itself? As I leave this collection, I’ve witnessed a fine example of how to balance function and dysfunction, and also how dependent these

two forces are upon each other. What really strikes me is the reward from seeking out this collection and the lasting influence I've found in these poems.

Katie Vagnino

SOUVENIR

We went to the gift shop for an artifact,
something to remind us of the afternoon—
African masks and Post-Impressionists,
the sleeping guard who snapped awake
when my laugh cut through the refrigerated air,
the old German couple trading sips
from a mug in the café.

Among the charming,
useless keepsakes—Fabergé egg-shaped soaps,
postcards too pretty to be sent, a book
on the history of buttonholing—
you told me that “souvenir” comes from
the French irregular verb: to remember.
“I didn’t know you spoke French,” I said.
We left without buying anything.

Now

I souvenir your cleft chin, your fear
of food expiration dates, the skyline of books
piled on your bedroom floor. I souvenir
how abruptly we became unnecessary
to each other, like the bronze paperweight
in the shape of Degas’s ballerina
you told me not to waste my money on.

Elizabeth Lampman

Paper railroad

All this time,
I've been your freight train

hurtling through the flat frontier
with my puff puff anthem—

peeling apart the sky
from the switchgrass

with iron teeth. Ties
shake loose the creosote

from their grain. Behind me
the quake chases, thrashes

white like the storms we'd follow—
back when we'd name

each clap of thunder,
trade similes for dreams,

and lie in skin and ilk.
After our hilltop

sojourn, I sent you notes
on the weather, the stars,

the way a highway overpass
interrupts the moon,

the way the streetlights
fight everything subtle

with putrid yellow and glow. Now

the old ink of our grapple

is brittle carriage and
I chug chug fresh stories

which turn to steam—
a stutter of ampersands scrawled

across a paper railroad
that will never cut through

that Blue Ridge, never lead me
to your charred city

where you pen another body
rob another night of sleep.

John Greiner

STATUESQUE

There are no beautiful
girls in the courtyard
today only exquisite
limbless statues
and that theme
has been played out

Alina Gregorian

FORMIDABLE BEGINNINGS

I want to believe in something unique.

Like fluorescent blue light bulbs?

Like senators projecting themselves in cautious dance.

I've got something you may need.

A duty-free container?

Someone to write letters to.

They say, "Kindness exists in portions."

Like a cake.

Like a football field.

They say, "Happiness exists in corners."

Like a pile of sweaters.

Larry Levis said something about trees.

That's why I've called you here.

Take a seat.

Open the window.

No, take a seat.

I'll open the window.

How long have you been a crocodile?

Can you stop green?

Can you begin fern?

I can't repeat questions.

Questions have expired.

Vanished into tea air.

Caroline Cabrera

THE FUTURE

The Future I imagined is a bowl of ash in my blue room
but for you a stand of pine trees you can walk around
and around without entering. You step perfectly
in your footprints to make an uninterrupted circle,
each step equidistant from the stand of pines,
and from some points in your orbit the pine trees, too,
seem equidistant from each other—a grand plan—
but from other angles they are a haphazard gathering.
You glimpse in the slanted afternoon light a space
in the pines, just your size, but as you continue
it disappears and reappears. You want to see
yourself in that space from every part of the circle
but you cannot risk walking outside your impressions.
I cannot find my footsteps. Don't even know
if they are in this forest. The sun warms the pines
and they give off the lovely musk of a pine forest,
which you remember from every pine forest
you have visited before. I lay down in dirt to let
the warm smell wash over me. You board a plane
to a place we once both loved together.

Joshua Barsody

Poetry Is

To complete the declarative statement that begins “Poetry is . . .” (as many before me have done), you first have to ask the question, “What is Poetry?”

I did that. I wanted to know what those who don’t read journals like this thought. And I found that a majority of them have a similar initial reaction.

“Gross,” is how one five-year-old put it. “Ew,” said another.

I asked if either could explain, or give me examples, of the grossness, the ew. Each vigorously shook her head no.

I sought out some folks who had grown up without internet or cable TV because they hadn’t been invented yet—people roughly retirement age. I thought maybe an older generation had some wisdom or knowledge that children have yet to acquire.

What I got?

“Poetry? Garbage! Real writers write books.”

I thought about what I’ve learned. About what we’ve learned. About how we’ve learned. That many things of high value in ancient times were preserved and spread by mouth. Our stories and histories were translated into verse. What we know of who we were comes from poetry.

I told the man who had said *Real writers write books* this. He and his buddies laughed. “Kids these days,” he said.

What is poetry? I read and read and read and found monstrous amounts of information. Definitions. Personal ideas. But nothing that quite resonated in of itself.

Then something clicked. I found what poetry is. Or it found me. In any case, this is what I know:

Poetry is recognition. It is hearing the perfect note of harmony in a song. It’s seeing the perfect shade of your favorite color in a picture. A scent that sends you back to a once forgotten memory. A flavor that instantly returns you to childhood. A recognition of truth through words.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Pick a card, any card.
Your card is an egg.
The deck is a refrigerator.

*

I was an egg once.
Now I'm more of a nest.
If a woman can be a nest.

*

Hold the knife close to your heart.
Lower it.
Make dinner.

*

Here are seven days like a ton of dirty earth.
Your face is a wishbone.
Mine is a mirror. Pull.

*

Green in December is Christmas.
It's June.
Grass, leaves.

*

I tried to grow a lemon tree in Quebec,
But sadness didn't need a throne.

*

I know as well as anyone,
Time is worth its weight in air.

Maggie Smith

THIS MORNING

Last week it was a dream: blood-soaked
sheets and something tiny, skeletal,

coiled like a snail shell in my palm,
coiled like the delicate mechanism

of the inner ear but gleaming white,
impossibly untouched by blood.

Each week the Internet compares
my baby to a new fruit. Last week,

blueberry. Last night, blood,
no waking from it. The child I have wants

breakfast, so I rise, thinking of a poem
of all things, thinking of the body

as numinous as words and as inadequate.

Thinking *blueberry, blueberry, blueberry.*

LUDLOW RESERVOIRS VII.

If another week had passed,
if another thousand new and glorious
potentialities sparked to life and died
only to Mallender's knowledge,
Jo-Ann Fabrics remained
for the most part the same.

Right now the air around Mallender
felt unquestionably French,
aisles wide as the Champs-Elysees.
Junk metal Eiffel towers, arc de
trionphe bookends, the Matisse
pendant his mother would have
loved; instead, standing in the fabric
aisle long enough to become
a perennial wisp of cloud
before the bolts of anti-pill
and blizzard fleece.

To hover over the wild
horseprints, to shade
the yellow turtles on blue
patchwork, to stand here,
his vision told him, would be
to one day allow red
red/auburn companionship,
but on that day, as he saw it,
a frog toss print replaced
the band of patient stallions.

Cloud, do not wander,
he said to himself,
cloud, do not scatter
into rain.

Brett Salsbury

A VESSEL FOR WATER

From the Prokaryotic world comes a metal container, born in a Farmer's Market on the shores of Missouri. It bears a striking resemblance to the waves of Oak in the cabin logs, and to me as I pace and smoke from a smoke. It's covered in glitter and serves nothing but realness; it has no gender and needs none either.

I drink from the metal
and tear up the label, letting it become
a placard for the trash can. I sense a
connection in the shallowest meditation:
a Bulldog's hair in Alpaca. I leave things
in places to remember their absence.

As I grab my purse to tell a few stories,
it rips from the bottom and we gain a
new sight of it. In making me laugh at
these multiple ironies, I power my head
through a canvas of fish-hooks. I no
longer bleed, so I pay a few utility bills
as I evaporate like ink.

Jerry Vanleperen

KAREEM ABDUL-JABBAR HAS REALLY BECOME A PRICK

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar arrives
in a purple tracksuit
at the children's playground.

He's wearing a bicycle helmet
and a lapel button that reads
I feel like shit.

His sneakers are light bulbs and dirt,
preventing shadow and eclipse,
creating a religion of candles.

Children cling
to parents' limbs,
cats won't come
down from branches.

There's a sense the heroes
aren't falling fast enough
from the morning high-rises.
The forecaster calls for doom.
Always doom, it's only business.

Lucas Pingel

IN ORBIT

At one point, we imagined ourselves
an entire bell choir, striking our palms

down each vertebrae, each pitch
birthing capillaries, muscle, ligaments.

Our crescendo would raise the hair
From each follicle, begin the push

and pull of the lungs, shock words
awake, stir them until they spilled

from the mouth. But it is a lean season.
Even the weather is plain. Even I

am trenched in the static waters
where abandoned cars have settled

in a foundation of mud and fishbones.
I think you are tilting around in your skin

in the slowest dance in history. Can
we move just a little bit faster? If it seems

like I am circling around your body,
then you have bought my greatest illusion.

We are simply a pair of cracking leaves
resting inside the world's empty chest.

Interview with poet Matt Mauch

Jasmin Ziegler: The first poem of your recent poetry collection, *If You're lucky Is a Theory of Mine*, titled “To survive is to lament, so let’s all do it well” has tremendous urgency and I love the image, “Watering plants, beer in hand, in my backyard,/ is like standing on the tarmac waiting for everyone.” Why did you choose this as the first poem for this collection? How did choosing the first poem for this collection compare to choosing the first poem for your earlier collection, *Prayer Book*?

Matt Mauch: When the I-35 bridge fell in Minneapolis, it had an effect on me I never would have expected. It left me with a kind of metaphysical limp. I’d guess that many who lived in the Twin Cities when that happened know what I’m talking about. I think people who didn’t live here don’t know, and probably think the limp I describe is sentimentality—too much syrup—and I don’t blame them for thinking that. How could one who was not worrying about whether or not family and friends are dead know? It’s that kind of circuitry—the default being that we’re able to not care profoundly about the daily tragedies of others—that allows for sanity.

I thought of my brother, who at the time was using that bridge daily, during rush hour times, to get to and from his job. After my brother, I thought of others after that who might have been on the bridge. It was like a probability sequence. After each person I thought of, I tried to contact him or her. For a while, phone calls got through. I was able to reach several people, and find out that they were okay, weren’t on the bridge when it fell. Then the news started to spread around the country and around the world—it happened really, really fast. Suddenly everybody was doing what I had been doing—trying to locate the whereabouts of friends, family, colleagues, students, etc., who may have been on the bridge. And all of the lines were jammed.

It took the longest to locate my nephew. He, like some others, was cloistered. He was in a mixed martial arts class, in a gym, in a

suburb, in a strip mall. Their cell phones were in their lockers.

On September 11, 2001, as the world was stopping its normal routines, a lot of the country wanted to feel like the surviving 9-11 New Yorkers felt. They wanted this out of something like sympathy crossed with patriotism, the hybrid being a sense of empathy. I don't fault the instinct, and actually think that the collective instinct provided the U.S. with an opportunity to live up to some of the promise that the elementary and even high-school textbooks say the U.S. represents. That didn't happen. And in the end I think the impulse to make the 9-11 tragedy a personal tragedy for those not in the kind of proximity that automatically places a tragedy into your personal collection was a bad one, at least for the poets among us.

I belong to a generation that may be (is?) one of the few that didn't have a war when we were of warring age. The military, as I grew up, shifted from a conscription model to a volunteer model. We had to register for the selective service, but given the political realities of re-instituting the draft in a time when being a politician is to campaign much more than it is to govern—to have your modus operandi as an elected official be growing your own popularity—the reality is that we would never see a battlefield unless we chose to be soldiers. There was a strong feeling among many of my writer friends, when we were in our twenties, that having a war, and having to face what one faces when deployed, having to face what one faces when returning from deployment, having to face what one faces when thinking about deserting or going AWOL or conscientiously objecting—that all of this was necessary to steel oneself if we were ever going to write great stories and poems. Like the impulse to make the 9-11 tragedy personal for those not connected by sufficient personal or public proximity, this, too, was wrongheaded.

We will all get our own tragedies in life. We do not need to invent them, or to sponge what we can from the tragedies of others. Your own collection of tragedies gives you all you need to write from depth.

When tragedies enter our collections organically—the bridge, for me, say—we see our own lives magnified. That magnification can prod us to do something with the time we have left. The magnification can make the time we have left seem awfully short.

It can bring the past into the present not so much as nostalgia for nostalgia's sake, but nostalgia as a model for living a richer life now. It can also make us appreciate what we call "the small things" in an amplified way. A poached egg over fried potatoes and onions, sitting in the sun, a waft of lilacs: these can feel imbued with metaphysical significance.

So with "To survive is to lament, so let's all do it well," I wanted to write a poem about the bridge tragedy for those who do not have it in their collections of personal and public tragedies, but who have their own-bridge like things—things that aren't in my collection—and I wanted to cover the gamut of the magnifying that tragedy does, making sure I was sympathetic to the fact that the magnification fades, that life's tragedies ebb and flow, that those in the depth of sadness are transacting or sharing public spaces with those at the height of bliss.

This poem is about all of the above, after the fact, with the understanding that most people would see my large tragedy—if they remember it at all—as a very small tragedy.

JZ: Your poems make alive and new things like pods, silt, clouds, wool, and stones. In *If You're lucky Is a Theory of Mine*, wind is a "bulked-up body guard," a beverage is "all dressed up in jumpsuit orange," blades of grass watch a mower "like this is a miracle in a movie,/ dreading the credits, the breeze that ends it," and "A sun and a glacier sit in folding chairs turned backwards." Would you say that you've always had a kind of animist interest in things?

MM: Growing up, two of my primary forms of entertainment were Saturday morning cartoons and Marvel comic books. Saturday mornings were the only day of the week when cartoons were shown (there were only three channels plus PBS then), and in fall, as the new school year was starting, there would be these cartoon preview shows on the Friday night before the Saturday morning of the new season. Not everything was animated. We had *H.R. Pufnstuf*, *Sigmund and the Sea Monsters*, and *Land of the Lost*, all live-action Saturday morning fare. On those preview Saturday nights, we saw snippets of what the next day would bring. I would get up early—*early* early—and would spend the morning watching cartoons and eating cereal

in my pajamas. Marvel comics were my monthly periodical fix. I started buying new issues when they were a quarter, but only shortly after the price had been raised by five cents. I got a lot of comic books at rummage sales with the “Still only 20 cents” sunburst on them. I had my favorites that I bought and even subscribed to—Spider-man, The Fantastic Four, The Incredible Hulk, The Avengers—and also tried to buy up as many of the debuts that came along—Luke Cage, Nova, stuff like that. I’ve still got every comic book I ever purchased or traded for. When I was in my formative years, I was formed by the kind of ethics, morality, and justice that came from cartoons and comic books, where there was humor, pathos, anthropomorphism, surrealism, defiance of the laws of nature, resurrection, intervention not divine but in the form of superpowers derived from spider bites and experiments gone wrong. Those things were the art through which I made sense of my life. And I did that as a kid—I needed that art, because I wasn’t confident or popular. Having grown up making sense of my place in the world via cartoons and comic books, it’s probably a logical extension that wind for me becomes a bulked-up body guard, et cetera. I think I’m appealing to that same person I used to be, and in many ways still am. Saying all this makes me feel like I have to come clean and admit that I haven’t fully grown up. Maybe I haven’t. I don’t remember my dreams all that often, but when I do what I love is the magic of how the impossible, when I’m dream me, is not only possible, but feels as real as anything else does. When I first read *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, I realized adult art could continue to build on cartoons and comics. I’ve been trying to live up to that possibility ever since.

JZ: In the poem titled, “Early egg cartons were made of skin and bones” from *If You’re lucky Is a Theory of Mine*, you see the soul of your grandparents in a “double-yoked egg” and then you write that “my heart, in my grandmother’s voice,/ sings, *We’re all shadows of one idea on a planet with multiple suns.*” The shadow from this poem reminded me of a poem from your earlier collection, *Prayer Book*, titled “The moon tonight inspires not only wonder and tides but also this deathbedish prayer,” where you write “I kill a mosquito, and as instinctively/ as I do so am sorry

for what I've done,/ that I am shadow, man, can't/ dismantle the border between./ I breathe in whatever the night/ exhales." These two beautiful poems really demonstrate something that your work does so well which is engagement with the liminal moment or state. Have you always been fascinated by the space where you "can't dismantle the border between"?

MM: I would say less "fascinated" than "owned or possessed by." As a kid I was a sleepwalker. Once I went to the neighbors and knocked on the back door. My parents, I think, were still up, watching TV in the den, as me in my pajamas walked quietly enough down the stairs and opened and closed the back door without making enough noise for them to notice. When the neighbors answered my knocking—they were an elderly couple with the last name Fox, and Mrs. Fox answered—I asked her if my sister was there. I was searching for my sister. It's the only time I know of that I sleepwalked out of the house. Mrs. Fox called my parents and they found me in bed, I think. In the time it took her to call I must have made my way quietly back in. I remember portions of my sleepwalks, of being in a different kind of state. I was pretty scared of the dark, at that age, when I walked to the neighbors, and can't imagine doing so without the courage of whatever a sleepwalking state provides. After I turned twelve, I didn't sleepwalk anymore. In college, though, I had a few out-of-body experiences that had nothing to do with drugs. I would be myself, as the "I" I think of "me" as, hovering over my sleeping physical body. It was nothing like a dream. It was metaphysical me literally hovering over physical me. It was serene, not scary. It happened a handful of times, and never again. It was cool, and I wish it would happen again. And while it's more pedestrian than either sleepwalking or out-of-body experiences, I hit and hit the snooze button on my alarm for thirty or forty minutes every morning, and go from sleeping to waking, sleeping to waking. The line between dream and reality in those thirty to forty minutes barely exists—each becomes the other. Things trivial and serious exist in both realms. I think I've drunk the glass of water I keep at bedside, only to finally wake up and find it full. I think I've done some horrific manslaughter-y thing, only to wake to find I'm mild mannered, no-crimes-committed me. If we don't

all live in liminality, then I guess I'm a freak. It seems like the default state of being, to me. I've really enjoyed, lately, reading about multiverse theories, and thinking about the possibility of cross-communication. It'd be cool if that happens. Especially if it happens way more than we think it does.

JZ: The reader can put your book down but the ambiance and tone stay with them. I really admire that. Do you premeditate the landscape and tone of your book? Do you think, I want a book that is made of glaciers, whales, bus stops, and horses and then begin the work of writing? Or does the work come first?

MM: I think the mindset, mood, and skills one needs for composing poems is very different from the mindset, mood, and skills one needs for revising poems. I feel like two different people when I do one versus the other. I compose poems in bursts of several months, writing a new poem a day. Just as with physical exercise, I have to warm up. When I start a composing burst things go slowly. Eventually, though, as with anything you're doing on a daily basis, things pick up. Composing starts to become addicting, and I start to see so many more things as poem-worthy. There's an arc to it all. Eventually I start to run out of gas, and then I quit composing. I won't have looked at any of the poems I wrote since the day I wrote them, but then I shift into revision mode, when I look at the poems differently. Composing is like diving to the bottom of lake, where it's too dark to see, but you dig up and bring to the surface as much wet lake muck and mud as can be carried. Revising is like coming back to each pile of brought-up stuff to see what it looks like now that it's dried in the sun. Revising is all about shaping the dried muck and mud into the something that it looks like it should be. It's also about the string of muck and mud piles—the similarities and differences, the juxtapositions and echoes, the keepers and duds. Unity of tone probably comes from composing in those bursts. When I try to make a book of it all, I don't keep all of the poems I originally composed nor the order I wrote them in. I'll add in poems from earlier composing, too, but the poem-a-day approach I think gives it a natural kind of cohesion. When I revise, I try to diversify the biosphere (the solar system, the universe) of my poems, and that

deliberate diversification forces me to go in directions I hadn't expected to go. I can't turn a carp into a squirrel without having to re-imagine the poem and its logic. At the same time I keep in mind something Richard Hugo said in *The Triggering Town*: "If you are a private poet," he writes, "then your vocabulary is limited by your obsessions. It doesn't bother me that the word 'stone' appears more than thirty times in my third book, or that 'wind' and 'gray' appear over and over in my poems to the disdain of some reviewers. If I didn't use them that often I'd be lying about my feelings, and I consider that unforgivable. In fact, most poets write the same poem over and over." When I look at the poems that comprise the books I've put together (published and not), I see how choose between those two poles, asking, on one hand, Is this something that needs be a thread that ties the book together, or, on the other hand, is this something that needs to flash on its own in a different way, which it can do without floating away because of all the threads already keeping things together? Writing a book of poems is like raising a big family. You might take the same approach with the same gene pool, or with the adopted or otherwise gathered, but every person or poem is his or her or its own entity. You control what you can control with nurture, but can only control so much given the nature of nature.

JZ: In your poetry I find comfort in these very tender, practical, and even material moments such as a beer in the backyard, making a banana and rum recipe, a greeting at the breakfast table, and sharing coffee. How do you envision your readers or audience? What are they like? Do you think of them when you are drafting? Or do you think of them when you are revising? I wonder if you write these poems with the *intention* to provide comfort for your audience?

MM: When I'm drafting a poem—when it's coming to be out of the ether—I am the primary audience for whatever it is that the poem is trying to say. I am an audience of one trying to discover what the poem is going to be. Sometimes it feels like chiseling the poem from a big block of something, as a sculptor would do, and other times it feels like I'm building up the poem, filling the air as a potter might do with clay. At some point the poems gets

sufficiently whittled down or built up (and eventually both of things happen to every poem—whittling down and building up become complimentary ways to reach the final shape) that I start to take responsibility for what's there, and that's when a sense of audience external to me enters the picture. I should clarify that: though the audience is external to me, it is channelling through me—I have to speak for it—and I think that increases the sense of responsibility. That external audience channelled through me is literally an amalgamation of poems I've read and am reading that I admire, respect, and love. I read the poems and try to see the poem I'm working on through the lens of the poems I'm reading. I adopt poetry-tinted lenses at that stage in the process, is a way to think of it—seeing not with the eyes of the poets who wrote the poems I dig, but through the eyes of the poems themselves. After that I'll shift my perspective again, and a sense of a real human being reading my poems in a kitchen or backyard or on a train or plane or bus or in a prison or on a phone, maybe (we can dream, can't we?) my poem jittering as somebody walking to spend a night with friends tries to read it—that kind of one-on-oneness takes over. That, I guess, is when I bring the reader in. Two of the questions I've written out and go back to when I get to this stage are *Will this provide something for the sick and dying or for those who love the sick and dying?* and *Does it make one pause who thinks his or her life is "fine"?* Those are the questions my poems get on their final exams. And at each stage the poems change and become something I never expected. And it takes a long, long time. I heard Bob Hicok, once, respond to an audience question about how many people he shares his work with before it gets published. The questioner essentially wanted to know about Hicok's writing group—how many people were in it, and how much he took to heart their comments. Hicok surprised the questioner, said he doesn't share his poems before he sends them out, that he is a writing group of one. Another time Kevin Fenton responded to an audience question about how long it took him to write his award-winning first book, *Merit Badges*, and Fenton, without a lag, said, "Eighteen years." At the reading where Fenton said that, I mentally figured out that one of the poems in *Prayer Book* had been simmering and distilling for exactly 18 years, too, before it was published. In those two ways I feel Hicokian and Fentonian.

I am my own writing group, and perhaps because of that it takes me a long time to bring a poem to fruition. I often wish I had an editor who could be my writing group in order to speed the process up, fixing both things (if, that is, they are problems to be fixed).

JZ: Your poems are generous and comforting but they aren't glossy or air-brushed. The comfort doesn't come by way of unrealistic promises of hope for humanity or nefarious untruths about how everything is just fine. These poems don't shy away from harsh realities. You even write in the poem, "This is for you," that "It wasn't a storybook dawn." I don't think any of your poems are "storybook." Instead they are, and as the poem continues, "rawer than that." Do you ever think about the risk of the storybook ending or the risk of melodrama in your writing process?

MM: Richard Hugo (who my teacher-mentor Rick (Richard!) Robbins always called Dick), said in his great book *The Triggering Town* that you have to "risk sentimentality," and that freed me to attempt in poetry the kinds of things favorite bands of mine (The Replacements, The Lemonheads, others) do in song. Good prose on poetry can inspire like that. It can (and here I'll channel a little William Blake) open doors you didn't know were there. The first prose on poetry I read wasn't even that—it was prose on prose, John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction*. That's the book that introduced me to the concept of "craft" before I ever knew what "craft" was, before Dean Young, in a Squaw Valley workshop, said (italics because I'm paraphrasing and mashing up), *Craft talks? I fucking hate that word—craft. What we do isn't craft, it's art. We're not making bird cages, we're making birds!* That was oral prose on poetry that eventually made the transformation to written prose on poetry in Young's *The Art of Recklessness*, which is some prose on poetry I recommend. A kind of thread that has emerged for me as I've answered your questions (which I haven't done in the order you asked them) is, I guess, more of a braid than a thread, and it's made of part formal education and part self education, and because a braid needs three parts, part *I've got to do this; it's never ever been done before!*, even though your formal education

or self education will eventually show you that it has. Prose on poetry is like the hairdresser I go to to get my locks braided. My prose on poetry books are my coaches. They show me film and tell me what I'm doing wrong or right, pointing out where I'm being sentimental (or _____) rather than *risking* sentimentality (or _____). I think that *risking* sentimentality (or _____) can be done in a lot of different ways, and that a lot of factors determine how an individual may or may not try to do so. How a Matt Rasmussen risks sentimentality (or _____) is different from how an Olena Kalytiak Davis risks sentimentality (or _____). They've lived different lives, seen different things, are different people. But I think it's that *je ne sais quoi*-ish *risking* of sentimentality (or _____), on each poet's own's terms, in each poet's own way, that oftentimes make the difference between a skilled poem and a great poem. Dean might say it's the difference between craft and art in a poem. (Full disclosure: Dean's prose on poetry is one of my favorite confessionals wherein I confess and am, after ten Hail Marys and an Our Father (or _____) forgiven.)

JZ: I've seen you read live several times and I am always delighted by your delivery. Just like there is a process to finding your voice on the page, was there a process to finding your voice for public readings? What advice would you give to a poet trying to find his or her reading voice?

MM: In spirit, I'm like the person who wants to skip the wedding but go to the reception. Weddings, like poetry readings, are the part that feels like work, like a job. And anybody who grew up with the kind of Midwestern work ethic I grew up with knows you have to do your work before you can party. But I like the party part a lot more. I like what comes after a poetry reading. But readings are thing poets have to do, yeah? It's part of the job. And my Midwestern work ethic tells me I have to do the best job I can, have to do all I'm capable of doing. So caveated, I have taught sessions on reading poems, because it's part of the job my students will need to learn to do. The sessions are essentially YouTube surveys of how poems have been and get read. I tell students they're lucky to live where they do, in the Twin Cities,

where there are so many readings, and I strongly encourage them to get to as many as possible, to listen, observe, and then, at home, practice reading aloud. Do you want to read like Matt Hart? Like Sylvia Plath? Li-Young Lee? Lucille Clifton? Dylan Thomas? Nick Demske? Elizabeth Bishop? Taylor Mali? Sarah Kay? Once you see how many different ways there are to read a poem, I think it's freeing. There isn't a right way or a wrong way, and you are free to change ways along the way. I teach learning to read one's own poetry that way because it's how I learned it, only back in the days before the Internet (the Internet has made a lot of things easier, but easier isn't always better). I first heard poets reading their poems on vinyl, and Dylan Thomas first of all. Later I saw poets reading their poems on videos and later still on MTV. Until I got to grad school live poetry readings weren't really a thing in any of the places where I lived (I was going to add "or I didn't notice them," but I don't think that's the case. Heck, though, poetry as a thing that anybody other than lovey-dovey middle school girls and Shakespeare wrote was a foreign concept to me till I went away to college). I don't know how I used to read, when I first started reading poems aloud (in grad school), but I know it's different now. I didn't have as many examples to draw from, which lent to a kind of tunnel vision regarding what one could do when reading a poem. The more I saw—the more I've seen—the more I've tried new things. If I say anything about the poem nowadays it's extemporaneous. I used to make notes on the page about the things I thought the audience ought to know about the poem before or after hearing the poem itself. It used to be necessary to drink two or three beers before I read a poem for an audience, which wasn't hard to make happen because the readings were always in bars. It wasn't standing in front of any audience and speaking that was a hurdle, but doubts about the work, about whether or not it was good enough, and what it meant if it wasn't, because, you know, there's blood on the page whether it's obvious or not. I do recall deliberately trying out different reading styles after hearing a poet read in a way I'd never quite heard before, a way I thought was cool, that changed the way I'd read. It's not a new idea, but I think of the poem, when I'm reading it, as a kind of score, and I try to be true to it. I don't think about the audience, but try to be allegiant to the poem. If

I read the same poem at seven readings seven nights in a row, I don't think I'd read it the same way—I don't hear myself reading it the same way—but to anybody listening that may indeed be the case. I've been doing it for long enough that I don't think about it anymore but have settled into what you could say is "my style of delivery." Whatever it is, I didn't pick it so much as I grew into it by keeping at because it's part of the job that needs to be done. It's the result of a lot of self study, a lot of trial and perceived error, until it finally felt—finally feels—natural, even though it's nothing like my speaking style. I have a tendency in conversation, I'm told, to not enunciate well—to mumble and blur things. When I read a poem I like to feel the words in my lips and tongue, like hard candy in my mouth, like they have a physical presence. Still, though, I'd rather skip the readings altogether and show up for the socializing that happens after. What I go to poetry for I get when I read alone every morning. I like to read aloud to my cats in my sunroom. I think those are the only poetry readings I can say that I love.

JZ: We tend to think of things that are trendy as short-lived and something that's a trend as a more permanent general direction. I've noticed that the Twin Cities has a high trend-awareness rate as well as a high rate of trendy-ness. Do you see anything trendy in poetry? And what do you think might be some of poetry's latest trends? Do you think we should forsake trendy for trends?

MM: I think that what you're asking is at the heart of what we writers do whenever we read or write. We have in the back of our heads Pound's "make it new," and are, at the same time, thinking about what kind of art will outlast our short lives. We like what's already been done less than we like open doors we didn't know were there, but we want whatever is door-opening to be standing on top of a mountain of what's already been done before it looks for a door—in the air up there—to open. We're a hard crowd to please, in large part because we're not necessarily looking to be pleased. Poetry can please me, scare me, challenge me, dare me, mirror me, put me into perspective, make me smile or belly laugh, anger me, bore me, wash over me, make me think, make me cry, make me want to write a poem of my own, the list (like

the beat) goes on. The poems I read that I like the most, whether I like it or not, inspire me, and make me want to write poems like them. I'm especially careful about that. I'm always reading multiple books by multiple poets, usually a poem a poet a book at a time, from three to five stacks of seven to ten books, in order to make sure that I'm not overly influenced by any one poet. Poetry, of course, is influenced by a lot of things in addition to the poets and poems we're reading, and taking all of that into consideration, we make instantaneous judgments about whether this poem or that is trendy or part of a trend. And then we give ourselves six months, or a year, or five years, or ten, and we flip-flop, or do 180s, or hedge our earlier bets. Which is to say I want to answer your question but don't know how to. I understand the distinctions you make between trends and trendy, but have been reading poetry long enough to be able to note where something I thought was one thing I now see is the other. I have been reading poetry long enough to allow for things to change sides again, and again. Believe me, I want like a motherfucker to come down hard on poetry I think is trendy and not a trend, but experience tells me to be wary; I might see today's trendiness as tomorrow's trend and try to do a bit of it myself in a poem here and there. I'm always drawing from it all, trying to make a poem that lasts, which may end up trendy, part of a trend, or more of the same. Writing poetry is like living life in the days before technologically sophisticated meteorology. You hold your finger to the wind, look to the sky, try to judge clouds, temperature change, et cetera, never sure if your predication of bad weather will turn into a sunny evening, or if a tornado will ruin your perfect-day plans.

JZ: One of my earliest memories is of a piercing blue sky and marigolds like orange globes nestled in my mother's garden. I ran inside and, yanking her apron, told her in toddler-esque excitement that my favorite word is *cluster*. What might be one of your favorite words or a short-phrase based memory that you just can't seem to extricate from a certain scene?

MM: I don't remember any particular examples, but remember there always being words or phrases either made up or given esoteric meaning that would function as a kind of linguistic

cement in various friend groups. Well, I remember a couple examples, but they're demeaning, having arisen from one or another friend group's attempt to elevate itself relative to outsiders and rival groups. Is this how sociologists talk? I feel like I'm talking like a sociologist. Both of my parents' parents ran service stations in a small (tiny) town in Iowa—the same town—and so I grew up around a lot of salty profanity uttered when things in the shop didn't go as planned. My dad worked for one of my grandpas and I worked for my dad, starting as a kid on Saturdays when I'd clean the men's and women's rooms and mop the front office floor and sweep the various bays in the shop. Eventually I pumped gas and changed the oil in cars and changed truck tires and stuff like that, and I heard oodles of these strings of profanities, which were always evolving, never planned, more like a kind of jazz than anything else. I graduated from observer to practitioner, and what I still like best about that kind of swearing is the invention—the success of spontaneity—when standard curses are rearranged, or strung together differently, with new coinings wedged in, something brand new and electric and so “the best thing that could have been said right now” sprouting from something old. Words for me are about feeling and moment, about the intersection of feelings at moments, words being the unplanned and unrecorded ether of sounds where it all becomes one. My way-back recollections are images, not words, one of my earliest being breaking a small glass swan of my mom's that was sitting on a table in the living room in front of the couch. I've told this story to my mom, and she says I was two or three when it happened. I remember knowing—being told—not to play with the swan, which was made of fine, clear glass. I don't remember if the neck or a wing broke off, but I remember the light—a brilliant white summer morning light coming in through the window above where we had a window AC unit. The air wasn't on—there were other windows and the front door open—but the light hit the swan, and refracted, and I remember streaks of purple and yellow and blue and red. My mom, of course, would tell it to you differently. It would probably be winter and the swan made of colored glass. The air-conditioner and swan and light would tell it differently, too. It wasn't until I got to college and switched my major from engineering to law to

English that I started to pay close attention to words as words, picking favorites, intentionally making phrases, and sentences, as things intended to last. Whatever lasts, though, first comes to life from the jazzy junk heap of not knowing what the fuck I'm going to say next. What I started to learn in college and have continued to learn since gave me intention and control. I still start from the same place, but I go further. As judged by some schools of thought, I'm sure that this is seen as a loss. To me, though, it's a gain—the awareness and practice of intention and control. When my faculties leave me and I drift back to unrecorded spontaneity, that's when I'll be able to talk to you about loss.

JZ: If you've seen the movie *Napoleon Dynamite* then you have heard of the mythical creature the Liger. If you could be a mythical hybrid creature, what do you think you would be?

MM: I love the idea of the Liger, and if I'm not mistaken (if Wikipedia's not mistaken) Ligers actually exist in zoos, and in times past may have existed in the wild. I loved *Napoleon Dynamite*, but it's not one of those movies I can watch again and again and again. That list, though, is pretty short, so *Napo* not making it isn't a giant slight. Actually, I'd like to see a really mythical hybrid: a ligerantlyawk, part lion, tiger, elephant, grizzly, hawk. I'm guessing you asked this question relative to poetry, which is why I've invented the ligerantlyawk, and invite anybody else to invent an even more-melted pot of a creature. Poetry to me is about starting with a blank slate and not knowing what kind of freak you'll end up with. That freak may excel, like a perfect mutation, or it may die unable to suckle its mother's milk. Birthing a poem is about taking that risk, about dealing with what you get and nurturing it until it takes or doesn't. Every good poem is its own brand-spanking-new mythical creature. In the place of "Liger" we get "[insert title]." But I've danced around your question. I hope you expected I would. If I could pick a mythical hybrid creature to become, I'd turn into Prince Namor, aka the Sub-Mariner. He's the hybrid's hybrid—water creature, land creature, swimmer, flyer, good, bad, temperamental, as willing to throw his life on the line for nothing as he is to sit out the good fight. He doesn't have the power of the Silver Surfer, nor the

humanity of Spider-man, but matches, I think, the complexity of some of the Greek gods I like best. I think good comic-book creations do that. I think the Greeks would have loved the graphic novel; it's the perfect genre in which to introduce and serialize a god. Most people don't equate growing up on comic books as growing up steeped in a kind of classical mythology, but I do. I have to. I didn't have any opportunity to do the latter. The former presented itself, and I drank of it.

Hannah Stephenson

STARLINGLIFE

Ooh, solidity is my favorite of all
the illusions. Molecular murmuration

is what we are, humming fast enough
not to collapse each second. Every being

alone is a flock, there goes your grandmother,
well, her eyebrows, I mean, your face

remembers how hers arched. Funny story,
turns out a human is the walking memory

of ghosts. Not our nostalgia. Theirs.
Posthumous nostalgia, remember when

I had a body, oh my shoulder, oh my spine,
oh my unattached earlobes, my Starry Night

fingerprints pressing their small selves upon
surfaces like wriggling dogs leaping up

to kiss you. He looks like me, a ghost says,
approvingly. We hear it as one bright tree

at the periphery of the freeway, shimmering,
shaking all its leaves at once.

Brian Beatty

Two excerpts from BRAZIL, INDIANA (A FOLK POEM IN THE SPIRIT OF RALPH EUGENE MEATYARD)

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The farm widow pried
a confused chicken into
her dead husband's boot.

Her rooster, too, was gone,
buried in the roadside ditch.

She'd quit collecting eggs
and tossing out scratch.

How long ago she couldn't
remember. Nor did she care to.

"I'll be your wife from now on,"
she told the bird blinking
dumbly at the sun.

•

The local beauty queen
the one-armed butcher's
daughter sharpened her
knives up and down

her pageant sash until
their blades shone as brilliantly
as the faux diamond grin
of her tiara.

Her talent for parades
drove boys her own age into rivers.
Grown men for miles patiently
slashed each other's tires.

Bob Hicok

Respect

Cows are cool enough to be born
wearing their leather jackets—the milk ones
behind us are quiet and scholarly
over their plates of grass, while the beef ones
below often scream like they're young
and watching *The Shining* for the first time—
it's as if they know the blades are coming
and scream's not quite the right word, as saying
I have cave paintings on the inside of my skull
tells you I hail from hunter-gatherers
but isn't meant as a description
of the actual decor—the thing
about the screaming is it makes me order
a bowl of beets and mushroom soup
at the restaurant when otherwise
I might have asked for the waiter's heart
on a spike—it's a rhythmic sound
that has blood and rust deep inside it—
almost a catching of breath
on razor wire or waking from a dream
of falling down an elevator shaft
to find you're naked and have
to give a speech while falling
down an elevator shaft—it makes the bucolic
creepy in the dark and creepy
under full sail of sun—but not the milk cows—
the milk cows are half ton whispers—
their udders seem to levitate
and meditate—I look at them as clouds
that have made emergency landings—
that have slightly more modest ambitions
for rain and shade but nonetheless
are still eager for a life as weather—
this is just a little of what it's like

to live in what we call “the country” —
think of it as a painting in a museum
that sometimes smells of shit and sometimes
a bear walks through the painting
and mauls the dew and sometimes vultures
weave a circle in the air and you wonder
below them, are they here for me
and I’m overdressed for the demise—
as I’m telling you I plan to wear
a tuxedo, both to yours and mine

Jeanne Lutz

THE MAN WHO BORROWS A PEN

in moldova
he once witnessed an execution
of rebels by a firing squad

it was a cold wet day
the rebels were allowed
umbrellas

he remembers this he says
handing me back my warmed pen
every time it rains

Joyce Sutphen

AT BOWDOIN

For practical purposes, I had to
pretend I did not exist (I did not
exist) although at night a plate of toast

and cup of tea would disappear. I marked
out places on the map where I might live,
sang “To Susan on the West Coast Waiting”

and “Oh Canada” in a slip-slide of
Joni Mitchell’s silky blues. I was not
there, and when Spring came (“Tin Soldiers and

Nixon’s Coming”), I was not anywhere.
Once, during those days, I walked through Brunswick
in snow much like the snow that fell back home—

whiter even than the snows of childhood
and snowmen who had melted clean away.

Dobby Gibson

The End

Author's note: *This is the last in a series of weekly talks I gave to the graduate poetry workshop at the University of Texas at Austin the fall of 2014.*

This is my last talk to our workshop, my dear workshop, and in every way it's going to confront my worst fear: the end.

I worry I'm not so good at endings. If true, this is a highly unfortunate deficiency in a poet. For what are poems other than devices engineered to detonate conclusions? Lines, like dishes in an argument, are quickly broken and end. Stanzas end and give us the silent treatment. Poems end so quickly you can see their endings from their beginnings. The end is the first feature we notice about most poems, most books of poems: "Hey, look, this little work of art ends so quickly. I can commit to that!"

And yet, oddly, poetry readings just seem to go on and on. There are some poetry readings I feel I'm still sitting through, even now. That one with the poet wearing so many scarves accompanied by the saxophone player in the Walker Art Center in 1998—it never actually ended, I'm quite sure. The other night, Eileen Myles told my seminar that Joe Brained said, on his deathbed, "Well, at least I won't have to go to any more poetry readings." I don't know whether or not that's true, but it's sure a great ending!

I should be really good at endings, given how many I've experienced in my life. I've had plenty of practice. My dog, Hoagy. My varsity tennis career. Thanksgiving, every year, unfortunately. Those Trollope novels, improbably. Even that Whitney Houston rendition of the national anthem before the 1991 Super Bowl, that eventually came to an end, right?

At the end of a fancy dinner, we dip our fingers into little bowls with lemon slices. At the end of a curse, we're doomed.

At the end of a sneeze, we're blessed.

At the end of singing a particular church hymn, we do that

“peace be with you” thing where we shake hands with total strangers, which I abhor.

At the end of singing “Auld Lang Syne,” we do that thing where we stop dancing and kiss total strangers, which I adore.

“Auld Lang Syne,” a song based on an eighteenth century poem written by Scottish poet Robert Burns. A poem that begins with a rhetorical question that the poem never fully answers in the end: Should old friends and the past be forgotten? It’s a Scottish poem, so it concludes by proposing we simply raise our glass and drink, which is as sensible an ending as any, I suppose.

Except if your Robert Burns. Burns’s chronic drinking, combined with a botched tooth extraction, led to his demise. He was buried on the same day as his 12th son Maxwell was born—the best kind of end: one with a beginning.

Here are ten endings from ten poems. Maybe this is a kind of cento? (An endto?)

1. Oh Lana Turner we love you get up.
2. Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through.
3. His soul shalt taste the sadness of her might, /And be among her cloudy trophies hung.
4. I stop somewhere waiting for you.
5. And I let the fish go.
6. Yet—never—in Extremity, /It asked a crumb—of me.
7. Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings, /saying *blackberry, blackberry, blackberry*.
8. Forgive me /they were delicious /so sweet /and so cold.
9. Jazz June. We /Die soon.
10. And, nothing himself, beholds /Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

If you created your own cento entirely from other poems’ last lines, which last line would you give the honor of being the last line to *that* poem’s ending?

My favorite form of ending may be that of famous last words. “I should never have switched from Scotch to martinis,” were the last words of Humphrey Bogart. “More light,” were Goethe’s.

“Dada, mama”: the catalog of famous people’s first words is not nearly so interesting. Which proves if the maxim “first thought,

best thought” were really true, babies would be far better poets. Endings are both more interesting and more difficult than beginnings.

Just ask a gymnast about to leap from the balance beam.

In her talk “On Beginnings,” Mary Ruefle argues—stealing an idea from Pound—that we each speak only one sentence in our lifetime. It begins when we’re babies, she says, and ends just before we die. This thought makes the idea of ending easier, because we suddenly need only one spectacular contribution to the form, but the notion is more clever than true. Anyone who has broken up with someone knows that endings—right in the middle of life—are real. Let’s not get cute trying to turn periods into commas.

The book *Japanese Death Poems* is instructive for the student of endings. It’s an anthology of *jisae*, poems written by zen monks in the last moments before death, as they attempt to render fleeting human consciousness as beautifully as possible. Sometimes mournful, sometimes flippant, but always lucid.

Kozan Ichikyo died in 1360 at age 77. A few days before his death, he called his pupils together and ordered them to bury him without ceremony, forbidding them to hold services in his memory. After writing this poem on the morning of his death, he lay down his brush and died sitting upright:

Empty-handed I entered
the world.
Barefoot I leave it.
My coming, my going—Two
simple happenings That got
entangled.
Like dew drops on a
lotus leaf
I vanish.

The 1968 book *Poetic Closure* is a useful study of the common strategies poems use to find conclusion. In it, Barbara Hernstein Smith identifies many different properties of closure. Closure can be tonal. The wind calms. A baby stops crying. Closure can be spatial on the page. It may or may not be temporal. It might

make use of devices like balanced antithesis, such as in the phrase, “Nothing to see here, move along”

Here’s an interesting paragraph from Smith’s book. In it, she describes what she observes as the common “anti-ending” of the Deep Image poem:

Closure in the pure imagist poem is usually weak, but that was part of its intended effect. The image itself, the presentation of raw data, the sensory experience of the poet recreated in the reader—that was the object of the objectivity. If it was successful, presumably the recreated experience would be sufficient and stable enough—but in a way any sense impression would be, with a lingering “after-image.” Like the haiku by which it was influenced, the imagist poem did not assert the speaker’s motives or personality, except in what has been described as “a tone of melancholy and restrained plaintiveness.” And it usually did not assert anything else either.

In *The Sense of an Ending*, the critic Frank Kermode suggests that we humans are innately incapable of understanding just what a tiny fragment of eternity our lives inhabit. To render existence coherent to ourselves, we have to imagine our lives in the middle of a history that’s poised to end. “It seems to be a condition attaching to the exercise of thinking about the future that one should assume one’s own time to stand in extraordinary relation to it,” he writes. Our apocalypse is the true apocalypse, in other words—for how else can we be special?

Maybe it’s best if we don’t think about endings too much. At least, not when we’re in the actual process of rendering conclusion. We should forget all about our studies and just go—or end—on our nerve. After all, who knows where endings even come from?

Sometimes the gods drop them upon us from above. The engineer drives to the airbase in North Dakota and launches Monday’s drone. Sometimes endings swell up within us. The bird nestles into her warren and places a wing over her head, knowing it’s time.

When in doubt, we can create endings by deconstruction. If

you have a two-page poem, throw the second page away. Now how's your ending working? Instead of writing an ending, delete a line. Better, same or worse? Studies show that being pushed from a cliff is a terrifically effective ending. So too is switching off the lights and taking a nap. See if you can create an ending that allows your poem to sneak away in the night. This ending is akin to the so-called Irish goodbye—horribly offensive, I realize—where you grab your coat and leave a party without telling anyone.

Well, I should report to you that we can see the end of this talk from here. It's waiting for us in the paragraph below. It won't be long now. Hard to believe it's time—but it's time. Pupils, will you go to the temple and fetch me my monk's robe and calligraphy brush?

Remember when Taya got her braces off? It seems like just yesterday. And that night Jason dropped acid during prom and drove the family car through the back of the garage? Golden days, all of them.

I thought a lot about how I might end this talk on endings, and I couldn't think of any way that wasn't at least a little bit corny. In the end, I just kept thinking back to the beginning—back to September, when it seemed like our workshop would go on forever. When it seemed I'd never have to say *The End*.

YIELD

I stared deep into the darkening waters
and had a few things to say to the media.

Punished by snowpack, floaty as wine cork,
I was handed a camera crew

and exploded as a flock of marriage doves
when they said they were rolling.

Noah, they all replied, go back to Iowa they said,
go back to Iowa they say, come back

to Iowa they say, go back to Iowa, everyone,
where the parasitic flora sprawls

the abandoned smoke-break loading docks
at the places my brothers choose to work there

while most days here I think of the recolonizing mountain lion
purring there into north-counties breeze, browning corn leaves jutting

like a chorus on the fields, a single miscast swallow
lacking apostles, neurotic on top of a galvanized outbuilding.

BJ Love

NOW I TELL YOU WHAT I KNEW IN TEXAS

That the moon can still pull us in any direction is a miracle I want to talk more about. Is what I want to fill these pages with. I thought of this today at a stoplight. Which is counterintuitive I know, but I wanted something red to help me contextualize a rising tide, something to help me explain our longing. Like a wave, I write the same poem over and over with the hopes that someday you'll notice your feet are wet. I write the same poem over and over because when I was 8, I learned English and there are still so many things I just love to say. To hear. Too soon, our jowls get meaty and we begin to look for other places to put our kisses. The sky is still there, even when you are driving, and some days the clouds are perfect but no matter how fast you drive home, every thing is different by the time you get there and the cloud that looked just like your old bedroom has blown into a reminder that you live in Texas now. And the moon is full. And you are in the midst of a tracking shot. In the midst of a long take. In the mist of the bayou. What is the ocean today will be a cattailed prairie tomorrow. I do nothing, says the moon, but bring you good tidings. I do nothing, you say, as well.

Matthew Lippman

NOT TO BE SOME BAD ASS JAZZ GUY

There was nothing
Left to listen
To
So I listened

To Lester
Young
Not to be some bad
Ass

Jazz guy
But because my buddy
Mike
Had turned me on

To Lester
Some years back
In an apartment
Overlooking

Broadway
Near Zabars
I forget what
We were doing

There
Drinking scotch
Some refined
Shit

Like Oban
Not to be hipsters
We just liked
Broadway

And Oban
And then
Lester Young
But tonight

None of that
Mattered
The world was
Really quiet

I am talking a
Quiet
Without distant
Car noises

Or piano noise
Or the noise
Of Samsung
Ice makers

Making ice
It was dead
Silent
And I wanted

To hear
The world
Not out of
Loneliness

Or fear
Or hunger
I wanted to hear
The world

Moaning
From its big brown
And beautiful

Belly

So I put on
Lester Young
And caught myself
Breathing

Sara Lefsyk

WE'RE AT THE ACTUAL MUSEUM of modern day history, realigning ourselves with the great spectral figures of our time. William wears the dress of altered states and explains how: "*church* is a roundabout way of saying *lunch* or *biscuits*," then puts on a type of coat.

Still, a man sits learning the names and colors of things. He no longer believes in the mind of a bird. This is his dharma: he points at the clear sky endlessly when a woman is breaking heliotropes in half. "I have almost fainted to be in commercials," she says, then runs out to the terrible mass of actual trees.

She is a hill upon a hill if she is a mountain. She is a slow-motion picture star. "I really feel it is as if there were birds" she says, then lies down in the grass or in the aperture.

When William is deconstructing the mind of a bird, he is interpreting the animal exegesis. "If it weren't for the hive of my being I'd think like animals think," he says.

When he refuses his dharma, He is recalling the hard land of his youth, where once he ate cereal with a real man for ten hours. "Real men never point at the clear sky and say 'real sky' endlessly."

Afterword

Are printed biographies in the backs of printed journals anachronisms in a nowadays when almost everybody has their own website or blog or multifaceted social media presence? We find ourselves asking this question. We find ourselves thinking about the nature of biographies as we do research in our own stacks of printed journals. There's the long bio, the short bio, the all-business bio, the whimsical bio, the askance bio, the I've-accomplished-a-lot-and-here-it-all-is bio, the I've-accomplished-a-lot-and-you-won't-find-a-lick-of-it-here bio. Oh, bios. We are going to forsake them. And pass the baton to you. On your mark, get set, go:

WWW