

# The AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW

MAY/JUNE 2018

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VOL. 47/NO. 3

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## DIANE SEUSS

I Climbed Out of the Painting  
Called *Paradise*  
& Other Poems

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## JOSHUA BECKMAN

Friendship, Porousness  
& the Intimate Experience  
of Poetry

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## RIGOBERTO GONZÁLEZ

The Incredible Story of  
Las Poquianchis of Guanajuato

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## TRACI BRIMHALL

Dearest Thanatos,  
& Other Poems

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DIANE SEUSS: photograph by Gabrielle Montesanti

### New Work by

CORTNEY LAMAR  
CHARLESTON  
CARRIE FOUNTAIN  
KIEN LAM  
IAIN HALEY POLLOCK



The Editors of  
*The American Poetry Review*  
and  
The Honickman Foundation  
are happy to announce  
the winner of the

2018  
APR/HONICKMAN  
First Book Prize

Jacob Saenz  
*Throwing the Crown*



Safa Yalaz

The APR/Honickman First Book Prize is an award of \$3,000 and publication of a volume of poetry. Jacob Saenz's *Throwing the Crown*, with an introduction by Gregory Pardlo, will be published in September 2018, with distribution by Copper Canyon Press through Consortium.

The prize is made possible by the partnership between The Honickman Foundation and *The American Poetry Review*.

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The Editors are grateful for the opportunity to consider unsolicited manuscripts. Please enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope with your manuscript or submit online at www.aprweb.org.

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The Editors of APR award these annual prizes:

**The Stanley Kunitz Memorial Prize:** A prize of \$1,000 and publication of the winning poem in *The American Poetry Review*, awarded to a poet under 40 years of age in honor of the late Stanley Kunitz's dedication to mentoring poets.

**The Jerome J. Shestack Poetry Prize:** Two annual awards of \$1,000 each for poetry published in the magazine during the calendar year.

**The APR/Honickman First Book Prize:** In partnership with The Honickman Foundation, an annual prize for a first book of poetry, with an award of \$3,000, an introduction by the judge, publication of the book, and distribution by Copper Canyon Press through Consortium.

five poems

**Passover Lamb**

Within the painting's real frame  
 is a secondary, painted frame composed  
 of flowers—roses, white lilies, salmon-tinted poppies,  
 and the blossoms of fruit trees. Inside the floral  
 frame, she's painted another frame,  
 this one nearly black, and elliptical, with an angelic head,  
 as if carved there, and wings, painted at the top. Two clusters  
 of grapes, one purple, one green, flank the head,  
 seeming to balance the illusory frame, the grapes so ripe  
 they appear ready to drop from their stems. Within the false frame's  
 false window, we see the Passover lamb, prepared for slaughter.  
 It's painted prone on a black, petal-strewn board,  
 the legs tied together at the middle joint  
 so that the pointed hooves fan out from their binding  
 like the sepal at the base of a bloom. The lamb's curls  
 are perfectly rendered, as are its flanks,  
 and soft, folded ear and large, dark eye, cast down.  
 It fought hard, but the fight is over.  
 The pink nose rests on the black plane of the board.  
 I imagine small, huffing breaths, breath that smells sweet  
 like the breath of an infant. (I remember those days,  
 when my child's breath was sweet.) All that's left to be finished  
 is a blade to the throat, a small struggle, a cry,  
 and then all of those flowers washed in blood.  
 The painter stages the scene with layers of artifice.  
 My eye journeys through the floral, the divine, the decorative,  
 as through theater curtains, until I land upon the lamb  
*just before*—just before the death of tenderness.

**American Still Lifes  
 (the Gothic Sublime in 102 Syllables)**

Still life with stack of bills phone cord cig butt and freezer-burned Dreamsicle  
 Still life with Easter Bunny twenty caged minks and rusty meat grinder  
 Still life with whiskey wooden leg two potpies and a dead parakeet  
 Still life with pork rinds pickled peppers and the Book of Revelation  
 Still life with feeding tube oxygen half-eaten raspberry Zinger  
 Still life with convenience store pecking order shotgun blast to the face

**Young Hare**

Oh my love, Albrecht Dürer, your hare  
 is not a spectacle, it is not an exploding hare,  
 it is not a projection of the young hare  
 within you, the gentleness in you, or a disassembled hare,  
 nor a subliminal or concealed hare,  
 nor is it the imagination as hare  
 nor the soul as a long-eared, soft-eared hare,  
 Dürer, you painted this hare,  
 some say you killed a field hare  
 and brought it into your studio, or bagged a live hare

and caged it so you could look hard at a wild hare  
 without it running off into thorn bushes as hares

will do, and you sketched the hare  
 and laid down a watercolor wash over the hare  
 and then meticulously painted-in all the browns of hare,  
 toast brown, tawny, dim, pipe-tobacco brown of hare,  
 olive, fawn, topaz, bone brown until the hare  
 became dimensional under your hand, the thick hare

fur, the mottled shag, the nobility of the nose, the hare  
 toenails, black and sharp and curved, and the dense hare  
 ears, pod-shaped, articulated, substantial, erect, hare  
 whiskers and eyebrows, their wiry grace, the ruff of hare  
 neck fur, the multi-directional fur over the thick hare  
 haunches, and did I say the dark inside the hare

ears, how I want to follow the darkness of the hare  
 and stroke the dark within its ears, to feel the hare  
 ears with my fingers, and the white tuft, the hare  
 anomaly you painted on its side, and the fleshy hare  
 cheeks, how I want to squeeze them, and the hare  
 reticence, how I want to explore it, and the downturned hare

eye, it will not acknowledge or appease, the black-brown hare  
 eye in which you painted the reflection of a window in the hare  
 pupil, maybe your studio window, in the hare's  
 eye, why does that window feel so intimate in the hare's  
 unreadable eye, why do I press my face to the window to see the hare  
 as you see it, raising your chin to look and then back to the hare

on the page, the thin hair of your brush and your own hair  
 waving gold down your back, hair I see as you see the hare.  
 In the hare's eye you see me there, my swaying black hair.

**What Could Be More Beautiful Than  
 Fede Galizia's Cherries?**

On the left, five cherries joined at the stem-end and their nest of nearly  
 black leaves. A small gold butterfly rests its thorax against a leaf. On the  
 right, three pears united, again, at the stem-end. The stems are melded to a  
 bit of the branch of the pear tree that made them. There are dark leaves, for  
 balance with the right, and a single cherry dangles from the elevated tray for  
 equilibrium with the gold butterfly. The profusion of cherries on the silver  
 dish are cherries as we dream of them. Each perfectly spherical, nothing  
 smashed or distorted, no worms or scars, just perfect cherries lit as if each  
 held a small red room, and a girl, and a candle bringing gold up through the  
 red walls. They're sour cherries. Bright red with something yellow in their  
 nature. A tartness that hurts the glands. Did she shine them, wax them? Each  
 is branded by light. And the gold stems waterfall down. She loves them, the  
 chance they give her to paint lines as well as spheres. The stem of the elevated  
 tray is a prototype for "stem." It's engraved with something like valances,  
 curtains behind which Fede, never married, it is written, lies on a small bed  
 in Milan, dying of the plague.

## I Climbed Out of the Painting Called *Paradise*

and padded barefoot across the cold marble floor of the museum. Outside, down the slate stairway, the ferry to the mainland awaited me.

Awaited all escapees. "Fee!" the Ferrymaster bellowed, but all I had to offer him was my last apple, a Golden Delicious. He grabbed it and took a bite with his horse teeth. He was so transparent I could see the bite as it traveled down his esophagus and came to rest in the cemetery of his stomach. "Shoes!" he yelled. It turns out he had a cardboard box full of shoes just for this occasion.

Most escapees were shoeless. I chose a red pair, but they pinched, so ended up with some worn sandals, the kind that White Jesus wears in depictions of him walking his lonely road. Once they were on my feet, the ferry began to glide toward the mainland like a drop of cream down a small mirror. There was no turning back; the museum was already lost in memory, which looks like fog.

The Ferrymaster used a long stick, pushed it into the silt at the bottom of the harbor to guide us along. "That ain't silt," he said, mindreading.

"That's escapees who jumped ship." And I looked into the glassy water and saw their bodies down there, layers of girls still radiant

with the green-gold light of Paradise, wearing borrowed shoes. When we reached the mainland, nothing looked familiar, though

it's said we were all born here. The Ferrymaster lowered the rusty gangplank with a bang. I knew it was rust; the word was nestled

in a cubbyhole in my brain, but I'd never seen it before. "Git!" he shouted. "And leave the shoes!" He talked always with exclamation

points, which I'd never seen before. They hung over his head like the droppings of scavenger birds. "What's this place called?" I cried

as he pulled away from the pier, but he only grinned like a skull grins, without humor. My feet were boiling on the asphalt. I needed shoes,

and coins to buy them with. Shoes and a pile of gold. There were people, hundreds of them, crisscrossing each other's paths like ants or bees,

carrying tall cups and printed papers and paying me no mind. Only one, with hair the color of a blood orange, stopped

for a moment, and stared. "Hey, beautiful," he said, which told me I was real. "Where do I go?" I asked. There were buildings

made of angles that bent sunlight, and roads curving back on themselves like snakes and crossing each other like crucifixes.

"Home to mommy!" the man said, and he laughed and showed the gold in his teeth. He was right; I had a mommy. A mother

and a sister. Mother with purple rivers of veins in her hands. Sister with pale lavender ones at her temples. My mother's hair,

white like a cloud of apple blossoms. I could picture her arranging peaches in a bowl, and I remembered our house, small and gray,

and beside it a cemetery on a hillside, and I remembered Death, and how the body is laid inside a box with a pillow for its head

and its hands crossed over its chest, and then the lid is closed forever and the box is lowered into a vault in the ground,

and the vault receives its lid, and earth is loaded on top of it and tamped down to keep the body from escaping. I remembered

it all: my yellow room, my little crib with decals of butterflies and a black-and-white dog and a gold cat on the headboard,

how I'd compose stories about them in my head before I could speak, and the yellow bird we kept in a cage, and the bog

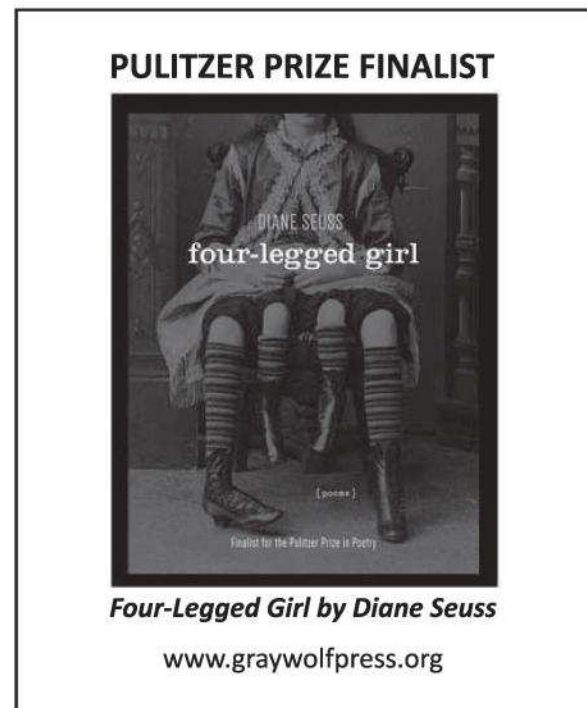
behind the house, the brown velvet cattails and how they exploded into sheep's wool in late summer, and the milkweeds, their mysterious

seam like the smile of Mona Lisa with milk on her lips, how they opened and their seeds were carried on the wind like ships

made of feathers, and Father, wearing a back brace, who would not be getting well and who could no longer work or play or lift me

into his arms, and I went running toward it, all of it. I wanted my mother, and this is why I left Paradise.

DIANE SEUSS is the author of four books, including *Four-Legged Girl*, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and *Wolf Lake*, *White Gown Blown Open*, winner of the Juniper Prize. These poems appear in her newest collection, *Still Life with Two Dead Peacocks and a Girl* (Graywolf, 2018).



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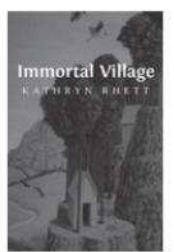
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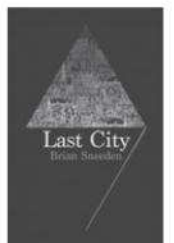
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five poems

**Dearest Thanatos,**

Not, I'll not kiss your lionlimb, not lap back the rattle in my ribs  
 like a lone pill going to powder  
 in an orange plastic bottle. Not, no not sing anymore of the wretch  
 and wrestle. No more ministers  
 to drive words through my wrists and leave me for the patient circles  
 of scavengers. No. You didn't kill me.  
 Not because, some days—yes—I wished for it but chose a different  
 courage. I stopped asking the mirror  
 for a dream and opening it like a door. I wished to welcome back  
 feeling, that whole mansion of trembling  
 rooms, wished to break every window, let the light storm through.  
 On my knees I wished for tempest,  
 for rack and screw. I asked for churchless pleasures to disturb my numb  
 comfort, wanted lick and wallow,  
 wished to swallow the laugh out of my child's mouth, and—my God—  
 wished for even the shame of an apple.  
 Now my wishes are down to two: Staying alive. And wanting to.

**From the Buried Kingdom of Together Still**

*after Natalie Diaz*

Let me not call it *denial* anymore  
 Let me name the miles between his mouth and mine  
 Temporary as Season  
 And then let it be spring and bruiseless again  
 rank as geraniums in the noon heat  
 astonished as skin before blood slips like a memory  
 across the distance of a wound  
 Like you I have let myself belong to someone  
 who stood on a bridge and told me he'd never leave  
 two days before he did  
 But who doesn't ask  
 for a lie when the air heaves, unsweet and green,  
 with a stalled rain and a sky blue as a new world  
 Let me not call it *bargaining* anymore  
 and say a wish is the daughter of longing  
 natural consequence youngest shame oldest hunger  
 Let me come to the altar of each noun and offer  
 to *distance*, burnt roses and an eastern wind  
 to *time*, the black hourglass in the gold of a goat's eye  
 to *greed*, my tongue, rotten garnets scabbed at its root  
 But not my vocal cords, the pearl of each blister hurting its sister  
 the sternum-burn of that scream its painful goodness  
 When you tell me the man who left me held our ashen love  
 and accepted its death but I kept trying to administer CPR  
 I put a cigarette out on an apple  
 bend it into an italic s in the skin  
 I bite the flesh  
 where I burned it taste the pink and gray wind of April  
 when Kansas ranchers driptorch the prairie  
 Maybe when he said *always* he meant  
 asleep like honey new as a crocus as far from now

as the ghost that sank between us like a promise or a knife  
 Let me call it *then* or *never* or accept that a heart heals  
 like a grave  
 Let the bluestem and switchgrass insist  
 until I rise until I call myself A Thousand Yeses until it is true

**If You Want to Fall in Love Again**

Meet me in the mint field under a black umbrella  
 Half your memories wait there in the shallow burial  
 of a cigar box labeled *My Once and Future Homecoming*  
 The prairie and its empire of grasses aged from green  
 to champagne and my pupils are useless in this biblical light  
 A stray wandered through the backdoor I left open  
 I gave it your middle name picked it up by its neck  
 Ticks studded its ribs like proofless rubies  
 I do that a lot now Leaving doors open See how little  
 I've changed I still cover the eastern windows with masking tape  
 X's in every storm Once I was in love with leaving  
 with wearing a dress with forty-two white buttons down the back  
 Now I know the German name for the counterfeit darkness  
 you see when you close your eyes translates to *own light*

When I press my eyelids looking for it red spreads  
 its knowing stain the way the oil in our fingertips once did  
 darkening pages of hand-me-down erotica as we sucked each other's toes

The months after you left fantasy was a form of injury  
 I catalogued each *What if* in cursive to try and wish my way  
 across the thin distance between faith and waiting

Truth is I put up with your bad waltzing because it made you close  
 enough to kiss to push the pin in your boutonniere  
 into your breastbone I think I might be in love again  
 this time with the finch pilfering purple coneflower seeds in my garden

You loved once the prayer in me where a prayer shouldn't be  
 the crisis with a theme The way I kneaded breath  
 into the shape of you How your absence reefs my skin

How your breath once did How you tailored your sentences  
 to almost but not quite reach the floor The parts of me  
 that ache for you lately are incus malleus stapes

And when I whisper *Stay* to the scentless side of the bed  
 you almost do or your voice does my heart  
 in its bone kennel shaking convinced it can hear you  
 from that far from here from this home I cannot live in or leave

**Pastoral Before Decomposition**

I imagine it lovely, the place he was killed,  
 imagine darkness as clear as it was before God  
 learned to speak, imagine the Milky Way burning  
 through the light-stained night, imagine trees blacker  
 than the sky, and then imagine cicadas bruising April.  
 The cold was crisp, I imagine, and scooped out stale  
 carbon dioxide in his alveoli. One of those good pains.  
 My imagination wants to redeem the bareness of fact,  
 so I imagine the field he died in as a place we might  
 have picnicked, imagine wind entering his clothes

and leaving again—not the knife. No. I will only imagine the way the cars versed themselves in curve and velocity through the arterial streets. Not how the men took turns, not the way his body proved to the medical examiner that he struggled, lifted his hands to defend himself—no, I imagine the grass, how it must have nodded along, how his phone lit up with a blue light blinking, blinking at the driver who stayed behind, his thumb brushing the red *END* from the screen like wiping an eyelash from his lover's cheek. I imagine her, only hours away, letting the spring salt into her sleepless room, Atlantic waves curling in on themselves, red tide creeping towards shore, and the suffocated fish with bellies like moonlight doing what is surely required of all the dead and rising.

## Crime and Punishment

after Francis Bacon

The night you died, I was alone and let the phone go to voicemail. I ate from April's greening mouth,

O my sorrow. I did not know. No one knew. Who knows why we were made in God's likeness but not liked by God.

At the prison art show, self-portraits by one of your killers. He, the man weeping. He, the man caged. He, the matador

who caught the bulls' horns like a bouquet. He and I had something in common after all. We beguile ourselves.

We dream of the same man after two glasses of moonshine. Bacon said a portrait teaches us about the artist, in which case

I am your killer's seceding heart with a torn ventricle for a flag. The oldest recording is not what I was told,

is not Edison shouting Mary Had a Little Lamb into tin. It's a French folk singer ghosting Clair de Lune through

the scratching with news of moonlight. O, starless, hereditary night offended by facts. Who wants to hear the dead?

It's the dying I'm after. It's transformation that I want. Even if I can't paint a smile or discreet red, I can practice

my injuries in private. I place your body in a field. I place it in a closed casket. I place it in a paragraph. An image wounds

in the wrong location. The horror of a carcass is the beauty of a butcher shop. I place your body in bed, a fan stirring

the hairs on your chest. At the prison art show, it all came out—the undisciplined sympathy, the undammed need

of the condemned to speak as oil, as ink, as your death tattooed on a stranger's cheek. The object is not objective,

but I always find myself on my knees in front of it, choosing between God and all those lovely golden calves.

The brush herds the lamb into my hands and subjects it to mercy. My pleasures are not accidents. I revived

the brazen bull's metal torso with watercolor, big enough for a man, the tube from the chest's hollow to the audience

who waits, lights the fire, listens as the man turning to meat inside the fabricated body of a bull and his screams transform

into singing. This is what I am waiting for, for the state to take my revenge for me. I held a candle at the vigil,

little thorn of fire threatening to obscure what the darkness confirmed. Guilt, a gulf unbridged. Grief, the lair of stillness.

I want to see God's face, to lick the white of his eye, to order him to die for me again. I want to dig up your body still clothed

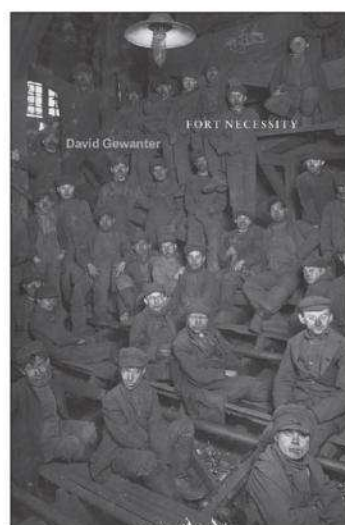
in heaven and give you back to the world, give you back as lightning, as the electric volt that rides through a man,

through the chair he's strapped to, his last words transcribed for the record, known, remembered, unrightfully saved.

TRACI BRIMHALL is the author of *Saudade* (Copper Canyon, 2017), *Our Lady of the Ruins* (W.W. Norton, 2012), and *Rookery* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2010). She's received a National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowship and is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Kansas State University.

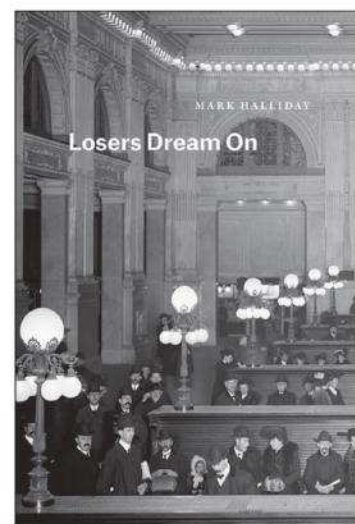
## Poetry from Chicago

PHOENIX  POETS



### Fort Necessity David Gewanter

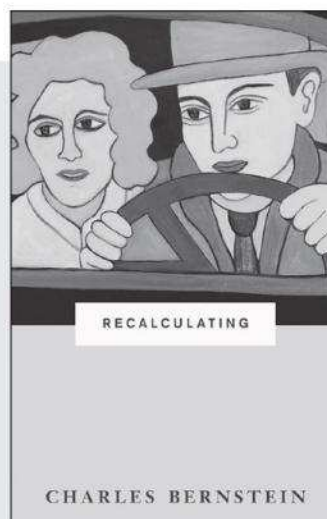
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# AIMEE NEZHUKUMATATHIL

## First Time on the Funicular

Monte San Salvatore, Switzerland

All I can think is what happens if the cables snap  
and we slide down this striped Swiss mountain

made of oceanic quartz on its edelweiss-covered face.  
At the amethyst peak is a lightning museum

where you can bolt a bright coin of knowledge  
into your neck like the pale green monster

of classic horror movies, back when no blood  
was ever seen, never pulsed or throbbed

on screen. And the lightning collector has not  
seen action in ages, no arcing low to engulf

a tree in flame because most lightning here  
catches between clouds. Our kids play back home

with their grandparents and what have we done—  
first we dared eat the finest risotto, drink wine

over a white tablecloth before noon, and now  
we are sliding up a mountain to see about lightning.

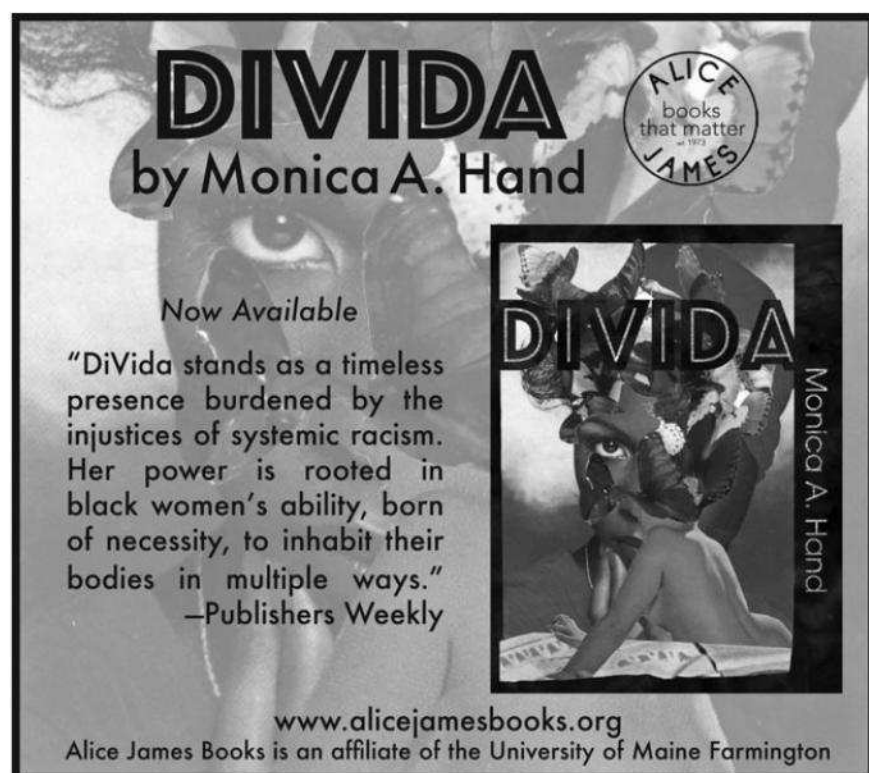
Serves us right if we were struck. But our landing  
is soft, the glossy red doors of the funicular open

and spill us all a few steps away from the cinnabar  
summit, dotted with blue moths. Even in thinned air

I still reach for your hand. Before our fingers  
laced, I'm certain the old ladies who stared

at us the whole way up saw it too: the spark,  
the crackle, the brilliant strike between us

AIMEE NEZHUKUMATATHIL'S newest book of poetry is *Oceanic* (Copper Canyon, 2018). Her nature essay collection, *World of Wonder*, is forthcoming from Milkweed Editions in 2019. She is poetry editor of *Orion* and is Professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Mississippi MFA program.



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## Of Time and the Line

### *The Craft of Tempo*

MEAN OVER THE COURSE OF THIS ESSAY to make some probes into *tempo*, one of the least discussed properties of poetry. By tempo, I mean the speed or slowness of the voice that's awakened in the audile imagination of the reader, bent silently over her book. The tempo of the poem is what she seeks to reproduce aloud when she reads the poem to an audience. My hope is simple: to lift into light certain techniques and principles by which the tempo of a poem is established and manipulated. My focus will tend to fall on the uptempo, as in the last roughly sixty years American poets have made marvelous advances in that area, affixing more recognizably quickened speaking tones to the page than at any other point in the history of English language verse. Much truly wonderful poetry has ensued. My hunch is that these tempos do more than exemplify personality, mood, and attitude; they correspond to different cognitive states; they lead to different phyla of image matter; they also carry the poet through different dialectical thought processes (think a fast spiraling vs. a slow straight line) and into different resolutions.

In a free-verse poem, a lively tempo can also have the practical effect of serving as a meter surrogate, replacing meter as a kind of a truss rod, clothesline, or skewer that holds together the sounds of words in a unified line. A quick tempo to a line can bind the words like an elastic string, literally pulling the sounds of words closer together. As breaths can't be so easily "snuck," as saxophonists say, a faster tempo will often tend to organize the breathing spaces to the line endings. It will also furnish lines with an increased difference in volume between accented and unaccented syllables. When we increase the speed of our speech, we almost always increase our speaking volume. When we increase volume, we increase the *difference* between the volume of our stressed and unstressed syllables. Yell across a street with somebody if you want to experience this freshly. HEY JOSTworth, HOWya DOOOin!!!?? The organization of breath and an increased "hilliness" to the syllables—pleasurable features of poetry—are features one can tend to lose in poems without meter. An uptempo speaker can fill the void.

So how does tempo, in poetry, come to exist? For one thing, it's an inferred property. There are no italicized Italian adverbs like *adagio* or *allegro* in the white space between the titles and first lines of poems to suggest how fast the words ought to follow one another. But it's an absence we rather prefer, like an absence of needing a babysitter. Because when we read a poem like Frank O'Hara's "Poem [Lana Turner has Collapsed!]," we're aware that a voice is speaking quickly. No one has to tell us this. When we read a poem like James Wright's "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio," we sense that a voice is speaking slowly. We seem to be *grasped* by these respective tempos, as our bodies are by the tempos in music, and yet how is it that we know? Well, it's never a single reason, because tempo in a free-verse poem is always a composite property. Multiple horses are hitched to the wagon, and in some cases, they aren't even pulling in the same direction. Some of those factors that influence the tempo of a poem are (but are not limited to): *sentence-sounds*, *punctuation*, *line-length*, *content*, *diction*, and *vowel sounds*. There's

also *rhetorical anaphora*, which in combination with a long line has been pumping the gas pedal on American poems since 1855. While my list isn't intended as an outright hierarchy, my sense is that the most important of these factors is the *sentence-sound*.

Before I get started exploring the sentence-sound and the ingredients of tempo, though, I think it's useful to make a few general notes about its function in everyday speech. Speed is distance divided by time, whether one is measuring a bullet, an inchworm, or the growth of a teenager. When measuring the speed of a voice, speech pathologists most regularly measure distance not in words, but in syllables. Words, after all, contain varied amounts of syllables. Of course, not all syllables are created equally. (Poets love to point out that "Jack" is shorter than "John," and a two-syllable "cricket" comes out fast as a one-syllable "slug.") In any event, syllables per second is a more precise measurement than words per minute.

According to sources on the internet, the rate of "normal" speech is about 4 syllables per second. This is a "gross rate," inclusive of pauses and hesitations. I see also that a slow talker of English utters 2–3 syllables per second, a medium talker makes her points in about 3–4 syll./sec., and a fast talker ejects them at a clip of 5–9 syll./sec. I reason then that the tempo of a poem, the rate of the voice awakened in the audile imagination, would seem to fall within this range: 2–9 syllables per second.

To get a sense for how these numbers translate to actual poems, I decide to stage an impromptu experiment involving the O'Hara and Wright poems I mentioned earlier as being almost paradigmatically "fast" and "slow." I spend about twenty minutes making voice recordings of these two famous poems, imagining I'm delivering each to a small audience as best I can. "Poem [Lana Turner has Collapsed!]" and "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio" actually have a certain affinity. Both are unmetred American poems written early in the 1960s by men then in their early 30s. Both are what you might call *monophonic* or *mono-colloquial*: there is one speaking voice in each. Both introduce an "I" in the second line, and it's an "I" that the reader, regardless of intention, tends to conflate with the poet. Perhaps most importantly, both poems deal with situations of vicarious living, how we're affected by those lives we watch. Wright's poem contains 111 syllables, 12 lines, and 3 stanzas. O'Hara's poem contains 143 syllables, and it spreads these over 17 lines and a single stanza.

For my purposes, I say each poem three times, listening to the results after each take, making adjustments. The most satisfying reading of "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio" travels from first word to last word in 34 seconds. I find that "Poem [Lana Turner Has Collapsed!]" sounds best at 29 seconds. At these rates, my voice matches the respective tones I imagine while silently reading, and I feel a kind of rightness, inasmuch as one can feel any kind of rightness at the noise of one's own voice.

Dividing the total syllables in each poem by the amount of seconds it took to read them convincingly, I find that Wright's poem paces at 3.26 syl-

lables per second, O'Hara's at 4.93. The results are a surprise, as I expected the variation to be more pronounced. Both speaking voices are actually within the range of "normal." It seems the tempo of a poem lives in a narrower range, perhaps between 3 and 5.5 syllables per second.

But now I'm curious about something else. After some more math, I spend another half hour trying to read the Wright poem at the rate of the O'Hara poem, and vice versa. This is trickier, as I'm trying to spread O'Hara's poem over nearly 44 seconds and compress Wright's into 22 seconds. When I get it, though, I'm amazed at the results. Separated from its characteristic tempo, each poem completely falls apart. Slowed down, the O'Hara poem ceases to care about its subject matter. It loses the energy of its silly, self-consciously-outsized, but unapologetic attachment. In fact, the sort of relationship the poem celebrates, to a star the speaker doesn't personally know, seems unbelievable. Lana Turner has collapsed, and so what? Word choices like "trotting" and "suddenly," which preserve the speed of that iconic opening exclamation, make no sense.

As for the Wright poem, if said at the nearly 5 syllable per second rate that suits the O'Hara poem, the results are even worse: the voice traffics in lies. In the opening stanza, the one action taken by Wright's speaker is an action of mind. "I think," says the speaker, where "think" is a synonym for "call to mind the humanity of":

In the Shreve High football stadium,  
I think of Polacks nursing long beers in  
Tiltonsville,  
and gray faces of Negroes in the blast furnace  
at Benwood,  
and the ruptured night watchman of Wheeling  
Steel,  
dreaming of heroes.

Said too swiftly, the sense is that short shrift is given to the plights of these Ohioans and West Virginians and their need to escape into heroes. The speaker hasn't *really* thought of them. The conclusive move late in the poem, grounded as it is in the internalization of the lives of these men gathered in the stadium, becomes likewise unbelievable.

What's intriguing is that what falls out of each of these poems, if the tempo cues aren't observed, is the element of *attachment*. It's an attachment of speaker to content that redounds as an attachment of reader to poem. A relative slowness is essential to Wright's empathic observation and reasoning imagination, just as relative speed is essential to O'Hara's enactment of the twining together of the narratives of a self and a favorite Hollywood star.

#### The Sentence-Sound

I've used this term a few times now, and for those who weren't baptized into it, I serve you, I hope, by explaining it in some detail. It's a useful tool for every American poet to have in the terminology belt. The sentence-sound was Robert Frost's name for a mysterious entity of tonal conveyance he became aware of around the time of the publication of *A Boy's Will*. He went on to outline it over the course of several letters written in 1913 and 1914. In these missives, written to his for-

mer student John Bartlett and his former colleague Sydney Cox (and summarized in a 1915 lecture to the children of the Browne and Nicholls school), Frost alternately calls his discovery “a new definition of the sentence,” “the sound of sense,” “the abstract sound of sense,” “the speaking tone,” “the *living* sound of speech,” “the ACTION of the voice,” and “the abstract vitality of our speech.” Perhaps that isn’t even all. What we have of his thinking on the matter more resembles spinning clay than glazed urn, but his own tone is clear: Frost believed he’d found the secret fire at the center of poetry, and this vitalizing and abstract force was the sentence-sound. Reading the texts in full, proof of its existence begins to appear out of his examples, and a sense of how he conceptualized it takes shape in his verb-metaphors. On one occasion, it’s boldly hypostasized into, of all things, a clothesline. Frost writes to Bartlett on February 22, 1914:

I give you a new definition of a sentence.  
A sentence is a sound in itself on which other sounds called words may be strung.

You may string words together without a sentence-sound just as you may tie clothes together by the sleeves and stretch them without a clothesline between two trees, but—it is bad for the clothes.

The number of words you may string on one sentence-sound is not fixed but there is always a danger of overloading. . . .

[Sentence-sounds] are apprehended by the ear. They are gathered by the ear from the vernacular and brought into books.

He’s said much here, but for our purposes, we might think of a sentence-sound as what allows a reader to hear, in her audile imagination, the exact posture of a voice. When we inadvertently “edit out the voice” in one of our own poems, what we’ve done is rubbed out a particular sentence-sound we might have had on the page before we started fiddling. We’ve cut the cord on this energizing element, or we’ve overloaded it. Crucial to Frost’s concept of the sentence-sound is the idea of *recognition*. A sentence-sound can be thought of as what creates the act of recognition when we recognize the exact tone of a voice on a page, the precise angle of speech. In Frost’s view, “You can’t read a single good sentence with the salt in it unless you have previously heard it spoken.”

There’s also a stranger force at play in the function of sentence-sounds, akin to the way that an electrified wire also behaves as a magnet. When a sentence-sound is running through a line of words, we recognize more than just the precise attitude of the speaker towards the content: our imaginations are activated. The “imagining ear,” as Frost called it, is capable of conjuring brief flashing scenes out of certain speaking tones, because these tones are linked to memories of the specific contexts and events in which these tones originate. A tone is struck, and our brains light up. Fans of Ashbery and Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* likely have noticed this phenomenon, and they might be surprised at how usefully Frost’s conception illuminates these authors’ experiments. Ashbery was a mad scientist in his deployment of a wide array of sentence-sounds, and with a line such as “Just a teardrop of milk, thanks,” he could steer a poem suddenly through the con-

text of, in this case, a cafe. The “teardrop” in that example also displays one of Ashbery’s characteristic moves: he loved stringing an unusual word on a familiar sentence-sound, mingling the pleasure of oddity with the pleasure of recognition. The fact that this technique is possible would seem to corroborate Frost’s idea of the existence of “a sound in itself on which other sounds called words may be strung.”

Likewise, Stein’s formula in *Tender Buttons* of curiously repositioned domestic language works (when it works) because the words are strung on recognizable sentence-sounds. In her case, these sounds tend to be those of cheerful, early-years instruction and correction. When she writes as she does in “[Apple],” “a green seen is called bake and change sweet is bready, a little piece a little piece please,” a reader hears the tone of a parent addressing a small child still unfamiliar with the manifold objects of this world. Our own internal database of tones knows this voice is more “sing-song” than a typical speaking voice, containing volume and pitch variation. We therefore, and with no conscious effort, hear a rising and falling into the sounds of words on the pages of *Tender Buttons*.

To demonstrate the conjuring power of the sentence-sound, Frost himself used the following example in an earlier letter to Bartlett. It’s worth reading a couple of times:

One—two—three—go!  
No good! Come back—come back.  
Haslam go down there and make those kids get out of the track.

Over a century later, we’re still able to hear this progression of tones distinctly. The same dramatic events are implied: a race is begun, but the race will need to be restarted because some children, probably younger ones, are in the way. We grasp that the second “come back” is peppered with more annoyance than the first, and that annoyance spills over into the voice’s instructions to Haslam, which come out all in an unpunctuated breath.

As for Frost, his own chief interest as a maker was in playing recognizable sentence-sounds and their natural accents in tandem and against the meter. Moreover, it was his belief that the natural accents and natural delays created by recognizable sentence-sounds *override* the accents and consistencies in tempo created by a meter. Said simply, sentence-sound trumps meter. He explains his gripe with Robert Bridges’ ideas about fixed-length syllables, detailed in his letter to Cox on January 19, 1914:

Vowels have [different] length there is no denying.

But the accent of sense supercedes [*sic*] all other accent, overrides and sweeps it away. I will find you the word “come” variously used in various passages as a whole, half, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth note. It is as long as the sense makes it. When men no longer know the intonation on which we string our words they will fall back on what I may call the absolute length of our syllables, which is the length we would give them in passages that meant nothing.

Frost is arguing, among other things, for the accelerations and decelerations of speech within the context of a metered poem. A regular meter most always has a normalizing effect on the tempo of a poem, the length of the syllables, but the effect of an instantly recognizable speaking tone, with its characteristic tempo and inflections, can shrink or elongate syllables, pry open aural gaps, whatever the imperatives of the tone. If the sen-

tence-sound has the power to impact the tempo of a metered poem, it certainly has the power to change the rate of syllables in a free-verse poem, which doesn’t “suggest” a tempo to our ear in the way that, say, a ballad meter does. With the right sentence-sound struck, even a short-lined poem, punctuated in a regular way, can skip along, up on the balls of its feet.

All of this has been a roundabout way of saying that the first and most important factor in establishing tempo in a free-verse poem is a recognizable speaking tone. A recognizable speaking tone will not only usher in an imaginative whiff of its native context, it will also introduce that speaking tone’s characteristic tempo.

Poems that are uptempo most often establish that tempo at the outset, with a strong and definite tone. Here’s how Mark Halliday begins his poem “Not That Great of an Evening”:

Yeah I went to the talk, and the reception.  
Yeah I went to the dinner, and the party.  
It was not a terrible evening. It was okay.

That “Yeah” at the outset does brilliant work: it strikes a specific “sound” that ripples through all the words in the line; it postures the voice, activating our tonal memory to do so. When in life do we begin sentences “Yeah”? Often it’s when we’re replying to an inquiry about a subject we aren’t so keen on. “Yeah I’ll get the laundry folded before you get home.” A “Yeah” casts an askance look across its content. “Yeah I know that Billy McCloud you’re talking about.” To my ear, Halliday’s achieved tone has a quicker pace than a straight declaration beginning “I.” Beginning with “Yeah” causes the poem to start with a stressed syllable, a shift in footwork that itself makes a tempo difference. In baseball, if a base runner wants to steal second base, he’ll push his right cleat into the dirt and make his left foot the first one he picks up when he starts running. The reverse, simply, is slower. Think about the way O’Hara sets Lana Turner into motion: *LAH-na*. *Beowulf* didn’t begin with an unstressed syllable either.

What I most like, though, in this Halliday beginning is that it shows that the difference between a recognizable sentence-sound and the lack of one can be as small as one word. Initiating poems with demotic diving-boards like “Anyway” or “And” (with their reference to earlier, off-stage yakking) or “So” (which instantly places us in the social, oral, colloquial realm) can do much to get a poem out of the blocks, establishing tone and tempo. One might think of these little words as accelerants, or fuel injections, or salt that ratchets up the flavor of a voice.

Lee Upton’s fluent, funny, and satisfying poem “The Naming of Bars” creates an upbeat tempo from the start and maintains it primarily through her use of one simple word—“and.” The word “and” in spoken English suggests that the speaker can’t wait to tell you what she’s about to tell you; she’s excited; she isn’t so much running on as being pulled along. Structurally, “The Naming of Bars” is like a paean to “and.” It begins:

And someone sat at the kitchen table and said  
I’ve got it: the name for your bar!  
And so there are bars named  
Otto’s Shrunken Head and the Surley Wench  
and The Stumble Inn and the Dutch Kills and

And off the poet goes. From the first word, we know where we are tonally—the colloquial. The second line, arriving after an aural pause nicely synced with a line break, gives us the familiar sound of an excited, probably bibulous voice that is utterly convinced it’s found the right name for,

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in this case, a bar. I won't quote any more of it, but throughout the poem, Upton demonstrates the power of "and" to spirit a poem ahead.

### Variation in Sentence-Sounds

Near the outset, I mentioned that increasing volume tends to increase the difference in volume between stressed and unstressed syllables. Likewise, increasing tempo will tend to increase a *variance* in tempo. When we're talking faster than usual, our tempo won't be quite so consistent. We'll run out of breath, out of mental juice, or we'll happen into a new layer of our subject and change with it. That said, memorable dramatic effects can be achieved in a poem by shifting speaking tempos. In fact, a poem with a quick tempo has to employ tempo modulation to keep our attention. Otherwise, it risks charging off a cliff. Changing tempo requires changing tone, which requires striking a new sentence-sound.

It's actually an ability to modulate tempos, to speed up then hit the brakes, that made O'Hara the master craftsman of poetic tempo that he was. While it's tempting to show off the masterpiece of down-shifting at the end of "The Day Lady Died," let's pick him up five lines into "Poem [Lana Turner has Collapsed!]:"

but hailing hits you on the head  
hard so it was really snowing and  
raining and I was in such a hurry  
to meet you but the traffic  
was acting exactly like the sky  
and suddenly I see a headline  
LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!  
there is no snow in Hollywood  
there is no rain in California

That gorgeous tone/tempo shift after the exclamation point is, to my sense, one of the most ecstatically original moves in any American poem writ-

ten in the 1960s. It's made possible, of course, by what happens leading up the exclamation point. The poem famously starts with hot news loudly echoed, but then immediately becomes a reenactment of how the speaker first encountered this news. The speaker must *get* to this moment. In every line following the opening exclamation, there is a poetic technique that preserves or increases tempo. The poem is quickened by the speaker's situation (a man hustling through inclement weather in an urban environment to meet a friend), by a lack of punctuation, by enjambment, by the inclusion of words like "suddenly" and "hurry," and most brilliantly by a sort of quibbling sentence-sound that doesn't exist except if spoken quickly: "and you said it was hailing / but hailing hits you on the head / hard so it was really snowing and." One doesn't bother to say such a thing at all except to say it fast. Think of how couples nod to their minor disagreements while telling stories: "And Jim said no way it starts it's been two years but I said it's been in a garage why won't it start?" The tone O'Hara strikes, because it tends to be spoken more swiftly than the language around it, works to accelerate an already quick tempo. It's deft work.

What's most impressive, though, about O'Hara's buildup to the discovery of the headline is the management of the breath. Like a video game character that sweats, the voice O'Hara puts in our heads realistically breathes, and so, kept from breathing, runs out of wind. Speaking is the division of an exhalation, an exhalation noisily apportioned into separate smaller exhalations by throat, palate, tongue, lips, and teeth. There's nothing left in the speaker's lungs after he finishes his headline. The stage has been set for the unforgettable, trenchant, catty observation that Ms. Turner, despite having fewer obstacles than the speaker, has collapsed.

### Line-Length

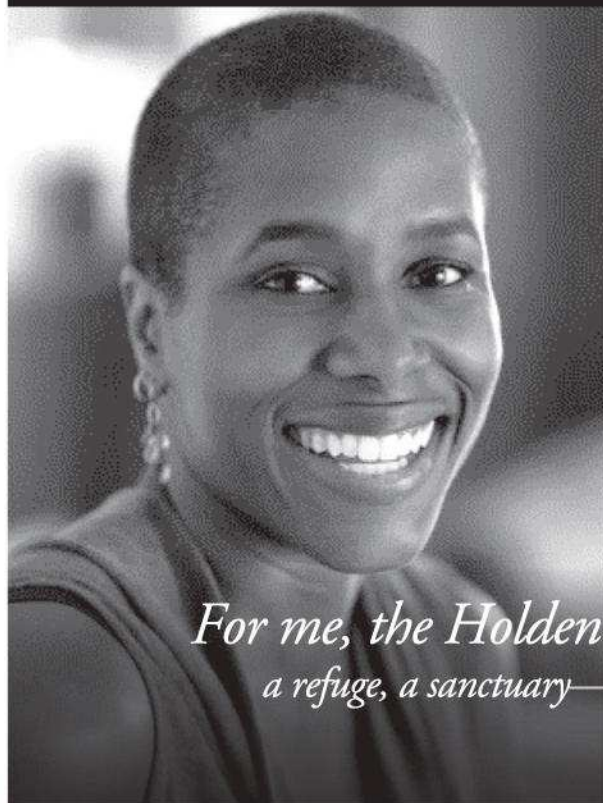
The relation of line-length to tempo is principled, and it applies both to metered and unmetered verse. Though a poem with a short line can "talk fast" if it strikes uptempo sentence-sounds and plows ahead with straightforward syntax, as a rule of poetic physics, longer lines move with a faster tempo than shorter lines. Lines of poetry are like sailboats: the longer they are, the faster they travel.

To my sense, there are two simple reasons for this. The first is that there's a natural momentum that words gather over the course of a long line, particularly in lines whose sounds are put together in a way that—for lack of a better word—*sings*. Over the course of a long, sonically well-made line, we are picked slightly up out of a normal speaking voice into a voice with more pitch variation, volume variation, and speed. To experience this phenomenon, open Robert Hass's *Praise* or any of Jorie Graham's volumes from *The End of Beauty* till the present, choose any of the longer-lined poems, and read aloud to another human.

The second reason is that a poem with shorter lines delivers fewer syllables consecutively before the interruption of a line break. Whether we have the notion, as Creeley did, to equate this interruption always with an aural pause, we still tend to equate a line-break with *something* happening to the voice—a slight pause, an adjustment in tone, a thought ending and a new one beginning.

If we compare the relative tempos of meters, we can observe that a heptameter will tend to be slightly quicker than a hexameter, a hexameter quicker than a pentameter, and all the way down. These relative tempos are a predictable product of lines being allowed to gather momentum, through consonance and assonance, without the interruption of line breaks. As contemporary read-

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ers, we don't cross paths too often with poems in heptameter, so I thought Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "By the Stream," published in 1913, might refresh our understanding of how a long line in a metered poem naturally picks up steam. Each line in Dunbar's heptameter consists of an anapest followed by six iambs:

By the stream I dream in calm delight and  
watch as in a glass  
How the clouds like crowds of snowy-hued and  
white-robed maidens pass,  
And the water into ripples breaks and sparkles  
as it spreads,  
Like a host of armored knights with silver  
helmets on their heads.  
And I deem the stream an emblem fit of human  
life may go,  
For I find a mind may sparkle much and yet but  
shallows show,  
And a soul may glow with myriad lights and  
wondrous mysteries,  
When it only lies a dormant thing and mirrors  
what it sees.

While the tempo in the poem is normalized (all the lines unfold at about the same clip), the pace is brisk, and the speaker comes across as one who takes a musician's joy in sheer speed. Compare the tempo to what results if every two lines are broken into ballad quatrains of alternating tetrameter/trimeter:

By the stream I dream in calm delight  
And watch as in a glass  
How the clouds like crowds of snowy-hued  
And white-robed maidens pass.

I don't need to go on. It's the same words, the same sequence of rising and falling syllables, and yet it's a different rhythm, a different tempo.

A final point about meter and tempo before I get onto the Whitmanian tradition of the long line: trochaic meters, particularly with their proclivity for accommodating imperative speaking tones, run faster than iambic meters. We can take this as a law.

### Line-Length (Free-Verse)

1855 was an epochal year for the acceleration of tempo in American poetry. This was the year of Longfellow's epic *Song of Hiawatha*, with its thou-

sands (upon thousands) of trochees. 1855 also saw the appearance of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman's miracle begat a new tradition of an American poem that sets its own limits, is public, open, incantatory, oral, and uptempo.

The long, unenjambéd, unspooling lines of Walt Whitman gather their speed from several sources. They ride across the page according to the poetic physics of longer = faster. They benefit from the spunk of sentence-sounds ("Who goes there! hankering, gross, mystical, nude?"), and they contain their fair share of exclamation points. However, the characteristic technique that Whitman uses to accelerate his pace is the pairing of *rhetorical anaphora* with a long sonorous line.

Rhetorical anaphora, for those unfamiliar with the term, is the repetition of a word or series of words at the beginning of successive sentences, lines, or clauses. It's a strategy that we often associate with preachers behind pulpits, situations where a crowd is addressed at once. Inclusive, public, insistent, and well-suited to litanies, lists of reasons, and inventories, rhetorical anaphora has the power to mesmerize and raise intensity. This increase in intensity tends to correspond to an increase (and variation) in volume and an increase (and variation) in speaking tempo. In rhetorical anaphora, there is an almost mechanical production of the next line according to the syntactical pattern proposed by earlier lines. This too is a natural accelerant. An analogy could be made to the way we drive faster on the curvy roads near our home. We have more facility, more nimbleness in following a pattern with which we're familiar.

I don't suspect I need to give examples of how Whitman uses rhetorical anaphora to fill up his *Leaves of Grass*. Just skimming its pages shows bundles of consecutive lines beginning alternately "The law of," "In vain," "Over the," "Where the," "If the," "Twenty-eight," "Earth of," "Voices of," "Great is," and that isn't even exhaustive. In fact, I'd estimate that upwards of a third of the entirety of the 1855 edition unfolds under the generative aegis of this device. Suffice it to say, Whitman was a teacher of athletes. His pairing of rhetorical anaphora with a long, end-stopped line initiated a whole tradition of doing the same, and the tradition is very much alive. Among young poets, one sees it being used forcefully and creatively in

Layli Long Soldier's celebrated "Whereas," and more subtly in Alex Dimitrov's "This is Not a Personal Poem," one of the finest individual poems of my generation. Here's an excerpt of three very lengthy lines from Carl Sandburg's "Chicago," first published in the March 1914 issue of *Poetry*, nearly sixty years after Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*:

They tell me you are wicked and I believe them,  
for I have seen your painted women under  
the gas lamps luring the farm boys.  
And they tell me you are crooked and I answer:  
yes, it is true I have seen the gunman kill  
and go free to kill again.  
And they tell me you are brutal and my reply is:  
On the faces of women and children I have  
seen the marks of wanton hunger.

Sandburg is running his sweeps straight out of Whitman's playbook, as well as employing the power of "and." The result is a fast tempo. Sandburg, to speak bluntly, isn't as good as Whitman, and nowhere does he spread Whitman's breadth to new widths. Fast-forward two generations, and here's an excerpt from a poem that does, Allen Ginsberg's "America," published in 1956. In "America," apostrophe also functions as rhetorical anaphora:

America how can I write a holy litany in your  
silly mood?  
I will continue like Henry Ford my strophes are  
as individual as his automobiles more so  
they're all different sexes.  
America I will sell you strophes \$2500 apiece  
\$500 down on your old strophe  
America free Tom Mooney  
America save the Spanish Loyalists  
America Sacco & Vanzetti must not die  
America I am the Scottsboro boys.  
America when I was seven momma took me  
to Communist Cell meetings they sold  
us garbanzos a handful per ticket a ticket  
costs a nickel and the speeches were free  
everybody was angelic and sentimental  
about the workers it was all so sincere you  
have no idea what a good thing the party  
was in 1835 Scott Nearing was a grand old  
man a real mensch Mother Bloor the Silk-  
strikers' Ewig-Weibliche made me cry I once  
saw the Yiddish orator Israel Amter plain.  
Everybody must have been a spy.  
America you don't really want to go to war.

Ginsberg's work throughout this entire example deserves discussion. Tonally, the spikes on this vintage black leather jacket remain sharp; the voice is barbed, rebellious, mocking. It's also fast. As any thespian will tell you, tempo is mood. Performing an activity like brushing one's teeth with exaggerated slowness will imbue it with sensuality; performing it at high speed will fill the act with rage. There's anger to be had in the uptempo, anger which (save in the transmuting genius of Blake) suffers a certain suppression in regularly metered poems. Ginsberg's craft of tempo in "America" allows the flames of anger to reach impressive heights.

What's remarkable to me is the *range* of line-lengths Ginsberg is willing to include in this poem, and the result is a stimulating medley of shifting tempos and tones. Contemporary American poets aren't timid in many ways, but one way in which we can be downright pusillanimous is in our unwillingness to admit lines of wildly varying length into a single poem. This is particularly true for those of us that compose on word processors, confronted continually as we are by the visual shape our words make. Because we privilege a craft of visual tidiness, and not a craft of

As with so many of us, Jared Harél is waging a battle with solitude and loss, the harm that can hide, even within love. He does so, though, with rare grace and tenderness, in poems of great imagination and beauty. I want to kiss you. Build asylum inside you brings to mind what I like best about his work — that the connections between us earn more of his singing than do the ways we spin apart.

— Bob Hicok

Funny, heartbreaking, and downright scary—all at the same time. Don't get cozy with this book, because here, even during the most joyful domestic moments like playing airplane with a child, death is always near: "I don't notice the ceiling fan / until it nearly scalps her." When you're laughing out loud, this book will stalk you and pounce. And as Jared Harél admits: "There is nothing I can say / to make it stop."

— Anders Carlson-Wee

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breath and ear, it's comparably rare in the 21st century to see a poem that gets out of the gate like Langston Hughes' "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." Note the Whitmanian athleticism (rhetorical anaphora) in the first two lines:

I've known rivers:  
I've known rivers ancient as the world and  
older than the flow of human blood in  
human veins.

The speed of Hughes' twenty-three syllable second line, which is poured out in a single breath, is made possible not only by its length, but by its lack of punctuation. This lack, grammatically natural to this line, essentially works to *shorten* the line in time. Note well that the longest line in the Ginsberg example above, over one hundred syllables, is also the fastest line in that example. Ginsberg's technique in extra-long lines is almost always to shorten them by pulling out the periods between short, related sentences. The result is an undeniable acceleration.

### Punctuation

*Omigod. Oh my God. Oh. My. God.* The relationship between tempo and punctuation has already been alluded to in several places. Punctuation is a powerful tool. In poetry, it has the power to create the tempo of a voice, not merely aid in its capture, and contemporary poets from A.R. Ammons to Victoria Chang to Matt Hart to Maurice Manning to Kaveh Akbar have used creatively minimal strategies of punctuation to speed the tempo of their poems. In Jorie Graham's most recent volume, the aptly named *Fast*, she goes as far as to invent a new piece of punctuation out of a dash and a "greater than" sign: --> The result is a right-pointing arrow. It relates to a dash much as a moving walkway at an airport relates to a standard sidewalk, and it works well in showing how one ecological event precipitates another.

Inventions like Graham's aside, as a rule of thumb, all pieces of punctuation except for the exclamation point slow down tempo. Periods, question marks, em dashes, semicolons, colons, and even commas insert all manner of speed bumps, flashing yellows, stop signs, and red lights into poems. Removing them speeds a poem up, but it does so at the risk of causing one sentence to crash into the next. If a sense of the division between sentences is lost, a reader must hunt for the new beginning, scraping the eye across the line like a thumbnail on a roll of tape. This is not a pleasurable experience.

In his two books of ebullient daily poems, *The Daily Mirror* and *The Evening Sun*, David Lehman regularly omits periods, capitalization, and even commas. Urban, light on their feet, ready to turn on a dime, the poems are made with an illusion of no sweat. Lehman indoctrinates the reader into a quickened tempo within the first two lines of the book, removing punctuation to unveil a speaking tone. Here are the first three lines of the first poem in *The Daily Mirror*, "January 1":

Some people confuse inspiration with lightning  
not me I know it comes from the lungs and air  
you breathe it in you breathe it out it circulates

Throughout the volumes, Lehman uses the technique of omitting the period and capitalization between neighboring sentences to snap cut *believably* from the subject in one sentence to a seemingly unrelated subject in the next. The move creates character, an idiosyncratic style of mind we tend to associate with modern city life. When we're talking a mile a minute (5 syllables per second), we're more inclined to jump tracks to a different topic or veer off on a zany tangent or make

a brief comment about the music in the background. Poetically, this results in a freedom to meditate on a variety of simultaneous phenomena in the space of a single poem, to admit telephone calls, scores, and news of all sorts as they break into our lives. In a Lehman daily poem, no topic dies on its throne.

In rereading these daily poems, though, I was admittedly surprised by the amount of punctuation that was in them. Somehow I remembered less. Much of the uptempo feel derives from a clearly positioned voice—the high art of the sentence-sound. The fact that Lehman hasn't entirely banned punctuation within the jurisdiction of these poems preserves access to tools that help to modulate tempo. Poets experimenting with the accelerative possibilities of omitted punctuation ought to take note. Punctuation doesn't have to be an all-or-nothing venture. If struck entirely from a poem, the results can be monotonous. The upbeat tone, fixed as it is, can cease to be believable, much as a rictus is not a believable smile.

Other than exclamation points, which offer a squirt of lighter fluid to the smoldering embers of

tempo, a burst of speed, parentheses are the other pieces of punctuation that have the power, in my observation, to increase the tempo of a voice. Inside parentheses live unnecessary but irresistible details, finical tics of a poet's personality. Parenthetical phrases are a way of keeping what we throw away, speaking and staying silent, displaying a passion for exactitude we know is excessive. A way that we include into daily speech the sort of content that, in poems, lands in parentheticals is by accelerating through it. Like the speed needed for one to leap between buildings, the tempo must be fast enough so that a connection can be re-established between the parts of the sentence that the parenthetical phrase interrupts.

### Diction, Vowel Sounds, and Content

As a conclusion, I'd like to touch swiftly on a few other of tempo's contributing factors, in an effort to emphasize that tempo is always a cumulative property. I've talked at length about how recognizable sentence-sounds, line-length, and punctuation work together to shape tempo, but there is also the *content* of a poem to consider, the ma-

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terial reality that the speaker inhabits. Is the setting urban or rural? Is the poem social or solitary? Is the speaker bending down to a dead deer on a snowy night or sitting on a morning bus she's just chased through crosstown traffic? All this makes a difference in a poem's tempo, or spectrum of tempos.

Sometimes the titles of poems give us cues, which translate into a posture of reverence (manifested as slowness) or irreverence (manifested as speed) before a poem has even begun. Mary Oliver titles one poem: "Walking to Oak-Head Pond, and Thinking of the Ponds I Will Visit in the Next Days and Weeks." If we expect this to be a slow, meditative poem full of close inspection of the natural world, we aren't disappointed.

James Wright, one of the poets who brought this style of titling into American poetry, calls one of his best-known poems "In Response to a Rumor that the Oldest Whorehouse in Wheeling, WV Has Been Condemned." To achieve a suitably slow tone of mourning, he uses a variety of long "o," short "o," and "ow" sounds in combination with as many commas as the sense will allow. I've boldfaced the syllables containing "o" sounds in the poem's first three lines:

I will grieve **alone**,  
As I **strolled alone**, years ago, **down along**  
The **Ohio shore**.

Where Ginsberg sped up the longest line in our earlier example by removing punctuation, Wright uses commas to slow his longest line down. If the title, punctuation, and moaning "o" sounds weren't enough, Wright's speaker is characterized as grieving, strolling, and later in the poem "pondering, gazing." The setting, the meaning of the words, the sounds of the words, and the punctuation all communicate a slower tempo, grasped intuitively by a habitual reader of verse.

## Conclusion

Speaking tempos run slower in the parking lots before funerals than they do in the parking lots before weddings. They also tend to run slower in the country than in the city. Speed rules in O'Hara's New York. Slowness prevails in Wright's recollected Ohio. We associate a fast speaking tempo with youth and its attendant qualities: optimism, fizziness, informality, rashness, excess of energy, wildness in image matter, boldness in declamation. We associate slowness with maturity, seri-

ousness, wisdom, care, perspective, veneration of subject, acuity in observation, melancholy, grief, and defeat. Speed tends to be colloquial, informal, social. Slowness tends to imply higher formality and, perhaps, higher stakes.

We also associate speed with modernity itself. Conversely, we align slowness with vacation, escape, or a deliberate rejection of the pace and imperatives of 21st-century life. While we think of poetry meeting the demand, as Pound would have it, of accelerating alongside society, the speed-up of communication that began with the telegraph in the middle of the 19th century has resulted in poets reacting in both directions. The slowness achieved by poets like Dickinson, Creeley, Gary Snyder, Fanny Howe, and Henri Cole, after all, has been coeval with the feats of uptempo versification in Whitman, Ginsberg, O'Hara, Lehman, and the like.

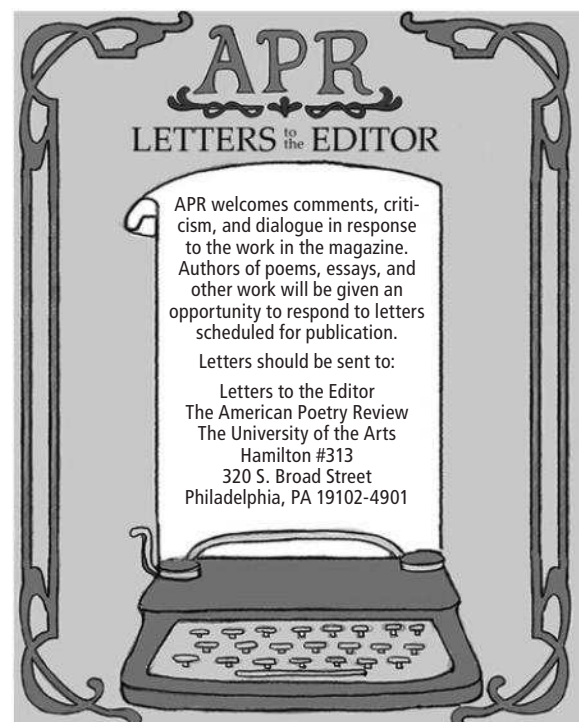
While the majority of the attention in this essay has gone to the fast talkers, the principles that underlie the creation of tempo apply to the entire range of speaking voices in poetry. Whether we aim for speed or slowness in a particular piece of our own verse, we do well to attend to how factors like line-length, punctuation, rhetorical anaphora, and sentence-sounds aid in the art of affixing that tempo to the page. ◀

MATTHEW YEAGER's poems have appeared in *Sixth Finch*, *Gulf Coast*, *Academy of American Poets Poem-A-Day*, and elsewhere, as well as *Best American Poetry 2005* and *Best American Poetry 2010*. Other distinctions include the Barthelme Prize in short prose and three MacDowell fellowships. His first book, *Like That* (Forklift Books, 2016), received a starred review from *Publishers Weekly*.

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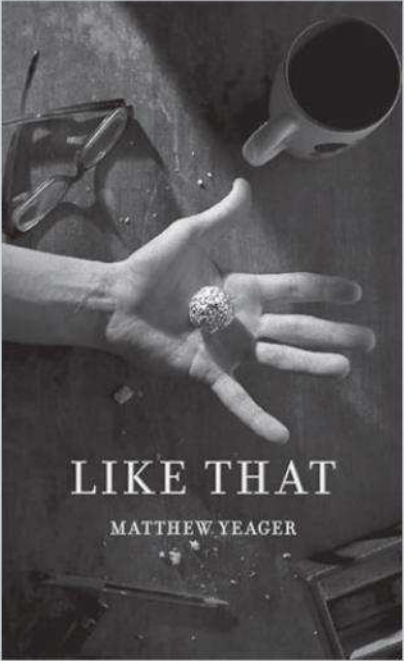
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## three poems

### Parable

My son can't keep the story straight.  
"Is he going to come into my room?"

he asks his sister warily of Santa Claus.  
He is so young he routinely needs  
to be reminded what to believe in.  
Santa is real; aliens are not real. "Aliens  
could be real," my daughter says.  
"Yeah, I guess you're right," I say.

"And Jesus is real," she says. "Zeus  
wasn't real. That was a myth. But Jesus  
Christ was a real man who walked  
upon this earth though he was  
the Son of God." I guess she's made it  
to the New Testament in the 100

*Bible Stories for Kids* she bought  
with her tooth fairy money. "Sure you want  
that one?" her father asked, and she held  
the book tightly to her chest. God, sometimes

I can see the privacy forming around her,  
like faint light or the shimmer of oil  
as the pan heats, and it is a great mystery  
to me, and it is painful to me, because  
it is lonely to be a person and what she is  
telling us with her Bible Stories is that she  
is a person. God, sometimes I step into  
this life like stepping into a room

I can't remember why I entered,  
and for a moment I see nothing—I can  
see nothing, I can see it, a space in front of me  
that is not yet filled, that could be filled.

It's simple and elegant, without needs,  
and sometimes I imagine that's the space  
I'll enter when I die, and it's not unpleasant  
to think of it, that ultimate privacy, though  
thinking of my children with spaces  
of their own is unbearable. It is  
unbearable, knowing I've brought  
two lives into the world and, necessarily,  
two deaths, and though it is unbearable,  
I bear it. Maybe I should read ahead  
to see how the book handles the crucifixion.  
Or maybe I should just hide the book.

Because, God, I am not prepared  
to let my daughter know how the main character  
of her story dies, not yet. She, who answers  
her brother so kindly, with such perfect honesty,  
saying: "No, the gifts just appear, it's magic,"  
though surely by now she only pretends to believe.

### The Revision

The hot air balloon hanging  
over the now distant mesa  
of my childhood was something  
else before; it was the ultra-fat  
wrists of my babies, maybe,  
the creases where flesh met  
flesh and sometimes, impossibly,  
met flesh again, and before that  
it was a confession that once  
or twice I've fallen deeply in love  
with someone I made up entirely  
in my imagination, and that one time  
it turned out the one I'd made up  
was living in the body of a man

I did not love but was sleeping with,  
and when I slept with that man  
there'd always come a moment  
when I'd feel this great disorienting  
displeasure—or was it pleasure?—  
as the real one gave way, shook  
and fell beneath the weight of my love  
for the made up one, until the real one  
was nothing, dust that blew away  
from me, which was fine because  
he was a dipshit, but now, it's the last  
time I walked over the bridge  
into Juarez with my cousins, to drink  
at the Kentucky Club the night  
my grandfather died and how  
we'd eaten burritos on the street  
and coming back into America  
felt like steady breathing, and all  
of El Paso averted its eyes at our  
drunken sorrow and then went on  
to become a Starbucks, and we didn't  
know then that'd be the last time  
we'd walk across that bridge  
like that, together, and later,  
at the funeral, a dove hit the window  
above the altar and died just as the priest  
had begun the heated whispering  
that always accompanied  
the preparation of the host,  
and, Jesus, he never looked up—  
he never even looked up—  
and I have for all these years  
wondered if the attention he gave  
to the body and blood of the savior

was so immaculate as to be  
impenetrable, or if that kind of thing  
happened all the time, that deafening  
thump and the blood left on the glass.

### The Student

I wish I were as talented  
at anything as he is  
at pulling Derrida into  
a conversation, any  
conversation, no matter  
what we're discussing:

Derrida. Even once  
when he was telling me  
why he didn't have  
the assignment, even then  
after a long and aerobic  
journey we arrived  
at Derrida, his white  
hair and elegant European  
ideas, and it felt good—  
I admit it felt good to finally  
arrive there—*ah bonjour  
Monsieur Derrida!*—  
because at least I knew  
then where I was, even  
if it wasn't where  
I wanted to be. *To pretend,*  
Derrida said, *I actually  
do the thing: I have therefore  
only pretended to pretend.*  
I pretend sometimes. Other  
times all I do is pretend.  
I've created gods this way,  
and on occasion I've tied  
those gods together  
like they do bed sheets  
in a movie, and I've escaped  
the high tower of myself  
this way, I've made it  
to solid ground this way,  
landed on the earth.

And each time I've been sure  
I've actually done the thing,  
but then I look up  
and the gods are gone.

---

CARRIE FOUNTAIN'S debut collection, *Burn Lake*, was a National Poetry Series winner and was published in 2010 by Penguin. Her second collection, *Instant Winner*, was published by Penguin in 2014.

## five poems

**Lunar Mansions**

It matters where you are born. *In a barn*  
means you are the holy star. Meteor child.

Jesus was the first bomb. *Where are you from*  
is a question I field too much. Once

I said *Vietnam* and the white man said *I fought there.*  
*I loved the country. I love their people.*

That's the day I started to lie  
about my birth. *In the stable*

the horses kicked me from their wombs.  
It was exactly like finding a baby

*in a haystack.* It was snowing  
in Michigan when the priest exorcised

me from my mother, said: *there is good*  
*in you yet* before placing a prayer

for the ground. Blessed America,  
there is good in you yet. *The moon*

doesn't have to bury any children because the earth  
carries so many bodies in the soil. *In a casket*

people are sometimes born. I have told my origin  
story over and over. *My parents fought, too.*

*In Vietnam.* They dodged Jesus, who'd  
extended his hand. And so I was born

*in a lunar mansion*—a configuration of the moon  
where my face changes in accordance with the light.

**Humanoid**

The doctor told me to dig  
my way into the MRI machine

and sleep in the metal den like a robot bear—  
said she'd watch me. Said I'd be okay. I'd heard

that trick before. In school, the teachers  
drilled us to cover our heads

with textbooks when the tornado  
siren wailed. Each time it woofed

like a dying wolf, and now I am not afraid  
of the wind. Or howls. I am not one to err

on the safe side. I've decided there is more  
than one way to commit to a relationship.

We are all just blips on someone's radar.  
Maybe the whole planet is someone's head

being thrust into an MRI machine—space  
a giant brain scanner. All of us little

neurons just trying to figure out  
what's inside of our heads. If it's dangerous.

The brain a creature always  
telling my body how to move. This is how

I tell myself my father is not the enemy. It is his brain,  
which I will probably never see. It is not worth it

to hate the shell. The body. The container. Whatever  
you want to call it. I've placed a kind of trust in walls,

as if they might one day wrap their plaster  
around me. But there are few adequate substitutes

for arms. The MRI machine hummed a song  
about a boy. It was a song of longing. I already pity

the first androids. How we'll give them arms  
and legs and heads. How they'll assume

the shape of their maker. There's no beauty  
in that. Not like a cloud and a tornado

and the ground, how for just a moment  
a finger tries to push the Earth away.

**Nomadic Theory**

The horses migrate. The birds and the whales, too.  
They are all running from winter.

This route passed down from their mother  
and their mother's mothers for so long

that it is now coded into their blood:  
the grains of their muscles like maps, their bones

shaped like arrows. Always pointing. Instinct  
a kind of religion where the messiah is a creature

bearing its fangs. Its face dripping. The sky opens  
its mouth come winter and spits out its dead teeth.

And so we have snow. And so the runners know to run.  
I have beaten my fists into the ground before. Even

on all fours, I am not much of a horse. It takes  
all of my strength to carry a human being. I have failed

so many of them. Them bucked off. Me bent to my knees  
without a prayer to offer, waiting for them to leave. My mother

left her country. And her mother before that. Always wars.  
What else was there to do but run and hope the beast starves.

**The Naming**

I used to think I could do anything  
with enough effort—throw a rope  
at the night and lasso in the moon,  
or jump from a tree  
and beat my arms into wings  
like an owl, its feathers nothing  
more than decoration, nothing my naked  
arms couldn't match. I was an imaginative  
child. An imbecile in some circles.

It is not nice to call someone names.  
I was the name caller. I said Little White  
Sickle to the moon. I said Big Head Bird  
to the owl. I said Mom, and I said Dad.  
I thought if I shouted these names loud  
enough, then someone would respond.  
These days I have seen my best  
efforts fail. All the love I've poured  
into a person. Or them into me.  
How I've failed to open myself



properly to receive their names.  
 Love. Love bird. I have been called  
 so many names. I have so many  
 identities I never meant to adopt.  
 In the dark, the owls hoot at each other  
 and I shout back: me, me, me.

## Apogee

*Let us eat what makes us holy.*  
 —Emily Jungmin Yoon

I am holy tongued  
 for God has found his way  
 from my mouth  
 where I have said his name  
 over and again.  
 This is how Moses  
 parted the Red Sea—  
 the water parts  
 when the air is dry.  
 A strong enough thirst  
 becomes faith.  
 This is how I learned  
 how to speak  
 English. I chanted  
 the alphabet  
 until it felt natural,  
 like language  
 is something you  
 are born with  
 and not given.  
 Or taken.  
 Such is the case  
 now when I try  
 to remember the exact  
 moment I stopped  
 thinking in Vietnamese  
 and how that must  
 have been the borderline  
 of my migration—on one side  
 me, God-blessed  
 and assimilated.  
 On the other  
 a boy I am trying  
 to remember. If it was fear  
 or curiosity that held me  
 when I first heard  
 English. If such forced  
 consumption  
 was bravery. I mean,  
 what else does a follower do  
 but walk  
 if the man they're following  
 splits the sea.

---

KIEN LAM is a Kundiman Fellow and received his MFA from Indiana University. His poems are out or forthcoming in *The Nation*, *Kenyon Review*, *Best New Poets 2018*, and elsewhere. He lives in Los Angeles, and you can follow him on Twitter @meanmisterkien.



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A prize of \$1,000 and publication of the winning poem in *The American Poetry Review* will be awarded to a poet under 40 years of age in honor of the late Stanley Kunitz's dedication to mentoring poets. The winning work will appear on the feature page (back cover) of the September/October 2018 issue of *The American Poetry Review*. All entrants will receive a copy of the September/October 2018 issue.

**Poets may submit one to three poems per entry (totaling no more than three pages) with a \$15 entry fee by May 15, 2018. The editors of *The American Poetry Review* will judge. Winner will be notified by July 1, 2018.**

See our website for complete guidelines: [www.aprweb.org](http://www.aprweb.org)

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five poems

**Bush vs. Gore**

Both fifth grader and go-getter, what I know of politics is red and blue markers and a blank, fifty-state map. Bill Clinton, blowjobs, blue dresses. CTA buses that don't quite run on the safe side so we drive by bystanders standing at South Side stops.

Daddy's daddy stays speaking on how Harry S. Truman desegregated the U.S. Armed Forces; Harold Washington be the mayor in Granny's house like always-forever.

In my family, ballots bang blue like cliché gang colors since there are no parties in Chicago, just machine, jackasses, a lineage of Bridgeport crooks, but these suburbs be a different beast entirely: mayors managed by city managers with Godfather-logo-like puppet strings, clubhouse polling stations, well-maintained yards mowed by uncompromised accents—*¿mexicano? Si.*

Basically, it's the wild wild west out here—you'd be surprised what bullets folks shoot off at the mouth, how they're meant to kill you off on the sneak-tip, to come through their kids' mouths, in a classroom, during scheduled *quiet* reading time. I don't know much about "sets," but I do know a word or two that begins with *n*, and their difference, like the sting of cuts from paper and the sting of cuts from useful blades, like box cutters. After my dad stakes that Gore campaign sign on our front lawn, I do the reasonable thing and wait for the bloodless bloodbath, for backup to come decked out in blue like police, but it never does, even the brother-man two blocks down the street leaning Bush like Ohio where he comes from. In short, me, short stuff, gets left to my own devices—my head as big as a Compaq computer monitor atop my sunken shoulders, oversized like a donkey's is in a political toon.

When Ms. Kohorn asks who we'd support that Tuesday afternoon, I cast the programmed vote for the man who invented the Internet, leave no hanging chad behind.

Some weeks later, when punk is officially certified, the kids in class finally feel free to call me *Sore Loserman* with practiced swagger, call me an *n*-word that doesn't start with *n*. Thankfully, in my mind, that's all there is at stake:

all there was inside me, burning,  
like a clenched fist flushed by blood.

**Bush vs. Kerry**

A full two years before MTV's *Yo Momma* hits the screen, there be absolutely no playing of *The Dozens* 'round here.

Nah?                      Nope.  
Nada?                      None.                      See,

the way you proceed in a petty debate in these parts is to slight dear Mr. President's intelligence. The way you punk the kid, the way you shake him to silence, swiftboat-for-truth his ass is to say *I heard they might bring back the draft*. The way you outflank him is to band with the one Egyptian boy that rides the bus to school with you like allyship is a loud garage, some public nuisance. The way you make a mix CD for the bus ride is by slotting OutKast's "B.O.B. (Bombs Over Baghdad)" as first track on the playlist. The way you become an outcast is with a "ghetto" middle name and impeccable grades across the board. The way you beat the curve is doing homework in the basement by the big-screen, HiDef TV tuned in to *Hardball with Chris Matthews*. The way

you live in the basement is to *chill*, become content with giving off a slight coldness. The way you become cold is to not give a single damn what they think. The way you best them, the way you win is to not flip-flop on any of this, double-negative multiply the situation into a positive one for you:

that choice is yours to elect, C—  
*popularly*, by majority of one.

Think about it. You could be the first black president someday. You could turn

this. mutha. out.

**Obama vs. McCain**

Black people place faith in a good many things, from bone marrow meteorology to "somebody's pregnant" fish dreams, but best believe the U.S. government ain't one of these, so when I tell you that we, the black delegation, never thought this day would come I mean to say we assumed the assassins would've made their moves back in June, as if it were Bobby Kennedy all over again, but it's November now and here we are voting in droves for a black man who's married to a black woman and I'll just reiterate none of us saw that coming, on both counts. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little salty at having the prospect of *first* pass by me by at least seventeen years per rules of constitutional eligibility, but the tears that have made their way from eyes to mouth taste more like sugared water to me. I shook this man's hand in Washington a few years back and realized then there would always be a Negro more magical than me somewhere, and that was a humbling thought; I came home from a summer program at Georgetown U. and told my dad that, yes, I was sure he'd be president someday, that the shine wasn't a camera trick and it looked like he kept his hair brushed and cut low like he had good awareness of the gaze on us. And that was two years after the red states and blue states speech at the convention, which was months after he came through our church during the early stages of that Senate race when he became the black dude running against a less black but darker-skinned black dude, the Democratic candidate and ergo who we felt more comfortable rolling the dice on because that's just how America is set up post Nixon's Southern strategy; and speaking of '68, again, Jesse Jackson is on national television crying on a cool night in the middle of Grant Park, which hasn't popped off like this since the Chicago Bulls held their championship rallies there during the dynasty of the '90s, the decade I came into existence, literally born into an expectation of greatness. It pushed me this far, to an elite education and an election night spent in company with the kind of women you wed if you want a political career that endures, but I excuse myself gentlemanly, step to the side and call the house my tuition bill forwards to. I talk to Dad: tease him about his early Edwards support because he thought Barack would never get a fair race for obvious reasons. Hang up. Dial the number again. Wait for Mom to answer and we speak

before I go dance in the streets  
as if something amazing happened.

**Obama vs. Romney**

Even before deducting tax withheld, 47% of my paycheck pays down debt, no lie. I chop up the residual for rent and utilities and parking, then kick some bread back home to Illinois: repay my auntie for a clutch college tuition bailout senior year; try to keep my brother out from behind bars on some charge that wouldn't be a crime

in Colorado; get some carpet laid in my littlest sister's room that her feet fancy. And after all that, I still scratch up enough dough to eat, live like a millionaire off the dollar menu at the McDonald's drive-thru—it's surprising I'm not selling cocaine at this point, to be honest. But I have a future to fulfill, or so I've been told time and time again. 47% of all the white people I meet think I'm super smart; 53% of all the white people I meet think I'm super smart for a black guy.

Go figure: it actually pays for a black man to have a job to hide behind when all else fails to register him a human being. It pays for the petty speeding ticket to go away; it pays for the plane ticket to get away to my girl—or through—but I always have to come back sooner or later. It's a fact of life, I guess. I'd wager that I smile about 47% of the time on a good day. At minimum, 53% of my conversations are about other people's problems. Everybody is a victim in their own eyes, I swear it, and it's precisely in this way that corporations are people, Governor.

So what he saved General Motors? What would the hood have been without Cadillacs? What would the hood be with union assembly line gigs to pay the bills? Look at what it's become without them.

53% of my peoples have no fucks left to give: they cost too much of the spirit and now, look, they're being accosted for it. In my own life, 47% of the instances in which I use the word *fuck* are expressions of an anger so deeply felt that it can't be conveyed in any other way than pumping bullets into neighborhoods with no economy, indiscriminately.

In other situations, I use the word jokingly. With all my gut. With all my teeth behind it, brushed and bleached to become the perfect picket fence. All the rumors are true. I really do have joy sometimes—47% plus 53% of the time, at all times, I'm blessed beyond measure, being taken care of according to some divine blueprint drawn up before I was born. That's why I vote how I do: for the get-back for the gotten-over-on. I believe in Robin Hood. I believe Jesus rode a donkey. I believe Tupac is coming back. I'm voting for the president no matter what. I'm trying not to become a victim.

Hear that, Governor? I said I'm trying  
*not* to become a victim, but I am one already.

## Trump vs. Clinton

And if America has an avatar for avarice, he is probably it.  
And if America has an avatar for avarice, she is possibly it.  
And if America has an avatar for avarice, I am definitely it

in a subordinate sense, if wearing a sturdy braided rope where some simple gold chain should be, something worth a little bit of money and being worth a little bit of money, maybe, the only thing that can save me, even if only for a short period of time. Her period came this weekend to confirm we aren't pregnant and I can only say—*hallelujah*. Thank the Lord for one less black mouth to feed, one less black body to protect from them and them and them and from itself as well: the pigment-matching of its interior thoughts. But through it all, through the hysteria and the ahistorical argumentation, math is still my biggest enemy; money, like water, may run dry or run away, like white neighbors. I want to scream *get yo' hands outta my pocket* because that's what's done before the gunshots ring out.

Listen.


You need to understand it's noisy in my head these days. I hear dead people and see the very ones who killed them walking in the streets with their children who smile at me without a second thought, but on second thought, I'm still finding small ways to be productive. I paid some bills today. I bounced from work ten minutes early because I felt like it. I called my family because I still could, on my own time, though I'll admit to being a prisoner of the moment. But, sorry, I can't cop to anything beyond that. If you believe any different, I'll put my left hand on the Bible and swear,

I'll fire profanities into the crowd and not care who they hit wrongly in the heart, so help me God—who I hope lets me slide for my uncouth, cusses out the room as I did, steps in as my lawyer to beat what's sure to be a trumped up charge:

resisting arrest  
or trespassing  
or breathing while black— whatever it takes to make  
America great again.

CORTNEY LAMAR CHARLESTON is the author of *Telepathologies*, selected by D.A. Powell for the 2016 Saturnalia Books Poetry Prize. He was awarded a 2017 Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Fellowship from the Poetry Foundation, and he has also received fellowships from Cave Canem, The Conversation Literary Festival and the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. His poems have appeared in *POETRY*, *New England Review*, *AGNI*, *TriQuarterly*, *River Styx* and elsewhere. He serves as a poetry editor at *The Rumpus*.

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DAVID LEHMAN

## On John Ashbery's "Worsening Situation"

Like a collage, I wrote, the bruised words  
Shampoo the hair of the dog. Or like  
The simile eclipsing the thing it is likened to,  
Which remains unnamed. The feast is  
Near enough to watch but too far to reach  
By foot. To up the ante, we get an echo  
Of Keats's last poem or a quote from Rimbaud.  
The key repetition occurs here. We feel  
We have been riding the A train since 1965.  
Rides, ceremonies, rites. What's the point?  
Yet it bothers me, everything I haven't disclosed  
Fully. I still read spy novels and get crank  
Phone calls. I'm like the guy whose wife  
You see on TV wondering how to get  
My collars clean. Tell her I'm somewhere  
Else—Paris, Texas, for instance.

DAVID LEHMAN's most recent book is *Poems in the Manner Of* (Scribner, 2017).

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# The Incredible Story of Las Poquianchis of Guanajuato

## 1. Las Ánimas I

María Delfina, María de Jesús, Maria Luisa

We are three  
unlucky stars. We are  
unlucky three, the wardens who  
traded their bodies for cells, their souls  
for the honor to be the brothels' unholy trinity.

Men will judge  
as easily as they will  
love. And history, so male in his  
cruelty, will write his fiction down in blood.  
The true travesty is that his words are louder

than ours.  
Don't be fooled.  
Listen carefully. Embedded  
in the falsehoods is our story. No, we are  
not innocents. But we certainly are the monsters

men created.  
If we're to blame  
for something, it's for making  
men first, and then quenching their thirst  
for the feminine limbs that taught them such affections.

What misery  
cycle, what wheel  
of misfortune that shrieks  
when it spins, unspooling the thread  
of our carnal sins. Oh fathers, oh sons, what a hell

we were in.  
But don't pity us.  
For the strays death is not  
so much punishment as it is salvation.  
And dead we don't haunt your beds or your dreams—

we only are,  
were, have been.  
That you remember us  
says more about your deeds than ours.  
Forget us and we'll continue to be three

names once  
anchored to evil  
so vast it took three of us  
to write the headlines. "Hellish"? Ha!  
They called us the Gorgons, the ugly sisters

that turned  
flesh into stone.  
We beg *not* to disagree.  
We put the fear of God in your small  
human hearts, that's true. It's what mirrors do.

## 2. The Gospel According to Maria Luisa

*Unbury the bodies, sisters, unbury  
the wicked fruit of the wicked,  
the wicked not us, not the greed  
of women but the lust of men,  
forever and ever, amén.*

*Forever and ever, these men, their  
simple urges, their idleness. How they  
spread their legs, how their small*

*hairy kings rule any house with  
a door that welcomes them.*

*When I open the door to greet them  
I'm taking sin off the streets—off  
the streets, you heathens who deign  
to stain the path to heaven's gate! Every  
stone stay pure beneath our Catholic feet.*

*Will you vindicate me, Father, will you  
tell the Lord what a good child I've been?  
I speak through the bible and anoint  
the suffering of our fatherless girls, our  
impoverished orphans, our Magdalenes.*

*On Sundays they wear veils  
and pray the rosary, they kneel  
not for man but God. I wipe  
the taste of mortal off their tongues  
with the back of a sacred cross.*

*Forever and ever the cross,  
holy symbol of sacrifice and loss,  
it's not the key to salvation,  
you stupid woman, it's the lock.  
I'm knocking, Jesus—knock knock—*

*I'm unbuttoning my blouse to give  
you better access to my heart—  
I'd give it you, Jesus. If you asked  
for it I'd tear it out of me, my  
unborn fetus, my unwound clock.*

*I'm the only virgin here, my Lord,  
the rest have sinned against  
their flesh. The Devil dragged  
his vulgar tail into this harem  
and tore away each maidenhead—*

*except for mine. I'm pure, I'm  
yours if you will have this most  
devoted of believers, touch me,  
Jesus, lift this fever that devours  
my inhibition during prayer hour.*

*I won't be tempted, I won't succumb  
to the damnation of this house  
of sin I'm slowly dying in but here  
I stay to save these souls and earn  
my place in His eternal grace.*

*Blessed be my righteousness,  
blessed be my martyrdom,  
blessed me the day I sit next to my  
Lord, in service to my Master,  
forever and ever, forever and ever, and ever and ever, amén.*

## 3. El Tepocate's Tattoos

*Delfina, his mother's name,  
the "f" a rose, its head bowed  
to dot the "i"; the "a" tadpole-  
shaped, his namesake. It was*

*his mother's own design,  
or rather, her idea to  
replace the cursive letters  
with images. Since she couldn't*

read or write her son would  
 teach her, beseech her  
 to retrace the lines of ink  
 across his back. He lies  
 face down in bed. *Did  
 any of them die today?* she asks.  
 If *No*, her finger swims  
 up the urethra of the “I” then  
 trickles down the flower  
 stem. The tickle makes El  
 Tepocate shudder. *Mother,*  
 he will whisper. *Stroke*  
*that part again.*  
 It’s *Yes* today. She puts  
 her ear between his shoulder  
 blades to listen to his blood,  
 her breathing hot  
 and just as calm. She spreads  
 her palm over the cross  
 tattoo stretched across  
 his lower back and mutters,  
*It’s for the best, isn’t it,  
 mi rey? Decades now the men  
 have fled to labor for the gringo*  
*and left the rest of us  
 unprotected and unfed.*  
*The cost of glory in the next world  
 is a life of misery in this one.*  
*May she rest in peace now  
 that she’s shed her weary skin.*  
*May God grant her wings.*  
 María Delfina’s lips travel  
 down El Tepocate’s spine  
 and kiss the center of  
 the crucifix. His impotence  
 is innocence. She reaches  
 down his calf to feel his  
 third tattoo: she trusts this  
 tinted dagger that will not  
 give in to impulse—  
 like her father’s had—  
 to harden in the drunken  
 dark to thrust.  
 And thrust.

#### 4. Corrido de la Poquianchi Jesusa\*

Señores, éste es el corrido  
 de la Poquianchi Jesusa,  
 era mujer rete-trucha,  
 no importa lo que se haya dicho—  
 que le decían La Medusa  
 pero éso es puro ruido.  
 Ella nació entre los pobres  
 en el campo de Jalisco,  
 Madre quería puros hijos—  
 machos por trabajadores;  
 Padre se puso abusivo  
 pues Dios mandó cuatro errores.  
 Jesusa fugó de su pueblo  
 rumbo para Guanajuato,  
 pero en muy corto plazo

las otras tres la siguieron  
 pues ya tenía entre sus manos  
 hombre, negocio, y dinero.

Delfina juntaba pupilas,  
 Luisa la hacía de cajera,  
 Carmen cuidaba las mesas,  
 ¡vean que exitosa cantina!  
 Jesusa era orgullo de jefa  
 con su casona de citas.

Llegaron los años sesenta  
 seguían las hermanas a engaños  
 a vírgenes secuestrando  
 sin que los padres supieran.  
 Les aseguraban trabajo  
 pero les daban condena.

El antro con más y más fama,  
 el pueblo tenía sus sospechas.  
 Jesusa decía que por viejas  
 les resentían tanta lana—  
 gente detras de las quejas  
 no ganan pan con la cama.

Problemas, querían evitarlas,  
 cerraron el bar en apuras,  
 se esconden con las prostitutas,  
 pronto fueron encontradas.  
 De rapto, extorción, y tortura,  
 Poquianchis quedaron culpadas.

Carmen ya había fallecido,  
 Luisa se dijo inocente,  
 A Delfina la cayó en la frente  
 una tina llena de ladrillo,  
 a Jesusa le tocó la suerte  
 de tener que cumplir su castigo.

Las revistas decían tantas cosas,  
 la tele prendía puro cuento,  
 más gusto le daba por dentro  
 a Jesusa que se vio famosa,  
 y así conquistó al carcelero,  
 la sacó y la hizo su esposa.

Y así concluye el corrido  
 de la Poquianchi Jesusa,  
 era mujer rete-trucha,  
 no importa lo que se haya dicho—  
 que le decían La Medusa,  
 ¿verdad que no tiene sentido?

\*On the spot translation: Gentlemen, this is the ballad of Jesusa la Poquianchi, who was a very smart woman, no matter what you’ve heard. That they called her Medusa is nothing more than noise. She was born among the poor in the rural state of Jalisco. Her mother wanted males, men to be hard workers; her father became abusive after God sent them four mistakes. Jesusa fled the town towards the state of Guanajuato, but in a very short time her sisters followed, once she had in her hands a man, a business, and money. Delfina recruited the whores, Luisa was the cashier, Carmen took care of the tables, they built a successful cantina! Jesusa was the proud owner of a very popular brothel. The 1960s arrived and the women kept using deceit to kidnap virgins without their parents finding out. They promised them jobs and then sentenced them to a life in prison. The bar became more and more well known, but the town had its suspicions. Jesusa claimed that because they were women, people resented their earnings. Those behind the complaints didn’t know how to make money in bed. They wanted to avoid any problems, so they rushed to shut down the bar. They hid with the prostitutes but were quickly found out. Las Poquianchis were accused of kidnapping, blackmail, and torture. Carmen had died by now, Luisa was found not guilty, Delfina met her end crushed beneath a bucket of bricks. Only Jesusa had the bad luck of serving out her sentence. Magazines made many false claims, the TV spun its tales, but it gave her a thrill since Jesusa became more famous. And that’s how she courted the jailer, who took her home and made her his wife. This concludes the ballad of Jesusa la Poquianchi, who was a very smart woman, no matter what you’ve heard. They called her Medusa but it doesn’t make sense, does it?

## 5. The Fourth Sister's Daughter

My mother was the oldest of the sisters  
though by the time the crimes in the brothels  
came to light she had already died.

This was her saving grace—why her name  
vanished from public memory. I say  
her name now—María del Carmen—

because I loved her, despite everything.  
She too is part of the story, no matter how  
much it pains me to admit it to you.

In many ways, she was the mastermind:  
it was she who went to Guanajuato first,  
not tía Jesusa. It was she who established  
the first bar, not tía Delfina, and it was she  
who kept the books, not tía Luisa. I know  
because Abuela Berna told me her sins

as punishment after my mother left me.  
My heart aches when I tell you that it was  
my mother who said, *Let's collect the poor,*

*the unwanted, and turn them into whores.*  
Abuela Berna's threat was that this too  
would be my fate if I didn't behave.

Abuela was afraid I had my mother's  
wild streak, and for many years I wished  
I did—it might have saved me from God.

But prisons were my destiny. I was  
conceived in jail after Abuelo Isidro locked  
my mother up to preserve her purity.

My father was the warden. Abuelo  
took us in but only if my mother promised  
to disappear into the night without

notice. He got his wish—one daughter  
at a time until all four were gone and I  
became his crutch as he shrunk

into the angry little man he always was.  
Abuela fed him now and then.  
My soul aches as I confess to cruelty

as well: the night he fell, I should have  
helped immediately. I stayed in bed,  
knowing he would bleed to death.

Only God can fine, but the Devil  
asks for payment. And Abuelo got  
what he deserved. As did my aunts,

I heard: tía Delfina met her end beneath  
a bucket of cement; tía Jesusa will  
likely rot in prison; and tía Luisa

is here with me, in the psychiatric  
center run by nuns. Abuela brought me  
to the convent before puberty

and here I am, cleaning vomit, shit,  
and blood for all eternity. I pray  
for the souls of the girls my mother

and her sisters murdered. I offer  
my suffering as penance for what  
my mother didn't pay. But I also answer

to the Devil: I sneak into tía Luisa's  
room each evening and whisper curses  
in her ear like Abuela Berna used to do.

The nurses are in awe at how,  
by morning, my auntie chews away  
her straps and claws a hole into the wall.

## 6. Death to María Delfina

An accident, the masons called it, but it wasn't.  
María Delfina was murdered. I know this  
to be fact. I know this to be truth. She was my cellmate.

María Delfina said she had the bad luck to be born poor.  
The good fortune to be born a woman. A woman  
had the power to survive anything. Including poverty.

The men up on the roof saw her coming. They knew  
who she was. So they killed her. Not for sinning against God  
or other women. But against men. She knew their weaknesses

for booze and flesh. She kept them in debt.

The only time she cried was when she talked about El Tepocate—  
how she mourned his death. The same men who shut down

her businesses shot him. Her world ended there, not here  
in this prison. I know this. On Sundays she walked to the chapel  
to pray. The masons worked on the roof, mixing cement.

When the younger prisoners walked by they grabbed their cocks.  
They spat on the older ones. María Delfina was the only woman  
who wore a veil. *That's one of las Poquianchis*, I heard them say.

She knew mischief was planned. On her last morning alive she  
gave me her bible. On her way to the chapel the vat of cement  
was dropped. The masons laughed. So did the wardens.

No other way could they bring María Delfina down. She was  
La Mera-Mera, La Poquianchi—woman who fucked  
the sex that would fuck us over. Stupid men. They didn't know

she was already dead inside. Hidden in her bible was a picture  
clipped from the newspaper. Her son's. She showed it to me  
once. *My only regret was that he was born a man*, she said.

## 7. The Return of El Poquianchi

Ay, mujer, the things that went on in the back of that bar  
even before the González sisters took it over. Truth was

those men fucked each other before las Poquianchis  
turned it into a whorehouse. They weren't known as

las Poquianchis then. They were tía Jesusa and tía Delfina,  
viejas from Jalisco who put up a sign that read *Guadalajara*  
*de Noche*, but instead of stretching assholes the men  
paid to stretch pussy. That's what Poquianchis means:

you leave very little forced open—wallets, mouths, legs.  
It's all part of the game. Tía Jesusa asked my girls to stay

but they had bigger aspirations—D.F., L.A., Nueva  
York, where the drag shows were catching fuego.

I retired my dazzling pair of heels and moved back  
to my little ranch in Michoacán and remained untucked

for the rest of my life. I felt bad for those girls whose  
babies died inside of them. Men are such wasteful whores:

they want the pleasure of firing their tiny guns  
and will hide the bullet anywhere. In anyone.

Because I showed up in court wrapped in my favorite silk  
rebozo I wasn't asked to testify. I would have spilled

every cold bean: how the police chief and the priest danced  
in each other's arms then, how they were doing so again.

## 8. Las Ánimas II

We are the mummies  
of Guanajuato you don't pay  
to see. We are the bodies  
of the daughters you sent away.

Yet here we are,  
stubborn roots in the ground  
you can't tear from  
the heart of México so easily.

We are your hidden  
fantasies, your most forbidden  
wants. Even now you  
titter with anticipation

as you uncover us  
to find our nakedness—  
hipbone and buttock exposed.  
Each fist a rose that withered

in our long wait in bed.  
How male to make even this  
about sex. It's what put us  
here in the first place.

You dare disturb our sleep  
and weep for us? Save  
those tears for your unmarked  
grave. Being found was worse

than getting lost.  
We no more belong  
to this world dead than we did  
alive. Or will you prop us

up along the wall  
with other mummies?  
Charge admission?  
Make your money?

No, of course not.  
You claimed us and now  
you will abandon us again.  
We know the crooked

streets of your realm.  
We too lost our way.  
Who to blame: the hungry men,  
the thirsty women, our

poverty, our bodies,  
the cheap escape into the bar  
with bottles and breasts?  
Our families who released us

into polluted air? Oh fathers,  
did you know what fate  
awaited us? Oh mothers, did you  
pray for safe return? Oh tiny

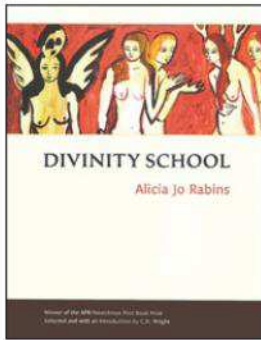
villages, you were the last  
to let us go. We closed our eyes  
as we bit into the soil for a final  
taste on our tongues of home.

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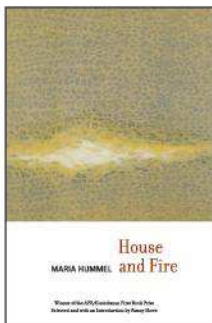
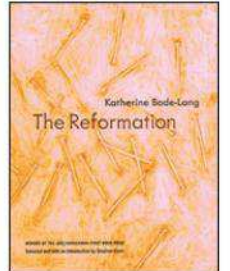
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selected by Stephen Dunn

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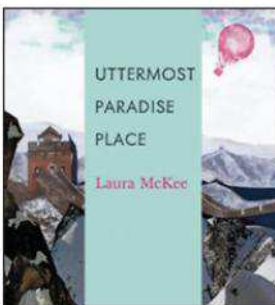
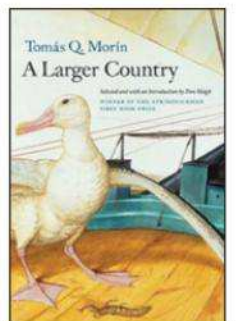
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selected by Fanny Howe

"These poems come from a deep well of experience that is translated, right in front of us, into hard-won craft and exacting lyricism. At one level, this book registers the story of a beloved child's illness. But at a deeper level, these poems are a narrative of language itself: of its vigil, its journey, its ability—even in dark times—to shelter the frailty of the body with its own radiant strengths. This is a superb and memorable collection. —Eavan Boland

2012 • Tomás Q. Morín, *A Larger Country*  
selected by Tom Sleigh

"Tomás Q. Morín invokes his heroic literary forebears—Czesław Miłosz, Isaac Babel, Miklós Radnóti, amongst others—in his energetic and moving book of fantasias and elegies, alert to history, rich with memory, which is, as he tells us, 'a larger country.' I welcome this 'pageantry of the interior,' this memorable first book." —Edward Hirsch

"In Tomás Q. Morín's distinctive and fully achieved book, the qualities of imagination and urgency inspire and amplify one another." —Robert Pinsky

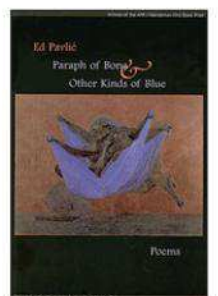


2009 • Laura McKee, *Uttermost Paradise Place*  
selected by Claudia Keelan

"Laura McKee creates a poetics of call and response, but not in the traditional sense, as in poet to reader, chorus leader to singers, etc. These poems call to each other, syllable by syllable, and they are so pleased with their circuitry of sound and sense that readers—if they just give themselves away to the pleasure of being exactly nowhere but in the unscripted place all authentic poetry provides—will experience the paradise the book proposes." —Claudia Keelan

2001 • Ed Pavlić, *Paraph of Bone & Other Kinds of Blue*  
selected by Adrienne Rich

"Ed Pavlić's *Paraph of Bone & Other Kinds of Blue* reveals and conceals in skillful verbal play that owes much to its woven patterns. A constrained, structural improvisation focuses each poem in a white space underlying the text—held like a mantra of boiled-down innuendo that is tinted with the blues of jazz and literary-cultural folklore. We have to thank this poet for his numerous down-to-earth surprises." —Yusef Komunyakaa



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## Honeysuckle Illuminated in the Garbage

**T**HANKSGIVING WEEKEND, A SNOWY quiet night, and I started to think of him, how he hated the holidays. And also how he'd just had his fortieth birthday a few weeks before, and I'd emailed, but knew I should have called. So that night I tried to call, but the number didn't work. And then I realized it had been so long since I called, maybe the number had changed. So I went online, trawled the internet for his number and found instead the headline of the police finding his body, the medical examiner determining it was suicide. He'd killed himself just ten days before.

Eventually I tracked down his mother who recounted additional details; his body had been found in the early morning hours at the bottom of an embankment in Overlook Park with several plastic bags duct-taped tightly around his neck. He was wearing a backpack filled with letters and photos, and a journal in which he had written a goodbye note. The journal explained that this was not his first try; there had been an earlier attempt to jump off a bridge into the Willamette but he had survived. Suddenly I remembered a very odd email I'd received from him earlier that year in the middle of the night, brief and valedictory, telling me how much he loved me.



That is how it ended. There is also how he and I began. "Joshua Keen," I called out on the first day of class and looked up from the roll sheet to see a handsome young man in the back row. Thick jet-black hair, black eyelashes, brown-black eyes. Black Irish is how he identified himself. Though I didn't know the poem at the time, when I first came across Joseph Brodsky's early untitled work describing a raven steed, I recognized exactly the beautiful darkness he was describing from my first impression at seeing Josh:

So black was he that shadows made no stain;  
they could not dye him darker than he stood.  
He was as black as any midnight dark  
or any needle's fierce unfathomed heart—  
as black as the dense trees that loom ahead,  
as the tense void between the nested ribs,  
the pit beneath the earth where a seed lies.  
I know that here within us all is black—  
and yet he gleamed still blacker to our gaze!

Josh wasn't a full-time student—in fact this was the first university-level course he'd taken—and he was older than the rest of the students in the class. He was twenty-one, taking his first college course, and I was twenty-three, teaching not my first but one of my first creative writing courses, a night class, while pursuing my MFA in poetry at Indiana University. He was a very good poet, easily the best in the class, though his subject matter was darker than the rest of the students'. I had assigned Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* that semester and can remember his enthusiasm for the imagery in her poem "Cut." "What a thrill—/my thumb instead of the onion./The top quite gone. . . ." I can still remember some of the imagery of the poems he turned in for that class. There was one poem with an angry and violent father, one with images of empty liquor bottles lined up like a city skyline; another had an extraordinary image of the blurry asphalt visible through a rusted hole

in the foot-well of a car. And there was something pessimistic, self-defeating, in his attitude, as if he'd preempted getting one's hopes dashed by willfully choosing failure ahead of time. The class's final assignment was to revise a selection of poems written during the semester and to turn this portfolio in to my office during finals week. One day I came back to my office after lunch and found a sealed envelope with shattered pieces of a computer disk inside it. A letter accompanying it was from Josh, explaining that he believed a good teacher should help the student break their own bones, which had grown crookedly and were deformed, and to reset them. He thanked me for "breaking the bones" of his poems and helping him reform them. Now how was I supposed to grade *that*? I thought to myself. I was so furious at his own self-sabotage that I gave him an A instead of an F.

Sometime the following year, I saw Josh at Bear's Place, a jazz club that, looking back, was one of the true gems of that mostly sleepy little college town. We were both there with separate parties, but we talked, and seeing him outside of the classroom was startling. He was insanely handsome. A few weeks later, our first date was a poetry reading. Charles Simic read to us on campus in a huge auditorium where clearly a chemistry lecture had taken place earlier that day because the chalkboards were covered with elaborate formulae and computations. "The meaning of all of the poems I will read tonight," Simic began in his wry Serbian accent, "is explained for you already on the chalkboard behind me."

There is a time in one's early twenties when one is most free (though it also feels sometimes most lost) in one's life, and where everyone is more or less equal, where without much trouble at all, one can get along with someone from a different race, class, culture, background, age, religion, or any of those features of identity that generally become so calcified as one grows older. One can easily encounter someone that, were you to meet them ten years later, or twenty, it would be nearly impossible to connect with so fully. I grew up in Texas in a lower-middle-class religious fundamentalist-type family; I'd gotten a full scholarship to attend a private university and was now pursuing a graduate degree; but I was also the only member of my family who had never been arrested; my only younger brother was in fact, at the time, in jail. Josh grew up in section 8 housing in Bloomington, where his father had worked in the quarry before being diagnosed with bipolar disorder and deteriorating to the point of abandoning his family and living in a shed in his parents' backyard; his mother had raised Josh and his little brother Andrew, who died of cystic fibrosis as a teenager, essentially alone. Those differences seemed minor at the time, but the repercussions and consequences of them continued to accumulate. Poverty is a kind of foreign country. When I met Josh, he didn't know how to drive and had never flown on a plane. I wasn't from that country, but one that bordered it. That Josh had gone to work after high school instead of to college was completely irrelevant, at least to me, because it was immediately apparent that he was one of the most brilliant and empathic people I'd ever met.

Every time I saw him, it was spellbinding, it was awkward, it was sexy, and every time I left him I

would say to myself, "Tomorrow I'll end it." After seeing him every day for two weeks straight, it was hopeless. I told him instead that I loved him.



"Now blindfold me," he said, sitting on the edge of the bed in his disheveled studio apartment. He had just finished sticking earplugs in his ears and was ready to lose the second sense. I took the black scarf folded into a band and wrapped it around his eyes, tied a knot behind his head that sunk into the dark mass of his thick black hair. For a long minute he sat there, first rubbing his hands up and down his blue jeans, then across his face, and finally across the rumpled comforter. Then he held out his arms, as if reaching for me. I took his hand in my hand. "There you are," he said.

"I'm going to sit in the chair," I said, forgetting that he couldn't hear with the earplugs in. He had asked me to let him manage on his own. This was all part of the experiment. He had explained it to me on the phone beforehand and I had agreed to help him. He was starting work as a caregiver for a woman who was deaf and blind. To try to understand what life was really like for her, he wanted to spend an afternoon without sight or sound. He wanted to see if he could make himself a sandwich when he was hungry, how he might find his way to the bathroom, if he could figure out what exactly one does to pass an afternoon without listening to music or reading. He wanted me there in case the phone rang or something went wrong.

I watched him trip on the small coffee table on the way to the kitchen, watched him drag his fingers against the walls to navigate his way to the refrigerator. He was going to make his favorite snack: toasted bread with slices of muenster cheese and Tabasco sauce sprinkled on top. His movements were slow, methodical to the point of being excruciating. I worried about whether he'd accidentally burn himself with the toaster, whether he'd cut himself with the sharp knife he used to carve two slices of cheese. I watched. I said nothing.

He staggered back to the main room with his snack balanced on a paper towel and began to eat. Crumbs stuck to the stubble on his face; others scattered on the rug. We couldn't speak, and he'd asked me not to touch him or interfere unless needed. I looked at my lover's face: his eyebrows were knitted together; he seemed to be lost deep in thought. I had access to all of my senses, but I felt cut off, too, separate, an observer. We were trapped in our two bodies; we were two lonelines in a small disheveled room.



He had told me stories about the woman he took care of. Her name was Karen. In addition to being deaf and blind, she was diabetic, epileptic, and mute. He communicated with her by sign language, and he would teach it to me sometimes, too. He would take the first digit of his thumb and forefinger and press them together, as if measuring something very small. That was "bird." And then he would flatten and stretch his whole hand and palm, as if gesticulating the number five, and wiggle his fingers slightly. Those were the branches in the wind, and that was the sign for "tree."

His grandfather, perhaps happy that he had a serious girlfriend, had offered him his old white Monte Carlo convertible with AM radio and maroon leather upholstery. Josh took driving lessons the summer after we met. He did it while I was away at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference on a work-scholarship that meant waiting tables—something I'd done lots of in my life—and surprised me with being able to drive upon my return. He drove me to a waterfall he'd found in the forest where you could hear and smell the water's applause on limestone. Some days he would sign into Karen's palm the question of whether she would like to go for a drive, and she would always sign back yes. I don't know where he drove her, but he told me that she loved the sensation of the wind on her face.



After I graduated from Indiana University, we piled all of our clothes and books into my red pickup truck and moved to Portland, Oregon. I remember sitting with an atlas splayed open across our laps and picking a place on the map. We had no jobs, no friends, no relatives, no money, no prospects at all waiting for us there. But we chose well. Portland was a city we both fell in love with. Josh got a job driving a short bus for the elderly, disabled, and mentally ill. I started out working for a plumbers' and steamfitters' labor union, then worked at the Mountain Writers Center, a literary nonprofit that hosted poetry and fiction readings, lectures, workshops, and the like. Josh and I read, wrote, and talked about poetry voraciously. He published a few poems in small journals here and there, but when he eventually decided to go to college, he wanted to major in something more practical. He eventually graduated from Portland State University with a double major in Economics and Spanish.

We had different ways of paying attention to the world, and we fell in love with each other's ways. Josh looked at parts of the world that were easy to overlook. He stopped and talked to every homeless person we met on the street. He befriended so many that he had the idea of writing a book that would be a series of interviews and profiles of the homeless and their fascinating life stories. He wrote articles for a newspaper called *Street Roots* that homeless people could sell on the street as a dignified way to earn money.

Likewise, he talked especially to dogs. He knew every dog in our neighborhood, and for the dogs whose owners were gone all day, he'd knock on their doors on weekends and ask if it was okay to take their dog jogging while they were at work.



After I learned of Josh's suicide, a friend of his who had been in a writing workshop with him shared with me a poem he had brought to the workshop. This may not have been the last poem Josh wrote, but it was one I'd never seen before. So for me it serves as his last poem:

#### ODE ON ATHEISM

Hours of rain. The river swollen.  
Newspapers smeared along the docks.

Then a sun break hits  
and the port remembers,  
steaming, a little stunned.

Freight containers are orange and blue again.  
The shadows of warehouses deepen, gratefully.

The city breathes and is forgiven.  
Not even weeds that ring a dumpster  
are turned away. Not even rust and moss.

The docks are bucolic. The docks  
are a 14th century religious fresco.  
Giotto with his big skies and affectionate gestures.  
Magdalene's robes graze Christ's bloody feet.

Like kindness itself, a sun break is both fragile  
and enormous. Its lack of judgment  
falls starkly on the world. It doesn't color anything,  
but rather shows us color more clearly.  
And so nothing is beautiful  
and nothing is perfect because perfection  
has nothing to do with appearances  
but rather is the outcome of seeing things clearly.  
Or so one might think, hooking fingers  
into the chain link fence that circles the overgrown lot  
where someone chucked bottles, a tire, a television.  
Honeysuckle illuminated in the garbage.

It's such an accurate evocation of Portland, especially that gritty industrial part of it that Josh would jog through, often along the Willamette River

and into the warehouse district where the fleet of short busses he drove for work were parked. The anthropomorphizing of the city, the way it seems to be coming to, "gratefully," finally "forgiven" now that the hours of rain have let up, finally able to "breathe," is conveying a telling emotional landscape, but it is also a subtle and perceptive description that comes out of deep observation of the world. Whereas one might usually look for concrete language to help convey the particular quality of an abstraction, Josh reverses that. The "sun break" is what's being sought to be understood, not the nature of kindness. I can so clearly hear the defiance in his voice, too, in that somewhat too insistent reasoning toward the end, the emphatic repetition of *nothing* three times and the firm declaration that the poem is an ode to atheism, even if its figurative language paradoxically tells us otherwise. Giotto was my favorite artist, and Josh and I would sit together sometimes on the living room futon and look at my art history books filled with Giotto's frescoes. Josh *was* a fierce atheist, but what I find moving here is his allegiance to the mixture of the sacred and the profane. It is very beautiful—and very like Josh—to argue that perfection is "the outcome of seeing things clearly." That is the struggle we all have, it is the poem's beautiful struggle, and it was his life's work. And I imagine that's how he envisioned his own suicide, that awful "outcome."

Why is it so moving to me, those fingers hooked into the chain link fence at the end? Maybe the evocation of his hands that surfaces from my memory, but also something in the image betrays real awe. And the literal desire to grasp, to hold on to what one has found and recognized, a momentary respite from confusion and suffering. Of course it is also making us suddenly aware of a fence, separating the speaker from the overgrown lot illuminated with honeysuckle and garbage, but isn't it also a little like the Garden of Eden he's been exiled from, fenced off if not thrown out of?



Josh had proposed to me before we left Bloomington, and we had each given the other rings, but although both of us wanted to get married, we never seemed to want it at the same time. Which was telling, because we were together for seven years. After several years, I felt restless or I wanted to settle, I couldn't quite decide which. Neither it seemed could he. He didn't want to have children. He didn't want to buy a house together. There was something that felt stalled in our relationship that I didn't see, then didn't want to see, then had to see as I eventually realized that my twenties were almost over. I had always known that I wanted to go back to school and get my PhD. I applied to the University of Houston and got in. I asked Josh if he would come with me, and he deliberated for days. I can't do it now, he finally said, but if you can give me a year, I'll come with you. So I deferred going for a year, and at the end of that year, I asked him again, and he looked at me sadly and said he was sorry, but he just couldn't do it.

I wrote a poem looking back on those last days with him. Our final winter together, he'd taken on a part-time temporary job at the post office to earn some extra money, but it usually meant that he would work night shifts. I called it in my poem "the year we lived in twilights":

#### THE RECORD

Kisses, too, tasted of iron  
the year we lived in twilights. They tilted warily  
like bags of groceries I'd carry up the stairs  
to find you in boxers, the smell of coffee mixed with vinegar  
from the bowl of pickle juice you soaked your fingers in  
trying to hurry the callouses. We trafficked in the grief  
of incompatible day and night, we stretched the hours  
as best we could, but mostly we practiced  
a kind of starving, excruciating to recall  
how hard we tried. I'd unpack the groceries  
and tell you about the day, and after dinner  
you'd pick out a tune on the guitar  
(it was the year you apprenticed to the blues).  
Before each night shift, in uniform and socks,  
you'd climb into bed and hold me until I fell asleep.  
Then you would slip quietly out.  
And when I dreamed, I glimpsed the gods in you,  
I dreamt you were Hephaestus with the iron forge,  
the sweat covering you when you jogged home  
was holy, it was the sweat of the whole city,  
even the roses, even the bus exhaust.  
The mind circles back like a record spinning,  
a little molten, a little wobbly, a record  
shiny as your black hair, a record player  
crackling and stuttering over a scratch, an urge  
to ask forgiveness even though it's dark now  
and you've already forgiven me.

The hardest day of my life, even now, was the day I left him, pulling over to the side of the road several times on my drive to vomit in the weeds. I wept uncontrollably when we said goodbye, reduced to a little girl, inconsolable, and which Josh sensed, because he told me, holding me and whispering it in my ear, a kind of bedtime story, one I find myself remembering now all the time. But it is a sad story because the animal and human strike me as how he understood the ultimate incompatibility—if also love—between us: *Don't be afraid, Jena*, he said. *One day I will come to you, but I will be a bear. A big black bear, but I'll knock on your door so you'll know it's me. Don't be afraid. Just let me in and I'll lie down quietly by the fire. Then you can climb up on me as if I were a big furry blanket and go to sleep.*

In memory of Joshua Keen, 1973–2013

JENNIFER GROTZ, director of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, is the author of *The Needle* (2012) and *Cusp* (2003), which received the Katharine Bakeless Nason Prize and the Natalie Ornish Best First Book of Poetry Prize from the Texas Institute of Letters. Her translations from the French of the poems of Patrice de La Tour du Pin are collected in *Psalms of All My Days*.

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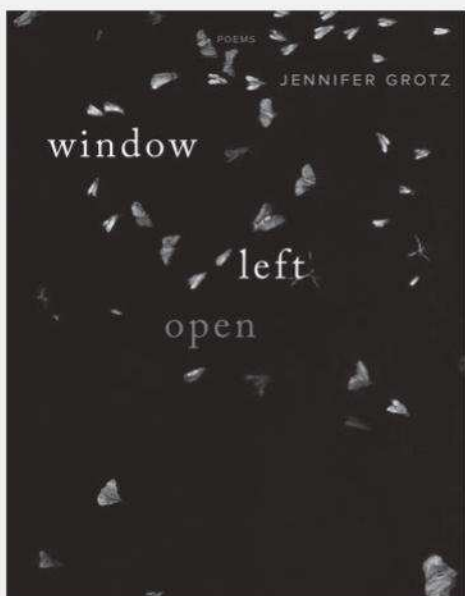
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five poems

**Indian & Colored Burial Ground**

We buried Uncle Keith in Nondaga Cemetery, the old Indian and Colored graveyard where Haleys have been put in the ground since Carlos bought himself free of slavery. A crab apple had just come into bloom near Keith's plot. With each breeze, a snow of petals covered the turned-over soil while we told stories. I remembered playing basketball in the driveway. Keith was wall-eyed and crippled by hard living—he didn't hit a shot all afternoon. The best story came from Keith's days working at the VA Hospital. One night his friends set up a corpse to spook him when he walked into his shift at the morgue. Spook he did—back through the door, his high-yellow face losing its last traces of color—and didn't come into work till three hours later. After the service I stayed in a fleabag across Route 15 from a train yard. A chain link fence curling off its posts separated a mangy lawn from a break of trees. The lights from Corning shone over the darkling, still-bare branches of those trees, and picnic benches rotted on the lawn. They had the emptiness of rooms in a clapboard house where no one will live after a drifter, a dozen years ago, butchered a family there. I was glad, in the morning, when I woke up alive.

**Boxwood**

The synthesized death rattle of soul music played on the radio while my father drove us to the school where he taught and I waited to be lined up and led outdoors. At day's end, I was dismissed before he finished with his students. Through a grated cellar window, I'd watch him, sometimes, in his basement classroom, his hands white with chalk dust or slapping a wooden pointer against a map I'd see redrawn within a decade. But most days, I teetered in the sprawling, low-slung branches of a yew and crushed the clear fluid from its red fruit. This afternoon, when I pick up my son from nursery school at the synagogue, he'll want to play on the lawn before I drive him home. He'll find palmfuls of acorns and throw them into the road to see tires mash them to pulp. Or, he'll find other boys, and they'll dash, with the buckling grace of fawns, under two old boxwoods, pruned to small climbing trees. They'll clamber and hang and despite all cautions, all scolds, they'll fall. And fall. And fall.

**Monoshone Creek**

The park is stripped down for winter. Acres of gray trunks sprawl up slopes on either side of the road. Even at speed, I can see deep into the woods, the only hint of foliage the green ellipticals of rhododendron curling in the cold and leaves, blanched and marcescent, that beeches refuse to drop.

A rime of snow coats the leaf litter, but on asphalt the morning traffic has melted it slick. A stone wall lines the margin where a creek ran before the city tunneled its water into a sewer line. (A gap fit for a bridge still interrupts the masonry.) Before the park, the houses were like the one I just left, where my wife is shading her eyes and straightening her cardigan. Now that the road has wound out of the valley, the houses have changed from brick and flat-roofed to gabled and stone—same rock as the wall, schist hauled up from the bank and bed of a broader creek that this road followed before it bent toward the buried tributary. Every morning on this stretch of sidewalk, I see the same woman walking her beagle as it strains against its lead, the same man dashing toward Upsal and the train. Above us, the sun burns a light spot in the gray expanse of cloud, a dull shine like an answer I know I should know but just can't bring myself to remember.

**Aubade**

You were standing at the kitchen counter. I did not slam the door. I pulled it so the lock made the least click in the latch. Did you notice my leaving? Along the road that passes the hospital where you will bear our second son, that forks as it heads out of town, I saw a crow perched on a wire. Flapping its wings, it rose on its talons but did not fly away. If my window weren't closed against the cold of a tailing year, I would hear the crow caw when it thrusts forward its head and throat. In the windshields of oncoming cars, the rising sun glints sharply. When I do not sleep tonight, shall I dream you a dancer in a coat of dark, iridescent feathers, or the freshly sliced pear's dripping juice on a knife blade? And me— shall I dream me a whorl of road, forgotten entrance and obscured exit, or a door slammed on sobs in the other room? I'll ask again: did you notice my leaving? I hope not. These autumn mornings I've tried to shut out all auguries, all evidence of my own leaving.

**Arrival: Troy, New York**

*And the migrants kept coming.*  
—Jacob Lawrence, "The Migration Series" (Panel 60)

Them fire-bombed. (This street will never be yours)  
Them shovel-handed new help. (Scabs scabbed over)  
Them erstwhile writers of glyphs in the dust. (We backtracked the plow furrow to the foundry,

the mule trace to the beasts'  
tannery-fresh burden.)

We went.

(Three-to-a-bed  
never scared us)

Stacked like spoons.  
Weighed like sacks.

(Ungreased arm of the grain scale)

We went.

And the bolts that fastened us each  
to each turned bullets, conical

& gleaming,

fell upon us like sun on the storm-ripped  
and withering trees of peach orchards.

Further gnarling of the already.

Them night leavers.

(Blackbirds, like arrows, in the black  
sky)

Them room emptiers.

(Splinter rough boards  
never looked sadder or prettier)

Them half-naked station waiters.

Them mountain-tellers

(though  
we be game-legged).

Them rain-swollen-river crossers

(Rock my soul  
in the bosom  
of Abraham)

Them blind blind.

Them following-  
the-blind blind.

Them blind-

who-ain't-seen.

Them ain't-seen.

Them seen, ain't-seen.

Them.

(Those Them).

Them Them. We Them.

We that Them.

We that traveling Them.

That arrived-and-still-traveling Them.

That traveling, traveling Them.

(That Them)

(Them Them)

IAIN HALEY POLLOCK's second collection of poems, *Ghost, Like a Place* is forthcoming from Alice James Books in September. His debut collection, *Spit Back a Boy*, won the 2010 Cave Canem Poetry Prize. He teaches English at Rye Country Day School in Rye, N.Y., and poetry at the Solstice MFA Program of Pine Manor College.



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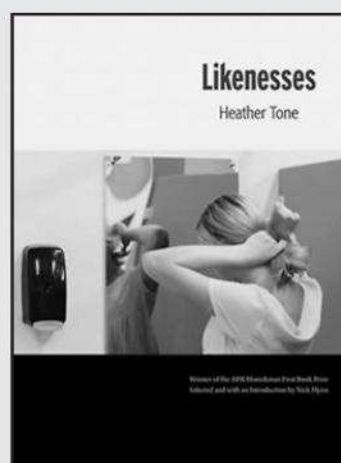
## Tyree Daye *River Hymns*



*River Hymns* by Tyree Daye, winner of the 2017 APR/Honickman First Book Prize, is available in APR's online store at [www.aprweb.org](http://www.aprweb.org) and at other outlets. *River Hymns* was chosen by guest judge Gabrielle Calvocoressi.

TYREE DAYE is from Youngsville, North Carolina. His poems have been published in *Prairie Schooner*, *Nashville Review*, *Four Way Review* and *Ploughshares*. He was awarded the Amy Clampitt Residency for 2018 and The Glenna Luschei Prairie Schooner Award in the Fall 2015 issue. He is a Cave Canem fellow.

## Heather Tone *Likenesses*



*Likenesses* by Heather Tone, winner of the 2016 APR/Honickman First Book Prize, is available in APR's online store at [www.aprweb.org](http://www.aprweb.org) and at other outlets. *Likenesses* was chosen by guest judge Nick Flynn.

HEATHER TONE is the author of a chapbook, *Gestures* (The Catenary Press). Her poetry has appeared in *The Boston Review*, *The Colorado Review*, *Fence*, and other journals. A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, she currently lives in Florida.

## two poems

## Toska

Days a cascade of what  
Trolley clatters thru a grimy warmth

Hours filled w/ what  
Dimming light as stabilizer

What you call me in the dark  
isn't what I am

& that helps me float  
above the moment

Is that what anyone  
means by role play?

Men point out the moon  
like we haven't been conspiring

this whole time. Like I haven't  
been right here, renegotiating

the terms of my objectification  
Let me give you the highlights reel

That's not how time works,  
but still

I say *not dtf*,  
*spiritually drained*

You say *that's sweet*,  
*thanks for sharing*

No equivalent for  
*toska* in this tongue

so I gape & gape  
at anonymous greenery

bursting from a neighbor's porch  
Birds flicker in & out of view

w/ nothing to tell. I can't  
write what I can't identify.

What happens when  
you want to assign meaning

for protection, absolution,  
to move past the incident,

reclaim yr body after  
the incident, quit calling it

the incident, hitch on to a word  
& use the word as foothold—

In school, my mother learned  
all the names of mushrooms

from primeval forests far out  
past the city & the dachas

Cautionary tales about crones  
& hungry wolves & wicked hearts

lost, like so much else, in the gap  
between the old world & this

*amerikanka* launching immigrant  
daughter guilt into the receiver

while my mother gains traction  
in the hatched narrative that she'll die

before her firstborn's settled. If  
there's a love w/o encumbrance,

I don't need to know it. At my age,  
she had two kids & three jobs

At my age, I have a busted phone  
full of contacts filed under *That was*

*a weird period in my life, actually*  
Awe is rare & sometimes grotesque

& it's not that I don't know  
what I want;

I just don't know how to  
want the same things

for a long time  
& what I don't want

can happen anyway, has happened,  
moves trackless, finds me slouching

through an esoteric French film  
about complicated love. You know

the kind: all the players deranged  
& beautiful, ready to bleed out

for it. The woman in purple eyeshadow  
screams *I love you means nothing*

Later, someone offers *sorry*  
*I was disappointing tonight*

in response to my body coiled  
around itself

*Stay if you want*  
means nothing beyond reflex—

proof I've been socialized  
to show contempt benignly

*I'm alright*—leave the air  
stilled as after a sudden storm

## Re: Eros

Do I look alive  
enough out there?

Crushed velvet  
signaling my intent

to be devoured, undone,  
et cetera, whatever else

shows veritable effort  
I want useless splendor,

to be as carried off  
w/ rapture

as the woman who kissed  
a Klimt hanging in a gallery,

later said *It was a gesture of love . . .*  
*I did not think it out carefully*

I want the class wars to start  
but everyone's so tired

All these neologisms  
for disruption & innovation

& still, not a soul I know  
confuses precarity w/ play

Eros, I've looked  
for you all over

Our totalitarian state  
glitched out my libido

& I give over whole afternoons  
to huffing lavender,

hitting up ghoulish senators,  
browser history littered

w/ herbal elixirs &  
all the things I should know

how to do by now. All around  
me, women grip the buoys

of their autonomy to stay  
afloat until personhood washes up

on the shores of no nation  
I stockpile intimacies almost

too ephemeral to clock:  
strangers act so kind

whenever I wear  
this ridiculous pom-pom hat

& old friends use my name's diminutive  
& some lovers leave

a glass of lemon water by the bed,  
my body carved w/ red filigree

Desire doesn't aspire  
to anything other than itself—

I don't miss so-&-so,  
just being seen in that way,

just having an unholy place  
to rest, set all this down

---

ALINA PLESKOVA's first chapbook, *What Urge Will Save Us*, was published in 2017 by Spooky Girlfriend Press. She co-edits *bedfellows*, a biannual print & online literary magazine that catalogs work about sex, desire, & intimacy.



## Friendship, Porousness & the Intimate Experience of Poetry

WAS ON CAPE COD—I SAW A BOY ON THE beach—he had a fishing pole he was sort of walking around—and he had a kite attached to the fishing pole—I guess so he could hold it up—and so he could reel it in and let it out—and he looked like a little English boy with his shorts—and even now I just sort of picture him like two old etchings drawn together—the kite flying above him out of the picture—I walked around reading Cape Cod—that being alone—and in actual space—that actual space and sand and water—all those bodies washed up on the beach in 1849 coldness—vastness and presence—kicking sand around and looking out at the clouds—the sense of form that finds itself constantly re-articulating in them—flying a kite you provide a tension—attempts at something physical—familiarity and awareness—you’re pulling at it—it, in the air—air sometimes forms itself as wind—into winds—winds varying and indiscrete—so catching—causes form—a tension—gives it form—

What stories  
bear repeating news  
of the day we demonstrate  
the motions of earth its shape  
birds pass through trees, or sit  
watching or in song  
not sounding afraid  
eyes make walls

dissolving stone but  
blinded  
the waves, seas, how forgotten  
stars dashed in the water

*(that’s Larry Eigner fifty years ago this week)*

in world a kind of span—in span a kind of time—a presence—and a feeling cooperative—simultaneous—form realized and released—a temporary state and selfness—a meditation—a shared state—and a dispersal in that sharing—partly just because you’re watching the kite move around in the sky while you’re doing it with your hands—it’s a physical thing like listening—or walking—that responsive presence propelled—or just a loafing and wandering about in it—but in it—a not getting there—getting there—or going—a kind of physical distraction—guided by attractions, concerns, and leanings—like walking—the poems free-form and moving—access and reflective space for the constant art of natural formation—like if a waterfall were made of the earth and rock it flows over—or just say clouds—the forming and changing of themselves—making themselves—

Even while they are existing in a book, all those words are out there doing other things—while you’re reading them in your poem, they are out there in the world as well, kinda polyamorous, suggestible and infinitely occupied—and I feel as though I am trying to recognize it as something temporary—through the experience of writing—in the same way it appears temporary through the experience of reading—capable of remaining—temporary—moments of today—the way it elevates out—

the heat obliterates  
the walls of the house  
indoors. outdoors. the children’s  
cries

the birds keep on  
and cars go by

*(that’s Larry Eigner again, the same time)*

Sometimes I think of the poem as something discretely placed in time, that the appreciable experience of the poem happens primarily in the moment of engagement or reflection—but doesn’t it happen so many other times too—and maybe that’s not even it—maybe it’s just that things that are alive or were alive don’t seem finite—when dead seem gone, sure—but seemed gone at other times too—and seem here sometimes, alive—even now—and poetry falls into that space between—when reading aloud, confronted by embraced real presence—you are there—in the poem—among the enacted world—which happens when poems are getting made as well—

I think of the haiku poets traveling and making poems—spirit of openness—haiku as conduit, response, and proof—so the life of the haiku poet is to exist and integrate thoroughly and fluidly into that existence the poetic act—the ways of being in the world are in its way—through its way—a kind of metabolism—social—shared—and this feels strange if you are considering a poem as a singular thing—some unalterable bit of perfection—finite and resolute in its completeness—and that’s just one way to think about poems—but isn’t it more organic and changing—

Centuries and centuries of spoken poems—of stories constructing and happening—the encounters of people—in space and time they are made to exist—if people are there you speak to them—change for them—that story as you speak to them—various repetitions and highlight senses become central—a kind of guidance—think of the troubadours coming to town wandering around and incorporating the people they found into their tales—drawing them toward the spots where they would eventually perform—an audience now an active visible part of the narrative—following to hear what happens to them—

And it’s not just the oral traditions—think of ancient fragments anecdotally kept and written down—think of samizdat editions and desperately scribbled copies—think of the entire practice of translation—think of Walt Whitman changing his one book and many poems over and over again—or Emily Dickinson leaving countless private variants to be considered—all the variorum editions of our most esteemed poets—and most poems never end up in print at all—private accumulation of drafts to be gone through or not—but still to exist—variant and real—and now in the 21st century it’s basically moot again—

Easy to Love  
the POETS

Their  
SPLENDOUR  
Falling all over the pages  
Extorting atomic rainbows

Easy to Love  
the Poets

Their  
SPLENDOUR  
Falling all over the pages

into  
My lap  
*(that’s Elise Cowen)*

I’m trying to imagine now the central experience of the poem as something temporary—and so I imagine it as something aloud—something spoken out—or aloud inside you—a muscular compulsion—the livingness—a spell—and the space of it—as the dancer, articulating space, moves around—their bodies moving around in what seemed empty—and then are there—or there it is—or here we are—making spaces too—with poems—we make them—are in them—made by them—a resonance and accumulation—the poem more and more an experience—a flash of being—

When I step through the door  
everything has changed. Finally,  
it is out the door  
past homes, down the trail  
the lovely beach  
draws me into her drawing. Finally

I am past the fear of life’s paucity.  
Green Angels, stream, in hot California  
and in the stillness seeds popping.

*(Joanne Kyger)*

A reading and writing kind of closer to drawing than painting—drawing, its incomplete presence allowing in—its fragmentary way essential—it’s what it is—time—traditional painters using drawing as a way to identify borders—by going through them over them—by failing in ways their paintings couldn’t—in ways they didn’t want their masterpieces to fail—

I think of Emerson—his saying that friendship is the masterpiece of nature—or really, he says it “may well be reckoned the masterpiece of nature”—that this conception of masterpiece is unfixed—that it is moving—that it will remain so—always in flux—temporary—I’m thinking of clouds again and people—but also that it can only be understood—that it can only be recognized fully from the inside—privately—intimately—so the masters concerned with their masterpieces would make these drawings—these studies—seeing the edges—of the visible—and to do so ceding all sorts of control—and accuracy—to something expressive and spontaneous—how else find the look on that person’s face or the emotion in that stone house—and there is something about this drawing—this unrestrained extension beyond—embraced in the poem—the improvisation, sure, toward art—but also, as art—the act as art, as poetry—the partial—the social—the bodily—the private—the free—

I feel friendship’s continual presence—the way a poem might stay with you—a poet—the exuberant passions—and attractions—the being consumed and inside of it—everything in and through it—I feel the poem unrestrained—sincerely present—and improvisational—at its core an exposure of unknowing—complex and unanswered—unconcerned with propriety or etiquette—the freedom that is friendship—the consent to accept—that allows the friend, unrestrained, to speak—and to be heard—not immediately designated or judged—but encountered—I think it’s that I found in the poems when I found

the poems I loved—some ecstatic circuit's been joined—and that's how friendship feels—

I remember a terrible professor in school saying that if you put a Rembrandt on a cliff and pushed someone off the cliff—its expression wouldn't change—anyhow, that's one argument—and of course there are plenty of arguments for that but I wonder—what I wonder is why accept or demand that set of values if what you want is something more communal—if your presence is already demanding another communal place—we isolate and individualize—but it is just a ridiculous notion—to propose a separation of one human from the other ones—

I found you  
came in the room and started talking,  
and ironing  
I turned on the radio, the night rose  
around us  
I forget,  
you  
were looking at me. I came in the room  
and started ironing. The night rose  
around us. The pinnacles, the far off  
spines of trees like  
the lakes  
under us, hollow  
stones to go through, in the distance, close, the eye  
brings the breeze under us,  
through us, over us

(Joanne Kyger)

I'm moving with the poem—I've found it—I can hear it—the experience of reading and listening—aloud—it's something so surprising—more future than past—you can recognize it—and you can tend to it in a way—the other things disappear—and you move through the space of the poem—in the poem's present—some other present receding—I'm hearing and speaking at the same time—my lips moving when I write—and this is what I'm feeling about reading aloud—reading aloud I get drawn to stand up—I expand my chest—I move my arms—I rock or sway—my head or jaw bobs in some strange rhythmic fashion—or I whisper or I mumble—I close in my shoulders—my body making intimate my reverberations—just moving my lips to make and hear—the words form—physical and sounding out—over and over touching my lips to each other—and if I cover my mouth, there my breath is on my hand—or close my eyes and hear a line—

I become occupied by the poem—breathing as it breathes—or talking as it talks—some poems call on you to act as they act—perform their performance—I find myself in some dramatic pose when I read Frank O'Hara—“Khrushchev is coming on the right day”—the experience a sort of cinematic pleasure—like one might find in front of the mirror—or in the shower—

“My dear reader, read aloud, if possible!” writes a 19th-century philosopher. “If you do so, allow me to thank you for it; if you not only do it yourself, if you also influence others to do it, allow me to thank each one of them, and you again and again! By reading aloud you will gain the strongest impression that you have only yourself to consider.”

There are some poems that attempt to release and exhale—exaggerations of affect—and some of those exhalations become poems—and some of the freer breathings become poems—and in reading them the body comes to be differently—not acting out at all—just being—

#### WAITING

over the lilacs won't he come home  
to at least rest tonight, I want to see  
the round car safe in the driveway, cinders  
and the moon over head

(Joanne Kyger)

I feel different, and it all feels like a counterbalance to the annoyingly persistent sense of self that seems so intent on being itself—and allows at times a sense of self that feels outside of my self—but still there—right in my self as well.



There's this therapeutic practice in which the therapist touches the patient or asks the patient to do some physical task like holding on to the table edge or their own hand—and in doing this—occupies the body of the patient—and directs the conscious mind of the patient to that occupation—and reading aloud can be basically the same thing—a guide provided—so

you are occupied in the bodily performance of it—your conscious critical mind applied to the task—the self of you in a cloud of experience—sound and sense—and the performing of it—the body pulsing—with its own enactment—the reverberations in one expressive and real—the space and zone engaged—as one might in the world world—unattributing and human—like wandering around—

Then the poem experience causing experience in everything—its effective potential on myself—of that—of what to me is recognizable—or some way bodily—sensually attended—spiritually present—a compostable mass always heaving and sprouting—sores and flowers on the pile—things microscopic—the glass fashioned full—the brutal physicality of actions and their results—after their results—or is the poem a reflection of a combination of physical needs—I need my voice my body my spirit to make these sounds and so out they come—out to meet those needs—the result of writing those poems being that those things got said—and the experience of reading being I said them—

I saw myself  
a ring of bone  
in the clear stream  
of all of it  
and vowed,  
always to be open to it  
that all of it  
might flow through  
and then heard  
“ring of bone” where  
ring is what a  
bell does

(Lew Welch)

A friend calls up and says “monks reading rules as devotional forms”—I play it over a bunch of times—monks' monkhood being the ways read aloud—I remember hearing the answering machine—the way you'd be at attention—that moment—you'd be there in that presence of being talked to—no, spoken with—some strange thing that was made and barely existed—until it got heard—some faithful expanse of time between leaving it and then—like a letter—and then it being listened to—and then it being gone—

The loose attachment to forms and things as they pass—that even while you move by—the sense of being—there—increases—forms of attended things temporarily present—washes of sense and place—as with consciousness—that one at times recognizes one's own form—states—it inhabits—you inhabit it—spans of distance and the energy they release—the disinhibiting of expressive responsive presence—making poems—making poems sound out—in ways—in new ways—those private newnesses I feel when the poem comes out of me aloud—my self and world more open—each time you read—experience sheds knowing—it acquires new knowings—each time a kind of regeneration and simultaneous decay—the poem feels alive—

the discursive how  
packed  
lives  
and by the echo  
dissolved  
as the  
forcing together  
a pile of screens  
you could leave acquire  
time, flies  
reverberating  
the dark house, and the vast  
sun moving, out,  
slowness, level of it all  
approach night  
the clouds to the sea  
stirred on

(Eigner again, from *November 1959*)

The inside space as one feels with sound—one's body vibrates with a sense of things—and so a continuous climate of sensation—even expression—as



one feels when one listens to music and is alive with that music—a kind of expressive attention—a part of what is happening—one feels essential—not the distance of appreciation or even some collaborative necessity to the completion of the work, but vibrating and responding so that characteristics of you and it become shared—in a way as music is often consuming—listening you can become part of it—the blood in your body, your skin too—sometimes your muscles and bones and everything—sometimes you dance around—sometimes your pulse calms, etc.—

And I wonder to what extent this is allowed by the general expectation that music's receiver is not the intellect—rarely does one apply that type of intelligence to a listening experience—imagine the fluid role of thoughts actions emotions one finds in listening and how easy on one's self one is in that dumb overtaken state—or the theoretical drifting one does while listening—that one's mind wanders—that one is unsettled—that the sensual experience seems to dominate does not make us feel any less that we are aware of what we have heard—in fact we can feel the proximity of the meaning (no, of a meaning) of the art despite our inability to define it—in fact it may be that like certain human instances and relationships, we are capable of the meaning only as we remain unable to complete it with definition—to understand is to complete—to try to understand is to try and complete—and for a poem, which is a real thing, a living thing—organic and changing—capable, sure, of a different kind of life than, say, a botanist or a flower—but still so capable of interactive presence as to deny its inanimate status—

So to desire to understand fully—(fully, being the more important word)—is to desire to complete, and the completion of the poem is the death of the poem—and here it feels important to state that the desire for some, or much, understanding—the prodding and pointing at parts of the poem—the isolation of the language so that its use may be comprehended—the parsing of part from part—the assessing of sound or any particular of the poem—the investigation of underlying philosophies histories biographies etc., decoding deciphering to name a few—none of these are of course in and of themselves detrimental—simply, I'm proposing that if one leads with the intellect one can find oneself done with the poem (some way or another, soon enough), and that that being done can be a kind of betrayal of the poem. If you don't care for the poem or the poet, that betrayal is not such a concern—but if you don't care that much for the poem I suggest you stop reading it and allow its fragmentary self to be—to move on—

#### THE LANGUAGE

Locate /  
love you some-  
where in

teeth and  
eyes, bite  
it but

take care not  
to hurt, you  
want so

much so  
little. Words  
say everything.

/  
love you  
again,

then what  
is emptiness  
for. To

fill, fill.  
I heard words  
and words full

of holes  
aching. Speech  
is a mouth.

(Robert Creeley)

That experience of knowing bodily—of self being in some place—being present in that place—not just the conjuring of places and things that are and make the environment of our poems—that moment and its castings are the poem—not that you understand them but that they are there—

I think of the most impassioned communications—as crying fights blown out with fragmented abstractions of hurt and anger—mostly partial and repeated words and sentences—interrupting and unfinished itself so one

might be—inside a swim of words and sound—without comprehensively expressed thought—but meaning more full—and the other more pleasant passions act the same too—abstraction can be porous like that—that folding cavalcade of words—words with their images their thought and resonance—meant to allow an attentive drift almost meditatively forming—meaning temporarily held—

I like reading like that—I think feeling like that's when the poem's a live rush or faucet-like pouring out—you'll go through it and just have to go through it again—the forming—the coming together—I was reading—in the center—this idea about porousness—the core of art—its making—its appreciation—and time the distraction that is access—

#### AN IRREGULAR ODE

Once I began to write,  
Be ruled by Beauty & her wilfulness  
& got no further  
Choking and wheezing, subject completely to the selfishness  
of my own history

I don't wonder that you doubt my love  
My attention wanders even now, squinting at the moon  
bamboo blinds—I should be with you  
we're only blocks apart

The same imaginary beauty splits us up, I keep chasing  
the one who invents the mountains and the stars  
I'm a fool supposing she's someone else than you  
are moss & ferns in forest light

(Philip Whalen)

Note: This talk was first given at the Poetry Foundation in Chicago. When it was given each of the poems was read aloud twice with the attribution in the middle, allowing the prose to move fluidly into the poem and then the poem to move fluidly back into the prose.

JOSHUA BECKMAN is a poet, translator, artist and editor. His first book, *Things Are Happening*, was (twenty years ago) winner of the APR/Honickman First Book Prize. His most recent books are *The Lives of the Poems* and *Three Talks* (in which this piece appears), published by Wave Books.

## Tom O. Jones

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# JAMES ARTHUR

## three poems

### Wolf

No costume, Red Riding Hood, ever could disguise  
this jaw, this brush-like tail, this tongue.

By now you must be married to a woodcutter  
or to a woodcutter's son  
but I am still entangled in the forest of your hair. Come back;  
get me out of this nightgown, and I'll show you  
how to raid a chicken coop,  
how to step around a snare.

Only stroke my face again  
as if it were one of the remaining wild places of the world.  
Does it make me a donkey, eating shards of apple from your hand?  
I'd devour every grandmother in the world  
to get back into your basket. Look at the savage brambles  
pasted through my fur. Don't tell me that my enormous teeth  
don't frighten you anymore.  
My enemy the moon looks down at me like a cauterized eye  
as I creep into the village

and softly call your name. Little scholar, little flame,  
shy girl in a crimson cowl, let me unfasten the buttons  
that you've done up to your collar.  
The shepherd's boy keeps crying wolf  
because he thinks we'll never come. Red Riding Hood,  
come help me blow these houses down.

It's not like I'm not able  
to live inside the law. It just makes me crazy,  
seeing little pigs building up their houses  
with hickory sticks and straw.

### Ararat

did it really happen  
the way I remember  
before the rupture

and the flood before  
I sent out the raven  
and the dove

and my family and I  
came down the mountain  
into a country

we couldn't recognize  
did I really go out  
and gather two animals

of every kind  
I hear them breathing  
across the yarrow field

beasts with tapered quills  
and ears drawn back  
with brightly colored

scales and feathers  
stranglers moving  
without a sound

how many generations  
have I now seen  
descend from me

and multiply  
I can't remember  
who is which person's

son or daughter  
but I remember  
the two rabbits we kept

and the many more  
we kept alive  
just for slaughter

the animals  
start screaming  
the boat begins to rise

I gather wildflowers  
from the valley  
to please my little bride

am I nothing  
but another creature  
of the field

am I not in the mold  
of the one who made me  
why he would save me

from the water  
and let me drown  
in time in the shadow

of my ship that was  
my church my home  
that was my barn

### In Al Purdy's House

It is strange, living in the house  
of a writer who has died. I use your cutlery,  
your typewriter. I read your autobiography  
while lying in your bed, trying to imagine Roblin Lake  
and this lakeside piece of land  
as they were sixty years ago, when you and Eurithe  
built the A-frame by hand,  
with no experience of carpentry, using salvaged lumber  
and whatever materials you could find.

Critics seem to always talk you up or talk you down,  
casting you as the forerunner  
of all Canadian poets who were to follow,  
or else as a roughneck and a clown.  
For me, it's enough that you were endlessly demoted  
during a war you found unreal;  
that you lived and wrote according to an image  
you had in mind;  
that you called your house *A drum for the north wind,*  
*a kind of knot in time.*

Your mother's good china  
is still here, asleep inside the hutch. History,  
your personal history, hangs around the record player,  
which I haven't dared to touch—  
but this year there's been so much rain,  
Roblin Lake has climbed up fifteen feet on the grass,

making an island of the short peninsula  
you and Eurithe added to the shore.

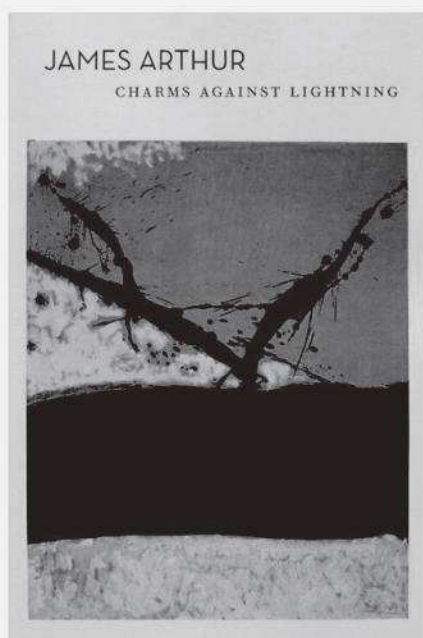
Standing at the window near the kitchen,  
watching a single sailboat pass  
back and forth across a distance  
that couldn't be more than a mile from end to end,  
I feel a collapse of distinctions  
between the real and the unreal,  
between what has already  
taken place, and what is happening right now,  
as if time had been doubled over into itself,  
like a sheet of folded steel.  
Cottage country becomes backcountry,  
as houses along the shoreline  
blink out and disappear.

I know better than to make myself at home  
in a house that isn't mine.  
Soon, I'll leave the keys  
on the counter, turn the lock  
on the inside, step out, and close the door—  
and from that point forward  
there won't be any of this, anymore.

Maybe because I'm left-handed  
I made my way through your collected poems  
back to front,  
so I ended with the love songs of a young man—  
poems for women  
you seduced, or thought you might seduce—  
and I began  
with your regrets, the many places you visited,  
and your elegies for friends  
who during my backward progress  
came to life one by one.

---

JAMES ARTHUR'S poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, *Poetry*, *The New York Review of Books*, and *The London Review of Books*. He has received the Amy Lowell Poetry Travelling Scholarship, a Hodder Fellowship, a Stegner Fellowship, a residency at the Amy Clampitt House, a Discovery/*The Nation* Prize, and a Fulbright Scholarship to Northern Ireland. *Charms Against Lightning*, his debut poetry collection, is available from Copper Canyon Press.



[www.jamesarthurpoetry.com](http://www.jamesarthurpoetry.com)

## ROBERT HUNTER JONES

### Lecture on Emptiness

My wife no longer wants to hear from me  
on this, how the emptiness of take-out coffee  
cups or suitcases in even the best series or film  
suggests a more pervasive hollowness. Method  
actors pretending to sip hot liquids from obviously

empty cups unmasks a world bereft of surface  
tension; it violates the necessary suspension  
of disbelief upon which all such versions  
of vicarious truth depend. Vacations taken with  
empty bags in tow depress me in the same way

those drinks decorated with paper umbrellas may  
mock the irksome myth of privilege and plenty  
in actual life, though this, it seems, is just a garden  
variety failure of unintended irony—a bit like  
a voice-over track applied to clarify the obvious.

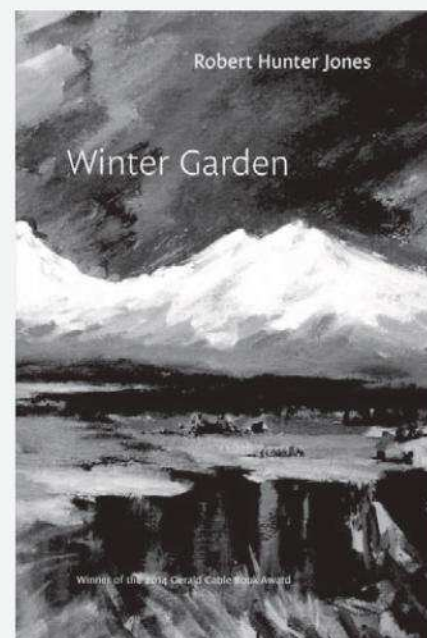
Let's return to the physics of emptiness, the necessity  
of weight and its relationship to gravity. Jesse Pinkman  
offers a welcome counter-claim, the weight of his duffle  
bag bulked with bundled hundreds pulling him down  
as he muscles it past empty-eyed meth heads gaping

at the flat screen his ill-gotten largesse has bought him.  
This, it seems, is how allegory should actually  
work, the suggestion of weight in service of the emptiness  
that radiates from its own gravitational center, pulling  
all the necessary consequences into orbit around it. Here

mass is exaggerated to underscore its own antithesis—  
the ineluctable relationship between action and its  
downstream implications—a resonant, weighty emptiness  
burdened with made choices. Here at last is hollowness  
we can celebrate, its heat real and dangerous to the touch.

---

ROBERT HUNTER JONES' collection *Winter Garden* was recently featured on *Poetry Daily*. His work has appeared in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Northwest Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *Seattle Review*, among others. He teaches Literature and Theory of Knowledge at American International School of Vienna, in Vienna, Austria.



[www.roberthunterjones.com](http://www.roberthunterjones.com)

five poems

**We, Said the Wren**

I didn't know vampires taste like Gatorade. Nor did I know hair's made fair with weeds, milk thistle, and lambs quarters.

Where our mouths came together, blue roots.

I was marooned in bird pathology: raptors and free jazz, until I swapped my name for your face.

We bit eyeholes into wool caps, traveled over a bridge of braids hung over a river, yellow reeds, my window, smeared with sap from the old plane tree.

*Sow. Deadhead. Knead.*

**Status Report**

After years of digging my tunnel I reach my neighbor's foundation. From picks and shovels to laser drills.

Progress is a beautiful thing.

Alas, the object of my excavation moved not long after I began burrowing.

I don't feel the same about my new neighbor.

Not yet.

Should I collapse my tunnel? Should I flood it and stock it with blind pale fish? Times being what they are, I think I'll stand pat.

It's a beautiful thing, my tunnel.

**Glam**

We gathered the broken-limbed kids and hauled them to the river. Sink or swim, we taunted, which was fucked.

The river was 10 yards wide and a foot deep.

Simply, we were awfully keen for their white casts, their plasters' blaze of Hancocks and erotic pictographs.

And we envied their allowances.

One was allowed to wear her Indian headdress to church service.

One gnawed Ticonderogas until his teeth were grey.

And we were left, with their chores.

We trashed the Chinese take-out. We walked the cat, washed the grass, and mowed the dishes.

We were made to wheel one of them to the beach and push her through wet sand so she could catch a tan.

We stole their stepmother's blush bikini bottoms from the clothesline, and took the blame.

Tinder, kindling, fuel.

So we built a fire.

It was the summer Ziggy Stardust died.

It was the summer our parents discovered the cries of cuckoos, pigeons, red vipers, parrots, bees, dragons, mongooses, blue-headed teals, tigers, and Himalayan quail.

Sink or swim.

One sang Cat Stevens as we tossed his crutches into the bonfire.

We ploughed the fields and scattered ashes and Morton's salt, to redouble our hate.

We used oyster hammers to crack their plaster shells, revealing their soft, pink vibrations.

One quoted Samuel, *we are like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again.*

We masked their faces with scarlet hose

heave-ho

we let go.

*Ain't that close to love?*

\* \* \*

When we got home our fathers were rubbing train oil into their old mitts, stuffing balls into webbing and tying them off like roasts, with butcher's string, breaking them in, again.

We were awful frightened of that smell, a loco inside a bull, and that look in their aleing eyes.

Our mothers were talking with their mothers, shaking with their curses, so out came the clippers.

Our fathers shaved our heads and made us pack our bloody hair in envelopes and hand them over to those drags in the hospital.

Our locks were burned with myrrh in silver censers as we chanted

*die already,*

under our breaths.

You see, we did not repent

because we were jealous of their days at home, watching old men solve homicides, eating cheeseburgers and sweet potato fries and

we envied their visits from the prayer squad

and the clumsy hand-jobs

and the healing

their second chance, we hated

those that grew whole.

**Antistrophe**

Sometimes young people fill me with helium, and let go.

In the air I bring my knees together, rubbing notes to warn the birds that I'm riding their tack.

Sometimes I brush chimneys; sometimes I break satellite dishes.

When children see me, they throw rocks, hoping to help, hoping to instigate my descent.

Once, a man, standing on the edge of a roof waved. Did he believe that we were striped, the same character? Maybe he leaped to join me. Maybe he cleaned the gutters.

Sometimes my neck snares in a telephone wire and I hear you, wishing me well.

When dogs see me they bark and snarl, hoping to guide me toward the catch of a radio tower.

Once, I saw a woman crying at a funeral, or was it a ceremony?  
Had she won the great prize? Had her father died? Either way, she wasn't  
prepared to deliver speech so the crowd lengthened, the chorus swayed  
like a field of goldenrod to fill her silence.

Miles later I sailed over a mountain dog, harnessed to a sled piled with  
corncockle, pillows, and a russeting girl who scowled as she figured what  
weather I resembled. Fog? Rain?

One dictionary definition of children is inhabitants, and I guess that's  
true, once they occupy your thoughts they never leave, even the ones who  
pray you're a snow cloud.

Sometimes young people gas me enough that I make the impasto-  
capped steppes and slip, like a wet noodle, through the mull, toward  
the sea.

I aim for a star and hope I make it to one of those islets in the bay, to rest,  
stitch my wounds, and sketch a russeting girl, laid onto a sled piled like a  
field of goldenrod, miles later.

## The Backyardigans

*for Russell Edson*

If you see a leaf that seems to be walking, get down on your knees, and  
take a closer look.

You may discover that an ant, a leaf-cutter ant, is carrying it away.

If not, stay down. You may have consumed a blue fungus? A white  
flower? Some jagged leaves?

Relax.

Enjoy the sun. Sip honeysuckle. Listen to birdsong. The wren's pall.

I love the common loon!

Soon, the ants *will* come to stroke you with their antennae and carry you  
below the earth, to a cool chamber, your new home.

---

Peter Jay Shippy's most recent book is *A Spell of Songs* (Saturnalia Books).

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## LIAM HYSJULIEN

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### All Fires

*After Cortázar*

I'm fine with the kind of love where  
you shoot me with an arrow decorated  
with a plastic model of Mars set on fire  
by a rag soaked in gasoline, so I can  
follow you into a cave and backlight  
the image of hands pressed thousands of years ago in red chalk—  
the first time people wanted to be remembered.

My friend after years of living in Montana pulls everything out  
from under the hood of his truck. We burn leaves in the  
yard to stay warm and he complains about oil on his plugs,  
then it's a non-sequitur about living in a cabin his boss owned  
on a thousand acres outside Lewistown.  
How he could shoot deer with his .30-30 from the kitchen window.  
*One summer all I ate was deer.*

We talk about the time his engine stopped turning over while camping in Glacier  
and somehow this is a metaphor for life moments being  
three dimensional objects—floating planets burning above.  
The lawn is covered in rust, metal, plastic hoses.  
Trashy and beautiful as rain falls in waves.  
We're about to start drinking, when I ask if he actually loves his truck,  
because he told me in the past he did. I say,

*like love, real love.* I'm almost done with a book about a father wrapping  
his dead son in white linen before placing him in the center of a ship built of stones  
that over the years were taken to make fences in a field now filled with trees,  
the outline of the ship remains sewn into the ground.  
Staring out the window of my office, thinking about nothing  
except the way I want to time travel by removing layers of my life  
until I become thin as a matchstick.

---

LIAM HYSJULIEN's poetry has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Ploughshares*, *The New Republic*, *Crazyhorse*, *Public Pool*, and elsewhere. He is working on his first book of poetry, *Let Live*.

# CHASE TWICHELL

## four poems

### The Second Arrow

Someone once asked Shunryu Suzuki Roshi why there's so much suffering in the world.

He said, *No reason.*

The Buddha said that suffering is the first arrow—

injury, injustice, old age, illness, death.

But it's the second he said to beware.

It might be tiny or even invisible, with one of the three poisons

glistening at its tip—

anger, delusion, greed.

Their tiny barbs fasten like ticks.

Flags in their three colors snap above the empires and encampments,

the towers of the rulers, high floors aglow,

and the blanket-and-cardboard towns,

the nests of the fallen in doorways and under trees

where the air is gray with suffering but the flags are bright.

I'm building a bonfire of second arrows to ignite on the occasion of my awakening.

Meanwhile, I come here to swing on long chains and hear their singsong:

*greed-y, greed-y, and the sprinklers:  
pissed off, pissed off, pissed off.*

The dogs are tearing the white stuffing out of a toy in Nirvana, right at my feet.

I still don't know what dogs know.

### Tiny White Spirals

*Census, August 1, 2016*

Number of insects never before seen in this valley: 5.

1. 1.25". Wingless.

Gray and white reptilian pattern on back. No apparent head.

2. Looks like a dung beetle but twice the size. Pincers at both ends.

3. 2". Aquatic insect or crustacean? Black carapace, corporate logo embossed in silver on underside.

4. A hatch of tiny white spirals in the pond. No idea.

The dog has made friends with one of the weirdest:

5. Scarab-like but square, 5", color of cherries. It hums and clicks,

and Rebus responds by dipping his head, which he does when he thinks something is funny.

I know it's the same one because it's missing one of its long horns.

Almost every day the two of them sit together on the big rock by the pond.

A dog and a bug. Anything can happen now.

### The Feeder of Strays

Someone leaves chicken bones in the park

among the nuggets of bark mulch.

A splintery cooked bone can kill a dog.

Mom is dead. Three months now.

Four times a day, beneath the palms, Rebus and I follow the piss-tags along the paths.

After dark we follow the Feeder of Strays. Rebus noses out the bones. I confiscate them

and throw them away with the shit.

### Plain American

The dog and I climb to a high ledge shagged with juniper,

from which we can see the house and garden below us diffused in falling snow.

Rebus sniffs out a freshly killed porcupine, quill side down.

A fisher will slit the belly with a single claw, leaving nothing but a scalp of quills.

A treasure for a kid, that pelt.

But confiscated today—  
No good for dogs. Sorry, Rebus.

I'll do something with the quills. Glue them to a mirror frame.

I want to write poems *in plain American which cats and dogs can read!* as Marianne Moore put it,

though I doubt that cats and dogs will ever read them.

Rebus says, *Let's get going.*

He knows I've got the porcupine in my pack, in a plastic ziplock.

---

CHASE TWICHELL is the author of many books, including *Horses Where the Answers Should Have Been: New & Selected Poems* (Copper Canyon Press, 2010).

## Chase Twichell

*Horses Where the Answers  
Should Have Been*



[www.chasetwichell.com](http://www.chasetwichell.com)



## Coming in APR

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Dara Wier

## It Keeps Her Safe & It Keeps Her

On Monica A. Hand

WHEN MONICA A. HAND DIED SUDDENLY IN LATE 2016, she had just sent Alice James Books her second manuscript of poems, *DiVida*. Along with this new work, she included the following brief rationale:

My initial concept was [to examine] the multiple personas black people need to survive in the world. I recognise this is true for everyone but still thought it prudent to focus on the experiences I know best. I set out to write in a dream consciousness using multiple/split personas in many of the poems: DiVida who wants to assimilate into the larger culture and Sapphire who doesn't/who won't at the expense of her self actualisation.

In *DiVida*, Hand composes from “the experiences I know best,” and into what Hand knows, specifically what she knows about forced assimilation, systemic racism, and the stress of living under rules designed to oppress, silence, and erase her. Where the systemic rigidities of language and syntax don't suit her artistic aims, she presses and alters them—her confidence and command being what she knows. In *DiVida*, Hand writes her truth, and her truth is the truth of many who will read this book.

Hand's poems are absolutely political, but the politics of Hand's writing are not new. They also are not a trend in American poetry. One might feel as though political poetry is a fashion or that it is a recent development. That is wrong. The politics have always been here. They have never gone away, but continue to be a lived and breathed certainty for many American writers. I'm thinking now of Jameson Fitzpatrick's poem about the ubiquity of the political, “I Woke Up,” whose title spills into the first line, completing the sentence with “and it was political. / I made coffee and the coffee was political.” But one's sudden awareness of something should never be interpreted as that same something's newness. Moreover, the poetics of politics are the poetics of survival. Who is not surviving?

Part of the labor of Hand's poems is to continue disrupting what some see as the “settled dust” of the political, but the purpose of Hand's *DiVida* is also not quite that forthright. It refuses to be typecast. Perhaps, superficially, this premise of Hand's book can appear predictable; however, Hand's methodologies have never been ordinary. *DiVida* is refrain and reminder. It is automation and mantra. It is anthem. It is protocol. And also directive. It is code, coded, and coding. It embarrasses language. It embarrasses we who use it. It undermines the rules. It questions the system. It reveals the system and reminds us—always—of the system's relentless attendance to those it traps.

What we encounter in *DiVida* is a language idiosyncratic and innovative—Monica A. Hand intensifying her syntactical and formal experimentations, while returning to the vital subjects of struggle and survival, identity, individuality, agency, and systemic discrimination.

There is also a lot of joy to be found in examining her tactical work, and I'd like to take the opportunity to discuss it, as it is as meaningful to me as is the premise of *DiVida* (indeed the two go hand in hand). There is genius in these lines. There is an unnerving sense of foresight. And now, there is our great loss of an influential poet, who was quickly coming into her full power.

*DiVida* receives us in an opening epigraph, consisting of two quotes: one is from an invented source, *The Book of DiVida*. The other is by Lyn Hejinian, a writer known for her skillful literary latticework of language-based identity: “. . . One is not oneself, one is several, incomplete, and subject to dispersal.” The phrase will be a physical and psychological marker, appearing again and again as we read through *DiVida*. We circle back to the notion of “oneself,” as Hand's poems negotiate its textural meaning, and we encounter in the opening epigraph another passage about identity and its markers:

Multiple personas are how the African-American survives in society. At the same time, donning these different masks could make them crazy unless they learn how to syncopate them.

In every aspect of her life, at work, at home, with her lovers, and in her dreams – she is a different person. She wants to be one person – the same everywhere, one with everyone. [*The Book of DiVida*]

The quote from *The Book of DiVida*, and the existence of its imagined source, supply gravitas to Hand's personas' voices and prepare readers to recognize, from the very beginning, the voluminous history of influence that DiVida—and her book—ultimately commands over this collection.



Monica A. Hand

She is master and she is pupil. Fluid. “Oneself” and “subject to dispersal.” And certainly, Hand's invented text calls to mind other sacred books like the Koran, Torah, or Bible. This is no mistake. Hand is eager for us to feel the immutable power of DiVida's voice—its authority, its directive, and as much as any religious text brings forth rules for living, so must *The Book of DiVida* instruct the reader with rubrics for living a divided life.

Hand writes in “Masks for the madhouse,”

The feminine  
Singular, neuter plural of

Identify the object of  
you name me

her speaker addressing those who would assign her, categorize her. Who would name her? The tone undercuts and remarks on the audacity of this system, how it oppresses us, how it chains us to a certain way of being and forces us to operate within its confines.

You give me no choice  
My choice no choice

Helplessness courses through these lines, a cry from the speaker for mercy, for justice, the lines left hanging on the left margin as the poem proceeds to direct us across the page to:

A body that builds upon itself  
Masks the madhouse

Hand asserts that this pressure, this being impressed upon, begins and necessitates a visceral reaction, a diverging, a fragmentation. It is the body's intrinsic obligation to protect itself, to prevent harm that would come if it were exposed. But what is exposed? Blackness. What is the imposition? Whiteness? The binary? Gender? A system designed to reduce individuals to whitewashed versions of themselves lest they be fired, murdered, beaten? The persona is at once protection for the speaker, her armor, and the speaker's prison. It keeps her safe and it keeps her. The “dance” between them is fraught: both are reluctant partners, both desire escape, both desire transcendence (both are bound and cognizant of this prison of desire). DiVida and Sapphire are two personas vying for dominance, both present to insulate the speaker of the poems from harm, both causing harm by the very *raison d'être*.

There is no end  
To what a living world  
Will demand of you.

—Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

In many poems, we encounter Hand's preoccupation with the speculative. Her interest is evident in the early “Mythology” poems where the past un-

folds as a present and future reinvented. Hand reaches into the story of Aaron from the Bible to recalibrate the Bible's mythology, working to recast the ideas it presents regarding creation, history, time, and its relationship to and dominance over us. She folds Aaron's story, makes it malleable, transforms it and, in this transformation, reduces the power the text has over the speaker and the reader. If Aaron's story can be restructured, if a story from a text that comes to us with so much innate power can be altered and set in the future, can transcend time and type, what does this say about the story? What does this say about history, personal history? In "Mythology," Hand positions the Bible within mutable space, stripping the value it's assigned, and withdrawing its exemption from revision. She holds the text accountable for its part in birthing and proliferating hate and discrimination—the "daughter" who "sleeps rage and spews vile."

#### MYTHOLOGY

These were the years when the earth weighted towards falling:

The years of the black president,

when the middle-class slept in their cars and their pure-blood children  
knew songs of want, like the poor.

War ravaged every continent and our overfed and undernourished bodies.

This place called Manhattan (cluster that once held slaves)  
boasted diminished belief in oppression.

It was a lie.

The God of many names: Jehovah, Allah, Buddha, money – could not  
save us.

At the dawn of these times, Aaron begat nine daughters and a son;  
demons seduced the boy and he died before he could make progeny.

But, the girls had plenty—bastard children of bad men.

Now, only one daughter remains and she sleeps rage and spews vile.

I have always been deeply moved by Hand's commitment to the deconstruction of standard syntactical conventions. Her work flies boldly in the face of *The Chicago Manual of Style* and is a hard refusal of the structural institutions of language; she will not be its captive. Her work desires freedom from these limits . . . no, it demands it. In *DiVida*, we negotiate Hand's intent concerning punctuation, particularly that of her en and em dashes, which frequently appear together in the same poem, and at first might appear to be performing similar functions. That, at first glance, might throw a reader off. Why is Hand employing an en dash with space around it and later a closed em dash, scrunched and squeezed in between two words? The answer is that air and space, confines, syntactically, are of great concern to the poet. The work of these poems requires the punctuation to do more, to negotiate more, to enact more of the drama and nuance of the subject matter and language. Hand charges her syntax to perform acrobatically. So, where we see a struggle enacted in the language—the persona developed as a mechanism for coping and the antagonistic reactions elicited by the persona's mere existence—we find Hand's syntax and punctuation choices mirroring this conflict.

Again from "Mythology":

The God of many names: Jehovah, Allah, Buddha, Money – could not  
save us.

And later:

But, the girls had plenty—bastard children of bad men.

Here, Hand works with punctuation to identify its relationship to space, time, and the revision of such elements. Circling back to her interest in the speculative, Hand's experimentation inserts doubt, malleability, and uncertainty into the context of these lines, but also points us toward the future. We ask ourselves: Who will save us? Who are the "bastard children of bad men" and what do they/have they/will they render?

Similarly, you'll find in this collection a unique system of hyphenated words where Hand finds the static interpretation of a given word—as conventionally presented—to be inadequate for her purposes. She forces the language into new constructions in order to expound upon meaning and capture the double consciousness of both the speaker and her language. This is the case in poems like "DiVida reflects on what she knows about love" and "DiVida appropriates after-shock." In the latter, we at first greet the construct of "after-shock" with slight distrust. How does this hyphen function, and why is it there? We read and reread this title. As we do, the insertion of this small piece of punctuation becomes a point of larger and larger importance. The hyphenation, the cleaving of this language, is Hand's search for clarity, double entendre, and parsing out pieces of language that in and of themselves suffer, by the way they were constructed, from their own identity crises. Aftershock is after-shock is after shock is af-

ter/shock. It is two words and one word. Its compound nature violent in its forcefulness; its pressurized alchemy. It makes meanings, when divided, which are wholly separate from its given form. It is at once all and at once none. Hand's allocated fluidity allows the word to multiply and collapse in the mind. We try to reconcile it and find its reconciliation is its inability to be reconciled.

Her work to undercut grammatical constructs extends into her attention to general rules of capitalization. On the whole, Hand avoids the capitalization of verbs in her poem titles. It brings us pause: what is the choice, what is the reasoning, what purpose does it serve? Those familiar with Hand's work will remember these affinities in *me and Nina* where the poems often refused common capitalization practices in lieu of a system that spoke individually to each piece. The inclination to refuse capitalization of the verbs in a title is prevalent in her work and speaks to, perhaps, her awareness of a verb's inherent power over surrounding words. By their very nature and employment, verbs seek to dominate and direct what inhabits a line of speech. The system of a sentence grants and demands this. Therefore, stripping verbs of their linguistic dominance (inherent power) strips the system upon which our simple syntax was built of its power as well.

How does this power transfer and to where? As we look at the page and the lines where these titles appear, it becomes apparent that the power flows evenly, in many cases, over all of the letters and words, creating balance and equilibrium, reducing the importance of one word and thereby increasing the importance of the others which surround it. We, too, must consider this premise, and the importance of system renegotiation when discussing the larger themes and concerns of Hand's overall body of work. That she uses syntactical reorganization and deconstruction to reshape poems—and the discussions they contain—into something wholly altered and decidedly democratic is no error.

Over and over Hand strips and reassigns authority. The persona, DiVida, leads this charge. In the middle of the book, which constitutes the largest section of poems, we encounter the bulk of the work most concentrated on watching DiVida, beginning with her kindergarten indoctrination in "DiVida archives 10 rules she learned in kindergarten." Again, there's no arguing with the intentional nature of the section's beginning: it is chronological in its assignment, and its chronology serves to both situate us and heighten our dismay and sorrow over the early infiltration of the speaker's interior life and schematics. Even just five years old, a black child in America becomes over and over a new person just in order to survive in the powerful, ubiquitous, and impenetrable system of whiteness. A black girl makes and receives and memorizes lists for living. A black girl cleaves into the model for white-dominated order (DiVida) and the rebellion against this order (Sapphire). The final line of the poem is:

10. No melt downs



In the latter poems of the book, we can't help but have our hearts broken over and again. Hand, uncannily, contemplates her health and transience as if foretelling her death. In no other poem is this more apparent than in "DiVida dies," where the speaker states:

#### DIVIDA DIES

There is an accident on a slippery road  
The doctors say: sorry no empty beds

Huge lumps inside her solar plexus  
pulse like they have their own hearts

The doctors are take-out food deliverymen  
who say: sorry no credit just cash

Sapphire sits in the audience  
of a cable TV cooking show

The celebrity chef makes rice with kidney beans and liver  
He says: Remove the pulsing lumps from inside the body

We don't need the body  
Just toss the body once you have removed the heart

The audience flaps their arms like bodies on a slippery road  
like bodies that think if they flap their arms they will find their balance

There is an awful beeping sound  
Then no sound like a flat line

The nurse practitioner tells me all my tests are normal  
I didn't die

That's not my body floating on the ceiling  
That's Sapphire holding an umbrella



This line interrogates expectation and silence. Indeed, there is no sound from a “flat line,” but the line also works in wanting us to put the words into their compound form, while Hand implores us to resist it. We don’t see “flat-line,” but we want to and cannot help but see and hear it. And indeed, the line would read much differently if there were “no sound like a flat-line,” in that it would evoke the finality and poignancy of death, not the lack thereof. Not the conjuring of a line running far off into space and time without an endpoint in sight. A flat line makes no sound. It causes no fuss. It just exists now and into eternity in juxtaposition with the awful beeping sound that registers its regular confirmation of life. And what does this mean about Hand and her impressions of death? The beating of life, its consistent rhythm, its consistent insistence, perhaps it is the nuisance, is the thing driving one to demise. The persistence of its requirements of the poet and the poems’ personas drains the desire for the beeping from us, from them, and instead we opt for the long silence that comes only with death. And what is that, to wish for death? To find the uninterrupted stream of armistice in death preferable to the adamant alarm of life? Hand feels it. Perhaps, even, she predicts it.



DiVida: Apportioned being. Division of life force. Feminine noun.



When it was originally presented, Hand’s book did not officially account for section breaks, or what I might in a spongier way consider interludes between her groups of poems. If you’re familiar with *me and Nina*, you know that there exists a striking contrast between the book’s sections; the middle interior portion entitled *Nina looks inside* serves as a visual inversion of the typical white page with black font, thus mirroring the introspection and shift in perspective within the book. In *DiVida*, we find Hand’s book gravitating, again, toward the triptych. The section in the middle dominates in both a relentlessness of the DiVida-driven poems and its overall length, and is intuitively bookended by two shorter sections that address the circumstances by which these poems arrive and depart. The first and last sections establish what imposed definitions and parameters befall the poet and her speakers, and they seek what freedom they can and must attain from these confines. When we consider “DiVida I am’s” which begins the book and its first “section,” and “White-face” which begins the third and last section of the book, we notice overlap in the subject matter—Hand addresses identity and its flawed mythology. She speaks to the stereotyping of blackness directly in “DiVida I am’s” and indirectly via the lens of whiteness within blackness in “White-face,” wherein the speaker lounges thickly, her presence seeping, cloying, and disquieting: she is the “latent” threat lying dormant, but vigorous, within the mind. She is a disease internalized, fighting to become undetectable to her host. The fight between disease and host is at the very core of this poem, as the “invisible” struggle between a white person’s idea of blackness and a black person’s uncorrupted identity (and the impossibility thereof) ensues. It is Hand’s lattice-work. The white perspective is so pervasive and externally reinforced, it threatens and diminishes the black individual altogether. The sickly presence manifests itself and attempts to coolly assume dominance. There is an interior landscape of whiteness formed; the word “white-face” in the poem is hyphenated to separate this language and allow for its multitudinous interpretations to divide within us: white, face, white-face. Taken as a triptych, what do we see? In this poem, we come to find Hand’s argument that a black individual has learned, via necessity, her own white face. It is a performance of another type altogether, more insidious than the racism of black face in our inability to perceive it, to separate it from our consciousness, and sometimes in the afflicted individual’s inability to perceive its existence as well. It is a dangerous split imposed upon Hand’s speaker in order to cope with her blackness as other, as atypical, as nonwhite, as systematically unaccounted for.

It is hard to capture what the imagination imposes upon us, yet Hand gives us the incredible gift of these poems’ call and response to each other. We envision. We mourn. We move into the final poems in *DiVida*, which begin to anticipate death:

**DON’T SEND ME TO SPACE**

bury me on high ground let me starve!  
teeth chattering  
body feast for vultures

This is the book’s shortest poem, beyond which words like “Evergreen,” “mirror,” “floating,” “pendulum,” “burning,” “earth,” “journey,” etc. frequently inhabit the poems to bring about its close. The imagery leads us to resolute continuity, to the infinitesimal “flat line” that courses beyond the very end of our imaginations, but not hers, to “home (almost there)” in

“The Happiest Day of My Life.” We end the book with Monica; her entrance comes at last. It is sweet to find her here. So vividly she emerges in the second stanza, the speaker (the poet) strongly urging her to “move your feet,” to keep going, persisting. And in her response, there is certainty. There is clarity. “I walk before the way,” says the poet who does not need a map, a prescription, a system, a preset language. She has her own. “She [will] be one person—the same everywhere, one with everyone.” ◀

MONICA A. HAND’s books include *DiVida* (2018) and *me and Nina* (2012), winner of the 2010 Kinereth Gensler Award. After a thirty-two-year career with the U.S. Postal Service, she earned an MFA in Poetry and Poetry-in-Translation from Drew University in 2011. In 2012, she moved to Columbia, Missouri, where she taught at Stevens College and pursued a PhD at the University of Missouri. She was a founding member of the poetry collective Poets for Ayiti. Hand passed away in December of 2016.

CAREY SALERNO is the executive editor and director of Alice James Books, author of *Shelter* (2009), and coeditor of *Lit From Inside: 40 Years of Poetry from Alice James Books* (2013). She teaches for the University of Maine at Farmington and serves as a literary curator for Pen + Brush in New York.

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## LETTERS

Dear APR:

I have great respect for Donald Hall, but I feel it is important to correct a few of the factual errors in his brief memoir of James Wright in an *APR* Supplement to the Jan./Feb. 2018 issue [Vol. 47, No. 1, pages 23–26]. Hall’s “Selected Poets” is part of his forthcoming *A Carnival of Losses: Notes Nearing Ninety*:

- Wright died at the age of 52, not 53.
- The title of Wright’s Complete Poems, published in 1990, is *Above the River*, not *Across the River*.
- The Bly farmhouse in Madison, MN, stood a few miles from the South Dakota, rather than North Dakota, border.
- In research for my biography of Wright, this is the first time I’ve heard that Wright “in the morning forgot everything said” after a night of drinking and literary talk. Wright was justly famous for his extraordinary memory, and his journals support this, as do more than 200 interviews.
- For an accurate retelling of Carol Bly’s inspired practical joke involving Wright’s dentures, please see page 157 in *James Wright: A Life in Poetry*.
- Mr. Hall misquotes the conclusion of Wright’s “A Blessing,” which reads: “Suddenly I realize / That if I stepped out of my body I would break / Into blossom.”

After they were married in April 1967, Wright told Anne that he had woken one morning the previous fall, when he was living alone in New York City, to find a cold hamburger in his bed. Attributing the words “Every morning” to Wright could be an example of Mr. Hall’s fondness for exaggeration—though Wright shared a fondness for it, too.

Sincerely,  
Jonathan Blunk  
Author of the authorized biography,  
*James Wright: A Life in Poetry* (FSG, 2017)

three poems

Other women don't tell you

mother is born from "a thick substance concreting in liquors," like the whiskey they tell you to rub on new gums or the red wine my mother told me would help his forming heart grow stronger, *Look how resilient you turned out*, she says, not knowing she too comes from "lees" or "scum" or "waste of skin," probably from Middle Dutch *modder* "filth and dregs," what's left of us after we've been named, but also see *mud*, found in many words denoting "wet" or "dirty" or "damp" or "moist" and other women tell you how they hate the sound of it, without explaining why, that word between the thighs, how they would rather come from Old Irish *muad* for "cloud," would rather look up in wonder, counting cows or crows or clowns, imagining their bodies too can change back just as easily, can shift from solid into air then back to water, without coming from the Polish *mul* "slime," the Sanskrit *mutra*- "urine" other women don't tell you is okay to talk about and be and let release without becoming "excrement," without relief being related to the German *Schmutz* "dirt," but your son's hands are full of it, the scum and dregs and filth, the earth he shovels in his mouth, devouring the world both of you come from, moving from mud to mouth to you so easily, you realize that being named for the "lowest or worst of anything," in his hands, is as close as you can get to flying.

Other women don't tell you

what your mother will say just after he is born, after they slap him onto your stomach like a wet rag, the tether binding you still warm and pulsing, and just as you look down, expecting blood, they don't tell you sometimes it isn't there, the flesh is almost clean, a dark moss of hair covered by a thin white film, a second skin, a part of you still holding him, perhaps. *He looks like an alien*, she exclaims, giddy with becoming, but they tell her she's too young to be a grandmother and she's happier for it. *Are his ears going to stay like this?* As if she'd never given birth herself, though she reminded you she has, just hours earlier, recalling to your midwife how, back in the old country, she was stitched-up with nothing for the pain, and between the women your belly rises like a moving mountain, back then, the young male nurse responded to your mother's screams by asking, *does it really hurt that bad?* And other women tell you that it does. That it's unbearable but you will bear it. That it's a mountain and drowning. That it's all worth it in the end. They don't tell you when the pain really comes, when it moves through you, a rush of snowmelt boring boulders on the side of the road and everyone stopping to look, that a small part of you will love the feeling, the control to grind as though you were chewing stones, the want

to bear the way centuries have, bare and unbroken by it, like the women who didn't tell you any of this. Your grandmother or hers, holding each other, hands and boiling water and sopping towels and feeling everything, only to never speak about their pain. To continue having girls. To raise them so they know to let their mothers be a part of everything. To understand your mother when she reminds you that you are an only child because your tiny body hurt her bad enough to never want for more.

Other women don't tell you

it's a battle for the body, for every part of it, *he's all you*, some say, *he has your eyes*, and others, *he has your hair*, *look at those curls*, and you let them twist around your finger, vine tendrils more plant than boy, more wild than will, more him than you, but it's a battle for ownership, for claiming the body you left him with as yours, and when you tell your mom he rode the escalator up and down, repeating "Whoaaaaa" in fascination at each descent away from the fluorescence until the lights of Gucci and Versace drew him towards their dazzle, *He has good taste*, your mother says, then adds, *You used to have taste too*. So now you lack the parts of you you've given him, your eyes are likely gone as well. You're chasing a toddler, blind through the shopping mall, you're Tiresias, prophet, between earth and myth, god and manlike thing, you've given everything away to own these parts of him, his eyes and hair, the certainty that they are yours, or so they tell you. So you are blind and bald and he is full of sight and mane and beautiful, and soon, your mother tells you, she won't know how to talk to you, but also that he doesn't have your mouth, his nose, she's said, is undecided still, unclear if he will wear your history of bones, dead noses piling up, all yours yours yours, but maybe, not his, maybe, other women tell you he looks just like his dad, and you see it in his cheeks and jaw line, in the flatness of his feet, the ankles caving in, and in the dips from waist to hind, as though some god or ghost has left their thumbprints to remind you how his body isn't yours at all.

JULIA KOLCHINSKY DASBACH emigrated from Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine, as a Jewish refugee when she was six years old. She has received fellowships from the Bread Loaf and TENT Conferences as well as the Auschwitz Jewish Center. She is the author of *The Bear Who Ate the Stars* (Split Lip Press, 2014).



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## JOANNE DOMINIQUE DWYER

### So, You Think I'm Afraid of You?

I'm not afraid of you or the black sun.  
I'm not afraid of the colony of ants in my ceiling  
or the displaced persons sleeping in my treehouse.  
I'm not afraid of the rain depluming the clothes from my skin  
as it pelts down hard as hail, hard as a hammer, hard as the shell  
of a musk turtle overturned and unable to right itself.  
I'm not afraid of the dove-colored smoke moving in the air  
in the pattern of a cry for help; in the pattern of waving goodbye.  
I'm not afraid to be ejected from the opera house for  
singing along to the aria about the woman about to hang herself  
because her lover won't convert to her family's religion.  
Or because she is dying of scarlet fever.  
A friend today saying *Crazy how the venom stays in the body for days*,  
referring to a Tabaño fly bite on her foot.  
I'm not afraid of downing a whole bottle of tainted Tabasco sauce  
or of diving into a gelid and storm-tossed ocean  
where the only people on the beach are lovers  
sequestered in the sand dunes far enough away  
that they would never hear my cries for help.  
It's hard enough to ask a stranger for jumper cables  
or a neighbor to water your lawn, in case of severe drought,  
while you go away for a few weeks to fat camp,  
in hopes of coming home thinner. Some men  
are tender and say *it just means there is more of you to love*.  
Other men are controlling and say *Don't eat \_\_\_\_! and don't eat \_\_\_\_!*  
Others have an arrogant, elevated, and erroneous sense  
of empathy and offer *How about I drive alongside you in my truck  
while you huff it around the block four or five times?* While driving  
they are drinking beer, eating pork rinds and ranch-flavored  
corn nuts and listening to the radio with the heater on,  
as you jog in threadbare shoes, in the frigid air,  
like someone being relocated,  
forced to traverse for days across the Trail of Tears.  
But that is another opera in progress.  
I'm not afraid of progress; it's just that I see so little of it.  
And I will understand you calling me out  
for using the Trail of Tears in a way that diminishes  
the devastation it was for those who walked it  
and those who starved and collapsed along the way.  
I'm not afraid to apologize for that.  
I'm not afraid to tell you that it's physically impossible  
for a pig to raise its head to the sky.  
I'm not afraid of the sky.

---

JOANNE DOMINIQUE DWYER is the author of *Belle Laide* (Sarabande, 2013). She is a recipient of a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers' Award, a Bread Loaf Scholarship, and the Anne Halley Poetry Prize.