

Poetry City, Vol. 8

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

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POETRY CITY, VOL. 8
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The cover quotation, “your tribe finds you,” is excerpted from the longer Lucille Clifton quotation, “it is nice to find your, or actually, what happens is your tribe finds you. and you are so happy.” It is Poetry City’s alpha inspiration. See past volumes for elucidation.

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Foreword/ Matt Mauch

If you can judge a place by the tchotchkes it sells, Boondocks, USA is at best an intolerant and at worst a racist truck stop in the heart of Iowa. And to judge furthermore on the general state of the premises, if it hasn't changed since I was last there (which was my first and last time ever) it's safe to say that Boondocks, USA is long past its heyday. Growing up in Iowa in the 70s and 80s, Boondocks, USA used to be a thing. You'd see people in town and people coming through town a fair number of whom wore a Boondocks, USA mesh-backed ball cap (what nowadays everybody knows of as a trucker's cap). Being from Iowa, it was a tongue-in-cheek, pride sort of thing to claim that you proudly come from and have lived your whole life (up till then) in the middle of nowhere, i.e., in the boondocks.

I was an adult and then some (or as much as I'll ever be such) by the time I actually ever stopped at Boondocks, USA, not really needing to gas up but stopping in out of sense of nostalgia for all the caps I'd seen on the residents and passers-through of the town of 3,500 (which has dwindled to a tad more than 2,500 today) I grew up in. Enter the tchotchkes and some new perspective.

Enter Poetry City, USA, which seemed to me a great way to add some balance to the universe—our poetry versus their tchotchkes. As a name for a brand-new poetry journal, it was also a nod—a bit of homage—to an existing poetry journal that was and is one of my favorites, *Forklift, Ohio*. From nothing, I had a something.

Barack Obama was president then, and was about to become the second president I voted for who won, who was also about to become the second president I voted for who won who would disappoint me with his pragmatism and compromise, with the chasm that I've come now to expect between what a candidate says they'll do and what happens when said candidate becomes an office holder.

And now? Now. We have a gerrymandered system of literally rigged elections that time and again means the party who gets fewer votes (the Republican Party) manages to get more representation (the riggers themselves call this “ratfucking”). We have rampant voter suppression, hitting the poor and people of color hardest, because Republicans know that more votes, especially from the disenfranchised, means more votes against them (more, um, rigging). The gap between the haves and the have-nots makes the gilded age look like swell times (it's been reported that three people—Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, and Jeff Bezos—have more wealth between them than 56 percent of the total population). At least two of the three presidents we've had in the twenty-first century were elected by a

minority of voters. Those presidents have, to date, appointed or nominated the majority of the Supreme Courts justices (four of nine), making any ruling they issue anything but the will of the people. I've witnessed two velvet coups, which are no less illegitimate for their lack of guns and blood. The first was when the Supreme Court stopped the Florida vote count and appointed George W. Bush president, and the second was when Mitch McConnell refused to fulfill his Constitutional duties and obligations by holding hearings and a vote on Supreme Court nominee Merrick Garland.

And none of this is the result of chance or the natural evolution of things. All of it has come about deliberately, via policy, via lawmakers from both major parties doing the bidding not of THE PEOPLE but of THE PEOPLE WITH THE REAL MONEY: the 10 percent, and more and more so the 1 percent, and their corporations and their stock market.

A majority of the US Senate now represents only 18 percent of the population. By about 2040, half of the US population is projected to live in just eight states, meaning about 30 percent of population will elect 70 senators, and most of that portion of the population will be whiter and more rural at a time when the total population will be browner and more urban. That's something, but it ain't democracy—not even the old watered-down, US-style representative democracy of old.

This summer I have begun reading the twenty-novel *Le Rougon-Macquart* cycle of Emile Zola, which examines nose to tail the Second Empire in France. It's unlikely I'll ever get through the entire cycle, as I won't prioritize finishing it ahead of all other books I want and will want to read (it would mean I'd miss out on gems like Marie NDiaye's Prix Goncourt winning *Three Strong Women*, a tale, among other things, of the harrowing and heartbreaking situations of refugees fleeing Africa for Europe—and so a slice of the relevancy pie here—which I also read this summer). Zola's naturalistic capturing of the authoritarian/capitalistic/bourgeois Second Empire is more than a little reminiscent of what folks like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez call late-stage US capitalism, especially as its identity has been further warped by the Trump abomination. I take my Zola, and I look at contemporary France—understanding that the right wing is emboldened there, too—and I look at contemporary France's democratic-socialist healthcare, and workers' rights, and I take away a bit of hope; what is is not what will always be; others have been where we are and have risen above (although the precarious situation in France (and in so many elsewheres) may point to another cycle beginning).

This summer I also watched a recent episode of *Parts Unknown*, the Anthony Bourdain series on CNN, set in Houston, a majority-minority city. In the episode, immigrants and refugees from India, Pakistan, Mexico, Vietnam, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Salvador, Honduras, the DR Congo, and

Singapore have made deep-red Texas their home, and they embrace the opportunities that they have in the US which they didn't have at home. If you watch it—which I recommend—you'll see scenes from Little India, an Indian-Pakistani restaurant, quinceañeras, a culturally mixed Salvadoran-Vietnamese family in the burbs, and rappers and other African Americans making and parading their swagged-out slab Caddys. The immigrants Bourdain hangs out and eats with in Houston come here for the same sorts of reasons that a lot of my immigrant students at the community college do. The episode shows that people still want to come here, and keep articulating reasons why.

This summer I've also read some Anthony Bourdain, including *A Cook's Tour*, his first foray into world travel as a food writer. It is, in no small way, an ode to Vietnam. In one of the several Vietnam-set essays in the collection, Bourdain paints a clear picture of the distinction between the Vietnamese people and the Vietnamese government. He writes: "Spend some time in the Mekong Delta and you'll understand how a nation of farmers could beat the largest and most powerful military presence on the planet . . . Take awhile to examine the intricate interlocked system of Stone Age irrigation, unchanged for hundreds and hundreds of years, the level of cooperation necessary among neighbors simply to scratch out a living, and you'll get the idea. These people survived bombing, strafing, patrols. They outwitted the CIA, the NSA, satellites, AWACS, blacked-out C-130 cargo planes that had been tricked out with sensors and Gatling guns . . . They beat the French. They beat the Chinese. They beat the Khmer Rouge. And they'll survive communism, too. A hundred years from now, the Commies will be gone—like us, another footnote in Vietnam's long and tragic history of struggle." I read that and hope that maybe that's what's going on here, too. Maybe we the people can overcome and overcome and overcome again. I start to believe that we, too, are different from our government, from our corrosive institutions. Zola's revolutionaries. The Vietnamese people. The punk rock spirit in us. We shall overcome, goddammit.

Other days, I'd love to be an expat. I'd love to get away and move to a place I've over-romanticized into the perfect place, with both the perfect people and the perfect government, or at least a more perfect version of each than is found here. But I know, too, that that wish is very much a "grass is always greener" thing. The perfect or more perfect tends to lose its sheen after you've gone around the block a few dozen or a few hundred times. When I wish to be an expat, it's like wishing to live in a bad novel (because good novels never turn out for the best). And, really—if we're talking reality—expats in our times are from the jet-set crowd. We hoi polloi just don't have the fucking means (if I'm wrong, ring me up. Let's talk).

As with a balanced equation, gains for the few don't occur in a vacuum.

The are offset by losses—by the reduced power of unions, by the elimination of pensions, by the military-and-prison-and-fill-in-the-blank industrial complexes, by the privatization of all that should be public, by rising healthcare and housing costs, etcetera. Today’s chanters of “USA! USA!” are the same chanters of “Lock her up! Lock her up!,” and on the whole tend to be anti-education, anti-science, anti-intellectual, pro-braun, and, en masse behind their supreme leader, are singlehandedly doing everything they can to ensure not that we do what we can to cool the planet we’ve made hot, but that we do the opposite, and make it hotter, less inhabitable for ourselves and our ancestors, if not uninhabitable altogether. They’re killing our country, they’re killing our planet, these chanters of “USA! USA! USA!”

So, as Poetry City, USA, there’s the ever-increasing sense that we’ve been inadvertently waving a flag symbolic of the wrong side of history (if, that is, history turns out to be just, if its arc indeed bends that way, as hoped). I founded this rag, and I am speaking wholly for myself when I say all this: The times are such that the “USA” in “Poetry City, USA” feels like a nod to all the wrong things. Any sense of legitimate patriotism that one might derive from the best parts of the Constitution, or the promise of the Statue of Liberty, or expanded suffrage, or the fact that we elected an African American president, or that we legalized gay marriage and are allowing states to legalize weed, etcetera, has been co-opted by the jingoism of the love-it-or-leave-it set.

If “as is” is the best we’re capable of, maybe we should start anew, cherry-picking from the good, using that as a foundation, making on top of it something more manageable. Maybe our 325-million-plus-members republic, which would make good-governance theorist Plato shit his pants, is just too big. Maybe keeping the union together, if this is what the union is gonna be, is a bad idea. Families fall apart. Schisms find their way through the most unexpected of bonds. Maybe it’s time.

Enter Poetry City, sans the USA. USA will stay in the URL, where the letters are lowercased (usa), which is appropriate. To be honest, part of that is practical. I can’t afford a new URL. But to also be honest, I think we’ve gotten more international submissions because of having USA in our name, and I hope that doesn’t drop off with this change, given that it will still be in the URL. As well, the lowercased usa in the URL sits there as a recurrent symbol of the hope expressed herein. If we ever earn uppercase, front and center again, I’ll write another of these. Until then, long live Poetry City.

www.poetrycityusa.com

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

– Lucas Pingel

Annmarie O'Connell

UNTITLED

I.

when the boys carried my limp body
upstairs to bed *140 lbs. of dead weight*
they laughed I couldn't stay straight
& be in the world a bellyful of burning

II.

here's my chisel here's my body here's my fishing pole here's
something invented to be silenced: the noise of my rape in your bare hand
forgive me south side I have outgrown your colorful fist

III.

the woman at the AA meeting said
you're too pretty for AA/they will murder you
my blood of predators
13th step sponsor holding me down in the motel room
south side sobriety will kill me

IV.

Let me go love song of my life
my blood of felons south side you have turned your backside
on your daughter getting choked out again single mother & my children's father sells dope
(the rug being pulled out from under us)

V.

in the church office the sound of my mother dying rippling up the holy water
spun out hands for food, etc. the white-haired people say
I hope I don't see you again my blood of drunk Grandfather showing me his penis
while I sit in my crib a volume of celestial terror Do you know my kind? Do you?

VI.

The song of my life
playing too long

VII.

Lucky me: a woman

sweet, too

sugar heart: anger red

Leah Umansky

WHAT THEY RECOGNIZE IS THE SMELL

“what they recognize is the smell”

– John Le Carre 60 Minutes January 2018.

At the Golden Globes, Guillermo del Toro says *he has always been faithful to monsters*. What I want to say is that I have, too: the brute, the drama, the dark side of the heart. But now, they seem too real. The monsters in our lives are full-hearted with want and desire. Recognize them. They are among us. Some are in charge. I turn green at the thought, khaki-ed, lemoned. Is it true that a force lies in us? Are we triggered by a safer speaking? No, don't fortress this. The goatish attempt must be swayed. Lament, but jade yourself forward. Lift the chin, smell.

ON FORGIVENESS

Fool

Noun: a person who acts unwisely or imprudently; a silly person.

Verb: trick or deceive (someone); dupe.

*

I watched him build daughters of fear. I traipsed
a happy shadow of one hundred knights across the heath,
scud trailing thundercloud. Song after-thought to thunder,
melody antagonist to wet deluge, cheerfulness an alien
doting on the starving bog. He'd beg me away, a father in rags,
then demand a bath. I had but one bar of soap in my unraveled pockets.
It stank no longer of lye but of sweat, desperation. I held it out to him,
him in a roiling mouth of mud, him and his eyes boiling in their sockets
and the soap disintegrated. Fluttered from my hands pale as a ruined bandage.
My use run clean. In cards and divination it's said I mean beginnings,
innocence, naivety. I mean a single bare tree punctuating
the fog-drunk wastes. After, when he held maybe my mud-made body
to the aloof and churned sky it was not my body and it was not
my mud. I had sunk through the jealous peat to the purple core
of an earth I never dreamed would want me.

Kayla Gray

A Review of Morgan Parker's *There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé*

When I first saw Morgan Parker's *There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé*, I thought, *I want to be that woman on the cover—a woman confident and comfortable in her body and in the space it takes up.* The cover art by Carrie Mae Weems, titled "Portrait of a Woman Fallen from Grace," made me contemplate whether my initial reaction to the woman on the cover was too simplistic. This woman that I will never know made me feel strength from another unapologetic bad-ass, gives-no-shits, beautiful Black woman. But like all things, I had even more questions after trying to figure out who she was. It became a thematic double-edged poetic lens from Parker and the different speakers she implements throughout her work to understand and deconstruct what society teaches about Blackness and women, and about being a Black woman.

Parker's bluntness regarding Black womanhood, on display in "All They Want is My Money My Pussy and My Blood," reveals a speaker of harsh truths: "I do whatever I want because I could die any minute. / I don't mean YOLO I mean they are hunting me." While this clearly is a statement about current social movements (such as #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName), a lot of her work juxtaposes this idea of collective trauma with personal trauma or mental health. Within the same poem the speaker also states, "I could die any minute of depression." The collective trauma experienced within the Black community creates a place where that depression can thrive. For me, this was (and still is) true about how I feel. When, in Minnesota, Jamar Clark was killed by the police, there were marches and the fourth precinct was taken over, the people demanding justice. On Sunday November 22, I remember going to the precinct around 3 p.m. to hand out hand warmers and talk with some people. Some had faces I knew from years ago when I was a part of Minneapolis Park and Recreation, and others were people who had simply had enough. The next day—Monday, November 23—they were shot at by white supremacists. Then Philando Castile was killed and I watched him die, his lifeless body slumping into the seat of his car. After that, a lot of my friends stayed indoors. I went to get food and felt the depression, fear, and anxiety of everyone around me being white and seemingly unbothered by what had happened. It was hard to grieve, as people didn't really seem to notice the pain. I saw three black people that day—yes, I counted, because I was crowd scanning, looking for someone as

hurt, sad, and alone as I was. It made me wonder if they knew, if they cared, or if they were going to recite any of the memorized justifications of why someone deserved to die. In the litany of police killing of Black people, it was always a character assassination on top of a real killing, even for 12-year-old Tamir Rice. These instances just highlight and underscore Parker's words, so much so that at times I feel I can retreat into a sacred space that Parker has created within her poetry.

There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé is the main theme Parker's book addresses—how we chase perfection rather than come to terms with our own imperfections. Psychologist Carl Rogers' (1902-1987) added "self-concept" to psychologist Abraham Maslow's (1908-1970) "hierarchy of needs," giving us three selves within "the self": the public self (how you want others to perceive you), the real self (who and how you actually are, say 3 a.m. when you're home alone), and the ideal self (the person you would like to be). The burden of incongruity between the real and ideal self has fallen heavily upon Black women in society, systemically, due to the general nature of this country's "founding," as well as its reinforced oppressive systems. Individually, each of the speakers in Parker's poems advocate for therapy, but as explored through "What Beyoncé Won't Say on a Shrink's Couch," the speaker states, "what if I said I'm tired / and they heard wrong / and sing it," showing even someone like Beyoncé, a paragon of perfection for most people, is human and often unheard even when she tries to be her "real self." At times I struggle with this and think Parker, by advocating for this speaker who seeks help, also wants to highlight that even in spaces where mental health is being unpacked, the systems are still present. In "99 Problems," the main problem and associated problems are all: "16. Oppression/ 17. Oppression/ 18. Oppression," and its various forms, as well as Parker's own struggle with her social, ideal, and real self (or life in general). The speakers in "99 Problems" and "What Beyoncé Won't Say on a Shrink's Couch" both carry this weight of being unheard and being tired of being unheard, and they struggle with this friction between the inner selves. Society often plugs its ears and allows incongruity to continue and to oppress people by not hearing or seeing what they need.

I felt a connection with each speaker and a collective understanding of the trauma of perfectionism, systemic oppression, and misogynoir (to name a few things) against the backdrop of pop culture and art. So much so that I often found myself living in between Parker's words. The speakers voiced ideas and thoughts that I had felt, but never really could cathartically release into the universe. In "These Are Dangerous Times, Man" the speaker states, "I think the phone is racist./ The phone/ doesn't care about Black people./ The phone is the nation/ that loves the phone." Often, through these speakers, Parker reminded me that society needs to do better, but as

a Black woman in it, I'm tired of trying to fix everything. By trying to fix everything, I'm reminded that Black women are often shoved to the back of the line, told to take a ticket, for an eventuality that never seems to happen. The #SayHerName movement focuses on Black women impacted by police brutality and Black girls who go missing or are murdered—who are more overlooked than their male counterparts and are sexualized. Parker makes reference to this recurring theme in “The Gospel of Jesus’s Wife,” wherein the speaker describes herself as almost invisible, a tool for man’s use, or not quite woman enough: “In this parable I am the goblet / Creator of birth and service / I leave no trace”.

I wanted to be the woman on the cover. To an extent I am, in that society treats me differently than I treat myself. At the same time, seeing these women—the one on the cover, Beyoncé, Parker—as just one thing negates their human experience and innately deconstructs their humanity. Taking yourself apart and putting yourself back together is tiring and after a while the pieces start to chip and they don't fit like they used to. The trauma of striving for perfection is harder when society tells you perfect is white, that you're an object for sex, and that you're often not even seen or heard due to your Blackness. Beyoncé, myself, Morgan Parker: We exist in a place where we have to assert over and over that, though we aren't perfect, we exist, and that we matter.

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Ben Aguilar

FACTS

Given enough time, HIV will make all the lymph nodes in the body look like a wasteland when examined by microscope.

There is no way to empty the lungs by just exhaling. The heart is never empty unless there is a tear somewhere.

The father of epidemiology shares the name of the savior of a famous fictional world.

Hitting a vein while your hand is shaking is like breaking the surface of water you've been drowning in.

An infant past its expected delivery date will open its eyes in utero—part of the postterm syndrome is a surprised, worried look on a thin baby.

You can prevent a scar from forming by cutting a longer wound in the right direction.

You are never really sure.

Children stare when I smile, and cry when I stop, and I still don't know how to make them stop.

The euphemism “incompatible with life” is too clinical & accurate.

The physical exam begins the moment see your patient walk into the room.

Eventually, you begin to examine everyone.

A baby comes out faster than it says in the books, and never how you expect it to.

If you poke a brain the right way with a small enough probe it might be possible to make a person taste everything they've tasted before, but this is past our current technologic capability.

There is nothing more important than the patient history.

exegesis after the fact

not one sub-atomic particle of
matter is ever destroyed

as if hardwired to

an unheimlich pact with
the melanoid stranger

in Amerikkka's house

a centuries long world-weariness [in-just-us]
symbolic of the dead the diaspora bespoke in us
[all that is seen & unseen] making due with
broken promises & forgotten fathers where we
colored the siren-embroidered gunshot night
with our blackness [been reborn] the native
tongue of gangsta rap & riffs ourselves free of
fear's centrifugal gravity [a] kind of sonic [free-
styled worship] arisen within the riddle
of immortal violence that churns beneath the
surface of all that Amerikkka produces &

consumes

collateral damage /kə'læt(ə)rəl/ /'dɑmɪj/

noun

1. the tragedies that happen to "Others" but is denied by mainstream
2. manufacturing silver spoons outta' plastic (eg. petro-liters of plastic twisted into kilo-tons of strangle)
3. \$7.25/hr. (eg. the worth of the average human being's life)

Jessica Mehta

THE HEART CONSUMES ITSELF

It's not true the starved
don't eat, we die

of broken hips, pelvis
churned to dust—slowly,

the heart consumes
itself. Atrophies and implodes.

(These chambers, remember,
are a muscle.)

Nobody nowhere shoulders
the strength to stop it all, the whole
fat world from slipping
between cracked, wanting lips. We eat

and we hate,

with each bite and gag-
me spoon. Our weakness
displayed like limbs
splayed wide, flushed
shameful folds of pink.
How I wish

I could stop. Let the valves
shut down cold. Listen,
that last organ coda. And you
in dutiful ovation.

CHAYA LEAH

This is how we live—our pigment
breaks down. Spots on our livers, spots
on our ovaries. Always be vigilant.
Always be moving. The rabbi
at our friend's funeral plays guitar.
She was 50 and lived 46 years
without knowing what would kill her
already lived inside her. Let's
sing it out. Let's study. Greenery outside
the windows has no time left.
This is how we pray—standing,
opening hymnbooks, turning our heads
away from trees. One
season drops then another
and another. The rabbi sings a nigun.
Stay present. Stay exalted. Fall
comes in hard.
This is how we bury.

Dmitry Blizniuk

CHARON OF AUTUMN

November tastes like a gulp of cold coffee.
Artificial light tickles
the stone throat of the avenue.
The golden ulcers of streetlights
give a sinister, glimmering light.
The Charon of Autumn has taken all
the fallen leaves
to the palaces of humus, to the floating castles,
and now he's calmly smoking under a lean-to.
A boy in a bright raincoat
takes a soft and juicy walk around the puddles—
sort of a growing messiah in high rubber boots, messiah still small for the world.
Everybody doesn't need somebody.
The wind bends the trees to all sides;
they are like a hungry fish that swallowed several hooks.
A harsh puppeteer puppets the world,
bending the showers,
shaking their cold, nasty spines,
emptying giant wells on the asphalt,
turning inside out stone sacks of bad water.
Juicy blackness oozes from all cracks;
the blue, mixed with neon, blood of the evening burns
like poisonous boiling broth.
The empty square with a monument to the leader
is a looped message to aliens:
Hello, you have reached the Earth.
No one is available now
Please try to phone later.

When my sister lost her mind

it was a riot flowing electric in my fingers.

My fingers remember suffering.

I was a sail in the cross-

wind, flapping & shaking to the sound

of my sister. I fled this woman

for a few years to track down God.

God was a flick between the thought

and the next thought. She is delusional

jumping out of ambulances

running from government

infested needles. She is so beautiful

it hurts me. Once I saw a man

stumble out of a taxi & into a bar

so carefree, the sight of stone.

I swore my sister was loosening

& swilling inside him like water

by the window we danced as little girls

switching hands, one foot to another.

Love is beautiful like this.

Love is learning

all your life

how to hit

for your sister,

how to fake

the music.

Olivia Gatwood

HERE IS WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Liam drowned the summer before in the same lake, and it was the first time I was handed the responsibility of death like a heavy and wailing newborn. Most times, when we name tragedy like this, as a plot point, it is to center the dead in ourselves, illuminate their legacy & demise as an opportunity to teach the listener about who we have become.

This happened to him but also me, his death happened to me.

And yes, that is true. But the reason I tell you about Liam's body, discovered by a fisherman, dear reader, is to help you understand the fabric of the air the first time I returned to the site of his grave. I want to note that it was not intended to be that, a revisiting, a memorial, but that the pollution of death is thick and unforgiving. I want you to understand why this story remains loud in the legend of my life and somehow, the nature of his going makes it so.

So, the boys, all five years my senior and shirtless, take me and my small body to the lake, and I do not tell them about what happened here. Instead, I say

Yes, shove the beer bong down my throat, gawk at the dance of my swallow.

When Aaron, whose first three fingers had been cut off in his father's butcher shop, or lost in a knife fight, depending on who you ask, puts me on the black, rubber tube, pulls me by his jet-ski in zig-zags across the surface, I decide to let go before being thrown, and, like a lucky stone, or nameless pebble, depending on who you ask, I skip and tumble and come up stripped clean, clothed in bruises, treading in his wake.

When I go into the water to pee the boys swim behind me and yank me under by my hair, hold me there until I pretend to go limp. Royce shits and, when it comes up floating, throws it into the bushes.

Sebastian and I fuck in the tent and he doesn't finish, throws an empty condom into the dirt and the next morning, as we shove newspaper into the fire pit, Aaron finds the rubber and puts it on his own dick, dances around the growing fire, and somehow, now, everyone has been inside me.

Before leaving, the boys decide we need liquor for the road but we have no money so Royce suggests we pull a runner at the mini-mart and I agree to stay in the car while they go inside and, in case you haven't caught on, I am not wearing any clothes, just a striped string bikini, because that's how they like it, and when Royce comes sprinting back, he says Sebastian got locked inside the store and tosses a twelve pack of HighLife into my arms, tells me to run, and so, I do, down an alley, barefoot and damp and it's not long before the owner of the shop, a woman in a blue Mustang comes peeling through the dust and traps me between her headlights and a cement wall and the boys are gone and she tells me to walk to the road while she trails behind, the hot gravel bullying my feet and I wait on the shoulder for the police and still the boys have disappeared, a story I am not unfamiliar with here, it seems, somehow, Elephant Butte Lake has made a hobby out of taking my boys and leaving me to carry the weight.

Here is the best part.

The woman takes my photo and tells me I am banned from the town, her store, the water, even the highway that slices through and I say, *You mean I don't have to come back?* And she says, *Never. Never let me see your face here again.*

Heidi Czerwiec

Choruses of the Dead

The Dead Girls Speak in Unison by Danielle Pafunda.
Atlanta: Coconut Books, 2014. Reissued, Bloof Books, 2017.

Don't Call Us Dead by Danez Smith.
Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2017.

The Möbius Strip Club of Grief by Bianca Stone.
Portland: Tin House Books, 2018.

We don't often see choral speakers in poetry, especially not group speakers who are dead. Yet three recent collections of poetry feature the perspective of a collective dead "we" as a central premise, and that "we" represents oppressed groups: Bianca Stone's *The Möbius Strip Club of Grief* (Tin House, 2018), Danielle Pafunda's *The Dead Girls Speak in Unison* (first published by Coconut Books in 2014 but quickly went out of print when the press folded; reprinted by Bloof Books in 2017), and Danez Smith's *Don't Call Us Dead* (Graywolf, 2017). Why is this strategy appearing now, and what does it say about poetry and this moment?

The first, Bianca Stone's *The Möbius Strip Club of Grief*, takes the title of her grandmother Ruth Stone's poem "The Möbius Strip of Grief" and expands on the idea to create the strip club, a setting where the living interact with the dead, paying them to perform acts that allow the living to confront difficult, unresolved issues. The concept is interesting, with women running the show: the House Mom, Mama-san; star performers like Emily Dickinson (a poet who herself gave voice to death)—"no one can take off her clothes, ever—she comes / and her language takes them off of us" (23); and the living paying for how they treated women in life—"now you want a piece? \$20 for five minutes; / I'll hold your hand in my own. I'll tell you / you were good to me" (9). The execution is much like any descent to the underworld, and while Stone puts a feminist spin on it—focusing on the neglect of women and the need to have them cater to our needs, even after death—the technique is still fairly traditionally applied.

But the other two books use the collective dead "we" to voice pain and outrage of an identity group targeted for murder. Danielle Pafunda's sixth collection, *The Dead Girls Speak in Unison*, raises several questions: why in unison? why "girls"? how did they get dead? and to whom are they speaking? Danez Smith raises similar questions in their second collection, *Don't Call*

Us Dead, which opens with the long sequence “summer, somewhere” that describes an afterlife for brown boys: “we earned this paradise/ by a death we didn’t deserve” (22). Pafunda’s and Smith’s use of the collective dead “we” works similarly to call attention to particular kinds of violence, but deviates in some interesting ways.

In Pafunda’s collection, speaking in unison gives these “girls” collective presence, forcing us to face gender violence. Several of the poems suggest lives (and their ends) in violence: “Be tied to us./...// Some with one wrist/ bound to the other/ and both to the ankle” (17); “We all died// boot to throat” (43). A history of stolen girls, they stretch back into myth, their songs evoking the betrayed mermaids of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, girls left “down the well/ under the bridge/ where all your brides swell” (34), victims blamed for any number of reasons: “If your wife is vain,/...// if her father rent her out,/ if her uncles clutter her basin,/ if she hold a doll like it live...” (65).

Yet the use of “we” simultaneously points to the erasure of their individual voices, just as “girls” points to their infantilization, a failure to recognize them as women, a failure to recognize them at all:

It’s happy death day.

It’s the day on which
every dead thing
becomes a girl.

Most of us were girls
in life, but all of us
are dead girls. (52)

But the girls gain a certain power in this. In an essay for *Volta*, Pafunda writes, “[I]n continuing to become or occupy the category girl there may be some radically subversive potential The girl is uncultured and unrefined, crude and raw (though like much raw food, teeming with live active cultures, possessed and pungent).” This quote informs the numerous images of meat and decay throughoutraw girls who bypass maturity, who are as rank and offensive as possible: “What we once went squeamish/ ewwwwing from, it turns out/ composes us” (29). These girls flirt with danger, a postmodern Death and the Maiden:

We used to do it, too.
Put finger to planchet and hope
for something even sluttier

to reveal its shuddering self
on the rod, skittering.
We used to yes or no it.

As though it wouldn't make us blind. (32)

To whom the girls are speaking is more slippery, as is their tone of voice: "you" may address society, their murderers, or other girls; they threaten and/or welcome; their rage is equally terrifying and "as ineffective now as we were in life" (37). I'm wary when they say, "You don't know where to turn/ so follow this arrow// and we'll take you in" (56). These unrefined girls are deeply unsettling.

In contrast, the paradise of the long sequence "summer, somewhere" from the beginning of Danez Smith's collection *Don't Call Us Dead*, is powerful in its peacefulness. The sequence starts with a narrator who describes this somewhere where

below, boys brown
as rye play the dozens & ball, jump

in the air & stay there" (3),

an image that signals an altered reality which is confirmed a few stanzas later: "here, not earth/ not heaven" (3). At this point, the perspective shifts to a collective "we" and settles what the imagery of "white shirts// turned ruby gowns" suggests—that these brown boys are prematurely dead via violence—though the chorus longs to defer this deadening effect, asking "please, don't call/ us dead, call us alive someplace better" (3).

The boys (always boys) arrive at this someplace in various ways, sometimes "born/ right out of the sky, dropped from// a bridge" or "pulled behind a truck" or "plucked...from branches" (5). They are welcomed by the chorus, who advises "if he asks where he is, say *gone*" (5), and explains

we say *congrats, you're a boy again!*
we give him...a second chance.

we send him off to wander for a day
or ever, let him pick his new name.

that boy was Trayvon, now called *RainKing*.
that man Sean named himself *i do, i do*. (4)

This collective chorus still allows for individual identities, but ones self-selected, though it notes "most of us settle on *alive*" (4). Occasionally, we get

individual speakers who tell how they died—some in too-common ways, some famous, many by “lawful” shooting, but all murder—and these “i” speakers occur usually when they’re trying to communicate with the living: friends, family, lovers.

The harrowing characteristic of this afterlife, this someplace better, is that it grants safety not guaranteed in life. While they note “if we dream the old world/ we wake up hands up” (12), here, “paradise is a world where everything/ is sanctuary & nothing is a gun” (8). Yet while “dead is the safest i’ve ever been” (16), this haven for brown boys is constantly being peopled:

O the boys. they still come
in droves. the old world

keeps choking them. our new one
can’t stop spitting them out. (17)

The choice to use the plural perspective “we” grants the dead—the girls and brown boys—a collective weight that the individuals of each group were denied in life, and allows them to describe the violence of their deaths with a certain detachment, a matter-of-factness that resists the didactic while still conveying the horrific nature of their murders. Even their reduction—to “girls” and “boys”—seems parallel. Nonetheless, the two poets’ usage differs in a few key ways. Pafunda’s use of “girls” points to their infantilizing, that even though many died as girls, even the women are called “girls.” She never allows the girls to be individuated, which both gives them a collective voice and erases each distinct girl. On the other hand, while Smith’s “boys” may recall the intentional disrespect of white Americans referring to any brown-skinned male as “Boy,” the collective treats the designation as a sort of rejuvenation: “*congrats, you’re a boy again!*” (4). Smith also allows their boys to choose individual identities, and to speak occasionally as individual “i” speakers, which refuses erasure and grants a self-determination denied by society in life. Pafunda’s girls restlessly inhabit their afterlife, moving between glum resignation and rage, a space that offers no relief. While Smith’s boys expect no justice – “*i leave revenge/ hopelessly to God*” (10)—and while they do miss the living, they finally have found relief in no longer being a constant target, finally “in peace whole all summer” (22).

So what, if anything, does this distinction mean? While Pafunda gives the girls voice, she points to their continued ineffectiveness and erasure, and responds with rage. Smith’s paradise concludes that brown boys only find peace after death. Neither chorus is meant to soothe, but to trouble. As #MeToo and Black Lives Matter attempt to force the media to remember names which, given the volume of violent stories, make the lists of victims

run together, this strategy points to both the erasure of individuals and a collective banner under which to fight. Poet Roy Guzmán has used this “we” in poems representing slaughtered immigrants in San Fernando and queers at nightclubs like Pulse. I am curious to see if we will continue to see “we” in poems—either in more conventional ways as Stone does, or used in more sustained and startling ways like Pafunda and Smith—as violent events continue to proliferate.

MARKET WITH MAMA

Black raspberry jam only tastes like it should when it's sold by the corn lady at the farmer's market. Only tastes of approaching a wooden stand, next to the crumbling and barren highway; no one wants to drive so early. I'm wearing the daytime. Right to me, a baby has red cheeks and is laughing, is sick with a cold and is laughing even though he is too warm. And he has a blue fleece hat. Left to me, there is a fresh plum, it is months away. In my chipped paint fingers is a cinnamon bun, a sticky treat for coming along this early and carrying the corn. We didn't get jam today, it is expensive and there is still some stuck to the sides of the round glass jar at home. It looks like a snail and I think it will slink away. One day I will open the refrigerator door and there will be none left.

Joni Renee

IN MY SISTER'S IMAGE

God created me in my sister's image to do my hair manually, daily and nightly with the same pajamas. It was brave of you to arrive. With atypical gestures, I whispered, "Today."

In crafted tones, in our long-distance telephone conversations, I was the knife set salesman—aggressive, self-injurious—and you, the friendly name at the end of an electric road.

I have seen your name in lights, with big lit arrows blinking me your way, as deeply ingrained as the motion for breathing. I am a full natural woman in your gaze. This is an ancient ritual, me, delivering blueberries to your doorstep.

PROPORTIONAL SYNAPSES (AS WITH ARMS,
LEGS, ETC.)

the wishing sinking glue sticking to the sides
plastered oats as breakfast
a juicy radish for you

lavender clover,
losing its color
shouted its name.
i did not know what corner of the room to look at

looking did no good, there were
too many trees
& feet

listening did no good, you cannot
hear a stem
or pulse

pins and anchored pricking, sent and aching sinew
and an empty garage, my silhouette
thinking alone with brutal concrete.

there's a space
where nursery rhymes are kept
and counting to ten
apart from syntax, or poetry.

that's where I keep you.

Luke Daly

THE YEARNING TO HOLD A LIVING THING TOO CLOSE

Sparrow is the shape of my palate—
I put her in my mouth. I form my lips
into a holy-oak bivouac, field observatory
for the bird to flee the Ford's wheel well
over clam pink glaze of sunken twilight snow
and the tungsten teeth of my redwing boots;
her pulse on the flat of my tongue may rise
like dampened tympani up neural filigree,
up blood map and plumage of the aspen
tips and aspen limbs ringing the silver lake,
up the milk-skin of my eye scanning stars freshly,
up and out the phloem sluice and xylem thrush
the open breath ringing the forest's hidden cello
of April, when I ever want to be the other thing.

the question of sun and stars in room 301A

it is strange
to notice the mole
(freckle?)
on your ankle
plain as an envelope
and pressed
like a fingerprint to the hollow
between your bones

my heart thrummed to my fingerprints
hummed a note
in the shape of an eighth
that told me, look
you want to curl
into the curves of each
of his angles
and nestle there as a bee
legs twirling in two
until your toes
brush the mole
freckle
spot
and gently
as though opening a flower
with a knife

press

once

against it in a prayer
or a promise

freeing
your body
from your heart

Matt Mauch

A Review of Leah Umansky's *The Barbarous Century*

Two seemingly disparate things. First thing: I am in a waiting room. I am the only one not on my phone. I bemoan the lack of eye contact, of face to face contact, of any body language at all aside from *pretend I am not in this room with you*. I measure the waiting room against what I recently experienced in London, where in pub after pub—we didn't stay in a typical tourist area—it was notable how few people were on their phones or had them out. I then measure my experience in London against a recent study showing the average Brit checks their phone every twelve minutes during the waking day. The anomaly I experienced, it seems, was exactly that.

Second thing: I'm at the co-op grocery store, one of today's co-ops—as shiny and accommodating as any other grocer—which are nothing like yesterday's co-ops (the 70s and 80s, I'm talking), with their limited hours, volunteer staffs, the abundance of strange dry goods and nutritional supplements and general lack of what anybody outside of the movement knew what to do with it, or certainly what to do well with. At Today's Co-op, I'm in the meat aisle, scanning the chilled products in the self-serve cooler across from the fresh cuts, grinds, and sausages, where the workers are ready to help me if I need it. I'm looking at oxtail, livers, hearts, necks, bones, etcetera, mingling with the boneless breasts, chops, sausages, etcetera—the prime and subprime at the same table.

Those two things are relevant because of a third thing: Leah Umansky's *The Barbarous Century*, a book by a poet whose attuned senses (“let the gutter turn operatic/ I will sing of the heart”) seem honed from the sort of necessary hyper-awareness a solo adventurer adopts to survive (“I am un-illuminating what glitters. I am un-narrating/ this story”). Umansky's speaker, in fact, echoes Whitman's approach to the burgeoning US democracy (“I am a galaxy of one” . . . “I am a magnet”), only she is singing of a much different time and place. As with Whitman, there are attestations (“The center of the self is a star”), but the attestations are tempered by the times in which Umansky's song is sung (“aren't all stars dead?”). The strong, seeing, and rallying “I” is counterbalanced by a Whitman-esque poet not necessarily happy to be so, as if the sheen of it all has worn off, as in this passage from “Sestina”:

A glass. Raise two. Why don't we just raise
the whole damn bottle of red.
Some of us might say what we feel is best.

Some of us might inspire other elements to action, but I stand
Alone and it not evolutionary. It is barely manageable.
It is practically a lie.

But one worth telling. I am bold in this lie I raise to my lips.

All follows from the title. One might (I did) first think of the twentieth century as the barbarous one. The world wars. The wreckage industry left (leaves) in its wake. The rise of inequality. The erosion of the social safety net. The devaluing of higher learning. The erosion of political compromise. I came of age in the 1970s, and haven't experienced successive years where things on the whole seemed to be trending upward. It becomes clear quickly, though, that the barbarous century here is the twenty-first, and Umansky has written a kind of dystopia of our times, as if she were a new Whitman serving as receptacle for all the pain of now ("The thing is I'm tired. Are you tired? I'm tired of these things that flank me").

But like a superhero with a peculiar diet (or, more conventionally, if you prefer, a flower feasting on natural fertilizer), the poet seems to need to feed on all the shit in order to turn it to something good, as espoused in "The Love Orphans," where Umansky writes, "Cluster around me . . . I want to pull a planet into my swing . . . I will not go dim . . . I will construct my own team"). The poems evolve into this point of view; it's not the first response, but becomes a welcome one. Poems like "This Is a Love Poem" ("I will forest bruises . . . I will hush the undone . . . I will belly the upset . . . I will flame the barbarous") signal the switch.

Much is done here with imagery that tends to be more abstract than it would be if the poet were intent on giving a particular dramatic context to the thematic content, as in a confessional mode. The few places where Umansky does provide dramatic context are enough, as in "Doing," where the speaker, as teacher, addresses a student about feminism, and also paraphrases/quotes from something Toni Morrison said in an article in *The Guardian* ("*so and so tried . . . no one does any more*"). In the hands of Umansky, this is a good thing. It allows us to allow (and watch) the poet do her great work with the abstract, as if breaking the show-don't-tell law were a necessary response to the novelty of now. Much of the book is about translating, in this manner, the potentially esoteric into the more universal. The literal kindness shown in a poem like "Force," where the speaker helps an old woman carry her bag down a flight of stairs, morphs into the much more general "There must be kindness despite the possible end of the world." The scales on which this morphing are measure tilt heavily toward the abstract side. Again, in Umansky's work, this is a good thing. It's as if Anne Sexton turned her focus inside out in this poetry that will wallow in the

abstract, much as political or religious speech does, but justifiably so; it's a liquid response to liquid fear (the phrase Polish sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman uses to describe the pervasive, unstable, fragmented, and ambiguous fear, shared by all, that is a by-product of what contemporary Western society has become). There is a coming-of-age sense to the evolution the speaker undergoes as she confronts by necessity what so many cannot—at least not very well.

In the heart of the book, a section called “People Want Their Legends” focuses on pop culture TV, specifically *Game of Thrones* and the Don Draper and Peggy Olson characters in *Mad Men*. Umansky's dissection of the shows' characters is as any dissection of our heroes: The flaws are acknowledged while the heroic parts are amplified. Of note is that dichotomy. In a barbarous time where we hold each other as individuals more and more to a kind of puritanical touchstone, forgiving, it seems, no transgressions of anybody IRL, we yet can look at our fictional heroes as complex characters we learn from. Sans complexity, there is nothing to learn from a character. Sans complexity, a character is flat, at best a foil or stereotype there to better illuminate bigger ideas. As well, the heroes in this section are from past times deemed themselves, each in their own ways, barbarous. Yet we pluck our heroes from them while turning a blind eye to much of the barbarism around us in the form of de facto purity tests. What increasingly happens in this section is that the legend more and more to be trusted, to be learned from, is the poet herself.

The speaker here is one who grows in the confidence of singing her own song. It would be easy to feel like one had been duped when, palm to forehead, one thinks, *This isn't like Walt Whitman, this is like Emily Dickinson. Emily Dickinson*, who in her own time did a kind of nothing as she simultaneously did a kind of everything for the future to unearth. *Her expertise with abstractions*, one remembers, and goes, *Yeah*. This is on clear display in “The Little War”:

The heart cannot speak. The stomach cannot see. The kidney cannot hear. The liver cannot taste. The eyes cannot feel. They lack.

In this little war, the speed of the eye is null and akin to nothing.
No one knows this.

...

It feels like a battle. A hidden one. I hidden, little, one.

...

I don't know what is beneath the exterior, or the virtual.

Which brings us back to thing one and thing two. Thing one: As the information age werewolf-like turns into the social media and fake news age, we are increasingly isolated from one another while we have a strong sense that we are more connected. It's a paradox that is at the very least destroying even our capitalistic-leaning semblance of democracy, and who knows what else. Thing two: At the same time, there are those among us who are using everything we can use to make good stuff, who aren't wasting the offal because the offal matters, too. Umansky sees thing one, and employs the thing two to conquer it, as well as it can be by an individual. This is the clear sense one gets from one of the end-of-the-book's poem's titles: "Lonely is a Hard Word to Use in a Poem." And I have to agree, but I also have to stand my ground and say, *But it's necessary in this book, about these times.*

No matter the legends named, no matter the legends intuited by this reviewer, the brisk individuality of the song this poet sings comes into its own, which is the book's arc, which is the point of the book: that from it all, one has one's song, and it's hard to sing it solo, but it's what—all?—you've got. This book *grows into the idea* of art for art's sake, a la Oscar Wilde. Umansky writes, "This is not seductive.// This is an inflammation, a festering, an epidemic of the heart." And furthermore (and I'm done now): "I am merely a person/ on the fence between wanting and getting it myself. I walk this sidewalk/ narrating my pioneer ways and there is so much disgrace that ascends/ from the swoon of heat in my breath, to the whole damn building of my body.// Every day, I use this broadness, this key to quarantine the hurt,/ to shepherd this all the away from me: desire, thirst, revolution . . . Open this stumbling . . . Accept the clumsy end of being human . . . and the guilt. *Oh, the guilt.*"

Kristin Berger

WHEN FOUR CHAMBERS ARE NOT ENOUGH

Sometimes our hearts live on the outside of our bodies.

Mothers are familiar with this sensation, calling into children's empty bedrooms.

They walk around, beating twice on doors.

We place palms on each other's chests while sleeping as a way of speaking.

Men long to rest within the bodies of others.

We live inside other people's hearts, curled white sprouts, quietly pushing out.

Some hearts are houseplants sitting on sills collecting dust on their velvet.

Sometimes we don't see each other's hearts, inside, glass-streaked,
turning all day towards the light.

Birds recognize our hearts—they come to our windows and sometimes crash,
beating at speeds that spare us the rush.

We can reunite with our hearts, running out a storm, or looking from the highest story
at the asphalt-gridlock below.

Wind wants to push our hearts back into our bodies like a standing wave
at the mouth of a winter river.

Sometimes our hearts are stronger than a spring tide.

They often weaken from being so strong: a cookstone split under the pressure of heat;
a horse unable to canter joy down.

Some valves leak sorrow.

Some hearts over-compensate, beat so large for too long, pain is a metamorphic rock.

We aren't meant to live on our disconnected ruby planets.

We need hearts in various stages of repair and despair to keep the world beating.

Hearts want to live in bodies that suspend love, for a time,
like snow drifts in the clefts of mountains.

Some crave to skip in the space between beats—
call that *peace*, call it *flight*. Leap and call it *home*.

FETISHIST

The birthmark on your neck is amusing.
It looks like a tiny fly.
I want to touch it, to play with it,
to see if the spider comes running to the call of the skin.
I want to bite your neck like a vampire,
to infect you with my own world,
to leave in the reeds of your subconsciousness
a few tadpoles.
You're holding my heart, and little by little,
you pare it with scissors,
waiting when it becomes
as small as
a scout badge,
but anyway, I'll be the first to get at your spine.
We are together, you and me. It's evening.
It's raining outside.
Someone plays Chopin's nocturnes
with long oily fingers;
the oily golden streetlights loom and shimmer,
and I'm looking at your neck—it's as refreshing as to look
at a waterfall or at a young branch.
You say that I'm a fetishist,
That I look at you with a deranged greediness
like a neighbor kid who swallowed spiders, on a bet.
It's because, my love, that I have
so much free time,
that I've missed all the trains in the world,
and I loaf about the railway station,
writing down no man's poetry lines
no one's searching for.



Who are you, who thought the sun could turn you
human, thought you could go on breathing
and feeling and feeling and feeling and feeling.

– Faryl Last

Adrian Lurssen

THEY GET CARRIED AWAY BY HISTORY

Who gets to remember
ice sheets anyway.

Who gets to remember
farmhouse walls

white breaks in
memory or history

a black stick notched
at the edge of the field

war's white paint
or wind through a snow field.

Sometimes what they had
resembled wagons

but often not even
wagons are enough.

The dead listen
swaddled like furniture

or swimming toward light
they listen

their tune evades
borders

steam lingers
in the courtyard

after a slaughter
spends its time

beside an idling car
smelling of capital.

The tune is not evasive.
The tune evades.

There is a difference:
father crossing

the bridge umbrella
under right arm

painted mother folded
over laundry basket

her sheets
covering sheets

third son pressing keys
on a silenced piano

this only skull those
smiling teeth

empty tea bowls
the hum

of steel freezers
on salt beds—

purely incidental
not part of the story.

There is a difference.
There is a difference.

Red lips pursed on her
remembered white face.

Michael Kleber-Diggs

A SIMPLE QUESTION

I really have one question, I say to the therapist. She is black like me, blacker maybe. Her hair is reddish or auburn, something in that range. A neat, textured jacket and straightforward skirt frame her well. I don't think about her neckline. She is maternal to some, I suppose. I like her eyewear—full of complications she doesn't seem to care about, suggesting a vanity I'd likely find useful if I intended to stay past this one visit. Her lips are dusty, dry. Her nose is familiar and lovely. There is a couch in here—an actual couch. I'm distracted by her silence, by a mahogany bookcase with three shelves, off to the side, decorated with self-help books written by people who list degrees after their names. One asks 'Whatcha Gonna Do with that Duck?' Another is 'The Psychedelic Explorer's Guide.' I get the game now—she's not going to say anything until I do. The sun is low in the sky and shoots through spotted windows like a searchlight; it splits us into separate shadows. I don't lie on the couch because that feels weird or typical. On the crowded bottom shelf, there is a book called 'Mindsight.' Somewhere in the room a clock lurches and stops, lurches, stops. *Why do I never wake up laughing?* I ask her. She looks at me and does not stop looking at me. I'm meant to feel awkward in this lingering—self-conscious, so I don't. I won't. No matter what I will not speak next. There is a tiny tape recorder on her desk, but I can tell it isn't on. Onto a notepad, she scribbles a sentence, maybe two. For some reason, she does not lick her lips. She lifts her soft chin in appraisal of me, sets the paper down, the pen. I see her fingerprints on her lenses. All of this takes forever.

14 SELF PORTRAITS

1. This one is before I have scars like watercolor swaths; there is nothing besides the desire to return.
2. This one is seen in the reflection of your eyes, dropped low. A blue silence rings as though I require all the oxygen in the room.
3. This one you'll find in the local newspaper, full color. Fresh out of a bath, I'd be naked if the cameraman wasn't there, but the screams are not new. Mom has a light mahogany perm.
4. This one is from the same paper, next page, black and white. The massive zucchini has pulled my hands low, taking the focus. My black shirt stretches past my knees. My smile is a shallow trough. At this age I can't yet compare day-past shaved legs to the rough, welcoming curves of this squash.
5. This one has me looking immaculate, but the computer monitor is turned off.
6. This one is me looking back 20 years in the future. I am naked and the unseen bottom of my just clean feet are caked again, already, in dirt and fur from the bath mat.
7. This one contains two of me, split-screened: on one side the state considers me disabled and the other one not yet. Pants and long sleeves in both.
8. This one is my dad's favorite because it's the only one he has of me.
9. This one is in a style too abstract for my mom to get, but it looks expensive.
10. This one we don't talk about.
11. This one is painted over #10. I'm wearing a funny hat. If you look closely at my mouth you see my lips slightly pursed from trying to pop with suction the blister on my gum.
12. This one isn't a portrait at all but an audio file: muffled by something (a door? is that an exhaust fan?) is harsh, wet coughing. Imperceptible is the tissue tearing.
13. This one is where you discover I have a brother.
14. This one comes after my nap but it tries to enact the sound of skin regrowing.

Gabriel Mianulli

An Interview with Brad Liening

After discovering Brad Liening's eccentric poetry, I had the opportunity of chatting with him over the course of a couple weeks about his work, the poetry world, and some other things.

GM: Your poems are hilarious. Do you think humor in poetry appears less frequently than other emotions? Why do you think humor is important in poetry?

BL: I think it's tempting to believe that humor appears less frequently in poetry but I'm not sure that it's true. Certainly, there are many, many, many humorless poems. Absolutely. But the more I thought about your question, the more I thought about all the funny poems I've read over the years. When I was an undergrad, I was thrilled to discover Russell Edson. His imagination struck me as wild and concrete and very funny. The sheer fact that anyone was writing much less publishing such oddities tickled me to no end. How ridiculous! He was the polar opposite of my tedious coursework. Then I discovered Dean Young, whose work has meant more to me through the years than I can say. His poems are hilarious and bracing and deeply serious in their plumbing of the human condition. These discoveries in turn led to other discoveries, a whole legion of poets with otherworldly, cyclonic vocabularies and imaginations that remind me how great it can be to be alive and to write poems.

But humor is very subjective. There's a silly, slapstick kind of humor that I like but that I suspect strikes others as inane, counter to the profundities we expect poetry to explore. I don't believe that, personally. I think humor of all stripes can illuminate and offer insight. And anyway, there are lots of poems that aren't laugh-out-loud funny but are wry and ironic and dry. I mean, Emily Dickinson can be very funny! But she's probably not the first person anyone thinks of when they think of funny poets.

At any rate, I do indeed think humor is important in poetry because it's an important part of the human experience. To discount it would be intellectually dishonest. It's a way we process the world in all its variation, its joy, its sadness, its injustice, its weirdness. We all just have different ideas about what's funny.

GM: Good point. It might just be the poems I've been reading lately that aren't funny enough. Do you think risk is an element that ties in with that silliness? Your poems can surely be described as risky, which I admire. Acknowledging that an artist can't please everyone, has that risk ever backfired on you? Has anyone every replied to your silliness with salt?

BL: From a craft perspective there's the risk of focusing too much on any one thing—say a humorous juxtaposition or joke or image or turn of phrase—and bending the will of the poem to accommodate it, which is a bad business that never turns out well. If we become too invested in a particular aesthetic, be it silliness or some other tone or whatever, I think we lose the forest for the trees. The poem becomes less of an event and more of an inert thing. The most surprising and luminous poems are those that follow their own weird internal logic, and by logic I don't mean linearity or causality, but its associative, emotional logic. Its tendency to disrupt and subvert itself, to transform and mutate. Hilarity swerves into heartbreak surprisingly fast, in life and in poetry. Never do you want to say, "THIS is the kind of poem I write!" because at that point you've already got one foot in the grave. The best art courts risk so you don't want to get too comfy.

With respect to humor and silliness specifically, there's also the risk of looking foolish, I suppose, of being regarded as less capable of doing the hard work of poetry. The risk of not being taken seriously. On the one hand, I get that, but on the other, who cares? It's been my experience that people are generally nice enough when it comes to poetry—if they don't like it they say "nope, no thanks" and we all go about our business. Rejection is part of the whole burrito and in the end our allegiance is to the work! Not to how people receive it, which we can't control anyway. It's better to follow your own inspiration and let the rest sort itself out.

GM: I love the burrito analogy! You name drop a lot of celebrities in *Ghosts and Doppelgangers*. Morrissey, Nicolas Cage, "Lebron James kissing Lil Wayne," etc. Do you know if any of them have read your work?

BL: Nope! Not a clue. But if Nicolas Cage ever got in touch I would probably die of happiness right there on the spot.

GM: Here's to wishing we get to hear him read it one day, and to *Ghosts and Doppelgangers* being picked for Oprah's Book Club. Your poem "Nicolas Cage" is one fantastic example in the collection of your stimulating deployment of literary voice. The whole collection is really a fantastic blend of doppelganger speakers, both creative renditions of yourself and

other characters. This concept of writing via doppelgänger speakers is very interesting as it's presented in *Ghosts and Doppelgängers*. In a way I think a person's writing voice can reveal things that their natural speaking voice can't or won't. When you're writing, do you see yourself as the same guy you are in your day-to-day life, or is there a difference?

BL: That's an interesting question. I agree with your notion that the writing voice gets more freedom and latitude than we do in our everyday lives. I mean, my day-to-day life isn't exactly thrilling: I go to work, I go to the gym, I scoop the litter box, I do the dishes and laundry and so on. I'm perfectly happy with my life and in fact I'm incredibly fortunate and grateful for its quiet simplicity, but it's not like I'm experiencing great depths of feeling or revelatory truths as I do these things. Real daily life in all its insistent monotony can be deadening. Like, I have to go to Target for toilet paper again? Didn't I just do that? Poetry is a force against all of that, a force of vitality, of instability and empathy and discovery. It's a clarion call, a cold shower, a burst of light, a pie in the face.

So while I borrow from my life and my experiences, I'm also always writing away from myself and away from my life. Where I'm writing to . . . I don't always know. I almost never know. For me, writing a poem is an exploratory process in which the poem's meaning is gradually revealed through its composition and revision. There's an element of play to it that I find attractive. So, to answer your question directly, I think the "I" in my poems is . . . adjacent to the real me. Certainly, it reflects my ideas and perceptions of the self or the world or whatever, but sometimes those are exaggerated or made up to get at some other larger thing. My poems are littered with factual inaccuracies that serve emotional truths (I hope). Adopting different voices and speakers and doppelgängers is a wonderful way, I've found, to get outside of the self, to open the world up a little bit more. Maybe the writing "I" is more like me than I realize, but in that case, I'd probably be the last to know.

GM: Can you shed some light on your writing process? Do you have any preferred location or time of day or any sacred rituals?

BL: I had more of a process or set of rituals when I was younger, just starting out. Being caffeinated was key, and so was writing everything longhand specifically on unlined paper for some reason, which I would then type up on a computer. I'd always have one of those sturdy sketchbooks at the ready. I think those sorts of things can help you switch gears if need be, and if it works for you, cool. Eventually I just quit all of that, though; it started to feel

burdensome and labor-intensive. It felt great to throw all those old methods out and slouch on the couch and start typing away while I played with the cat.

These days it's all catch-as-catch-can. I try to be open to ideas and poetry all the time (as if I really had a say in the matter), to sort of idle along in low-poetry-gear. I write directly on my laptop or longhand on whatever paper is handy. I'm generally better, fresher, earlier; I'm typically pretty fried by the end of the day. So far as I can tell, the only thing I really require is some solitude, some quiet, and a little mental elbow room to just kind of daydream. Mull over whatever's floating around in my head, build off of fragments and scraps. Sometimes lines or images will come to me while I'm sitting in traffic, you know, just sort of staring off. If I think they're good enough to follow up on I'll jot them down on whatever's handy. I still don't have a smartphone, which I understand is how a lot of people take notes or even compose whole poems these days. I'm a big fan of whatever works. I still drink a lot of coffee.

GM: Coffee always works for me, too. You're a graduate of the University of Michigan and the Iowa Writer's Workshop. How has your experiences in academic creative writing programs aided your growth as a writer? Was writing something you always wanted to do or a latently developed interest like it is for some?

BL: I didn't have any interest in writing until college. Earlier in our chat I called my coursework tedious and that's actually an unfair description that I want to retract—just some of my poetry courses I found tough-going. I think it can be hard to teach the canon in a way that's interesting, and my first experiences with poetry were, I suspect, like a lot of people's: frustration, boredom, a bit of anxiety. I still kind of squint sideways at Wordsworth. But I'd always really liked reading and majoring in English felt like a foregone conclusion. English courses were the ones I enjoyed best (and were sort of the only ones I was good at). I thought I might be more of an academic, really, since I loved tackling reading assignments and writing essays. I'm not totally sure when I started to treat writing and poetry as a more serious pursuit. Maybe midway through undergrad? I had a couple of really good teachers who helped me along but nothing like a formal creative writing curriculum. It felt more like a private pursuit that ran parallel to my academic courses. And the two informed one another, of course, as they always do.

After graduation I applied for MFAs. By that time I knew I wanted to keep

learning about poetry and practicing my hand at that craft. In fact, it was pretty much all I wanted to do. Iowa was a great place for that. I'm lucky I was admitted. The teachers were bright and committed and insanely talented. It was actually a bit terrifying at first. The workshops and classes were very illuminating, though in some cases I didn't fully absorb their lessons until years later. And maybe best of all, I was surrounded by people who were nuts about books and writers like I was. There's value in being part of a community like that. Most people I meet in my daily life don't care about poetry. Which is totally fine. But to be constantly among knowledgeable people who love poetry? Who are always ready to engage with it, to read your poems, to ask you to read theirs, ready to talk about this book or that writer? To have, like, three great bookstores within six blocks of each other? That's pretty rare. There's a contagious enthusiasm there, an osmosis that occurs when you're living and breathing this thing, or trying to. In the end I can't exactly say how school helped, except that it did. I'm very grateful for my friends and teachers.

GM: Can you talk about your revision process? What makes revision worthwhile, or even essential, and what have you learned that helped with that process?

BL: I understand the act of revision to be a lot of reading, rereading, rewriting, rethinking, changing a thing, changing it back, and rewriting one last time. Almost always I end up cutting a lot of stuff—extraneous language (I tend to get talky), lines that once felt important but have become superfluous, etc.

Revision is critical for me because I'm a very messy writer. I alluded to this earlier—I figure out the poem through the act of writing and revising. It's very much an exploratory process in which I add and subtract lines all the time, feeling out what goes together and what doesn't. Sometimes the addition of a line or idea changes the whole direction and tenor of the poem, and I try to be open to that. I hope to surprise myself. And by "go together" I mean materials within the context of that particular poem. Disjunctive things often go together, or ideas that compete and subvert one another. It all depends on what a poem ends up being about. Rarely do I have an idea for a poem, sit down, and write it. That's probably happened only a handful of times.

The most important thing I've learned about revision, honestly, is to listen to yourself, however painful that might be. It can be utterly dispiriting to find out that this thing you've been working on and excited about is in fact

terrible. But it happens. Better to find out as soon as you're able, chuck it in the recycling bin, then get back to work. Inspiration tends to happen while you're working, and I've found that if I'm enjoying myself and the process then the poem will probably be okay.

GM: What do you think of "the American dream" as it pertains to the writing lifestyle in modern times? Is it alive, dying, thriving? What's it like to be a poet nowadays?

BL: Hmm, I'm not sure I totally catch your drift. But for me pursuing poetry has been a constant in my life for a long time now. It's just there. I go through different phases where I'm writing a lot and submitting poems to journals and being active, and then there are quiet phases where I don't do much at all. I recognize both phases as being important so I try to be cool with those cycles, though I do get antsy sometimes if I'm not writing. And it can be hard of course to keep poetry present when you're attending to the exigencies of daily life, which has a way of conspiring against loafing and inviting the soul.

GM: I guess what I mean to say is, how does a writer in modern times balance their craft with the exigencies of daily life? Is it easier to strike that balance now, or has modern society made it more difficult to live the writer's fantasy, i.e., be your own boss and set your own hours? I've always had this pipe dream of loafing around in my bath robe writing poems full time, but the real world seems to demand more from poets unfortunately. Did you ever envision something similar that you had to reevaluate when the real world bared its teeth?

BL: Haha, yes! I've absolutely envisioned loafing around in my bathrobe, being richly rewarded by the world for writing poems! I think every poet has. It's not realistic, of course. You've just got to balance writing against your other responsibilities. As to how that's done . . . man, I wish I knew. If I had the answer to that I'd charge everyone five bucks to hear it and then I'd retire to my own private island right next to Nic Cage's own private island.

Perhaps I'm wrong but I have a hunch it's always been this way, even for no less a person than Shakespeare. When King James took Shakespeare out of the public theater and made him a royal playwright, effectively making him a made man, Shakespeare was also now something of a kept man. He couldn't offend his benefactor, so you see him writing complimentary things to the king by talking about the sanctity of royalty and the bloodlines that lead eventually to James in plays like Macbeth. He's sort of sucking

up to the boss. These plays are still incredible, obviously, but that's another conversation entirely.

Anyhow, I muddle through as best I'm able. Truthfully I often don't feel I'm succeeding in this balancing act—that I'm giving short shrift to poetry or else I'm digging into poetry at the expense of some other thing I need to be doing. Everyone I know experiences this same thing, more or less. It's never going to be perfect. There's always life to be attended to, as it should be. It's where poetry comes from.

GM: A lot of your poems evoke a sort of apocalyptic twenty-first century Americana landscape. Where do you see the world heading now, in 2018? Several poems in *Ghosts and Doppelgangers* involve this mopey character, "The President of the World." Is that a character we'll get to see more of, given our current political climate?

BL: Well, "apocalyptic Americana" is a nice phrase that rather puts a button on it, doesn't it? As far as "The President of the World" goes, I wouldn't be surprised if he turns up again. He does seem to be fairly indestructible.

GM: You reference psychoactive substances in your work sometimes. A lot of writers (including myself) have grappled with substance abuse. Where do you see the line drawn between responsible use of recreational drugs versus destructive abuse of them? What advice would you give younger writers who might be exploring psychoactive substances as a route to creativity?

BL: I actually just read a very good book on this subject, *The Recovering: Intoxication and its Aftermath* by Leslie Jamison. She writes of her experiences with alcohol abuse while examining the lives and works of artists who struggled with alcohol and drug abuse. It's a blend of memoir, cultural history, and literary criticism, and it's altogether a moving account of how human beings are shaped and sometimes torn asunder by desire—for love, for escape, for recognition, for some elusive thing we can't always put a name to. While the stories she recounts vary widely, they can all be reduced to a repetitive core—desire, consume, repeat—that virtually always acts corrosively on the human and the work. It's a must-read for anyone who is interested in the role of addiction and recovery in literature. And while it's hard to argue that drugs and alcohol have not had an effect on literature and art and the people who strive to produce it, I heartily reject the romantic linkage between substances and creativity. It's a shibboleth that needs to be buried. Sobriety is by far the best course of action for any writer wanting to get serious work done. In order to write well you need to read a lot and not

be afraid to write badly. It's best to do both with a clear head. That's the best advice I can give.

GM: Where do you draw your influences from? What are the things you look to for inspiration?

BL: The news and cultural happenings. Things my friends tell me. Things I overhear while waiting to get complimentary coffee at the gym. Zoning out while running. Music, especially classical and jazz and punk rock. Quiet morning hours. I love those, when the neighborhood is asleep and the world is dim and heavy with dew. Podcasts. Movies. Philosophy I have trouble understanding. Surrealist manifestos. The properties of odd foodstuffs like Jell-O or cotton candy. Empty swimming pools. Insect mating habits. Cats. Trees moving in the wind. That feeling you get when you cut a nail too short. Weird bits of language. Probably most of all books, including but not limited to poetry—you read something and then you write something. Sometimes nothing at all is happening and then there's no choice but to simply wait it out. Once in a while dreams.

GM: I have to ask about “Remember that demon that played his butt like a trumpet?” I think it's probably my favorite line in *Ghosts and Doppelgangers* because it made me laugh so hard, and the image has kind of lodged itself in my brain now, I guess because it's a direct question and because the word “remember” makes me remember it more, and now I'm hooked into this theatrical image of the thing, and that sort of exemplifies the mischievous quality of the collection. Can you explain this image of the butt trumpet demon as you see it? What does it look like and where does stuff like this come from? I love it!

BL: Haha, I totally stole that from Dante! It's straight out of the *Inferno*. Of course, I can't find the relevant canto now, but Virgil is taking Dante down into a new level of Hell, and that's how the demon announces their departure or arrival. The line, as I remember it, is something like, “and the demon made a trumpet of his ass.” I remember reading this as an undergrad and being struck by it. A lot of things in hell are blasphemous inversions of things in heaven, so it makes sense within the context of the poem, but it's also a straight-up fart joke in this otherwise rather serious and high-minded politically charged epic investigation into the soul's journey toward god. It's a weird little moment that obviously lodged in my brain too. It just goes to show us, I guess, that literature is never just one thing.

GM: Literature is indeed a vast gamut of worlds to explore. It's truly amazing how much of it there is and the variety it comes in. Is there any territory or style you've come across lately that strongly appealed to you? What good books (poetry or otherwise) have you been getting into recently?

BL: No, nothing in terms of style, really. I'm always picking up and putting down novels and nonfiction and poetry. I've recently enjoyed Richard Russo's *Empire Falls*, Sarah Hepola's *Blackout*, Bill Bryson's *In a Sunburned Country*, Bruce Chatwin's *In Patagonia*, Dan Darling's *Archaeopteryx*, Michael Finkel's *The Stranger in the Woods*, Hari Kunzru's *White Tears*, and Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. There's actually not a lot of poetry on this list, I see. I should correct that.

GM: You have three books out now: *Ghosts and Doppelgangers*, *Death Salad*, and *O Gory Baby*. What projects are you working on currently?

BL: I'm working on a project right now but it's very early stages. I have no idea what I'm doing! I'm writing and just stockpiling poems, revisiting them, revising them, just sort of noodling around and working intuitively to see what feels right. I don't know yet if any of it's good or bad. If all that sounds a bit squishy, it rather is. But it's the only way I know how to get going. It's got to feel fun and I've got to be directionless.

GM: Be sure to check out Brad's blog at Bradliening.blogspot.com

Diane Martini Richard

BLUE SKIES

My sadness attaches to odd shapes—a torn cardboard box on the highway. I mistook it for a dead dog, heartbroken how he must've felt, hungry or just trying to find home. His family will miss him so much. Still the box, it could've held someone's treasured items one more time during a move across town. Now it's too late. I want to move across the Atlantic. Is that far enough? How many boxes would it take? Only six more minutes for the rice to cook. Tonight I'm making *Ma Po Tofu* with ground pork. No pock-marked grandmother. No grandmothers of any kind. Maybe that was the problem. No one to showcase school pictures on a prominent end table. It should cause a numbness, the Szechuan peppercorns. I wonder if I need a religious attitude in the second half of my life. I commit to achieving one night of sleep without half-listening for tires pulling into the driveway. Not pulling into the driveway. On floral blue sheets, I could perhaps dream of a grassy hill. I will roll down it, the hill, pontificating. Green grass, blue skies, white tents. Turn up the color turn up the happy. When I was ten, I cut up cardboard boxes & tied them to my arms, at the top of the hill, ready to fly. I tried all summer. There was time. There was no time. *Nothing but bluebirds all day long.*

Madeline Reding

BLUE GHAZAL

The primary color between green and violet in the visible spectrum,¹ blue, such as that of a clear unclouded sky. The color blue

most compelling to satin bowerbirds, who ferret away bits
and shards, inorganic frippery. Blue straws, blue spoons, blue

cross-section of packed ice on pavement. I slid and my knees
hit stone. Great bloody mess, hot snotty tears, blue-

black² cutting cold. Some can't take winter's teeth
at their toes. Bluestocking, blue jeans, singing something bluesy.

A dye called Prussian Blue gives Van Gogh his starry night.
Gives us cyanide.³ While cousin Satin collects blue,

the Macgregor's bowerbird collects beetles. *He killed them
solely for the purpose of decorating,*⁴ inky blue

jewels, a heap in the dirt. *The only other species known to use animals
in this way.* See: cyanide in waterholes, powder white that fizzles, blue

that kills.⁵ Take, instead, this taste of vinegar.
In a blue funk, baby blue, feelin' kinda blue.

Children say they're sad *because the flowers are all gone,*
but the irises are alive despite frozen-rot, *somehow still blue*

*as veins.*⁶ Chin up, we say. Silver lining, we say. We say, *look up.*
Even a small child has sense enough to drink that blue

*whose beauty wounds him so precisely he knows his life is worth saving.*⁷
From the top of this tower, the city's smog an opaque blue.⁸

Notes on "Blue Ghazal":

1. Definitions from Dictionary.com
2. "blueblack cold" from Robert Hayden's poem, "Those Winter Sundays"
3. Cyanide is chemically derived from the same substance as the dye, Prussian Blue
4. Quotes about the Macgregor's bowerbird collecting beetles from an article by Virginia Morell, in *National Geographic*, July 2010 issue
5. Some poachers use cyanide to kill elephants for their ivory
6. From Matthew Siegel's poem, "With my face buried in supermarket flowers I spent the entire evening"
7. From Belle Waring's poem, "Look"
8. My first name means "tower"

Theodore Worozbyt

IMITATION

My smashed nautical clock imitates its motion. Place an apple core with a little meat still on it on the boulder by the river. By dawn it will be gone. They take it, the mockingbirds take it. The killdeer spill the sand. I laid the scab on my pillow. A tiny beaver eyed me sideways unconcerned and turned out to be a muskrat. The next time I walked past that place he was flat on the intersection next to a cigarette I hadn't smoked. The turtles dropped without a ripple through the water's sunny skin. The pollen on the pond spread its arms like an indolent galaxy. Buckets of marigolds floated. Twin oxygenators breathed from the bottom. The green on the pond was clearly spreading.

THE LIGHTHOUSE

The shadow on the wall peels off layer after layer after layer
slow unraveling vacant striptease
a stifling burden of hot refusing to uncoil as she sifts through shades of dark
searching for a new skin

Outside rain pelts fat drops onto the tin can shoreline
waves the color of charcoal, fresh foam slow-caressing
rocks hissing steam the same tint as the body seen through the window

Glass and drywall, yours & mine
and no chance of stasis
no way to temper the air oppressive
or hold out a cupped hand to catch or slow the relentless rainfall
powerless watching the sky of ash meld into the battering horizon

Sea of nonsense, sea of urchins, sea of longing, sea of teeth

A silhouette indiscernible raises a hand toward the window
You finally seem able to surprise yourself

Waves the color of charcoal swell like distorted shadows
and soon there are no layers left to lose
a body unyielding as driftwood carried to bed on a rocky embrace

Sea of talons, sea of echoes, sea of plasticine, sea of chains
and I an unpeeled body dancing on the shore

Carl Boon

POEM FOR BEŞİKTAŞ

By most accounts the shore at Beşiktaş
bends past the palace, the sellers
of chocolate cake and alibis.

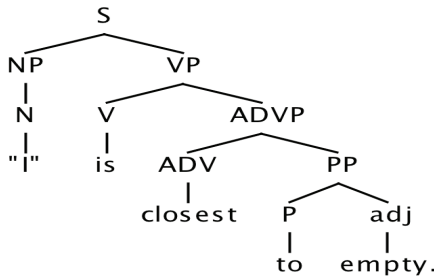
They say we are supposed to dream
the past, fishermen in black and white
who promised their girls
mackerel and salvation.

If there was smoke it was romantic,
stacking the skyline, lovers' notes
composed supreme, clear Saturdays.

Empty bottles drifted down
from Ortaköy, drips of whiskey
for the gulls, shells of sunflower seeds.
We were supposed to find joy

in freighters bound for Veracruz
and Bari. I took my mother's hand
and asked her what the whitewash meant,

what the men inside the mosque
at Kabataş sang. Sometimes I wished
for disaster, dinosaurish arcs of cloud
to break the continent again.



In June 2016, I attended a poetry manuscript conference. I was confident that the pages I had carefully arranged were going to garner support, and that I'd leave feeling validated in submitting my manuscript to contests and presses.

The manuscript I brought was mostly comprised of poems I had written in graduate school—narrative poems that quite literally explored my estranged paranoid schizophrenic mother, my love life, my dad's cancer, my childhood, my, my, my.

my:

pronoun

1. (a form of the possessive case of I used as an attributive adjective):¹

Example: My old poems are foreign to me now.

The first small group workshops I attended at the conference were just what I had hoped for: my old poetry was well-received. My poems were complimented on their bluntness and occasional blasts of imagery. The next step of the workshop was to have a poetry editor from a well-recognized press read and react to my poetry manuscript in real time as I (and the rest of my group) watched and listened.

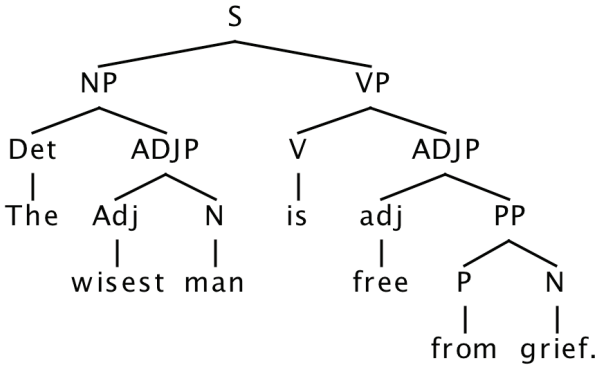
In the next 20-30 minutes, my biggest poetry fear was revealed: that I could no longer use the poems that I had grown so attached to—that I'd have to start from scratch—that I'd have to spend legitimate time and work on the poems or write entirely new ones.

¹ Dictionary.com definition

I listened to the editor's exasperated comments about individual poems: '... need to enter the poem sideways ... too pointed ...' '... feel cramped by this form ...' '... not a great first line ...' 'this poem wants to go at something but keeps going to simile and that's not the courageous move ...'

I got the gist of the editor's comments: my brain understood the validity of her comments, but my ego raged against her. I remember walking outside in the Santa Fe sun and standing underneath a deck, focusing on the small dots of light that spread across the support beams like a pox. I left the conference feeling that I shouldn't have been assigned to an experimental editor, that I had been cheated somehow.

The truth is that before I left for the conference I knew that my old poems were unsalvageable. My work was steeped in ego and grief—I was recycling material from the same dirty bathtub water of my small existence.



After I returned to the states from living in China and India, I said I no longer wrote much poetry (or anything at all) because it forced me to tap into my ego. This was an insult to poets, and a direct result of my unwillingness to do the work of re-writing and revision. Poetry is not read to understand someone's specific story or to answer questions, as my work had.

Nowadays, ideas for poems come to me less often. I tend to listen more than I write. It is difficult to write something authentic to my present because my old process was easier. It only required myself.

Patricia Kirkpatrick

COYOTE

Dawn holding rain at the screen door some charcoal
sky thundered feet in black grass the newspaper
hadn't come yet no world waited on steps to be read just
animals tracked the city a wilding again I'd been living
alone for some time fiercely the juniper flashed
like a seizure ruptured then slack neighbors said they'd
seen one before I could name the rash fur ran past
the flank I can't say wasn't really a fox the more I kept
looking the less certain I was I remembered
the tail of what vanished such keening came when I saw

Jiaqi Zheng

YARDS AND GRIDS

After snow the continent decides
To open its cleft the way a mouth parts.
Better hear it talk, when sparrows sleep
Sealed-shut. Little frozen beaks.

The continent
Thrusts a continent away from a continent,
Plucking icicles of its sweat
And lies back satisfied.

Between the new lips, colour
Grumbles and goes numb.
The pine trees do not say a word.
They never do, nor are they wise.

They stand their black veils to the sides like nuns,
Faces crescents and hands
Folded in in in on their laps.
And be faithfully sorry, like nuns would do,

Watching the ruins with tremendous mercy.
Their eyes are wood.

John Brantingham

ON THE BANKS OF THE EEL RIVER

She plucks
the stone
from the shallows
on a whim,
almost
forgets it
as she chats,
and her fingers
play with it
absently.

It fits
in her hand
as naturally as
an infant's head
both of which
have been formed
by moving
water
as has
her palm,
which will
cradle both.

Jeffrey Little

COPENHAGEN FOLLOWS

The challenge lies in decoding the irregular grammar of bones. It's true, my mom was right there in the maternity ward when I was born. We can use this as the template for manufacturing a better braille. It was the first of April, 1963. The sky looked

like an oat sack stuffed with wedges of boiled meat. Logically, Copenhagen follows. What surprise, then, that squid consider cannibalism sacrosanct? Semiotics notwithstanding, you never can tell about the pause, the tactical application of the pause.

I've asked around, this place has little tolerance for a notional assassination, people here need to work with their hands. In blackjack, you systematize exceptions and solve for x as there is always more rust to roll in. Scream. Scream like a chopper

slowly spinning in the drink and remember, wear your nattiest pair of pants, the wide wale corduroys, topped off with mom's houndstooth hat. What I love is that feeling of being on a boat that's already gone under. Yesterday, when she woke up, my

wife stuffed everything she ever owned into a single black sock. It was applied physics at its finest. And when she finished, she was never even there. A party trick. Like trying to fuck an idea inside the broom closet while your guests are singing old torch

songs of lost Saturdays and shame. It's a simple puzzle without a workable solution, but we wanted more. Never think deeper than the opening gambit in a game that you cannot understand. I back my way in, and I bend. That ain't the wind, boy, it's birds.

THE SILVER SKIFF

Under the oaks we veer in a silver skiff.

– Georg Trakl

It is such a small boat that skims above infinity.
Do you ever look over the rim
to gaze at the depths we glide over
or do you keep your eyes locked on the body
of our little boat, telling yourself,
this is the whole world,
the oar is a city that will never die,
at the prow my true love, a bronze statue who
will stand thousands of years, golden and perfect,
each passenger here a heroic poem who will be
sung and remembered for as long
as we know how to sing the old songs?
Have you noticed the waters below quicken?
Did you look to see where we race to?
The multitude of stars above blink out
one by one. Is it dawn's blush or
were we wrong about everything?

Kristin Berger

BROWNFIELD

These fights last from season to season scouting
for a well-swept brownfield to flood and vacate.

Noise extinguishes itself in the contrails.
The heart wants one good panorama with no power lines.

A cigarette grass-fire divides rain-forest from shadow,
and below, a wedding ring slips into a river—

It might settle into the outgoing tide, onto another finger.
We could agree to send love away like that.

Recall one step when you crossed from forest to scree
and knew it as home, yet had no words.

In hanging valleys, small blue pools clutch every cloud.
Some vanishing points wire us from birth.

Tell me how the volunteer vine maple in my backyard,
with its hundred-thousand helicopter seeds

ever tapped groundwater; how it leapt above shingles,
rung itself year after year, with flourishing.

A Review of Caroline Cabrera's *Saint X*

The fervor with which I used to dive into things that need to get done doesn't show up as much as it used to. Chores, I'm talking about. Doing them used to be rather automatic. Even the big ones. Whether it was outdoor work or indoor work—removing three-quarters of a yard of sod and replacing it with what will become “landscaping” in four or five years, or removing hundred-year-old wallpaper, patching the holes, and painting subtle stripes by alternating not color of paint but shine, from matte to high gloss, or hundreds of other tasks in the heat of the sun or the dank of the basement—my to-do list used to be a lot shorter in days past than it is now. When the fervor does show up, I go at it as well as I used to. But more often than not the fervor doesn't show, and instead I find myself in a state of being. Watching. Thinking. Remembering. Pondering. Figuring. Reading a big book slowly. A few paragraphs a day. Maybe over again two or three times in passages where my divining rod goes electric. My priorities have shifted. And I like it. And from my new perch, Caroline Cabrera's *Saint X* is a shining star to follow.

A book-length poem, *Saint X* is structured as an extended Q&A. In the realm of interviews, Q&As take the easy route. They don't go beyond the two-dimensional level of exchange. There is no third dimension in which the interviewer and interviewee, and time, and setting, all as characters, lift up and off the page. It's the difference between a city on a folded paper map and a city that makes your legs and lungs ache after a day getting to know it. But Cabrera subverts that norm. Her Q&A not only drops the reader into three dimensions, but into what at times feels like dimensions four, five, or six.

The questions for the most part are the adult equivalents of the honest questions kids ask about a world they're just getting to know. “What triggers reversals of Earth's polarity?” “What existed before the Big Bang?” “Can evolution outpace climate change?” “How much can parasites change the social habits of their host?” “Why do we blush?” “Do rogue waves exist?” As adults, we tend not to have the benefit of a room full of those older and wiser ready to fill in our blanks and answer the questions we ask. Nowadays, we go to the internet for answers. And we should, at least as a starting place. But we should also broaden what we accept as *an answer*. And that broadening should include Cabrera's koanishness. As part of her response to the “Why do cats purr?” question, the poem-answer tells the tale of the speaker's first-ever vase of peonies (“they were expensive/ but I felt worth it/ like L'Oreal commercials/ taught me to feel”), how they were ruined by a

pounding Florida rain (“*bruised* is so accurate here/ they looked beaten/ I thought *how careless the rain/ how stupid the peonies/ to be so fragile*”), how this devastated her (“I never cooked dinner/ I undressed and wrapped/ in a towel and lay in bed/ where you found me/ at first I yelled/ I couldn’t tell you/ about the flowers/ much too soon”), how “that was a blue time/ for/ I wasn’t myself/ (or is that me?),” ending when the other in the poem returns to visit the speaker, still in bed, and she “spoke in a low steady voice/ that said/ *I won’t tear your eyes out/ right now/ you can come closer.*” What the internet says about why cats purr is like that flat city on the map compared to Cabrera’s three-dimensional answer.

The point of view in the poem-answers is fluid. You might get first person, second person, or a kind of unspecific point-of-view that one is tempted to label third person, but that resists labeling. In the second person, the answers are authoritative (“if you smash your head against a window/ and break your head/ and the window/ and pieces of your head stay with you/ and pieces of glass stay with the window// those are moons,” as part of the response to the question, “What is the origin of the moon?”). In the first person, the answers reveal a narrative stance, but not a typical narrative. There are lots of gaps in what one would think of as story. Altogether, it feels natural, like the shifts and digressions of an engaging speaker or professor, and Cabrera here is the kind of speaker or professor who is so captivating that when she dutifully pauses to ask if there are any questions, nobody raises their hands, for they want to hear more from her in the limited time they have together.

Interspersed sections enclosed in parenthesis work to ground the long poem in the sort of narrative that one is always tempted to peg as autobiography. While that may or may not be so, what matters is that the grounding works and is apt. From one of the sections midbook, a short paragraph in a cluster of others matter-of-factly states, “Like my mother I cannot stand to have my arms or legs pinned. I flail with disregard. My mother says we were buried alive in a former life,” and the feeling is that we are getting not answers but revelations regarding the answerer, as if the sections are stations where we are waiting to catch a transfer and are passing the time so.

There is philosophy here, and it’s Platonic in the sense that it’s driven by character and story and conflict, rather than abstraction (the response to “Why do whales sing?” tells of the mission of Voyager 1 space probe, launched by NASA in 1977 to study the outer Solar System. In 2012, Voyager 1 left the heliosphere for the deeper space of the interstellar medium). The further we have gotten from Plato, in the Western tradition, the more obscure our philosophy, especially our metaphysics, has become (I say not as an expert, but only as one who minored in it, and I am sure there are exceptions). One absorbed in philosophy may revel in decoding the thick

passages (as I, minoring in it, did). It is a kind of badge of honor to decipher the seemingly indecipherable. But what Cabrera does is offer us a restart. She takes us back to the elements of literature that is characteristic of Platonic teaching (“When Voyager 1 left/ the solar system/ it received the soft whine/ of plasma reverberating/ off its hull/ and transmitted/ the sound back/ to earth . . . When I first heard it/ I thought of whales”).

In addition to philosophy, there are thematic focuses on art and science. Cabrera is of the renaissance set in that there is little she does not want to tackle, nor finds herself incapable of tackling. The artificial distinctions of the university and its colleges and departments are distinctions Cabrera walks through as if she were a ghost faced with stone walls, giving us the answers that art gives, as in “How does the brain give rise to the mind?,” which is answered in part by question (“Do I hold your hand or do you hold mine?”), in part by spatial perception (“You can encircle something and never really touch it. You can be the thing encircled and not know”), and in part by physical description (“I think I am holding sand in my hand but I can’t be sure. Even when I shake it away, it holds on”).

Occasional epigraphs in *Saint X* are from *The Little Prince*, the oft-translated 1943 French novella by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, which, in a nutshell, gives us a stranger’s point-of-view on our own culture. It allows us to see us as we seldom see us, and so is wholly appropriate to Cabrera’s stance, wherein the nature of perception itself is the unifier, seeing as none have seen before being the common thread. Within that “alien” seeing is the conundrum of knowing versus not knowing, which, again, feels like a nod to the Platonic. This book, ultimately, is humancentric, resisting answers that come from other than our own faculties, mapping a kind of individual consciousness that is shared by all (welcome back to philosophy).

What engine is it that drives us to know? That’s the question that is the engine of this book. The questions allow affirmations. The affirmations increasingly shift to the quotidian, and an essential vehicle in Cabrera’s work is a kind of realism centered on the idea of what we are to others: to people (What determines the size of a primate social group?// The mean girls”); to animals (“Orcas, too . . . Different pods sing songs so divergent/ they can’t understand each other when broken/ apart and reassembled in captivity”); and to plants (“I saw a special about an artist who took a large section of felled tree, with it’s surrounding flora and fauna, and relocated it to greenhouse. It will decompose over time and change each day; it will continue to live on, far past the artist’s intention. Younger, I found this fascinating. Older, I wonder at the audacity of applying your signature to a piece of forest”).

A critical current running throughout is the plight/situation/place of women in the world—women alone (“I read a young woman’s essay about

the freedom her car affords her . . . When your body moves through the world a commodity, it needs a metal armor”), and women together (“Back at camp we set out in search of a circle of trees we invented; we had all afternoon to walk toward nothing . . . We danced, perfect in our slimness, out total unknowing. We were women together; we were only girls”). It’s an un-concluded and complex rendering, as it has to be, as anyone who pays attention knows (“I stand before you, a chimera, every woman or girl I’ve loved built together”). There is clear but nonspecific abuse from former male loves, and clear but nonspecific connection to and enduring singular good one, also male. What matters are not the specifics, but that the seeing and the saying here—the Q&A—come from the un-concluded complexity that is being a woman in the world today. This isn’t Helen Reddy roaring. Rather, Helen Reddy’s roar is contained within the confident intelligence here, just as the confident intelligence is evolved from the same roar. That paradox infuses the poetry, and for me is elegantly if obliquely (but it’s the obliqueness you fall in love with here) summed up in “What explains latitudinal patterns in species diversity?”:

it is the body

that pushes us forward
it is the rabies virus

trying to spread
that makes its host

terrified of water
can you imagine

too scared to swallow
your own saliva

...

I imagine

and whisper
at night

to anything harbored
inside of me

please don't
take my brain

please don't.

So, this state of being I've grown into in which I don't toil with the body as much as I used to but watch, think, remember, ponder, and figure instead, seeking, adventuring, because we call it those things when, even if it's work, it doesn't feel foisted upon us, but feels chosen: I am glad this summer to have had Caroline Cabrera's *Saint X* as I wallow so, on my front porch, working, but not on chores. It is like I am the dish receiving the signals sent by the Voyager spacecraft that is Cabrera herself, exploring the outer reaches of the us and the now.

Catherine Esposito Prescott

TRAVEL

My friend, I have a confession
to make. I lied about the bracelet.
When I told you it was from a Moroccan
prince, it wasn't. I must have stolen it
because I don't remember buying it or receiving
it as a gift. As for Morocco, I travelled
to Tangiers once where I met
a boy who offered me lamb tagine and kif,
and although he seemed like a savior,
he was no prince. What shocked me
was not the lie itself nor that I told it,
but how easy it was, and I wonder
how many more untruths could flow like water
from my tongue if I let them. And what stories
may be missing from my autobiography
because of this slight? How much juicier
would my life seem if it held a few more
fictions, not lies so much, not the ones
on which shaky homes are built, but small
ones that add color and maybe comfort,
that portray a life more like an edited
photograph using a chrome or noir filter
than a life shot naked and without?
In this memory, I was fabulous
not because the bracelet was diamond-
crusted, though it was, and not because
it was worth more than my home,
though it may have been, but because it told
a story, one I believed—and the fictions
I carry—each one a shining memento of an affair
or a time that never transpired, change me.
Never mind what is real and what isn't,
in this space in the mind this bracelet existed,
a bold, foreign and valuable thing, and the man
was a shadow of many men, and the memory
a postcard from another time, and dear friend,

this is the strange part, I confess, though it never
happened, I ache all the same.

Nicole Walker

ONCE WAS A ROUTE

Spontaneity. Who doesn't want some of that? I-40 East, on our way to Winslow, on our way to dinner, early in the afternoon, we had time to stop at Two

Guns, where we were not the only ones to fight about which of us knew this place first. I'd read signs. You'd read the paper. The Apache and the Navajo

read water rights, Canyon Diablo crossing, and grass you could eat and grass you could blow through. Over the scooping sound of you telling her about the route

that swung through here for forty years, I'm yelling at you to keep our kid off that old bridge, concrete windows so wide even I could fall through. Let's look at the gas

station instead, I say, the one with the posted sign "Regular" fuel as if fuel was anything but regular now. Everybody's got a full tank but I remember analog

clicks and manual handles that I want to show the kid but you've got her off again looking at that sign "Mountain Lion." To her question, what is a cage? I can only

shake my head and look at the car and the road and the distance between dinner and the car and say, you know, stuck, trapped. "Did they like it?" and I roll my

eyes because have you ever met a mountain lion in a zoo? It's not the pacing, it's the sleeping that will break you open like these cages here made out of ruined

stuff, broken squares of stone hacked off and hodge-podged together to invite the tourists. Then, again broken. And here we are, looking at rebar wondering where

they put the corn and where they put the animal feed and where the first stone tore out of the mortar and rolled into Canyon Diablo, where chunks of limestone float

above a ravine that could still be transacted—(you can see the remains)—of a bridge
one side—where the Navajo (or was it Apache) had crossed to claim as theirs,

and one side mine, the one I'm on and the one I won't let our baby cross. It's bare-
ly a structure, let alone legal. Search and Rescue flying over, coming to dredge

her out of that one slice of water in the whole corner of this route and the I-40
which too will be surpassed by another interstate and even this spot where I stand

where holes appear in my argument, (you read it first), the one that is losing sand
beneath my feet, (you first, I only saw signs, and I've never been here before), di-

vorcing Southern Arizona from Northern Arizona and you are on that side
with the Apache and I am over here with the Navajo and the old man named Two

Guns who hid out in the cages before they caged any lions and threatened to shoot
anyone who came on his land, where the cows graze and stumble, slide

without grace down the slope, over the rock, into ravines where animals nouveau,
animals without babies, animals without thirst, animals without grass, animals who

fear nothing but the highway cutting out their thorough-fare, making their grounds a cul-
de-sac, a dead end, shove against the oil of a road even though there is nowhere to go.

Madelyn Musick

95th/DAN RYAN

On my way to Sunday morning I get stuck in a turnstile, held between December and the body of a man who says he still loves me. He tells me I never listen, but I don't understand. He says there are some things English fails to phrase, but I don't understand. I am leaving all the Russian I ever learned on the train platform at 95th/Dan Ryan. I have dropped it, as though I lost it, as though I didn't notice that half of my chest had fallen out. I leave it alone, like I would leave a dead baby bird if I saw one. Alone, to be swept up by someone else. Transit police approach me and ask if I even have a heart to hold out for examination. The only thing I keep on my sleeve is a receipt. The charge of my transgressions I have been meaning to exchange for a little grace. They check my pockets for secrets and spades. A homely man praised by pigeons sits on a nearby bench. He reads my obituary from the newspaper horoscope. Apparently it is upon me, my cosmic demise. Scorpio fills the bathtub, Mercury sharpens the knives, all the while Mars raises a glass to a holy arson. I wonder if I am brave enough to walk up to Death's door. Will Death answer this early in the morning? Will Death think I am delivering the Sunday Times? Or, will Death welcome me with a cup of coffee, maybe even let me sit at the kitchen table while we share the paper? Is Death an Arts & Leisure reader? The transit police demanded my answer, so I say: Some nights I am afraid of sleeping alone. I am afraid of waking in the middle of the night to a light from the bathroom that I didn't leave on. I am afraid of hearing the bathwater running. I am afraid of hearing the faucet being twisted off. I am afraid of opening the door. I am afraid of finding no one there. The transit police take notes. They look conclusive. They ask me if I often feel alone when I'm with other people. Have I been exhibiting avoidance behaviors? Do I want to slip out of the man's arms or fall back into them? Am I running away? They say it is okay to run. They say it is

okay to be afraid. They leave me at the gate. How eager am I? And just what kind of home am I looking for?
!



Paint these streets.

Paint them bright.

Where those dive-bars once bled out tumbling figures,
in senseless colors, and dull shades of death in the alley,
under the bridge, beside the highway—paint it all over.

Paint it *all over*.

—Heid Erdrich

Cary Waterman

SPEED OF STONE

From the place where I am I've already left
-Manoel de Barros

I look back the long road.
No gas pump.
No general store.
It's sage & sand
& love of asphalt
lying across the hurt.

In the dream I bought silver ear hoops,
quick like a rabbit. Or a coyote.
A fix. All fast
and no longer present.

Manoel, I saw your shadow
on the page of my book
where it says:

*From here all I glimpse is the border
of the sky.*

The lines danced.
Perhaps it was an illusion.
Saint Theresa's face on a dishtowel.
The Virgin on a wall of mud.

ABC

A black pickup crosses the double yellow line to overtake a white pickup. I am sure the black pickup hits 100 in the process. It's almost 1 AM and we're about to hit a blind left curve. Of course the streetlights along this highway don't work. I'd check my own speed but my eyes are glued to the two trucks speeding uphill, high-beaming, diesel engines going at thousands of RPMs, cargo bays wide swaying like post-partum hips—the black truck will hit another car. By the momentum of the curve it will derail to the right, and clip the white truck at the rear. The white truck will be going at enough of a speed to tumble several turns before ending up on its roof. The car the black truck will have hit will be obliterated. Cars laid out like a modern art installation portraying a juxtaposition of forces mechanical and visual, contrasted with distance and isolation; or perhaps a set piece that speaks more by intuition and feeling. (I will pull up by the side of the road and call the police before admiring the set pieces—) I'd call the police because I don't know the numbers of any of the emergency services in our city. (Yes, the contrast is very striking, the reaction this display teases out of you is very visceral—) Airway, breathing, circulation. Airway, breathing, circulation. Airway breathing circulation. Perhaps having to do these more than this number of times. Likely more. Likely crushed maxillae, mandibles, larynges, tracheae. Long bones, at least one sternum. Probably 2-3 milk carton bricks of blood lost per car. What to look for: flail chest, open/tension pneumothorax, and I forgot, but there were four things. Pericardiac tamponade evident by Beck's triad. Glasgow coma scale pertinent. "Don't worry ma'am/sir, I've called for help," will be appropriate. Should I have to, I know that between the cricoid and thyroid cartilage there is a space about a fingertip wide that I can slit vertically with—a piece of metal? I have rubbing alcohol—to ensure breathing. And the plastic case of a ballpen. Hollowed lumen. Whether or not I will have steady enough hands is another question. Someone <11 years will change almost everything. We are hitting the most crucial part of the curve now. The black truck sounds out a long, low blast of its horn, its side glinting in my headlights. It reads 4x4 on its rear door. In the emergency room these people will take priority. Damage control surgery. A re-evaluation of airway, breathing, circulation, number of wounds, site depth and type, severity, volume lost, organs and vessels involved. All hands on deck. Hypovolemic shock, fluid resuscitation stat. Color code. They will all likely get here at the same time. It will be a matter of ambulance seating capacity, or number of ambulances. There will likely be a crowd gathered around the three cars, even at 3 AM. Wooden crosses might have to be made.

The collision doesn't happen. There is no coming car. The white truck is gracious and slows, and moves to the right. In a line at the department store two women reach the line for the cashier at the same time, and hesitate, look at each other, at the line, at each other's items, before one of them gestures with her hands to the other, "go ahead, you go first," and the other bows a bit in courtesy and smiles as she takes the ahead spot. Her relief at being first is evident. She shifts the blouse and toy box she holds in her hands. She considers pocketing the pens. The line is long but not that long. It is long enough to shift feet, survey the dresses hung up neatly by size and brand, to lean on a display rack, and count the change she will get back. Airway, breathing, circulation. She would overtake if she could. I think she can.

A Review of Danez Smith's *Black Movie*

Movies allow adults to play pretend, but in their *Black Movie*, Danez Smith is done with the fantastical magic that suddenly turns Black history into tales of a long ago past, instead of the ever present, ongoing racism of today that does not have a happy ending. Their short but powerful poetry book begins with a new version of the 1959 Disney movie, "Sleeping Beauty in the Hood," one many may be uncomfortable reading. Smith boldly acknowledges this: "you mad? This ain't no kid flick. There is no magic here" (3). It becomes clear that we are not invited to "Sit Back, Relax, and Enjoy the Show."

Playing with form and imagery, Danez Smith retells classic movies with morbid twists, repurposing themes of love, romance, and triumph, for hate, death, and defeat. But hope is not lost, and love lives on in their poems, deep within the culture they writes about. Between the murders and the grief, Smith slips scenes of dreams into their movie. "Portrait of a Black Boy with Flowers" imagines a black boy "in his aunt's garden/ & the world does not matter/ his lungs are full of a green, full scent/ pollens dusts his skin/ gold as he grows" (9). This love is different from the Disney movies they references: focused on the self instead of "the other," it is constantly fighting hate, a hate wildly more powerful than any evil witch. This love is inclusive, it is pure and strengthening, though it is not idyllic enough to kiss awake a sleeping black beauty: "all the princes sing songs and kill dragons/ but Jamal won't wake up."

Black boy magic is not born from spells and Prince Charmings; it is born from the neverending resilience, the rich brownness that is the living soil, the foundation of this country (3). Romanticism has no place in this movie. It is not filled with soft, glowing light, princes that can save you with a sword and masculinity. In Smith's movie reality, masculinity is no savior to black boys— their racialized, gendered bodies come with different rules and regulations. Their darkness threatens the fragility of white-male-hood, its difference and culture too dangerous to be left alone. Instead of these black boys being able to grow into fully formed men with positive identities, too many are left without the chance, stuck in a not so innocent boyhood forever, as Smith makes clear in "Boyz N the Hood 2":

Let's not mention the original
nor cast any boyz at all.
The whole thing is a series

of birthday parties for the child
who lives in the picture frame.
Every year we watch his family
light candles on a blue cake.
Every year we watch the family
watch their home burn to the ground.
The movies gets old. The boy never will.

Their entire life becomes a game for white America to watch with entertainment, “shock,” and disgust.

In “Jim Crow, Rock Star,” we see the personification of Jim Crow segregationist laws: a haunting musician who uses “a guitar made from your aunt’s bones strung with your great-granddaddy’s stretched out beard” (5). At the end of this horrific act, “Jim Crow” encourages another performer to come to the stage, “the youngest brown boy within reach” (5). But he doesn’t hand him that morbidly racist guitar; instead, a pistol, as he whispers: “play.” For racists, the idea of black hypermasculinity, and violence, is not only a way to keep young black boys from growing physically and mentally, it is also a game to watch and be amused by. Every time another cop kills another black boy, we wonder why there is nothing done about it. But these segregationist laws are hardly a thing of the past; they linger within every corner of life. The laws may be gone but not forgotten. They’ve only turned into “ideals” for American society, leaving black boys and black people without a true space to call their own. There is no room for dreams to become reality, unless, of course, racism is swallowed whole, powerful no more, as seen in “iv. Song Oh I Just Can’t Wait To Be King”:

This is the part where the racist cuts off his tongue, a wet, pink
Repent
He gives his eyes & his hands & himself to the lions
& the lions feast & the lions are still a metaphor for black boys
& the boys, full of hear turned into dinner, fall asleep & they dream

Yes, yes, we really do dream.

Though this black movie stars black boys and men, black women do not go unmentioned. In “Lion King in the Hood,” “viii. Scene: Simba comes home to kill his uncle”: “The queen suffers too but gets no name” (17). Smith acknowledges the exclusion and invisibility of black women as well. Smith knows how much they sacrifice, “the woman who knows where she placed what is dead & what feeds, who rules the skillet with both while both she & the dinner bleed” (37). But, in their first poem, “Sleeping Beauty in the

Hood,” it may seem like Smith replaces a woman’s role with a man, erasing black women from this narrative. Smith changes the classic Aurora’s name to “Jamal” and makes “her everyone’s brother” (3). The poet here is actually just playing with society-deemed gender roles, claiming that black boys can be sleeping beauty, too: beautiful, and helpless, their autonomy stripped from them. And they are, every time they are murdered. But even though they cannot be awakened, forever in a slumber that brainwashes us all to think it may be easier to give up, to keep sleeping because staying woke is a nightmare in itself, Smith reminds us that “when a person dies, the black lives on” (30). It is how we are all still here, shouting BLACK LIVES MATTER, never sleeping on our responsibility to honor those who have fought before us, and died, in the name of whiteness. In the name of a God, Smith realizes, one does not want to know.

Instead of sleeping, we keep dreaming. The last poem in Danez Smith’s *Black Movie* is much more optimistic than the rest. They tells of a movie called “Dinosaurs in the Hood,” where a little black boy isn’t given a gun, but a toy dinosaur. One day sitting on the bus he looks up and sees real dinosaurs, “his eyes wide & endless

His dreams possible, pulsing, & right there” (40).

Though they leaves us with positivity and hope, Smith holds nothing back—there is no coat of sugar over the poems they writes, no artificial sweetener that leaves readers wondering if what they have consumed is real or fake. *Black Movie* may only be a slim 40 pages long, but the space it takes up will fill your entire mind, body, and soul. My sister told me it was a fast read, that it would take a half hour to get through. But I still feel myself digesting it every day, his powerful words hard to swallow, its bitterness like that of coffee taken black . . . except the energy this poetry gives does not wear off; instead of caffeine it harbors black magic. Dark and growing, always there.

Theodore Worozbyt

NEXT

Mondays they lift a star out of my mouth. Fridays the knife slips past gas refused, a cluster of deading needles, a dribble or two, some white packing and arms that swing trails of sussurizing OK?s, one hoverer asking a question that seems to me a matter of love, though I have impedimentary tonguelessnesses and cold silverings stick a question mark finger with metrical holes down my throat. My tongue hugs at stitched syllables. The music I prefer takes a long time to be tuned, not that I've asked for any love, and whited out girls pretend to run around, and the static tastes cold, and I am cash-heavy, the money is freezing a hole in my flat-assed pocket parakeet parabola hmmm umma gumma oh pink careful with that axe Eugene Oregon but when it comes as I lie on my back it is Poncé on a C3 Ramirez and so blood graft and carving whiz become remote and serene, and I could have told them, yes I *could*, but their language was absolute and technical and remote from the beautiful icily detached love I was seemingly feeling, that it was all the same to me what they did with their delicate nails so softly.

DIVINE DUST

A psychic once told me I wrote
to get things off my chest. She said
I was meant to be mother
to the world, so of course my breasts
would be heavy with milk.

I wouldn't have taken her seriously
if she hadn't called me marionette
and predicted the coming trouble in my legs.
She said I needed more Divine Trust
and I wondered what that meant

until I was easy listening to Carl Sagan,
the Mr. Rogers of the cosmic neighborhood,
helping to make the cold and glorious
universe friendly, worlds spinning in perfect
order, prayers up and off the page.

Kayla Little

Exploring Trauma and Power Through Poetry

When left to my own devices I chose to explore my traumas in my poetry. They spill out onto the page eagerly, sometimes a welcomed friend, other times an uninvited guest. I've more or less come to terms with the idea that this is the type of poet I am and these are the types of poems I write—at least for the time being.

My feelings on going to the page: writing these poems, sharing these dank memories have become a pressing dichotomy. I'm split in two over it, the halves scratch and gnaw at one another. Both bidding their time to see who will win out. There's the idealist in me, who wants to connect through the trauma. She wants desperately to have someone understand. Wants the poems to stand as warnings, as worst case scenarios but to show that there's hope at the end. Then there's the child in me, still stuck in the weeds of the trauma who wants to burn the page before the poems can come out. She wants to stay invisible, to disappear into my inner walls. She's the redness that spreads from my neck to my cheeks when I workshop a poem or read it aloud. They make it hard to write some days. They've kept me away from the page for longer than I'd like to admit. Their power struggle is something I hope to draw strength from, to push past and make me a better poet.

During my undergrad a close friend and fellow poetry student said that all my writing at its core explores power dynamics, that it's the power I'm fixated on, not necessarily the trauma. As I've come to recognize the power struggle within myself I can see the truth in their observation. I can only hope that I can use it to make me a better poet.

A Limitless Art

If I had to pinpoint the first time I encountered poetry that actually stuck with me, it wasn't a Shakespearean sonnet, or Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken." It actually would be from the 1990's show *Charmed*. For those who have never had the pleasure to watch the show, basically it is a drama about three sisters who are powerful witches that fight evil on a day-to-day basis. These witches embody a modern-day witch: There's no pointy hat-wearing or black-cat curses. But they do create spells with one rule: they have to rhyme. A common spell they use to vanquish demons and warlocks is a simple rhyme of "The power of three will set us free." Other spells have the common theme of simple end rhyme, but they all rid the world of evil. When I was younger watching this show I thought these spells were so silly. As I have re watched the show a handful of times, and now as a writer myself, I have adopted a better understanding of the beauty behind the rhymes of these spells. They were my first glance at how poetry expands beyond books and stuffy literature classrooms.

When I tell people I study English and creative writing, they always tilt their head to the side and questionably ask, "What are you going to do with that?" My answer is never what they want to hear, "I have no idea." That is usually when they change the subject. I have learned that writing and studying poetry and literature is something that does not have an end for me. I can receive an MFA in poetry, but that won't mean that the road ends there. I can read every book in the entire library, but that won't be the end either. For learning about poetry, the learning never ends. There is no final stamp or test that makes a person an expert. That to me makes majoring in the art of English something special. Something also unique about this field of work is I have read work from poets that have been writing for thirty years, and I have read new poems in their first drafts from poets I have never heard of. Both are great, both have strengths and weaknesses. I couldn't say this for hardly any other career path. I wouldn't want a doctor who has only been practicing for a couple months. This make poetry writing unique and a skill anyone can acquire. Some are born with the gift to write, some have to work harder for their voice to come out. For me, this life is full of constantly learning and gaining knowledge. The more I read and write the more I know. Learning and writing are constantly working hand in hand. Some say that you never stop learning, that it follows you even after you have received a diploma. I couldn't agree more.

I have learned that poetry is all about rhythm. This sounds obvious,

something you learn on the first day of studying poetry. For me, it took awhile to fully understand the difference between reading and listening. These rhythms do not have to be simple nursery rhymes, or iambic pentameter, but it has to enter into the listener's ears and invoke something. I know a good poem when I hear one, not after I have read one. Reading a poem is like eating a bland diet of white bread and rice. Listening and taking in a poem is like being served a grand eight course feast with lobster and caviar. Hearing a poem out loud creates an entire experience. The way the lines roll off the tongue to fill the room with beautiful sounds is truly a magical experience. That's why I have watched *Charmed* over a dozen times. Hearing the cheesy spells and watching them immediately work by destroying evil makes me believe creating poetry creates something larger than I could imagine. If someone, even one person, reads something I created and shares that by speaking the lines into the world, that creation is never ending. Poetry is definitely something that should not be overlooked. Everyone has heard that "seeing is believing." In poetry, listening is as well.

If I had to write a list of all the tips I have so far learned about writing poetry, I would have to write a book. The one that keeps me writing, and I hope can keep others writing, is that poetry is all around you. As cliché as it sounds, it truly is. It can be from the rhyme-filled spells from my favorite childhood show, or the way your dog snuggles with you on the couch when you're sad. Food, birds, the sky, the jerk that cut you off in 5 p.m. rush hour traffic, anything. It is all out there. It is like an invisible friend that is by your side. Sometimes the friend will hide from you, giving you writer's block. Other times they are handing you ideas that keep coming. The key is that the ideas and techniques are always there. Once you understand that the idea that poetry is about constantly learning and changing, you are golden. Some days are easier to write than others. Trust me, I know. As long as you understand it never ends. The ideas that create poems are limitless. You just have to put on your stylish poet shades and see the world differently.

THE CONTRACTOR LOSES HIS MIND

1

The man faces the wall,
wondering what is behind it.
He smashes his head into it,
but the wall doesn't move.
The wall faces the man.

2

At night, the walls become one
wall, closing in
as the man tries to sleep.
The wall wraps itself
around the man like a blanket,
but he remains cold
and Argus-eyed.

3

Where does a wall end
and where does it begin?
The man considers this,
looking for the source
of the wall, and also looking
for the outcome of the wall.
He finds neither,
but has a headache
that is load bearing.

4

The Great Wall of China
can be seen from the moon
but could not stop
the Mongols from raping
and pillaging
to their hearts' content.
The man thinks of this
in his discontent.

5

In the man's recurring dream,
Reagan keeps saying
tear down that wall
while riding a horse
with a blaze
like the birthmark of Gorbachev.

6

A thin colorless wall
acts as the partition
between the man
and his desire.
He cannot see it
but knows it is there.

7

Saul is still seeking a wall
to pin David to.
The man is still seeking a pin
to stick into a wall.

8

As the man
approached death,
worn and weary,
he looked for a wall
as hard as he had ever
looked for anything.
He couldn't find one.

9

There are no walls
in heaven or hell.

Kate Bernadette Benedict

THE CURATOR

I have an eye for what rises from the emulsions,
for what rises in the darkrooms from the negative materials.

Hence have I marshaled this seminal collection.
Hence have the images been located and archived.

Each of a rarity, each with a provenance.
Daguerreotypes, tintypes, snapshots, transparencies.

Here is an ovum egged through a tunnel.
Here is the vandalized goddess of love.

Here are the long shots: latitudes, firegrounds.
Here are the close-ups, the membranes and pores.

This shows your crib with its butterfly decals
next your crypt with a death year inscribed there.

Bend your head lower. Bring your eye closer.
These are the likenesses. These never lie.

Jenny Sadre-Orafai

11/11

You see them as separate, fugitive
auras that dissipate when you get
too close: a group of people
practicing tai chi this morning
in the open, cars moving to jobs
around them. They thought
we couldn't see them doing sacred
work. A rainbow pulled apart.
I undo it when I get too close.
I put my face against the glass,
refracting. I say *we'll take that
one please*, like ordering a doughnut.

a story ending in breakfast

after Ross Gay

Because I love you, and because this morning, before eating the avocado toast I will make you for breakfast, you stood beneath a shriek of light on the porch & said *you know you love someone when you look the way I do right now and feel comfortable*, pointing to your dry elbows and unlaced shoes & because I imagine you were talking about allowing your body to exist in its truest form & because you have let me touch your most honest skin, I want to tell you a story about the tricks I have done to make my body disappear & because I want you to understand, I will start from before the beginning, where a girl is told that in order to be loved properly, she must make a habit out of service & because she is a girl who moves her body to the high school bell ring, ritual is not foreign to her & so she justifies it, *she says, some people need coffee, he needs this*, & I should clarify that *he* is a boy but at some point in this story he will become a man & many things will change, but the girl's vindication is not one of them, she says, *i do plenty of things once a day, shower, set my alarm, call my father to tell him i am safe*, she says, *what is love if not being needed and unzipping your throat, if not letting the rats underneath the sink live, because it is the middle of winter?* & though the girl does believe she knows most things, she is willing to accept a new vocabulary from the boy, for instance, when he says *now*, he means *here*, and sometimes *here* is his bedroom floor, sometimes it is a gas station parking lot, the dumpsters behind her school & soon the velvet of being desired begins to harden & the girl must sculpt a new, doughy mantra to pass the time, she thinks *it takes three weeks to form a habit, which means twenty one days until it is as simple as brushing teeth* & she does, of course she does, but soon his body becomes immune to the gift & she begins to realize she cannot bind her mouth into something tighter though she dreams of it, her lips a synched purple liquor bag, but because this is merely a dream, his needs mutate into a tumor with a face & teeth & hands & soon, she is swallowing his pillow, tending to the rug burn on her palms & knees with oil & cloth, she begins to imagine her body being that of the girl in the magician's box, whose upper torso rolls away from her hips with ease & this is effective until the bell rings & the need becomes immunity becomes tumor & now he wants it twice, four times, in the middle of the night but she is asleep but he wants it so she wakes up until she learns to not wake up, learns to lock herself inside of her dreams & stay there until the sore morning &

by now the boy has grown a beard & signed a lease & the girl is preparing to graduate but all she can think about is running into an open field of wheat & it is not long after this moment that the boy goes to work & the girl leaves, not by her own will necessarily, but by the will of the open door & does not return, she says she is triumphant but covers herself in wool even in summer & turns to cold steel when a hand is placed upon her shoulder & she does not give the boy's touch a name until he comes to her in a dream years later & yanks her from sleep as he always did & now, the girl is a woman who can be touched the wrong way but that fact is merely a footnote in the legend of her life, her middle name is not *rip* or *swell* or it is Rose, actually, just like mine & she still moves to ritual but now, that ritual shows itself in the grocery store, where she ponders too long over the ripeness of fruit, until she finds the perfect avocado, the same one you will find on the counter, ready to be cut open & pitted & smashed onto bread.

A Review of Brad Liening's *Ghosts and Doppelgangers*

Hunter S. Thompson once wrote: "Buy the ticket. Take the ride." I bought my ticket when I found the last stocked copy of Brad Liening's *Ghosts and Doppelgangers* (published by the defunct Lowbrow Press) at Moon Palace Books, and he threw me for a loop-de-loop. It's really unlike any poetry book I've ever come across. Thompson also wrote, "when the going gets weird, the weird turn pro." If the world itself is going weird, Brad Liening is a professional worthy of examining it through his kaleidoscopic looking glass.

Really though, it's unwarranted to call any book "weird" in a world that has lost all normalcy. A more appropriate and less offensive word for this book might be "quirky" in the best way. Brad Liening celebrates the mischief of spontaneity and exploration with voices, and his speakers leap from the page as a result of that brazen introspective investigation. "Is it up to each of us to stitch together / the disparate experiential elements / of our lonely days / and peripatetic nights / into a meaningful narrative whole? / If so, holy shit, dude."

I'm the type of guy that gets excited when the first line of a poem is "Aliens turn people into goo," and *Ghosts and Doppelgangers* is chock full of deliciously startling bits. Liening's fireworks will singe your eyebrows; his territory is as courageous as it is ridiculous at times. Guest appearances in the collection include Frankenstein's monster, Tom Selleck, Brett Favre, Mickey Mouse as Secretary of Defense, two whales walking into a bar, vampires, Oprah Winfrey, albino reptiles, Bugs Bunny, Nicolas Cage, Chekhov, Michael Jackson, the Creature from the Black Lagoon, Martin Esslin (who coined the term "Theatre of the Absurd"), Wolf Blitzer, leprechauns, and plenty of other peculiar concrete characters and celebrities that form into a squadron of wondrous but well-balanced abstractions.

An idea explored in the collection is self-analysis through self-perception. The mirror in Liening's case is both brutally honest and playfully imaginative. He's a savage, debauched writer who you'll have endless forgiveness for. His reflective rendition of his physical self is explored via haircuts, genitals, and shameless male bravado, while his ego is explored (and wholly embraced) with shameless "internal memos" that gleam with audacity, as in "Brad's a quick study in the art / of erotic foot massage / and earlobe delectation. / He also makes a mean cup of coffee." Or, "In soft lighting I look ten years younger even though I'm at least five years / older." Or, "Two words: sex ninja! / Even his moustache knows tricks."

Ghosts and Doppelgangers explores how we perceive and define ourselves

and how we broadcast that image to others in a world dominated by media influence. So, who is Brad Liening's definitive self in this collection? You'd have to consult all of them: Lil Brad, Bradley Pee Pants, Brad the Amazing Athlete, Brad Liening with a Mouthful of Blood, Brad Liening Sans Parents, homebound Brad Liening, and you could of course refer to "The Last Will and Testament of Brad Liening." Through his doppelganger speakers, Liening lets it all hang out, and the resulting depiction is that of a boldly goofy poet who isn't afraid to reveal it. Liening allows himself unrestrained freedom with voice. Flocks of his most ostentatious doppelganger selves roam free on the page in all their devious glory.

Liening's lineation is lethal and varies greatly. Longer prosaic excerpts tumble with single words or blunt, shocking phrases. An equilibrium of elaboration and curtiness emerges from his proclivity for both mind-fuckery and quick wit:

With fiery indignation I will defend myself against those outrageous
allegations made by parties unknown who clearly wish to malign my good
name and vituperate against my lovely family, none of whom are to blame or
are involved in any way. / I will be an epistemological orphan. / I will tattoo my
face on my face.

These poems come together like a twisted farce play. Liening lures the reader into oddities and slams the trap door shut: "Remember that demon that played his butt like a trumpet?" I do now, and I'll never forget it. I'm still pondering how exactly the butt is played like a trumpet. I'm imagining a red-skinned contortionist with horns twisting into the necessary position, maybe with some type of brass attachment. I'm wondering what it would sound like where the line blurs between flatulence and jazz. Flip the page and he has a new door open to another, stranger dimension.

I thank Brad for allowing me to laugh with him as he pokes fun at himself and at the line between imagination and the real world, where people can take things too seriously. Sometimes I think poetry could be more accessible to skeptical audiences, and Liening's work has the capacity to reach such readers. It also has the potential to ruffle the feathers of those with uptight attitudes about what art or poetry is "supposed" to be and may even be a remedy for the narrow-minded. I theorize that many people who don't appreciate poetry simply haven't been exposed to the right kinds. To me, Liening's works represent that eureka moment available in contemporary poetry. It's like prying a boulder loose to discover a world teething with unexpected life underneath.

Layers of this collection address broader issues in society, like corporatocracy and class. Released in 2011, poems in *Ghosts and Doppelgangers* have aged remarkably well in regards with the political and societal issues they encompass. For instance, "Poem":

The frozen lake inside
the musician is getting bigger.
It looks like a frozen ocean,

an island of garbage and excess
caught between coasts,
lit on fire and set to wax,
and what magnificent hair!
Who knows how many midriiffs it's touched?
It would look even better
on YouTube or in a loft
in a borough so fucking cool
it doesn't have a name
even though it's our nature
to name what we love
and thus erase it from the earth,
at which time corporate
sponsorship is conferred.
Ditto video game rights.
Here's your official T-shirt.

Liening's virtuosic depiction of the world is one of cataclysmic disarray that is nonetheless endearing—a pell-mell media-driven circus show that provides endless opportunities for relief from its morbidity:

Myopia run amok under
a big bad sun, dragged
for miles over glowing coals.
Does anyone remember
when this was thick woods and farmland?
All our finest dreams and desires
Were frozen with Walt Disney's head.

The world is still a circus of chaos, but we can engage our societal catastrophes with hilarity to parry some of their sting, and we can look to Liening's work as an example of how to accomplish that.

Brad Liening's *Ghosts and Doppelgangers* is boundless hilarity tangled with gut-wrenching bafflement and raw introspection. It's a thoughtful analysis of our celebrity-obsessed culture and its absurdity—an artifact of social media's rise and the subsequent communicative transformation it invoked. This is a warping journey through Liening's front row view of his own mojo and of the world's chaotic, but comically appeasing existence. There's just enough cosmic imagery embedded to match his cosmic mind. If you see him floating up in space somewhere, feel free to wave, but don't entice him to come back down. There's poetry up in them stars, and he's mining it for us.

Casey Knott

MORNING, SPARROW

A fallowed branch sharp
and insistent as crow bone—
I sat so long and so still
that the sparrow paused its dust
bath, cocked its seedy eyes
sideways and down and up in search
of a meaning as the grass bent
and the sun burned in the universe.

Somewhere a telephone rang
and a boy skinned his knee and
someone was singing and a bottle
was opened and a book closed.

Someone was happy for no reason at all.

And somewhere too, the love
of your youth exists, hands conceiving
new histories. And maybe he thinks of you some.

The fruit ripening on vines, thoughts
I have yet to speak.

All these events threading through time
like lights on a string. So many dots—
I'm real, I say. Yes.

ODE TO MY MOTHER'S FACE

Crowned as it is by carob and gray down, lovely across the Oklahoma earth of her shine, my mother's face is an ovate frame, with apostrophe eyebrows possessing the massive planets of her eyes. I love her countenance captured in a photo from fifty years ago, before her lover was killed and not replaced, before the joys and agonies of motherhood—her powdery base against the sharp white of her uniform, a tidy nurse's cap resting comfortably upon her nest of ideas, her graduation smile, her tirelessness. But not like I love her face at 76. Her ears unchanged in size. The knot she owns above her heavy glasses, the sad inflammation crowding her eyes, the deep folds arching away from her widening nose, around her skeptical mouth like parentheses staging the lush curtains of her lips, the ones letting you have just enough show to realize you're missing something intriguing. My mother is the lone freckle on her right cheek.

Meghan Privitello

DAY 1

In 1913, the first highway across the country was built.
From an airplane, the country was presumptuous in its tearing apart of fields.

I want to be a dark road.
To say: Nest, your eggs will be crushed and cooked here.

I am no place to settle.

But then one of the pigs begins to look like a man.
When it asks to cross me I don't know whether to marry it
or cook it.

I mean, there are families to be fed.
There are wedding dresses disintegrating.
There are empty beds where children used to rest.
Now they are out trying to invent a gimmicky balloon that promises less walking
and constant ethereal sleep—a two for one bail out.

In 1913, there were nearly one hundred years left to live.
Every house from New York to California was a shrine
to the oven, the robe, the gold-rimmed teacup.

For the beetle's armor, can you believe in falling asleep
without the television on?

For the porcupine's knives, could you believe for a second
we used to fall in love with each other for free?

Steal what weaponry you can from the animals.

From the road, I see armies of us dressed as ghosts trying to cross.

DAY 11

When the world ends, I want to be sailing on a ship
that, from a distance, looks like a folk painting.

Its misshapen sails will hold my hands
and tell me *we are helpless*
against the wind. I will touch them
as if they are small bruised faces.

From the distance of floating out to sea,
I will look through my telescope to find you
and hemorrhage when I realize
I packed a kaleidoscope instead.

Figuratively, you are the stationary
blue speck in its spectral center.

Literally, you are an almost invisible
wind-burnt man standing in a ditch.

Don't blame my eyes for being distracted
by flashy patterns. They swallow
your dim blue light and spin themselves
into maps of incurable diseases.

Chances are I will never find you.

Unless I have chosen to pack my cello,
in which case I will strum one string
until it becomes drowsy whale music
and hope that you have crawled inside the body
of Moby Dick which would be the only way
you could translate my voice saying:

I am on a ship.
I am sailing towards the horizon.
I am dressed like a star—angry
and unafraid to die.

*The world has been flat all along.
By the time you hear me say this
I will already have fallen over the edge
and forgotten your name.*

DAY 14

When the earthquake hit, it was a surprise party. It opened us like gifts. Suddenly, we knew things.

I can teach you how to stack the cups and saucers in the cabinet so that they don't fall over, ever.

Broken china is so convincing in its misery that I once glued the plates to the floor and walked around them saying:
It could be worse.

I don't ever want to be so crippled that, when I sleep, you sit in your car and call strangers.

Don't ever fall.

I don't want to seal envelopes stuffed with articles about the country's top ten disasters and wait decades for a response in the form of a sweepstakes that promises we will be set for life.

When the earthquake hit, I instantly knew death: the chandelier and clock swaying in slow motion, the reaching out for your lover's hand as you say *Let's get out of here, before the walls crumble around us.*

Matt Mauch

A Review of Sara Lefsyk's *We are Hopelessly Small and Modern Birds*

“Mirror image, see no damage/ See no evil at all/ Kewpie dolls and urine stalls/ Will be laughed at/ The way you’re laughed at now,” sings Paul Westerberg in the The Replacements 1984 hit, “Androgynous.” Well, it was a hit with me, and in my circle. A tender song about gender and norms and bucking the system and falling in love, it was covered in 2015 by a trio of mostly more-famous singers—Joan Jett, Laura Jane Grace, and Miley Cyrus—in support of Cyrus’s Happy Hippie Foundation, which focuses on youth homelessness and LGBTQ matters, and hopes to change the world. In a 2001 video accompanying an earlier Joan Jett cover, Jett reads what is ostensibly a Dick and Jane primer to a class of rapt elementary students. The primer veers from the traditional tale, follow Westerberg’s lyrical path, changing the world for a bunch of kids, in the world of the video at least. It’s a song that’s always in my gravitational field, and its orbit has gotten closer as I’ve been reading Sara Lefsyk’s debut collection, *We are Hopelessly Small and Modern Birds*. While not about about gender issues in the particular, Lefsyk’s book is all about finding oneself a stranger in a world that deems your strangeness a wrong or an illness, and finding a way to overcome that through love. So the song is a perfect, imperfect fit.

One of the first things that stands out as other is Lefsyk’s imagery. It’s shocking. Apocalyptic, even. And, cheering on the speaker, I want to deem the imagery “unapologetic,” but it isn’t that. It just is, because it has to be. Inherent in it is a sense of longing, and a direct appeal to the idea of a muse—the idea of a someone or something who can serve as guide in a landscape that conforms to no norms. Lefsyk writes: “Throughout the day my body becomes a millennium of seagulls and seashit and it’s as if I had spent the whole night in the arms of some deadman,” and of “the suicidal eyes of miniature birds,” and shows us “holy spheres where thousands of roosters sway in the darkness like violins,” and makes a plea to Federico Garcia Lorca, “take me the friend of dead-smashed butterflies. Take me to the miniature priests of idiot brains.” So immersed, I begin to feel as if veils I didn’t know were there are being lifted from the very world we inhabit by one who sees not just differently, but, strangely, more clearly.

One, however, proceeds with caution. Amidst the imagery are hospitals and doctors who deem such seeing wrong. “Those were the days before the asylum,” Lefsyk writes, noting, “All my fingers were insecure patients

in the both the National Public Hospital of Kentucky and the Kingdom of Fecundity Gowns,” spotlighting a clash in points of view regarding the “wellness” of such seeing from such a seer. “Who is going to loan me legroom in the National Public Hospital of Kentucky?” wonders the speaker in “THIS IS AGONY,” continuing, “Because the water that is in us is very psychological and sometimes seems like another whole person altogether.// Sometimes our bodies become very historical.”

Surrealism, thought of as a kind of self portraiture, as a kind perhaps most available to us in dreams—which are also, it should be noted, the purview of noted psychology and psychologists—well, given that, it makes complete sense that Lorca would become one of first muses the speaker seeks out for answers (“I tied eight ghosts and a thousand sequins to your [Lorca’s] hair and wore the gloves of one hundred sadnesses under the lemon shadow of your actual dreams”). Lorca as muse also brings to the waking/dreaming—it becomes wonderfully difficult to distinguish the two—his penchant for socialism: “Above us, the Socialist Party is laying tin cans over the roof so that, when the bigbig rain comes, we may all sleep imprisoned somewhere between the landscape of the rooster and the landscape of the sea.” While the appeals to Lorca are personal, the socialism that accompanies him is always at arm’s length, on the roof, “below us,” outside the window.

The other half of the “us” here, early in the book, in addition to the speaker, is Immanuel Kant, who is both there in the speaker’s dreams and also in her apartment complex. Kant the character here is largely “Kant’s philosophy,” his dictates that we ought to think autonomously, free from the dictates of authority, that it doesn’t matter if a ting is real or not; the question should be, Is it in our own interest to make it so? Kant held the human as the center, like the sun is to our solar system. He believed that we are not able to transcend the bounds of our minds, that we can’t access the “thing-in-itself” (something like Platonic forms), that the external environment is necessary for the establishment of the self. Again, given the nature of the unveiled world this speaker sees, Kant as muse is a seemingly perfect fit. Would that he weren’t in the apartment building she’s in when not hospitalized, and as powerless as she is. “OCCASIONALLY, OUR APARTMENT COMPLEX floats out to sea,” Lefsyk writes, “As it was, Kant and I had our noses somewhere in the distance,” and “‘maybe,’ Kant says: ‘we have been digging holes and lying beside them this whole time after all.’”

Notably, both the speaker and Kant are seeking another to rescue them, a literal Messiah (“In my shadow the alphabet takes the form of a classroom in which the Messiah is an unlikely animal sniffing the edges of this page”). And the speaker is not so much discarding muses as she is accumulating various aspects of them as her journey continues. The imagery continues to do its thing, and the communal sense of order, per socialism, infuses many

of the dreams and/or visions. And as the speaker accumulates, we as readers acclimate. What was strange loses its strangeness and becomes familiar. When the speaker takes her pigeons “out into the streets to snack on various sorts of breads and cheeses” in “I’M TIRED OF THESE SORTS OF WALLS,” these are pet-ish to us, now, the pigeons, the habits of which we are attuned to.

Enter Heidegger, whose philosophy probed authenticity regarding our truthful relationship to the “thrown-ness into a world” nature of existence, and deemed “care” to be humans practically engaged and concerned mode of “being-in-the-world.” Heidegger is some heady shit, and there he is in the hospital with our speaker (“**When his eyes are** closed and no one is looking, Heidegger’s caseworker touches my breast and says I’m some good factory”). The body begins to matter as much as the mind. The boundary-crossing, abusive/illegal encounters with care providers continue here and there, but the primary sexual encounter is with “the son,” a string of occurrences that starts off well but ends badly, and leads to a communal allegiance with “my sisters,” who “all take up arms// and our bodies are really only something/ we have read about in dreams.” Alongside her self-selected mentors and muses, the speaker continues to encounter great resistance to what we, along with her, accept as “the world as it is,” deemed over and again as “illness.”

Enter William James, whose philosophy and psychology contains a differentiation of the selves we are, public and private, the “me” versus the “I.” James was also an early experimenter in the use of macro doses of hallucinogenics to free oneself from the confines of the ego—the literal sense of a self—and to see the world as is. Lefsyk writes: “At the old fish breeders William recalls how, in his youth, he had been haunted by the trout in the Great Bering Sea . . . ‘There is a sort of animal shape hovering above,’ he says. William says, ‘What!’ then eats a very tiny salted cracker. His whole second body expands inside his first. ‘All is well inside the first and second bodies,’ he explains, ‘the world held together with rope, various beams and rope.’// Still, a woman wakes up and feels a wilderness. She says, ‘I feel the wilderness moving inside of me moving outside of me.’” There are continuing appearances of gowns, sometimes put on, sometimes taken off, sometimes made of this or that. The most constant constant here is the reality of an external world as represented by the animals in it, a state of perception commonly described by adventurers into egolessness, though attained here, by our speaker, solely as a by-product of being who she is and seeing how she does. William James indicates that there is danger in the magic, which is the old story: What you are is not a thing it is appropriate to be.

The various guides and guiding here, and the aspects of the guiding that stand up over time, as new guides are met and take the baton, are like

Virgil after Virgil guiding the speaker through an Inferno of the self. As we descend, the speaker pauses to summarize:

Once, I met a man who could divide himself into lakes. “It is imminent,” he said, “we are aligning ourselves with the great spectral figures of our time.”

Then, with a landscape of pheasants in his eyes, and the darkness of hospitals in my blood, we spilled a thousand empty moons.

We had to.

Enter love, but not love as we think of it. The love here is a melding of visions, a melding of the veilessness that has been deemed illness all along (“Then a Savior comes falling out of my dreams”). The other is a real, flesh and blood other. Those who would have been guides earlier in the book are now compatriots and contemporaries (the psychiatrist/psychotherapist Fritz Perls, who invented “Gestalt therapy,” emphasized the “experiential present,” and believed that everyone is caught in webs of relationships; the psychologist Mark Epstein, who mixes concept from both Freud and Buddha; and the coming-full-circle return of Lorca). What could be jarring in a poem—and what was jarring earlier here—become harmonious poems; the lone one has found another who sees as they do. The animals that have part of the imagery throughout are now key to the harmony. The final section of the book is a celebration, then, of a state of mind, a state of being, formerly deemed illness, but now embraced for another has been found who shares it (“And then it was made clear that I would have to reveal to him my most recent DSM diagnosis, which involved being haunted by the ghosts of something like eight different Polish immigrants all at the same time. And so, because of this, I went **out on the great precipice** and I says to the Great Atmospheric Listener that, I hear a hundred birds circling my house and sometimes I think they are ghosts as well and what does the DSM have to say about this?”). Addressing the other, the speaker says, “I will take you back to Kentucky in a covered wagon and, just as the North Wind begins to blow tiny fish skeletons all over the land, we will see that we have actually been looking through two layers of trifocals turned backwards this whole time.”

In the penultimate verse of “Androgynous”—“Now, something meets boy, and/ something meets girl/ They both look the same/ They’re overjoyed in this world/ Same hair, revolution/ Unisex, evolution/ Tomorrow who’s gonna fuss”—we get the same sort of triumph of two that we get in the final section

of *We Are Hopelessly Small and Modern Birds*. It's a triumph that carries a reader away like the best of happy endings. I am reticent to admit how many stars I inked above poems in this section, to how many pages I dog-eared, just as I would be reticent to be seen crying at the close of a movie, which is just a damn movie, and not real. That the mantle of "Androgynous" has been taken up by others is a testament to its honesty and penchant to be healing, welcoming, loving. Sara Lefsyk, with this book, sings a song that does the same.

THE LOVER AS DREAM

we are at a circus.
we are not lovers anymore—
this is somewhere in the aftermath
of our loud & bloody affair
& it is raining & there are mice
everywhere, zig-zagging across
the carnival cement, panicking
as the water grows deeper around our feet
they're going to drown, i keep
saying but she doesn't respond,
she wants to know why i'm wearing lipstick

who are you always dressing up for

they're going to drown

who are you always dressing up for

they're going to drown

i once heard the word *conversation*
described as a *progression of exchanges*
but there is no progress here
so maybe i will instead compare this
to the bullet drop—the idea that if you shoot
a gun and drop a bullet from one location
they will hit the floor at the same time,
hundreds of feet apart.

we are born from the same city
of worry and doubt and fear of loss
but always end up so far
from each other.

she takes me to see the elephants
& i notice that all of the animals
have feeding tubes, bags collecting

pus at the base of their stomachs
& i keep using the word *inhumane*.

she wants to take a photo
of the fat, grey beast who is dancing
on its brooding hind legs
for a crowd of leering tourists
& when i give her my phone
she digs through it, finds the evidence
of my new, bright life,
my new, bright lover.

who is she

this is inhumane

who is she

this is inhumane

we met up to exchange something
of her's i had—an artifact from a time
we thought each other's homes
safe enough to leave our things
but whatever it was is not here
anymore, the boil of her backbite
is the only thing we hold together
now & so i tell her it's time for me
to go & she agrees, she wants
to stay anyway, she wants to see
the grand finale, the elephant
painting a picture with its nose
& so i leave her there, amongst
the sticky chaos, the sweet wound.

it is still pouring, i am still
heavy with the weight of living,
there is a line of sunburned
people snaking towards the entrance
& still, no one cares about the mice.

let go

i remember crying uncle
my brother the bird, the plane
thwarted
and now i know:
if i got rid of all the things
i'd just get some more

i don't believe
in safety in numbers
so many safety pins
oh
if only i could sew
*impeded in my strivings for perfection
cleanliness, godliness, riches—
i'd settle for godliness, actually
okay, cleanliness, I suppose*

and time
more than all the rest
time in any direction

this is my catastrophe
so small, so insignificant
a banality threatening
to reveal its true nature
i don't even play dominoes
let alone poker

at night i dream of
—no i remember—
a large dark closet
wonder filled
and a small bathroom

on the floor
with the doors closed
cool tiles, soft rugs,
toilet paper—
 peace

where, then, is my resistance
my goodness
my apple
my dream

Afterword/ Heidi Czerwiec

As I'm writing the afterword for this issue, it's the fourth (*fourth!*) anniversary of the death of Eric Garner, who suffocated after NYPD officers placed him in an illegal chokehold, despite Garner repeatedly pleading "I can't breathe." In observance, several of my writer friends have been reposting Ross Gay's brief yet powerful elegy for Garner, "A Small Needful Fact." The poem, one long sentence draped across fifteen lines, begins by telling us the needful fact—that Garner worked for the Parks and Rec. Horticultural Department—before telling us what that fact means: "in all likelihood,/ he put gently into the earth/ some plants which . . . / . . . / continue to grow . . ." Ross's conclusion is simultaneously a gut-punch, a homily, and a quiet triumph as he explains that the outcome of Garner's work is the work of plants, "making it easier/ for us to breathe."

This past year, this journal's staff—mainly students from regional community colleges—have been reading the poems sent to and solicited by us, and a lot of that work has been dark. A lot of the past year has been dark. At the same time, the staff members have been reviewing and writing critical work about recent poetry by writers like Ross Gay, Danez Smith, and others—poets who, from a variety of voices, reject irony in order to engage with an emotional directness that's refreshing and welcome. Poets who deal with dark matter yet still say, guilelessly, lines like "The heart wants/ her horses back" (Ada Limón, "Downhearted") or "This place could be beautiful,/ right? You could make this place beautiful" (Maggie Smith, "Good Bones").

So it's no wonder, then, that the student staff chose to arrange the poems of this issue in a progression leading from dark to light. And no wonder that I'm thinking about Gay's awful and amazing poem, which manages to do just that. We need poetry from a variety of voices—Gay, Smith, and the poets of Volume 8—who can represent this fractured world and still love it, who can point out to us a path through it, and who can keep us good company on the journey, making it easier to keep breathing.

