“Dear Whomever—what beauty, you were something else I misunderstood; a half-life come crashing through the night. A medium is a ghost ship that makes it from port to port or it sinks but you can package information in any media still it gets taken in how the sun just does, filtered spasms of ions and turns out green; the holes in me let life in or out in other ways.”

— PEEBLES, p. 15
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Congratulations to

Julia Copus’ Girlhood

(Faber & Faber, 2019)
mom removed her makeup and made three dinners after the diner. she ate hers last just as we finished our plates and glasses. she is absent from photos (a note: daguerreotype was blurry and slow, and to stop their children who might die from the vagaries of victorian life, victorian mothers would hold their shoulders to keep them still for the whole of the long exposure. she would wear a black veil, blurred out of the photos or positioned behind a chair as if she wasn’t there. they are called hidden mothers). once i snapped at her and she started to cry and even my quiet felt powerful in a way that made me want to cry myself, as if both our silences were my own.

my tongue half a boy with a man’s shadow

my father played dominoes online, and if you’re wondering at his skill, know that dad is black and only getting older. he’d become a celebrity in the leader boards, and then change his name. dozens of times, over and over he used the names of everyone he knew—no one wants to face a demigod. the story of america is a black body reinventing itself until it runs out of names.

my father’s father was a cop. brain cancer took him. that’s the story of justice in america. dominoes is less a game of chance than honor. their faces are black and white and made from dice just like me and mine. eventually dad’s name always betrayed him. they’d know the odds. to save time, he began to play as random words. he’d dash a career, from amateur to pro in the course of days. he ran out lives as quickly as patience. to some men, this is labor; inheritance ruins bones (american homes). some words sound feminine to strangers. my father, totally silent as he played, was the cypher of a man, and in these times they were silent back. until he was a sweet flavor or a tree. then my father was a bitch.

i fell apart in public once.
our anniversary.
the waiter didn’t notice, or pretended.
the food was fine

when it comes to a woman undone, any number of suns might erupt. or none
Ode to the Police

may your feet and hands be soft.
may the pads of your fingers
be like aloe vera kleenex
and your chest fill the land with the strong
and dependable comfort of medicated balm.
may your hair glitter like the targets of stars
and your sirens resound like children
for their fathers.

may we see you coming a mile away.

may you taste the common taste of milk the way
we taste the common taste of milk
and your heart become extreme—large
as a softball at the zipper of the ribs and therefore let it be

enough.

let it be so big you cannot breathe
for all your other feeling

Still Life with Fruit Flies, Boiling Water, and Sink

either you die ruffly in the sky
or in the ground, a dangle—
 jangle?—from telephone lines
all of us aloofly like rhymes
in the throat of history naïfly
they say there are ways to marry continents
but all of them involve waiting
tables the blackened fruit of elbows
gruffly scrubbing steps memorial
after memorial day drowning you know
is chiefly a function of power over time &
what’s so great about constellations
sitting stiffly that you cannot learn better
from the listless paths of free lightning
bugs being open as a palm
ready to strike out fly if you consider it
is a most tremendous name—

Transcendental Function: I Hear My Father’s Voice, Anesthetized

in the quiet i am able to hear you
babybling to someone
I believe

...
Exploding Haiku

(what fills a lion can never fill a dog)
i am undone. the bells clanging to my ribs
floweth over like what. low cantrip
of my feeling. my spine is the space between
two colliding stars. portrait of a bird
against glass. the aftermath of mirrors.
when i dream like that, a bullet’s sweetness.
thank god, someday, for the release. surprise!
birthday batter, folded neatly.
my fat who cares against my fat.
finally nothing to worry to say.
stop my greying. stop silence, the wideness
of the bed. who is there to impress? the young dead?
ah, my god’s favorite joke is hell.
every body attracts every other. that’s gravity.
cremate but they better not shave my face.
one i dropped what i was holding
da dozen times before i steadied my hand.
mind over-mattered. off-brown anxiety to glass.
why wouldn’t i shatter? but a joy
is working the body past what it would have you.
or the choice to. or to sit in silence on a ledge
resting after making a fool of my muscles
and convincing my heart to be a mule
i know the name of. like i’m the ugly
that speaks finally in class
and not a body breaks the quiet.
the great typography of silence.
the only list of true homonyms.
say almost nothing to ensure the air
stays right, and let the sweat
drift off into space with the helium and zenith
and scrape salt from your temple, a message
your body left that actually you contain oceans.
perhaps lupus or lime. perhaps the fleck of rust
that begins at the window of the brain
until the process or code
(the divine happening) is undone.
it runs in the family. same
our hands that are gusts of wind that, when we are tired
let release, or animated, lift flags
and bits of trash into the sky where the light
is like the light and nothing else. einstein said that
the universe is infinite. skin, i make it that.

Keith S. Wilson is an Affrilachian Poet and a Cave Canem fellow. He is a recipient of an NEA Fellowship, an Elizabeth George Foundation Grant, and an Illinois Arts Council Agency Award, and has received both a Kenyon Review Fellowship and a Stegner Fellowship. Additionally, he has received fellowships or grants from Bread Loaf, Tin House, and the MacDowell Colony, among others. His book Fieldnotes on Ordinary Love (Copper Canyon Press) was recognized by the New York Times as a best new book of poetry.
Biopsy Pantoum

I am waiting for biopsy results again—
in the mirrored room where time stalls.
Knowing women are always at the mercy of men,
even after I get the results, it will feel like my fault.

In the mirrored room where time stalls,
I stare at the same insipid face.
Even after I get the results, it will feel like my fault.
I walk the treadmill, regretting what I can't erase.

I stare at the same insipid face.
The longer I carry my body, the harder it is to tend.
Knowing women are always at the mercy of men,
until I die, this worry will never end.
I am waiting for biopsy results again.

Memento Mori: Pistachios

I never know I'm an animal more
than when I shell pistachios in the kitchen,
after washing dishes, waiting for you to come home. I know how I must look, cracking
the tight shells, popping the small green nut
into my open mouth again and again.

You showed me how to place half
a discarded shell in the small opening,
like a tool. It frightens me—
my new resourcefulness. My hunger.
The way I wait for you as if
I will never have enough.

intertidal ordinary—

PATTIE McCARTHY

I should say something about water
your feet cold in it
hunting for dulse on
an afternoon turned
hotter than expected
the boy puts a conker in the walk archive
& the season turns from shells
a coast becomes longer the closer
one looks at it—you turn
me inside out with your mouth

&a fast slack water
village bunting is contagious
maximum autumn mom
english for an estuary
rejectamenta the wrack
leaves behind high & low
tide lines & the boy pops
the brown float bladders
knotted spiral & toothed
leaves the holdfast attached

&& the boy with a crab in his hand
left his heart in a fish & in his hand
a fishhook & beneath his feet
several feet of air between
his body & the working wharf
I take the photo from far away so
the girl is just a speckle for scale
not herself but rather a landscape
marker in the intertidal where we are
permitted to fish fowl & navigate

the law is unsettled as to whether
fowling includes birdwatching
the image is my daughter
her hands overwhelmed with hermit crabs
her rashguard a makeshift
pocket overflowing with hermit crabs
the high tide an unusual ten feet
going out fast & the crabs everywhere
a perigean spring is king & even
the ebb of a king tide is dramatic

skeletal wrought
iron light on the neck
people in love walk
too slowly we agreed
equinox to solstice
attached please find
beginning at stake &
stones running six rods

the walk archive achieves
through accumulation—the soft
paths mossy or midden
yield a bit to each foot
each sweet thud the walk
ends where the water
begins—water
is challenging archival material
I bit my lips but
the crows cawed

the season is the air
near water full of crows
& seagulls the trees
full of crows & one
osprey the neighbor
calls a fishhawk
the season is the way
the air tastes of crow
calls & salt
the long fetch of the waves

the king tide is a spring
tide that has nothing
to do with the season
this prediction is historic
not harmonic
low tide history
reveals a delicate weave
& when the tide is half in
the mud mirrors clouds
call it a half tide space
assume me to be a vengeful
ghost not one who urges
you to fall in love again
do not—miss me forever
instead the tidepool
is only discrete at low tide
swamp me the rest of the time
the water was cold & the children
were brave counting down
three two one & jump

do off the wharf into a king tide
which was warmer near the top & so
we floated as long as we could until
the cold under water swelled up
waves grind their edges—I’m in
the library’s skirts—the water
shimmers like skin & like
the skin of it I
expand to the limits of what
ever time I’m given
Catalog

I was only eight. Not the driver, but I was
the one who begged for the cats. Our father,
so allergic he stopped breathing sometimes,
gave in. So long as I fed them.
So long as we kept them in the garage.

Outdoor cats we called them.
All I wanted was a body, different from mine, I could love.
Regardless of limits.

I have failed so many people. Other animals, too.
Sometimes, I think I will make a list. In case I’m ever asked
to explain where I went wrong.

In the hills, behind our house, a classmate found a frayed
collar loose around a set of small bones. I see
disasters everywhere I look. Which is why
I am recounting the facts as calmly as possible.

A coyote, probably.

Those were the days before we settled
who of us would get to thrive and who would suffer.

Once, we turned our heads for a minute, maybe two.

I heard him first, my little cousin. First generation post-Loving.
There’ve been plenty of names for a baby like him.

In the backyard, he giggled to a coyote. Doggy, cute
doggy. Come here. How he howled
when we dragged him inside! All that broken up joy.

Would it be better? It would probably
be better not to know the many ways a body

My father would let me have it,
let me have all the cats, despite how his head swelled
each time he went into and out of our garage.

All love means compromise.

We saved my little cousin, but we lost
the first two cats to coyotes. Then our last great hope,
a kitten so briefly with us I don’t even remember
its name. . . . Oh! That little, shrill, and awful
sound. Our car idling. Then shutting down.

I won’t forget that.
The garage’s buffed cement.

Fastidiousness is one way my father refuses
the degradation of his body. Only the small tail
not caught under the tire’s tread. The blood
beginning to pool and, already, congeal.

Oh! Would the rivers of the world continue to run
if not for the blood I’ve seen spilled?
I’d begged for it.

I am keeping a list of all the things I’ve hoped for.
I am also, always, the driver. Always. Think of that
coyote, called to sweetly by a light brown boy.

No way that could have ended except with one of them
hurt. That poor kitten. My dear father. Oh, Dad!

Metaphor of America
as this homegrown
painted lady chrysalis

My head has come off
and by a string of my own creation
is dragged what remains
of my last meal. Here, too, you see
my waste, and my brothers’ and sisters’.

You can take this literally or not.
Whatever I might have been has dissolved.

When you moved me, I shook
like a leaf preparing for autumn.
The child panicked. But soon, I returned
to my patience. Call it potential
if you’re feeling optimistic. There will be wings.
Bright, brown, black. With just a little
white to set things off.

To enter our own
empty house

She was seven when we stopped
using keys. One less thing to lose.
Now we punch a combination—
easy, but hopefully not so easy
a stranger could guess. This is where
I should stop. They are bound
to be angry—my beloveds.
I am giving away all our secrets
again. Such vulnerability
is the root of much fury. . . .

I was small. One stone in our yard
hid a metal case with a lid
that slid like a matchbox top
to reveal our key. Lifting that
big brown rock, I’d think hard
of bashing someone’s head. Harm
always came dressed in the body
of a stranger. Sometimes, I wrestle
with my daughter—make her tiny
body work its way out from under
the weight I make of my own.

In this way I try to teach her
how it feels to break free.
This is good

Kabir says, stay firm in that which you are,
according to Bly.

And, earlier, Don’t go off somewhere else.

Outside our window
is a spruce some house finches nest inside.

In winter the tree stands, blue green
as the ocean off some island.

All winter long
this spruce pulls into itself
the way I pull into myself when I hunger.

I won a prize once.

The man I spent my nights with couldn’t
fathom how something that looked to him
like everything would make me cry.

I’ve been climbing these stairs
for a hundred flights, I told him,
and now
I’ve reached what I thought was the exit
I see it is only the entrance
to another landing.

There will always be more stairs to climb.

Loving that man
was like reaching into a shallow pond

to find a lost ring.

The water was warm
but murky. There were lilies. An abundance—
in the early stages—of writhing things bound
to take flight.

I came away with a handful
of mud.

What we talked about, mostly,
was poetry. I still often wonder
what he’d make of something marvelous
I’ve read.

This translation of Kabir (15th c.),
for instance. By Bly. Known for his brawn.
His brains. His—well-meant—yawping space
for men.

What is required
for a successful translation?

You have to be
open to somebody else’s thirst.

Willing to make of your own mind something
like a cistern, a ladle, a well.

My sister
lived, in those years, a boat ride from an island
the United States kept for a test site.

We didn’t swim in the cordoned off parts,
but close.

Held up by the salt in the ocean,
I let myself float.

My sister said, Be careful.

The water, there, was this deep blue green.
Winter is over.

Just out our window, at the tip of each branch
on the spruce, I can see a bundle
of tight shoots. Roundly pointed
as a clitoris in its hood.

The mind wanders.

There is an island somewhere, its sand
lapped by gentle waves.

You’ve been lonely.

A wanting-creature.

But stop now. Stop.
The finches are nesting.

Camille T. Dungy’s debut collection of personal essays is Guidebook to Relative Strangers (W. W. Norton, 2017), a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. She is also the author of four collections of poetry, most recently Trophic Cascade (Wesleyan UP, 2017), winner of the Colorado Book Award. She was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2019.

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~ Adam Schuitema, author of The Things We Do That Make Sense

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~ Richard Carr, author of Our Blue Earth

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defying gravity after all // isn’t the same as flying
after all // are you thinking of hurting yourself
isn’t the same as are you thinking // you might kill
yourself // we must be confident being more
direct // an X drawn in orange on a tree trunk
one morning it was there // 30 feet of maple
gone by the time I came back home // the city
gave me no choice // sometimes we have no choice
and warning signs can go unnoticed // until I didn’t
think they were serious // they wanted attention
didn’t mean it sometimes it doesn’t hurt // death
feels like a solution // sometimes it hurts so much
after all // you are thinking of hurting yourself no
you are thinking of hurting // other people not us
walking a gorge late at night // leaves rustle their
should I live and should I live // no one wants to die
are you nobody too // good then we’re not alone
please don’t die // it’s good advice I don’t want
my kind of sadness // is like my favorite tree
planted long before me // shadow punctured now
and then with light // when gusts ghost through
and that’s enough for me // the garden thrived
except the lilies planted in full sun // didn’t make it
I planted a new tree // in the hollow of what I had lost
one day I’ll rest in its shade // should I live that long

The Language in Question
When I called you a beluga whale, I meant it
as a compliment. What a noble beast. You said this to me,
meaning me. Maybe I’m wrong, but I’m starting to think
that this comparison is not without its faults. I was wrong
in bed when I grabbed your belly fat, and I said it wasn’t fat
but my hand adrift in sensory deprivation. Total a-hole move,
but it did remind me of my own body’s buoyancy. As a boy,
I grew up near the sea, and my mother would say
una mujer le da sal a su hombre, you just remember that
not knowing if she meant that salt can halt earth’s growth
or tongue man’s junk to pearl. When my mother left,
my father ate a box of Morton salt hoping he would die.
He didn’t die and I called you a beluga whale and I’m sorry
you’re salty because you think belugas are dopey dolphins—
but did you know they train their handlers and not vice versa?
Belugas blow hoops of bubbles like smoke rings off a cigar
right into the trainer’s face, and the sub smiles at his dom,
won like a cheap prize at the ring toss. Oh! And scientists
actually recorded them mimicking human speech! Ask them
how they know it wasn’t just clicks or squeals or noise,
they’ll say: because it fell within our acoustical spectrum.
One beluga was singing, another appeared to be yelling
out, out, out! Mimicking human speech, like humans at the zoo
telling the chimp stop, stop, stop while it hurls fistfuls of poop.
This all started when you asked me: what is my animal spirit?!
Don’t forget. It doesn’t work like that. You don’t get to choose
who you fall in love with. But I am trying to be a noble beast.
I have been practicing white people speech for years and years.
Forgive me. I was always about to understand you.

Benjamin Garcia’s first collection, Thrown in the Throat, was selected by Kazim Ali for the
2019 National Poetry Series (Milkweed Editions, 2020). He works as a Sexual Health and
Harm Reduction Educator throughout the Finger Lakes region of New York.
The devastatingly crystalline “Portrait,” in its entirety:

Maddy draws me—

a head,

a pair of boots,

and beneath, a womb where the egg,

a speck of black pen, lays.

The figuration of the fertilizing egg as a “speck of black pen” establishes a relation between the physical body of the mother and the generative work (however heavily metaphorized, in culture) of writing: an association that overrules the more bleak contingency between women and materiality/maternity, and biology as destiny. The sonomelodic “Blue Moon” and “Supermoon” poems describe a speaker who (hilariously, in “Blue Moon,” “After the appointed fuck”) wanders the house at night, in cahoots not just with her sleeping children but with the rhythms, wild, of the natural world. “And in / the lightless worlds within, a miniature moon / floats in my womb’s slippery night, / heart beating time, time beating heart.” This last line suggests a profound connection between the body and the cosmos, yet is rendered (as everywhere) with such a light, material touch as to make it seem effortless.

To focus overmuch, however, on the aspects of gender and motherhood, and its concomitant tropes of labor and delivery, that the score the book would be to do a disservice to its other fiercely political aims. This is a book of awakenings, and poems such as “The Mother in This Poem Is Me or You or Your Mother,” “Truth in a Nonmoral Sense,” and “Truth in a Moral Sense” reveal the speaker’s own deep investiture in issues of race, identity, discourse analyze, and culture—and yet (lucky us!) they are crafted in the shape, tone, and form, of poems.

An excerpt:

both monster

and slave sha me

and slay me

this is the Labyrinth

where you play

Theseus

and I play

Minotaur

it’s okay

it’s just a metaphor

All seeming contradictions resolve with these lines, which both soothe and disquiet—the idea of role play (and, by extension, violence, figura-
this collection (e.g. “Butterfly”) do not spare the reader the shock of registered meaning any more than the more lyrical poems do—if anything, they mine the speaker’s culpability in the world: her carbon footprint, yes, but also her hand in, or at least her witnessing of, the death of nature all around us. Yet this same culpability is also used, elsewhere, as in “Apoidea,” to revel in the pleasures and joys of prosody, itself a kind of redemptive force:

“Though woman, lover, other, boss, the hive
Without its matriarch, like Empire, dies.”

In an ever-unfamiliar global village/soulscape, is it frightening or comforting to acknowledge “the / sea too is / a mirror”? Along with granted subjectivity to women and other minorities who have too long been forced to apologize for their existence, where now is the place for the expression of power and passion? How can we, as poets and people, more radically embrace difference? What does it mean to bring children into the necromancy of our contemporary moment? Despite the “day’s little deaths,” this speaker (a self-declared “professional digger”) is as adamant in her work as she is in her hopes: of, in the collection’s final poem, “The Caravan,” call and response, as well as the power of literature (read and written) to transform our consciousness and world.

Thus, “this / is how it / is written”: the poignant, heart-breaking, and indisputably heroic plight of the human in a post-human world.

Virginia Konchan is the author of two poetry collections, Any God Will Do (Carnegie Mellon, 2020) and The End of Spectacle (Carnegie Mellon, 2018); a collection of short stories, Anatomical Gift (Noctuary Press, 2017); and four chapbooks, as well as coeditor (with Sarah Giragosian) of Marbles on the Floor: How to Assemble a Book of Poems (University of Akron Press, 2022).
Night Sea

after Agnes Martin

We had a great time
walking into oblivion
before dinner
unburdened by the wind
of tinkering conversation
a glorious glut
of being shut up
by implied continuum
spun off in ultramarine pieces
though I don’t think
you can imagine
even a particle of vastness
I’m not able to tell you anything
really, but this is the real
thing—a picture, an interior
cinched in a net where
every thread makes you
its maker so twisted
by subliminally
illuminated gold triggers
how far you are
the flux remains gritty
and stutters blue upon
blue endless cells
a suffering wave is not
about nature but
known best in the mind
once there was a grid
and in it two lovers
evaporating and the sea said
one feels as though
one is a panic in complete
certain darkness one
has made some
terrible error generating forms
in sand some hades
that we have got to
have we have got to know
worlds beyond this

Milk River

I, like the deer,
appear
a feral thing
muddy, single-minded
for juniper and easy fruit
indignant among tombstones
twitching desire
how gravity bests
the beasts in us, it is
the talent of feeding
on light as a belief
in preservation
charted into every
gene by grace
descending a rocky
path you have to
lift your foot
an increment higher or fall—
to will a void—fix on its fullness
more full to sweeten us
I took the conch shell
from his small hand
and told the boy
I’d throw it back
into the sea because
that’s where empty
crab homes go but
lying, hid it
in my pocket so completely
over giving little
boys whatever
they want when
they cry for
milk like a fawn
stuck in a rain-choked
field its black hooves cool
unempathetic with need

In the Garden

During the War

Dear Whomever—what beauty, you
were something else I misunderstood;
a half-life come crashing through the
night. A medium is a ghost ship that
makes it from port to port or it sinks
but you can package information in
any media still it gets taken in how
the sun just does, filtered spasms of
ions and turns out green; the holes
in me let life in or out in other ways.
I am a person with comfort-seeking
tastes, which makes me some version of
humiliation/ human woman and I only
fired a Tommy gun but once, besides,
nobody’s shot me yet—I see fuzzy buds
anchored in the underbrush, how we’re
all shivering with faith in personal
failure and night-vision goggles, a spot
in the trees to be/ to wonder for hours
what happened to you in the maternity
ward waving my hands above the
fanatic smoke insufficiently akin to any
mother though I am not.

For the love, give me anything but
another flag and if you see me hanging
my flag over the garden wall I’m already
dead: my flag is blue in the morning,
clear mist at night—my flag covers your
star with fire—like a wall is anything but
a pissing post or a place to lean and kiss
upon—my flag’s one star burning down
the others dropping sleepless thoughts
in a line of gunpowder through the
forest. What ghouls the dogs become,
captured under ladders in the snow. I’ll
free them before morning, how the day
howls violet upon itself, I can’t even
suggest with this pencil that wound—
and whatever, beauty—come crashing
through the night. The messengers are so
different now.

Cate Peebles is the author of the collection Thicket (Lost Roads Press, 2018) and four chapbooks, including The Woodlands (Sixth Finch Books, 2016) and James (dancing girl press, 2014). She is an archivist and lives in New Haven, CT.
“When You Swim, Make Your Whole Body Like a Lung,” Says My Wife Rose on Our Honeymoon

Yes, let the body swell and contract with the waves, which I try to remember when I follow her into the sea, not heeding the ambulances in me as we skim above urchins, their million arms. At dinner later, over spaghetti carbonara, and tiny silver sardines also soaked in oil, we talk about how there are some people who are both afraid and uncurious and never leave their homes. Others are very curious about the world, but sometimes afraid. I think but don’t say we are equal parts curious but me, more afraid. My stroke is sloppy so she teaches me how to frog my legs and arrow my arms and every day I swim a little farther, above the spines.

I like it: the worm in my stomach tells me to leave, and I endure it longer till it passes. I have been so afraid of my body, measuring everything wrong or weak: the mononucleosis that lasted a year, a long cough and the mistake of my lung’s skin folding on the X-ray, miming a spot. I wept. I died again in my mind. Oh Rosie, I want to be brave, and I can!

Last year, you were pissing on my leg after an anemone stung it, when a wasp zoomed in. You gave me a look to say *Nomi, relax*, and instead I flailed your wee into your face. This year, I let the wasps pass. Haloed with a green-gold fear, then they pass.

Sonnet on Want, While Driving Through a Grove of Deciduous Trees

Pistachios are fat in their saddles. Wearing tight yellow jeans on the moped, I think of our strap-on. Not sure if you guessed it, but I’ve been afraid of cock since long before we met. Once one went in me when I didn’t want it. Now we’re on an island, where each road sends us to the sea, past groves, to blue water. I want you most when we are eating, salt on your lips, wasps bombing our plates, bringing sucked fish bones to the sky. Astride and hard, I ride you home, dreaming you have one, or I have one, your coccyx a shock against me, til want is cleaved from fear. The oracles from my past: they clap their hands.

On Taking Students to the Millstone River and Reconsidering the Category of Fieldwork

For Jeff Whetstone

Our classroom is small, the world, large. Through everything, a river passes.

Before piping it under the earth, this town was a river. The mind rushes water into the library, into Spring Street’s yards, red brick apartments, once a spring. Park the car below: bright puddles round the pipes.

Following Google Maps, all 12 in a van, we choose stops: by the parking lot of Penn Medical, through icy grass and trash to the river, gathering what charisma we can find. Reeds are lit in the sun. Deer droppings *blaze up into golden stones*. Drive another bend to Shep Lee, who left Merrill Lynch to farm pears with his wife: near the river, but not near enough. They dig a well. Fieldworkers hold a recorder to Lee’s lips: “What do the pears taste like?” We try to find the old mill, but where it was is Modway, industrial storage facility. Behind it, the river. After, I ask, does it feel closer? My student *Elijah* says, Well it’s in my shoes.

Anglers dart American shad and drop flutter spoons as bait. Shad fly against the river, up ladders of water. Fieldworkers write in notebooks. They set it down.

I’m trained as a social scientist. For centuries now we’ve made maps, noted kin, drawn boxes around what we know. Oh friend, can I learn how to see it, the world—electric, bright, terrible, and beautiful—but not turn it into food?

Fieldworkers climb into a dank, cooled beaver den. We’d read about a zoologist, Charles Foster, who wanted to become animal, to know their secrets. Why not? Greek Gods did it to spy on mortals. As a child, Charles collected blackbird tongues, listened to mudflats. We too, he argued, have golgi tendons, muscle spindles to register space. One bird has as many receptors on its beak as a clitoris. It nuzzles towards a worm. Horse chestnuts stir in the wind. He chooses
to be a badger and live in a burrow, even bringing his son.

Finally writes, “This is Charles Foster, writing about being an animal.” Language is the tunnel the world rushes through. / 

Thirty-eight miles long, the river crosses Sweetman, Applegarth, the Turnpike: our part flows into the Lake, sluiced in 1903 for Princeton rowers, who build their torsos as above them swans pass.

We meet a man who paints the river chocolate brown speckled with reflections of trees. Another who lives above it, sleeps to it. You can’t drink it or wash your face in it. But some people love it. / 

Turtles are drunk from 8 months of sleep: you could pluck them from the mud. Jasmine and Zoe find one with a maimed face. The students point their iPhones there. I do too. Elijah lifts it above his head, then carries it. To the water. / 

Willa records the rain falling on the trees into the Millstone.

It isn’t special unless everything is special. But everything is special. / 

Paddling under honeysuckle branches, Elijah finds a nest of four teal-green eggs, pillowed with feathers and mud. Don’t touch it. I’m not very good at paddling, but I keep going, til my shoulders burn, til the Box around the river falls away. The Field grows and grows to hold the boy’s wet shoes, the mall where he bought them, just past Macy’s. And the hole he falls through whenever he is sad. The trees at the park and the swans. And the stars. I meant from here to the stars, moving like quick currents between us. So much faster than we could write it down.

Note: This poem incorporates a fragment of a line from James Wright, “blaze up into golden stones.”

Black Woman on a Plane, 21st Century

Minutiae in a bowl
jerry-rigged hand
in need of a drink,

The flight attendant
said, “It’s on me."

I must’ve looked
like I needed one.

Such a rough climb,
wobbly as the sun
during Leo season
come to find out
a brand new plane
is hot to handle.

The first breath:
crucial, coughs.

My favorite path
of looking winds up
when I’m in the air,
there’s no way
to vacuum seal death
up here I suppose,
even though I’ve never
felt the urge to buy
a traveling pillow.

If something develops,
if our machine defects,
I’ll ask if I can hold
the hand of the woman
who gave me a drink.

Then it’s time to land
like nothing’s happened,
the captain standing
at the door with his crew.

He’s younger than I am,
a baby-faced white boy.

We don’t know his name,
or where he came from.

Black Woman in a Wide-Brimmed Hat, 21st Century

She wanted folks to call her ma’am
Ms. or Mx, don’t matter which one,
as long as they called her.

Adjusting the angle of a hat
to complement her world,
feeding the comfort of her mind,
folks can get a good long look
& think again, she’d had enough
of ppl and their confusing ways.

Besides, the well was full inside,
the books overflowed her path
to bed and her hat rack packed
with floppy brims to keep off
certain loads she didn’t feel like
sifting through to wear anymore.

She had an appointment today
with an old gentleman in a black
hat who lived at the crossroads,
not too far from her own house
where she drank elderberry wine
from her porch in the summertime.

Old pops in black who lived on old
town road. She got herself ready
pulling her eyes to the big trees,
the otherworldly. They’d play cards,
tidy up those blessings & talk shit.

Population Control

Chopped up by lumber overlords.
Trunks still alive if they were hardy,
my mother insists we are more than
our tree, her ship is still on the way
to take her from the managed forest.
But the men came, slaughtered a town,
wood is profitable, and all the bones
of women are worth more than ivory.

Years later I pace the same forests
with my two children, thinking of a
response to a friend who believes
overpopulation is the causeway to
global woe. If she was with me today,
I’d point to the root of my children’s legs
the cute baby trees mama is so proud of.
Seems like they sprouted up overnight
to protest the upheaval of our scattered kin
with their own green lives, comforting space
where moss grows, where women used to be.

Sorry for What

Sorry for what, dear stranger,
as you count exact change
for the books you want
science fiction and homesteading.

Sorry for what, dear stranger,
as you anticipate
and I anticipate,
meeting in the germ, tumbling apart.

Sorry for what, dear stranger
the edge creeps up
and yes, seamless stranger
we’re both strange to one another
and cannot anticipate each other’s thoughts.

I could apologize all day long
for not saying what I really mean
maybe you can hear it somewhere
someday it won’t be so strange
to be quiet, knowing what we both mean.

Read me wrong
or read me right
perception at the edge of isolation.
**I Could Really Go for a Deep Hug**

FREE HUGS! screamed a white man at the hippie fest, but I wouldn’t hug him, an unknown, a man, old enough to be my father, it was the first time I saw hugging as a kind of currency among the countercultural, it was cute I guess, I hugged women I’ll never see again, didn’t even know their names, I saw women hugging that man, he seemed ok, everyone knew him but you never know, he believed in those hugs he was giving, he could heal the world, but I didn’t trust him, his hugs were fishing for something else, trust yr intuition, Nikki, which I did, that time, and smiled, walked by, hugged women instead when they asked, I’ll hug my sisters, we share histories, it was comforting, resting for a minute, from bad men probably, ourselves, the powers that permeate, there was no reason to advertise these hugs were free, no reason at all, currency was out of bounds, we are beyond, women holding beyond the value of labor but the guy kept screaming from his position, everyday, FREE HUGS! FREE HUGS! his wide eyes, he was so CONVINCED he had what it takes, selling it, declaring himself free, c’mon people now, I got these FREE HUGS, human contact at no cost, but something was not right, like when they tell you we’re lucky to live in the land of the free, to be proud, the hugs he was giving out cost someone something somewhere, probably a woman, where he acted out on her body what he wasn’t capable of giving, now he was FREE of her and his women troubles, He was the purveyor of FREE HUGS INC, meanwhile women, total strangers, hug each other everywhere, waiting in line to use the bathroom, trying to put our lives back in the aftermath, a coworker suddenly reaching over to hug you, letting you know she’s here, with you, in male dominated spaces, I hug you back and mean it, except at first it might be a shy hug, half-hug, but when my body hurts, thieving ache, low-down blue ache, fellow man, I mean, no, dude, I don’t want yr hugs, screaming enterprises of touching women beneviolently, I’m looking for real friends, kinfolk, women who understand, to share a deep ache of another day of terror perpetuated by the US government, I could really go for a deep hug, by women + femmes, the country’s number one targets, we’re not supposed to ask for what we need, here I am, asking for deep hugs, if someone is interested in hugging, I’ll hug back w/ what I can hold, which doesn’t feel like much to me at the moment, maybe it’ll be enuf for who I’m hugging, maybe I need reminding I can survive, we should survive, strengthening ourselves, bleakly

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at some point my translations

at some point my translations
and my notes flew directly to my ear

another day
alone in these white chairs
I rest on sand
an island

rests upon the water
I remember all the kinds of wind

the light could make
if I walk
by different streets
the gardens
I could hear the flowering
I mostly
work to the last minute
I hear skin
and bones
at some point on the patio
the bread arrives
and the washing of our
hands

Before the rose
Before the rose is born and the bride is buried
Before the body breaks into roses
In the rushes and the reeds
slap your lips
Gulls circling the pier
calling hunger
In your throat the night sky
filled with all the stars of the cosmos
and your small yard
and you
Before the father
Before sleeping on rocks
in contemplation
Before the uncut clothing
leave it on

It’s dark in the street

It’s dark in the street, but still daylight
in the plaza, and upon the monuments there,
upon the plane overhead
and the birds on the wire, shivering
and sleeping.

I walk the steps behind the fountain.
I rearrange your room.
I put pencils on the table, and a moleskine,
a phone, my passport.
Your bed’s empty and made.

I take down your death mask, and the photographs
and excerpts.
It’s small, my friend, and the linen curtains,
they’re old.
Outside, songs of laughter

and yapping, of water
and sirens,
and from its long way back
a tired light
next door to the pharmacy

where they
provide for you each day
a new pasta
and a bottle of filtered water
and a glass of wine.

And certain people
And certain people
come back
I don’t know what age I am
Life is mostly normal
and this is when I wake up in the arms
of strangers
And as it is
that a child at rest will think of home
The old man with the glass eye

The old man with the glass eye and all the cash

Keepsakes in a drawer, as if you were running away

flicker, flicker, hand held

All of us as we drove crammed together with the windows open
dark the light looking through water, a black speck in the blue

To the left you don't really recognize me
to the right I put my hands up
forever

and while the low long bridge is meant for quiet
and human ground

we don't say it
for if I do

Ralph Angel’s last collection, Your Moon, was awarded the Green Rose Poetry Prize. Exceptions and Melancholies: Poems 1986–2006 received the PEN USA Poetry Award, and his Neither World won the James Laughlin Award of The Academy of American Poets. In addition to five books of poetry, he also published an award-winning translation of the Federico García Lorca collection Poema del cante jondo / Poem of the Deep Song. His recent work includes entropia, a collection of thirty-one images from the fine art photography publisher Dark Spring Press, and Strays, a limited edition chapbook from Foundlings Press. He passed away on March 6, 2020.
I got all my jeans from Walmart
until a girl giggled to her friend,
"Does he get all his jeans from Walmart?"

Now I import them straight from Japan;
spun on vintage Levi looms.
The thighs come in a little tight
until I break them in.
Only takes a couple months.

I look fabulous.
Everyone knows.
Everyone says.

On the street the other day
I passed a guy in big, husky Wranglers.
Poor bastard.
I turned around for one more look.
He looked so comfortable.

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Jacob Saenz
Throwing the Crown

Throwing the Crown by Jacob Saenz, winner of the 2018 APR/Honickman First Book Prize, is available in APR’s online store at www.aprweb.org and at other outlets. Throwing the Crown was chosen by guest judge Gregory Pardlo.

Jacob Saenz is a CantoMundo fellow whose work has appeared in Pinwheel, Poetry, Tammy, Tri-Quarterly and other journals. He has been the recipient of a Letras Latinas Residency Fellowship as well as a Ruth Lilly Poetry Fellowship. He serves as an associate editor for RHINO.

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Taneum Bambrick
Vantage

Vantage by Taneum Bambrick, winner of the 2019 APR/Honickman First Book Prize, is available at APR’s website, www.aprweb.org, and at other outlets. Vantage was chosen by guest judge Sharon Olds.

Taneum Bambrick is a 2018–2020 Stegner Fellow at Stanford University. She is a winner of the Academy of American Poets University Prize, a Susanna Colloredo Environmental Writing Fellowship from the Vermont Studio Arts Center, and the 2018 BOOTH Nonfiction Contest.
By and large, political poetry—poetry responding to national or global events, poetry of “engagement” or even “witness”—was not the norm in the United States through the 20th century. When it was written and when it was read, critical reception was hostile. Are these assertions controversial? Surely, it is too much to say, as Lawrence Ferlinghetti said at the time, that poetry before Sept. 11, 2001, was B.S., and that everything after was A.S., but he was right in saying that 9/11 changed things. So was Amit Majmudar, who, in his introduction to Resistance, Rebellion, Life. 30 Poems Now, writes, “As it did to so many of my generation, 9/11 broke a taboo that should have been broken well before” (xiv). So was Tracy K. Smith when she recounted her experience as a creative writing student in the 1990s, when every one was admonished “to avoid composing political poems,” and how after 9/11, “something shifted in the nation’s psyche.”

Yet one keeps having this conversation: The claim that American poetry has become more political in recent times, which it demonstrably has done, meets with the objection that poetry has always been political. Smith’s article, for example, prompted a wave of protest on a number of poets’ Facebook pages. If we keep only of the United States, the objection is unfounded. Is American poetry more public in the 21st century than it was through most of the twentieth? Is it more political? Does it address current trends and events? The answers are yes, yes, and far more than ever. During the long arc from one fin de siècle to the other, the idea of a politically engaged poetry was overwhelmingly held in disfavor. Those who grew up in the early part, in a modern poetry class of the 1960s, most critics would agree, had no acquaintance with the ideas of poetry.

First, Fredric Jameson was right: the political allegory is there beneath the most trivial TV sitcom, beneath the most Oulipian procedural poetry, beneath the uplifting poetry of Mary Oliver, or the sentimental poetry of the Instagram poets, especially poems by women, that stray too close to the familiar arc of “At a Bach Concert,” or of a before-and-after watershed, as in “The Wreck,” a poem that actually does appear in the anthologies), which are the only vehicles by which most readers have any acquaintance with poetry.

By the time Rich died in 2012, 2012, political poetry had taken its place as a viable and even inviting avenue for all poets to follow, not only those, like Baraka, Jordan, Lorde, Ginsberg, or Revoir, self-identified as political or outrageous (the long retread “raw vs. cooked” opposition). No one any longer objected—in no small part because of Rich’s own struggle, her own example—to poetry that engaged race prejudice, sexism, lesbian love, or U.S. military expenditures, whether among many other topics. I am speaking of course of trends, not of a before-and-after watershed, as in the earlier comment by Ferlinghetti, for whom the 21st century was a wasteland of solipsism, aestheticism, and pretense—mostly B.S., in short.

Is the kind of visceral reaction Adrienne Rich, among others, met with before, no longer thinkable now in the enlightened and poetically permissive 21st century? It is not. Even leaving aside the New Critical continuities I have cited, consider a New York Times (Feb. 2014) obituary of the poet Maxime Kumin, an otherwise laudatory commentary which however typifies, as Eleanor Wilner notes, “the kind of past resistance to political poems, especially poems by women, that stay too far from the personal hearth, as if that were the boundary of the self and its most heartfelt concern.” The reviewer writes, Most critics agreed that Ms. Kumin’s finest poems were those that trained their focus close to home. Those on large political subjects like mankind’s dubious stewardship of the land, reviewers said, sometimes read better as prose than as poetry. (my emphasis).
No such critics are named. Wilner writes, what struck me about the language here . . . was the attribution of opinion to some kind of large but unidentifiable majority: `Most critics agreed . . .` and `reviewers said . . .`. This vague and settled plurality, like the `they` of `they say`, creates a kind of spurious authority that assuages the very skepticism it fails to document, and seems one example of what had been a prevailing attitude.

Kumin’s poems about the Iraq war, such as “Imaginary Rendition” or “Entering Houses at Night,” are brilliant, at least as much so as her poems about nature and personal relationships. The fact that the reviewer felt it necessary to go on record as preferring the non-political poems illustrates what Wilner calls the critical “undertow” of the past. Poetry, in short, was a lot of things over the last century—experimental, personal, epiphanic, spontaneous, tender, obscene, learned, unintelligible, or simple enough for house pets to read. What it mostly was not was political. The American (and British) scorn for didacticism sprang from a particular depoliticized aesthetic and critical approach. After the 20th century, the word “didactic” very likely will be pejorative to the end of time, and the didactic predilections of the 2000 years prior to the fin de siècle will be forgotten.

Poetry, from modernism onward, was not “conservative” in other regards: indeed, the important poets were (and were famous for being) experimental, groundbreaking, and difficult—in short, modern. That, the modernity, not the politics, was foremost.

Why and out of what circumstances was engagement pushed out? One can start with the late 19th century, when Oscar Wilde said that “art never expresses anything but itself” and “All art is quite useless.”11 The modernists, weaned on the Symbolists, extended this idea, with Stevens (“Poetry is the subject of the poem”), Yeats (“a poet [should] keep his mouth shut for he has no gift to set a statesman right”), or Auden (“poetry makes nothing happen” and many similar marks).12 In Art Poetica, Archibald MacLeish wrote, “A poem should not mean / But be,” a mantra that echoed down the decades, arguably more central than any other poetic dictum of its time.13 Like alcohol and gasoline, poetry and politics were not supposed to mix.

It is not of much value to argue that the idea of the autotelic work of art is somehow mistaken; it is simply where history went. The remarkable point—after all those centuries of viewing literature as primarily moral and instructive—is the near universality of this view in the Anglosphere 20th century. One could say that this ethos passed away amid the tear gas and marijuana fumes of the 1960s, but it did not.14 In that decade, Robert Creeley wrote, “Poetry denies its end in any descriptive act, I mean any act which leaves the attention outside the poem,” to which Charles Olson absolutely agreed. In the 1960s, the California poet William Everson (later known as Brother Antoninus), reviewing a posthumous book of poems by Robinson Jeffers, wrote, “Our aesthetic reveres the pure essence; it is anti-polonoma, anti-programmatic, basically anti-subject matter. For us, propaganda is propaganda, and we disdain it” (Correspondence and Papers). Everson saw this aesthetic as unfortunate; he mourned the loss of the “committed spirit,” which Jeffers, he thought, demonstrated.

What about later, much later? In fact, there is no need to use the past tense. Poets do not write manifestoes anymore, and probably never will again, but consider contemporary poets on what poetry is or is not. Matthew Zapruder, in Why Poetry? (2018), writes, “Unlike other forms of writing, poetry takes as its primary task to insist and depend upon and celebrate the troubled relation of the word to what it represents” (15). Paul Muldoon, another poet who is certainly postmodern in key regards (procedural poems, sound poems, pop music poems, general pop-allusive zaniness), writes, recently, “The poem itself is after all the solution to a problem only it has raised, and our reading of it necessarily entails determining what that problem was” (“The End of the Poem,” 374). Michael Robbins, critical enfant terrible and author of the ground-breaking Alien v. Predator, writes, recently, that “[a]esthetic life is a sphere of self-directed activity whose external ramifications, despite periodic utopian exuberances, are minimal at best” (quoted in Menand).15 Cleath Brooks and John Crowe Ransom would have agreed with every one of these assertions.

Louis Menand in an article reviewing, among other books, Robbins’ Equipment for Living: On Poetry and Pop Music, writes, “Some version of this notion—that whatever the ostensible subject matter, poems are about ‘language’—has been current in English departments since the days of the New Criticism” (11). He then quotes lines from Frederick Seidel’s poem “Now” which are so unequivocal and direct that the idea of the troubled relation of the word to what it represents “flies out the window:

Now a dictatorship of vicious spineless slimes
We the people in has taken over.
(Resistance 84)

Try this exercise on other recent poems of engagement:

How come we’ve listened to the great sties—Neruda, Akhmatova, Thoreau, Frederick Douglass—and now We’re silent as sparrows in the little bushes?
(“Call and Answer—August 2002,” Robert Bly, NAPE 24)

What would a formalist reading contribute to our understanding of the following?

Some burned, their faces caught fire.
Some were asphyxiated.
Some broke windows and leaned into the sunny day.
Some were pushed out from behind by others in flames.
(“When the Towers Fell,” Galway Kinnell, NAPE 109)

One can note the Whitmanic (or Poundian?) “Some from fear of censure, / some for love of slaughter. . . .”) anaphora, but to what purpose? In these cases, matters of content overwhelm matters of form. To respond to Archibald MacLeish, a poem can certainly both mean and be.

And today? Here are some anthology titles of the past fifteen years: 1. Poems for Political Disas.

The American (and British) scorn for didacticism sprang from a particular depoliticized aesthetic and critical approach . . .
The U.S. arrived somewhat late to a poetry of engagement.

The usual terms for engaged literature are problematic: littérature engagée, literatura de compromiso, “public” or “political” poetry, “the poetry of witness.” Of all these, perhaps the most important over the past half century has been “witness.” The concept of a poet of witness was paramount in the study of the poetry of Latin America and Eastern Europe in the mid to late 20th century, in studies of Paul Celan and post-Holocaust poetry, and in Carolyn Forché’s groundbreaking 1993 anthology Against Forgetting (in which most of the poems were by non-U.S. poets).

But Forché herself has redefined “witness” significantly. Reviewing her own work and her con- age of the phrase “poetry of witness,” she writes in Poetry in 2011 that “as compelling as many such “witness” poems are, “poetry of witness” originated in a very different constellation of thought, in which it was not regarded as constituting a poet’s identity, nor prescribing a new literary engagement. . . . In my sense of this term, it is a mode of reading rather than of writing, of readily encounter with the literature of that-which-happened, and its mode is evidentiary rather than representa-tional.” (165)

Although not presented as such, this is a serious reckoning with Forché’s earlier mi- tence on a poet of witness being grounded in the specific reality—in that country, having experienced that event—out of which he or she speaks. Still more recently, Cathy Park Hong, in “Against Witness,” writes of the problem of mak- ing art (she is reviewing an installation by the Colombian artist Dorra Salcedo but speaking also of poetry) that represents another victim’s pain:

“Oftentimes the poet has witnessed catastrophic conditions that have happened elsewhere in a geographically remote place . . . or conditions that have already been bookended by the past.” (157)

She asks, in her conclusion, What kind of proximity do I need to write as witness? Do I have to experience the event myself? If I watched the video, can I write about it? Do I have to be related to the victim? And what do you mean by related? (161)

But this correction, or adjustment, of the term raises problems for a critic such as Timothy Yu, who questions the value of representing “highly mediated, often distant mass events to which the poet can have only an ambivalently impersonal relationship” (6). Yu quotes Ann Keniston and myself, noting that one feature of contemporary engaged poetry is the “domestic ‘I’” who con- structs a “distant, calamitous place that the speaker learns of through the news,” but adds that this more mediated situation forms “a sharp contrast to the strategies of identification (however problem- atic) pursued by many poets of color.” (6).

The non-white poets included in The New Amer- ican Poetry of Engagement—among them, Yusef Komunyakaa, Timothy Liu, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Claudia Rankine—would almost certainly disagree with this characterization. Komunyakaa (who earlier in his career wrote poems about the Vietnam War, which he did witness) saw on television the image of the body of a young man jump from the Trade Towers; his poem about the U.S. military’s “shock and awe” policy in Iraq is informed through media, as it would be for most poets; the same is true for his poems “Surge” and “Grenade.” Claudia Rankine in “Don’t Let Me Be Lonely” saw on television the reports of a black man dragged to his death in Texas; she did not meet Timothy McVeigh, nor did she witness the Bush election election through media; the writing is not diminished by that. Naomi Shihab Nye’s “Dictionary in the Dark” concerns the insid- ious language of war. Timothy Liu’s poem “Ready- Mades” does not suggest he actually met President George Bush. Moreover, a number of these poems, adding to this mediation, use constructed personae—a soldier in Iraq, or an Israeli speaking of Palestinians, for example.

Contemporary writers—leaving aside embed- ded journalists—experience distant events through media. Yu interprets what Cathy Park Hong calls “secondary witness” as a shortcoming, as if these contemporary poets are not doing the real work of witness in situ that Forché seemed to describe in 1993, while poets of color are. One might see, instead, this acknowledgment of complexity (and often complicity) as salutary in new poetry, not as a demerit. Poets today no longer pretend to have access to unmediated realities. Indeed, most people in the West today—poets or not, white or non-white—are spectators, from a distance, through media, of the war in Iraq, the earthquake in Nepal, or the killings by the police in Ferguson, New York City, Baltimore, and Madison.

And one of the strengths of the best contemporary poetry is not to present a view from nowhere but rather to suggest, even to identify, one’s implication in events very far from oneself.

The U.S. arrived somewhat late to a poetry of engagement. I can remember the cover of the August 10, 1963, issue of Life magazine, a Hearst publication, on which the face of Yevgeny Yev- tuschenko looks out from the streets of Russia. Inside is a three-page spread accompanying Yevtuschenko’s poem “Babi Yar,” about the massacre of Jews at that site in the Soviet Union, and the refusal of the government to establish a memorial there. The poem is written in the “international” open style of its time. There are large photographs of Babi Yar. This was fare, in a conservative magazine, for a broad readership. Yet no “political” poem by an American poet of that period ever received such attention, least of all from a national magazine.

But Auden’s poem was widely quoted in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, its resonant phrases seeming to anticipate the events of 9/11 (“The unmentionable odour of death / Offends the September nights”) and its possible causes (“Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return”), culminating in the poem’s anguished tagline: “We must love one another or die.” Yet the very fact that Americans would turn at this moment to a half-century-old poem by an English-buff poet might be seen as signaling a certain lack of comparable voices in contemporary American poetry. As Brendan Bernhard would write in a reflection on Auden’s poem a decade after the attacks, “Poets who spoke with that measure of confidence and ambition no longer existed—at least not in America.” (I emphasize mine)

Yu is right to note that the recourse to a poem by a British poet, writing sixty years earlier, might signal “a certain lack of comparable voices in con- temporary American poetry.” Even more impor-tantly, Yu illustrates that the public today is more receptive than ever to a poem of this kind (and to its uncanny echoes with 9/11). Today is the key word. Yu fails to mention that Auden repu- diated “September 1, 1939,” as well as “Spain,” and refused to include those poems in his Col- lected Shorter Poems 1922–1957. Rather, he wrote in “Squares and Oblongs” that the “Orpheus who moved stones is the archetype, not of the poet, but of Goebbels” (181). Auden regretted these polit- ical poems and insisted that poets should not try to “exercise control over their readers” (180). Yet “Auden’s words were everywhere,” as the TLS reported at the time, especially the line he most
“We must love one another or die.” 23


Notes

2. For obvious reasons, I can deal here with only the 20th and 21st centuries. When we examine literature of earlier centuries, the change is radical: up through Matthew Arnold, but not much after, it was apparent to most readers and writers that literature should instruct. 3. And from the movies, a film like Capra’s Meet John Doe (1941), with its depiction of the inherently good, honest “People” vs. the fascist rich (complete with leather-clad motorcycle squad), would, after the war, never be made again.
4. Kaufman, however, took a Buddhist vow of silence from 1963 to 1975, so the world had changed considerably by the time he took up writing again.
5. Sandburg did get into the anthologies, but usually with innocuous poems like “The Fog.” Moreover, The People, Yo was itself innocuous, if not clueless: “To the paradoxes of democracy, / Yes to the hopes of government/ Of the people, by the people, for the people…”
6. The “political” bursting up or out was preceded by the important psychological breakthroughs of the personal or “confessional” poets of the 1960s and 1970s.
7. Bishop like most writers of her time disliked poetry of “social conscience,” although she admired the example set by Ralph Ellison, who had been her classmate at Vassar: “her life is one heroic saga of fighting for the underdog: going to jail, writing about silicosis, picking alone in Korea… In comparison I sound about like Billie Burke” (One Art 63)). More charismatically, however, Bishop disliked Diane di Prima and was revolted by Diane Wakoski.
8. In Hugh Kenner’s The Pound Era (1973), the biggest and most-read volume in modernism in its time, there is almost no mention of race, gender, or class. Nor does the metacritical index of that huge book have a single entry for “fascism.” “Musolini” does appear in the index, but most instances are mere mentions. Books on modernism written thirty years or more afterward would be framed completely differently.
9. I.e. Lorin Jones and Eldridge Cleaver.
12. These remarks were made in the preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray. When asked about the passage, he added that art “is not meant to instruct… It is superbly sterile.”
13. Yeats, “On Being Asked for a War Poem,” The Wild Swans at Coole, 1919. Auden was explicit in his prose. Poets, he wrote, in The Dyer’s Hand, “by the nature of their interests and the nature of artistic fabrication, [are] singularly ill-equipped to understand politics or economics” (84). See below regarding his reputation of the poems “September 1, 1939” and “Spain.”
15. When I refer to the 1960s, I mean not so much the fabled “Sixties,” which began in most places in the U.S. in 1966 or 1967, but rather the actual decade, which largely belonged to the “transgressive fifties,” as Rob Kirby and others have called that period. The undercurrents are another matter. None of them would come to the surface until late in the 60s or be read in some classrooms until well into the 70s.

16. Also characteristic, but more devastating, is the condemnation by Michael Robbins of James Wright’s “soft” poetry: “if fetal alcohol syndrome could write, it would sound like this.”
18. I would have to bracket Adrienne Rich’s 1996 Best American Poetry, which Harold Bloom greeted with horror, but whose preface should be re-read every year. In the 2017 issue, edited by Natasha Tetreauhy, even the series editor, David Lehman, emphasizes the public function of poetry, closing his introduction with a full-frontal politi-
cratic. His aversion to political poetry, regrettable though she seemed to describe, much more, our own time:

In our period they say there is free speech. They say there is no penalty for poets. There is no penalty for writing poems.

They say this. This is the penalty.

What is poetry which does not save nations or people? (xxvi)
19. Examples in Keniston and Gray, The New American Poetry of Engagement, include Hugh Seidman’s pantoum “The Book of Memory: Microphone” and Philip Metres’s redacted poem “Testimony” (147). Timothy Donnelly’s splicing of Osama bin Laden and the Beverly Hillbillies in “Dream of Arabian Hillbillies” (38); and several others.
20. See Terry Eagleton on the relation between New Criticism and the Cold War, in Literary Theory.
21. Although Chung, incredibly, did not ask him the key question, Baraka left no doubt in his essay “I Will Not Apologize”: he believed the Jews were behind the attacks on 9/11. The theory is alive and well in France and throughout the Arab world.
22. Auden was not yet a U.S. citizen.
25. In von Hallberg, 72. See also Saunders, The Cultural Cold War

26. For an update on the question of whether or not the government cares about, much less monitors, writers, see “Spying on Writers,” Christian Lorenzen, LRB, 11 October 2018, p. 9. The piece included Baldwin, Hemingway, Truman Capote, et al. Now, possibly Toni Morrison, Don DeLillo (because of Lee Harvey Oswald in Lihai!), but these are reck-
less guesses. Poets? The article mentions none, for good reason.

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hated (changed in one version, deleted in another):

“We must love one another or die.” 23

As regards the present, the fear is not that one might end up in jail but that one will eventually be canonized by the State and depicted on a postage stamp, like Thoreau and Malcolm X. In first-world capitalism, unlike the worlds in which Neruda or Castillo lived, absorption, not execution or exile, is the rule. Derek Walcott has spoken of the vast blandness that absorbs artists in the U.S. We might be hungry for oppression by the government, as Bruce Murphy has suggested, or nostalgic for real or imagined oppression, as Hunter S. Thompson wrote in 2003: “I’ve become almost homesick for the smell of tear gas.” In a letter to Anne Stevenson, Elizabeth Bishop wrote, “One almost envies those Russian poets a bit—who feel they are so important, and perhaps they are. At least the party seems afraid of them, whereas I doubt that any American poet (except poor wretched Pound) ever bothered our government much.” (Poems, Letters 863). An atmosphere can change, expectations surrounding it have changed. “How can a poet write truth to power when power doesn’t read poems?” asks Ben Lerner (xvi). Amit Majmudar writes, “Today, no poet, no matter what kind of pose he or she may strike, is ‘dangerous’ enough to persevere.” No poet attracts any malignant interest from the halls of power, at least not yet. In the old totalitarianism, oddly enough, the bastards actually gadget a damn about poetry” (xxv). 26

This is the irony: at a time when the prevailing ethos was overwhelming to see the poem as an art object, and to repudiate any tendency toward solemnity, commitment, the government and the public alike were aware of certain poets’ existence, their lives, their missteps, their letters to presidents, their obscurity tests, even their incarnations (Pound’s, at least), while, at present, with political poetry proliferating among poets of every stamp, and as widely disseminated as poetry ever has been—harmony and the popular culture could not possibly care less. Surely, if we are willing to admit it, the latter reality—obliviousness—is at least one factor in the flourishing of political poetry.

It is not likely that Donald Trump will ever convene a “Festival of the Arts” of the sort that presidents throughout the last century, and into this one, frequently hosted, and which artists could, if they wanted, glory in, condemning, or at least refuse to attend, and against which they could collect poems of protest, as Sam Hamill did, in 2007, publishing 260 poems in Poems Against the War (366 of the poets responded), addressed “to Laura Bush.”

The last and most vexing thought, then, is this: the fact that nobody minds means nobody cares. Even Adrienne Rich could not have foreseen this, at a time when everything the warned against has come to pass. What poets write today does not threaten anyone. In the purportedly lobotomized fifties, it did, or it could. The personal lives of artists, even poets, actually took up space in J. Edgar Hoover’s brain. Muriel Rukeyser had it right in the 1960s, in the poem “In Our Time,” though she seemed to describe, much more, our own time:

In our period they say there is free speech. They say there is no penalty for poets. There is no penalty for writing poems.

They say this. This is the penalty.

[26 THE AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW]


Reader, I

remember the midnights. The hour’s stark cleaver—new year from old. A stranger’s...
Gobble: a song of climate change
As I roll three buckets of water
in a wheelbarrow down the drive
to water grass above a retaining wall,
a wild turkey crosses in front of me,
nervous, edible, a male, yo bro,
we're a team. The grass is dying, so am I,
so's the turkey, yo everything, we're a team.
There's a drought, the sky is naked,
everyone can see it not raining,
how do you offer the sky a glass of water,
a turkey a glass of Wild Turkey,
how rude, yo bro, let's get wasted,
go team. I'm wondering if we've killed the sky.
The grass says yes, turkey bro doesn't know,
the water table (and chairs) says duh,
science—fun when it explodes
and plays with nematodes—is getting stoned
and nodding its head, yo facts and figures
and test tubes and interferometers, we're a team.
I've heard turkeys are stupid
but it's people who say this
and people who are unhappy
with the world as it comes to us, yo bulldozers,
two-for-one sales, unrepairable Apple everything:
thank you for your destructive service,
please stop being on our team. Be careful
what you don't know how to wish for: human modesty,
for rain rain to not go away, for people
to wake up and smell the methane,
yo desperate times, meet desperate measures,
red rover red rover, send over
the do-over: go back, go team, go green.

Genuflection: a song of climate change
If a forest falls and no one is there
to catch it. If there is a last tree, last leaf.
If clear-cutting lacks clarity. If I am an accessory
to murder. If a conditional sentence
never finishes combing its hair. If a glacier dies
in Alaska. If a glacier is killed in Iceland
and buried at sea. If I like breathing.
If I like coral. If I like liking the blue Earth.
If forests had lawyers. If trees were CEOs.
If CEOs were angels. If an angel falls from heaven,
comes to dinner, opens her chest, opens his mouth
and stars pour out. If heaven rises. If heaven prizes
canopy, under story, overgrowth. If appetite. If covet.
If capitalism is suicide by comfort. If shrug.
If “Will you look at the time.” If I abet extinction.
If I am an accomplice to poof. If trees are green engines,
god of every heart and lung. If clear-cutting
is our brains proving they are knock-knock jokes.
If who's there. If too late. If a tree is planted.
If a forest is guarded by the Secret Service.
If another tree is planted. If a forest stars
in the next superhero movie and the sequel
and the prequel and ta da. If breathe. If you.
If Eden. If grace. If the apple is the word “apple.”
If a species falls and no one is there to notice
it is us. If I take a knee. If I die before I pray
to wake. If I pray we wake before we die.

Bob Hicok’s ninth collection, Hold, was published by Copper Canyon Press in 2018. He is a recipient of the Bobbitt Prize from the Library of Congress and has also been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, two NEA Fellowships, and eight Pushcart Prizes. He teaches at Virginia Tech.
Luxury Tax
A fig in your drawer. A descant, a signet ring. Your index finger once you’ve chipped all the polish. Yes, you say, a pair of them in with the silk and the lace. A Windsor knot one-handed. The piece you bought for your husband. The plate in your wrist, how it’s thicker in the morning. Cheesecake. Pannacotta. The poet fled to Montana, nursing the gout in his leg. Flowers for your table. The granite has thicker veining than the marble, of course. Her name like forty flounces on a dress. Jacquard. Knifepleats. We thought you’d gone to Florence for the summer. A house exchange? A smaller dog. The outlet sells different goods than the flagship. A cord snaking away from it. The hours you supplicate in your green dress, in your girdle. Sat on your heels, your lips a bow, and what you say—like needles from your dowry, pulling, pulling, to make a whole, or cut one. Would you allow me to make you an accounting? The marks your necklace left. The twin beds together to make a king.

You & Your Destiny
The thing that lifts you up out of the field like a pair of pincers. The stage you keep ascending to, but there’s another flight, another. The way you cried in bed after I finished the painting, and you said I’ve known since I was a boy, and I agreed though you didn’t finish. When I was a girl I knew that if I didn’t shave under my arms, I couldn’t bear children. If I didn’t make myself a basket I was a fence instead. Chain-linked, porous, the place the trash catches, and I go for miles until I stop in a place just the same. My arms flung out in worthless praise. I’ve always known too, I say, and with my other hand I pull the sheet up over my head. No, I walk along myself for miles. I beat the grass. I’m here to scare up the birds—look how they tangle like that, together, up in the sky like a pillow exploding, like coughed-up coal, like a thousand crowns in search of a worthy head.

Brittany Cavallaro is the author of the poetry collections Girl-King and Unhistorical, both from University of Akron Press. Individual poems have appeared in Tin House, Southern Review, AGNI, and elsewhere. She is the recipient of an NEA fellowship in poetry. Cavallaro is also the New York Times bestselling author of the Charlotte Holmes novels for young adults.
STEPHEN S. MILLS

In Life My Husband Helps Put a Woman Back Together Again

Her arm was in the other room
when he arrived—
not with her body
still breathing in the living
room. In and out of consciousness.
And blood of course.

But not as much as you might expect.
So he retrieved the arm—
lifted it into a bag full of her
freezer contents
(paramedics do not carry ice—
it would melt).

This made him think of lifting his dead cat
after he hit it with his car as a teenager:
still warm.

He vomited then,
but now he is a professional.
But still there’s something alarming about a piece
of a body completely separated
from that body,
which is somehow still surviving.
An arm thought to be cut off by a lover
now on the run.
Detached
but can maybe be reattached.
Modern medicine and all.
Most things do not get to my husband.
He brushes off the sick.
The tragic.
The suicides.
But today
when he gets home, he wants to hold me.
Says he will keep me safe
as if I’m the one who needs reassurance.
I smile.
Kiss him.
Tell him our three-legged dog gets along just fine:
so very capable.

And he laughs and she wags her tail
because she knows we are talking about her,
but doesn’t know why,
doesn’t know about the woman whose arm
was brutally cut off today.
And I can’t help but think of the blood—
her blood—that was up both of his arms
after he lifted her onto the gurney.
And I wonder if I had one of those forensic lights,
if his body would glow against mine
like a map of his day spread out across his skin.
The same skin I take to my skin,
against my beating heart,
and into my still intact arms.

In Life We Dance at a Gay Bar Named After a Dead First Lady

And they play “Jolene” by Dolly
and we sing at the top of our lungs
as the boys all move in and out of doors
to and from the dance floor
to and from the water that is so close by
here on the edge of the island
and you say: Can you imagine writing a song about a bank teller
you were jealous of and having it survive this long?
and I laugh asking if you’ve forgotten I’m a writer
and no matter what any writer tells you
that is always our goal: survival
and popping up in odd places
like a bar named after Jackie O in Greece
where her face is blown up on the side of the stairwell:
young and fresh Jackie
a little blurry
all before fame and tragedy
which makes me think of other dead first ladies
and how people rewrite the stories of dead white women
always giving them extra room
like when Hillary Clinton praised
Nancy Reagan for her work fighting AIDS
and all the gays gasped
how easily the pieces are rearranged
Don’t speak ill of the dead, they say
Fuck that, I say
but Jackie was different
brave and beautiful
with a keen eye for fashion
which makes her an easy gay icon
like her insistence on continuing to wear
that bloody pink Chanel suit
that changed America
changed our access to information
but that picture isn’t here in this bar
where we dance miles from home
trying to forget
the tragedies of America
of our moment
of our soon-to-be history
and I think of the mother I saw recently
in Washington D.C. taking her little boy
around the First Ladies exhibit
which is mostly dishes and dresses
and how she stopped in front
of Mamie Eisenhower’s dress
turned to her son and said:
The dress is prettier than the woman.
She wasn’t very attractive, was she?
and I remember how he looked up
at Mamie’s photograph
and asked: But was she nice?
and I wanted to hug this boy
right in front of the dresses
and the dishes
and his awful mother
but all I did was stand there
and listen as she answered:
I don’t know. I didn’t know her.

Stephen S. Mills is the author of the Lambda Award–winning book He Do the Gay Man in
Different Voices and A History of the Unmarried, both from Sibling Rivalry Press. His
third book, Not Everything Thrown Starts a Revolution, is now also available from Sibling
Rivalry Press. Website: http://www.stephensmills.com/
I told my daughter the story of how my friend died. Almost ten years ago now. How he fell off a mountain in Hawaii. And though the story made me cry she wanted to hear it again and again. And again the next day. “Don’t worry mama,” she said. “He’ll just turn into soil and grow a new friend.” This is what I told her when I put the flowers she loved so much into the compost bucket when they had wilted and dried and begun to rot. “Don’t cry sweetheart,” I said. “They’ll just turn into soil and become food for new roses.”

His name meant a wreath of flowers. And though I wish that life for my daughter would be an unbreakable halo of blossoms, I tell her—There will never be another Garland.

Anisa George is the Founder and Artistic Director of George & Co. To date, she is the writer and director of several plays, documentaries, and short films, including “Animal Animal Mammal Mine” (Philadelphia International Festival of Arts), “The Seer” (nominated for Best Ensemble at the Edinburgh Fringe), and “Holden.”

i was a child greedy in my skin hungers my stomach churned by festival meat the lamb in the courtyard with its necklace of rope gone & in place of a memory pools of its blood in the dust where i played barefoot with the cousins wearing the small boys’ alallah for which i cried until mama habab sent for the tailor crisp pinstriped jalabiya & its smart striped trouser i took great care to keep it pristine & cried on days it was taken from me to wash twisting on the line like my truer body now i am the farthest i’ve ever been & the fabric tears canopy of fig trees arranged in place of mothers i face homeward & feel once again that i am longing for my uniform to return from the water that i am waiting for the animal i took care to name to wash & nuzzle its wet face into my hand i wake on festival days & reach for something to wear & find only that bright chiffon that irritating clanking of bangles i wake on festival days to the smells of charring animal & no one to accompany me to the prayer & no one to look upon my naked feet & no one to touch me at all


Katherine Bode-Lang

THE REFORMATION

“. . . the speaker in these poems achieves her own form of grace, writing directly of the female body and learning to trust her own instincts. She wrestles with self-definition . . . revealing, for readers, one woman’s path through contradiction and tradition.”

—Robin Becker

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

APR welcomes comments, criticism, and dialogue in response to work in the magazine. Authors of poems, essays, and other work will be given an opportunity to respond to letters scheduled for publication.

Letters should be sent to:
Letters to the Editor
The American Poetry Review
1906 Rittenhouse Square
Philadelphia, PA 19103-5735
Two Rolls

The only way to ferry mementos unnecessary for survival to a new place was to make like the farmer in that riddle, with his chicken, fox, and sack of grain: trip after trip, mindful of the logic things have, the fox eats the chicken eats the grain, the canoe not too steady.

Hint 1: remember always to bring something back with you, for perishables like photographs and diaries and letters should not be left alone with an appetite like time’s.

I began with baby pictures, a small me sitting in a metal crib pulling a hat off my head, a plastic roly-poly righting herself before turning back to flesh, falling over.

I wasn’t going to carry more, not that time, I hadn’t planned for the envelope of contact sheets I found, two rolls, developed in a workroom and cut by hand.

Hint 2: learn how to make room. Imagine you returned to shore to find the chicken pecking at gold shavings. Eye the water line of the canoe. Make do. What you cannot leave behind, you must carry.

My uncle who taught me the riddle said, I’ve been thinking—
Shouldn’t.
Don’t.
Leave it.
Not worth it.

My uncle who taught me the riddle said,

Let them persuade each other. To do what you want to do, work both official and unofficial channels.

The official word came down: fine.
Unofficially this was what I would have done all along: slide the envelope into my notebook, into my backpack, onto the plane under my seat, against the side of a cabinet in my bedroom.

I take them out sometimes and count the people. Didn’t you fear that it would be a discontinuity? Didn’t you fear that it would turn out not to be? I show it to nobody, that voracious amnesia about to unhinge time’s jaw.

History Says (Hegemon Remix)

I.

History is muttering in the background. Please if you are not speaking can you put yourself on mute? The conference line echoes. This isn’t my usual scene.

II.

I nibbled around the edges of history in school. Mouse bites that were almost American history, a piece on the Revolutionary War here, a crumb on the Kennedy assassination there. Even less on what was not American history. I was a straight-A student who did not know the dates for World Wars, civil wars, War of the Roses, and if you keep asking I won’t have the names of the wars either.

In college I took a bye for world history, as if without evidence I had already concluded with certainty that all tomorrows were games in which I was assured of being on the winning side. History says, those who do not know me are doomed to repeat me. [Hegemon says, the victors repeating their victory is hardly doom, so who is your warning really for?]

III.

I felt guilty, I suppose. Was I doomed? I tried a different tack, hoping to make inroads with adjacencies like the history of science and political economy, but my copy of *A People’s History of the United States* that I aspirationally acquired remained as pristine as my copy of *Wheelock’s Latin* (same impulse). I suppose I want to handicap myself, so that there can be no mistake later.

IV.

A man once said to me, “You can’t underestimate the power of history.” He was trying to explain to me the nature of European rivenness. He said something about language, culture, a litany of wars, but what I heard was, no bell is uncracked except one unseen, nor its loveliest tone unless heard from a distance. But let’s not dwell on what he said or what I heard.

V.

History says, I belong to my victors. History says, the losers are put on display for all to see. [But what do I hear? Hegemon says, don’t be ridiculous. Hegemon says, they are merely incidental to the agreed upon story of the victors.]
Now I find that I must piece things together for myself. So let us work backwards.

VI.

June was a subwoofer.

May was a half game of Go hiding some way out only if you could see that ripples are the sleeper agents of waves forming hundreds of miles offshore. April was the no-knead bread doubling in size every four hours airy with warm festering and expectation.

VII.

A calamity. // History says, wasn’t it ever.

A finale. // History says, I wouldn’t wait around for it.

VIII.

Hegemon says, the protection of power is the ability to never have to bother learning history. Hegemon says, memorize what you must for this test. I promise you’ll never have to think about this shit again.

IX.

Thirty years make up a saeculum, or perhaps it is a hundred. But if all the living members of a group of people who survived a calamity have already forgotten, live as if there weren’t anything they had to forget, then what the Etruscans believed about the length of a saeculum isn’t really the point here.

These poems are part of a chapbook manuscript entitled Emperor Penguins on the Square, which reflects on the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests on the occasion of its 30th anniversary as well as He Xiang’s childhood in Beijing and China’s development in the subsequent three decades.

He Xiang lived in Beijing as a child. Other poems from this series have appeared in Prairie Schooner, which awarded them the Strousse Poetry Award, and will be forthcoming in Bennington Review and Ploughshares.

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 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.
Singularity
for Suhanni

Even among stars she’s a dazzler
this three-year-old, doe-eyed, brown dwarf
Spunky as sparked hydrogen she orbits
the kitchen in Black Panther pjs
or revolves past, breezily ballooning
her pink princess petticoat
electrically, eclectically radiant
eyes two blazing sunspots
erupting with mischief and mirth
black hair a nebula of tangles
combed into a constellation
of rainbowed-bead-bound braids
circling a dimpled sphere of face
glowering or aglow
petulant or persuasive
She is diva-licious
She is revolution
a seed-speck of dust
layered in light and shadow
like a black pearl, light years ahead of us
She brings you one by one her galaxy
of dolls, inviting you into her world
The attraction is irresistible
The point is always her
singularity
her being celestial
leaving you eternally star-struck
as stars do

Winter Melon Soup
For the children of Noy S.H., 90

The day you buried your mother I remembered
Mrs. Noy’s winter melon soup each warm swallow
singing in the throat a small bird
flew from China to dreams America whispered
The world at war Japanese bombs exploding
on her village the son, age four, she buried You remembered
she ran with baby sister on her back Mastered
sewing patchworked English fresh-off-the-boat
the foreign words sparse in her mouth as a small bird’s
teeth Grew three children and giant gourds inside her
patch of city garden a Cantonese-American pot-pourri
Your mother unearthed a new culture You remembered
the rites—bowed thrice, burned incense, Joss paper, preserved
tradition But even in the afterlife I think she would forego
ghost money to put yin food in the mouths of her small birds
Dumplings dim sum oolong tea She stirred
worlds together her winter flesh spiced from the loveliest broth so long
ladled the Tao as nectar to her hungry hummingbirds
The day you bury your mother you remember

"WHERE POETRY COMES FROM"

The Phenomenon of Oksana Zabuzhko

ASKOLD MELNYCZUK

This is what power really is: the privilege of ignoring anything you might find distasteful.

— Oksana Zabuzhko

"Language, any language," observed the young poet Oksana Zabuzhko, "is the capital love of my life" because “nothing else has the power to synthesize music and myth, two things without which the world would be a totally unlivable place.” It’s a credo to which Zabuzhko has remained faithful across time, even as the young poet evolved into the mature fiction writer, polemicist, and activist who is without doubt the most influential literary figure in Ukraine in the last half century. “You’re not really a woman,” reads the epigraph to Zabuzhko’s Clytemnestra, immediately underscoring three central aspects of the poet’s work. First, she’s an inheritor of the Western literary tradition, grounding many of her poems in classic texts she then transforms into counter-narratives. Here Clytemnestra and Ophelia finally speak for themselves. Elsewhere, she lets us know she’s read the same fairy tales, studied the same Hebrew origin stories, the same Greek myths and Roman history, along with the British classics, as have her counterparts around the world. Moreover, she’s translated not only Sylvia Plath and Derek Walcott but also the poems of contemporaries such as Marie Howe and Lucie Brooke-Bundo into her native Ukrainian. Then there’s the epigraph’s implicit feminist subtext: Clytemnestra is indeed a woman—Helen of Troy’s sister, in fact—and she’s primed for battle. Initially it appears she might reject conventional male nostrums while heralding a much-needed assault on the old order. Blade in hand, awaiting her husband Agamemnon as he climbs the stairs, Clytemnestra imagines a different role awaiting her husband Agamemnon as he climbs the stairs, Clytemnestra imagines a different role for herself: “It would be a hundred times better to run off with some pilgrims, / Say, to Delphi, and become a priestess.” But it’s too late for that. Preparing to murder her husband, she justifies her choice: “With a single lordly gesture... / I’ll undo everything you have accomplished, / I’ll establish a new kingdom.” The promised world never arises. It remains stillborn, a kingdom of spectators from behind a glass wall.

While a similar observation could be made by many writers from beyond the pale of the traditional Western canon, each story has its own intriguing contours. In the case of Ukraine, the glass wall has lately cracked, though not in a way that could possibly please Zabuzhko or do much to enlighten her once and future readers. A well-known writer said to me recently: “I’ve heard a lot about Ukrainian corruption. What about Ukrainian culture?”

Oksana Zabuzhko was born in 1960 in Lutsk, a town whose origins date back to the 7th century. It has ties to the Kurik dynasty—one of Europe’s oldest royal houses which endured in the region for more than 700 years. Such deep history is important in understanding the role pride of place plays in Zabuzhko’s work. Her poetry, scholarship, essays, and fiction reflect a writer determined to view her subjects in their historical contexts. Because of the way history was written in the Soviet era, this has involved considerable archival excavation and led to unsettling discoveries for which Zabuzhko was better prepared than some of her peers.

During the purges of the seventies, Zabuzhko’s parents, both trained philologists, may have been on the right side of history but they were on the wrong side of Soviet authorities. At the age of five Zabuzhko found herself being babysat by a KGB agent for hours while her parents were interrogated in the next room. Surviving such an education proved excellent preparation for the years ahead.

Zabuzhko published her first poem at age ten—twenty years later than her heroine, Lesia Ukrainka. However, because her output was restricted, she wasn’t permitted to release a book of poems until the start of so-called “perestroika” in 1985. This period of “reconstruction,” during which Moscow loosened its stranglehold on its constituent republics, and which ended with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, was a literary renaissance: “In the decade since Gorbachev’s perestroika, the new Ukrainian literature has enjoyed an atmosphere of freedom it hasn’t known for centuries,” wrote the literary critic, the late Solo-mea Pavlychko, adding: “Many writers, however, experienced that freedom well before the country declared independence in 1991. Indeed, it was largely the inner freedom felt by writers and the intelligentsia that led to independence.” Writers have long played an outsized role in the evolution of Ukrainian culture. The nineteenth century poet Taras Shevchenko, born a serf, still enjoys the kind of iconic status which, these days, we reserve for religious figures, sports heroes, or celebrities: statues of him cast their shadows in practically every square in the country.

I met Oksana Zabuzhko in 1990, at a poetry conference in Kyiv a year before Ukraine declared independence. It was an exhilarating period. Every city through which I passed was erupting in demonstrations. The assemblies, known locally as “manifestations,” reflected the people’s desire to control their own destinies. I recall standing on the stairs leading up to Lviv’s Opera House early one afternoon, preparing to go in for a tour, when I heard the sounds of distant chanting. Turning around, I watched as tens of thousands of protestors poured into the square in front of the Opera House. This was Tisianemme or Tahrir Square, but with a happier ending.

The following year I invited Zabuzhko to take part in a conference on “Poetry and Opposition.” The event brought together an international cast of writers, including Walt Whitman, Charles Bukowski, William H. Johnson, Baraka, Marjorie Agosín, Dennis Brutus, Robert Pinsky, Victor Montejo, Leny Jayyushi, Bohdan Rubchak, Samuel Cornish, Sven Birkerts, William Corbett, Martín Espada, Dzvinia Orlowsky, Fred Marchant and Charles Simic. Zabuzhko subsequently returned to the US, where she is now a Fulbright Scholar and a writer-in-residence. Zabuzhko reshaped the literary landscape in Ukraine with the publication of her short “American” novel, Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex (1996). The book’s complex prose style—unusual Jamesian sentences scoring an intensity Plath would have seconded—with its blunt yet sophisticated sensuality, its assertively feminist slant, and a ferreting intelligence, remained a best-seller in Ukraine for over a decade and has been translated into sixteen languages. Its subject is the trauma inflicted by totalitarian systems as it manifests in an intimate relationship. As the narrator is an intellectual, she allows herself to speculate on the nature of that trauma. A chapter from the book, translated by Halya Hryn, was published in April in 2001. The entire novel, in Hryn’s pitch-perfect rendition, finally appeared in 2011. In the last pages its heroine, who has managed to stave off the impulse to suicide, imagines herself making an announcement on the flight from the US back to Kyiv:

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have created a wonderful world, and please accept on this occasion, sincere greet-
ings from US Air, and from CNN, and from the CIA, and the Uruguay drug cartel, and from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, and from the millions of killers in all the prisons of the world as well as the tens of millions still at large, and from the five thousand Sandejo children born of rape, who will, after all, grow up some day, and—exultant and upward, brave new world, and that actually is all I wanted to say, thank you for your attention, ladies and gentlemen, have a good flight."

Then, in 2009, Zabuzhko published an even more remarkable and ambitious novel, this time impressively translated by Nina Shevchuk Murray. The Memory of Abandoned Secrets leads readers back through the labyrinth of the last century’s extreme political and personal dramas, from today’s post-9/11 landscape to the Second World War. While the action in the novel takes place in Ukraine, its subject is global and its insights universal. Reading Zabuzhko on what took place in the US after September 11, one wonders how a “stranger” can know so much about us, and can understand so clearly what has happened to our shriveled democracy: “(A)ll talk about liberal democracy, or the Partnership, or whatever’s all crap, forget it. The politics of today is an amalgamation of the experience of twentieth century superpowers and the experience of the marketplace, of advertising. An amazingly powerful combination, if you know how to use it.”

Zabuzhko the novelist is an acute and unspiring chronicler of the material world. Here’s how she describes one of the dubious characters who populate this richly peopled book: “He is capacious and amiable like a shaved, whiskerless walrus, and his breathing is a bit heavy and irregular, as happens to well-nourished men past their prime: an early shortness of breath that, if you’re not used to it, might be taken for erotic arousal.” And yet she does more than pin her subjects to their bodies: she also endows them with minds.

In one of the book’s most illuminating passages, Daryna, the main character, meets with a former historian now a newly minted oligarch named Vadym. Sitting in a restaurant Vadym owns, the pair engage in the kind of wide-ranging conversation readers expect from Eastern European writers—and of a sort that’s generally frowned on by Western critics, with their stiffing, right-freighted fetishization of the quotidian—as though that were not the stuffing and filler of most Western fiction over the last century, as though an engagement with the realm of ideas were somehow an insult to the inescapable mundane, rather than a complementary and necessary reflection of a common human impulse, our capacity for speculating about ideas, of abstracting from immediate experience, of dreaming in words. (Isn’t that what abstraction is? Language dreaming . . .) The pair’s sprawling conversation ranges from a discussion of ice cream to imported GMO potatoes injected with scorpion genes to realpolitik. At one point, Vadym observes that “you can’t draw a boundary anymore between what you call reality and what’s been manufactured . . . realities that have been manufactured by people . . .” Here Vadym echoes Donald Runnfeldt’s much quoted remark: “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously, as you will— we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out.” Pointing out one difference between the US and Russia, Vadym observes: “The White House announced that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction—and everyone believed it. And never mind that they still haven’t found those weapons—and, most likely, won’t. They’ll be morons, of course, if they don’t; if it were the Russians, they would have planted some right away, and then no one would ever dig up what actually happened. There you have your reality. . . .”

In the fall of 2013 I began receiving emails from Oksana warning me things were heating up in Ukraine. Its president, Viktor Yanukovych, had decided not to sign an association agreement with the European Union and was on the verge of formalizing closer ties with Russia. Oksana said the threat of civil strife was real. She also mentioned that Russia had managed to influence a number of politicians across Europe and was extending its influence into the US. This was the first I’d heard of what’s come to be known as the “hybrid war”—in which propaganda plays a more important part than conventional weapons. I was at the time preoccupied with recording the corruption of my own country in the Middle East. I’d traveled to Lebanon and Syria a few years before and had seen some of the damage inflicted by our interventions on the region’s citizens, interventions which have led to the refugee crises presently overwhelming parts of southern Europe even while we behave as if the tragedy, affecting millions and sure to be felt for generations, has nothing to do with us.

At first I dismissed her anxieties, but as the crowds in Kyiv’s Independence Square (which became known as EuroMaidan on Twitter) swelled, and the administration turned to violence to contain the protesters, the situation became impossible to ignore. Eventually nearly a million citizens crowded the city. President Yanukovych and his entourage were ultimately forced to flee to Russia.

The People’s Rebellion succeeded in a way similar protests throughout the Middle East had not. Zabuzhko herself was a regular on the front lines and in the five years since has played an active role in shoring up the free-doms for which over a hundred men and women gave their lives. Soon after the protests ended, Russia annexed Crimea and began a war on Ukraine’s eastern border which has thus far left some 18,000 people dead and nearly a million displaced.

The glass wall Zabuzhko confronted, while cracked, stands even today. The situation recently prompted the Soviet-born British journalist Peter Pomerantsev to observe in the New York Review of Books that neither the London Review of Books nor the New York Review of Books has ever taken notice of Ukrainian writers, despite numerous opportunities over the years. Like most walls, this one is built of ignorance and nurtured by propaganda. A better-informed left-leaning intellectual community in the US might have been expected to support an indigenous people’s efforts to preserve their culture and language. Instead, they took as fact versions of cultural history chronicled by Russian-speaking emigrés, whether the emigrés themselves were from Ukraine or Russia. This ignorance often manifested as scorn. Any number of writers I know referred to Ukraine having only a “peasant culture”—as though that in itself was somehow shameful. Or accurate. The notion of Ukraine possessing a contiguous yet distinct literature and history undermined the carefully cultivated image of a monolithic Russian culture as representative of the variety and interests of the citizens of the Soviet Union. That was never the case and all the republics paid a heavy price for their “solidarity” with Moscow. As historian Sethu Plokhy points out: “Since the fall of the USSR, the Russian nation-building project has switched its focus to the idea of forming a single Russian nation not divided into branches and unifying the Eastern Slavs on the basis of the Russian language and culture. Ukraine has become the first testing ground for this model outside the Russian Federation.”

"Oh yes, the neighbor’s daughter Gave birth—a boy, a bit overdue. He had hair and teeth Already, and could be a mutant Because yesterday, only nine days old, he shouted, ‘Turn off the sky!’ He hasn’t said a word sinc. Otherwise, he’s healthy.

In “The Conductor of the Last Candle,” the speaker imagines herself attending a symphony in which she alone witnesses a conductor leading an orchestra composed of lit candles: “No one sees them but me. These flames the candelabra are loaded with like guns with bullets.” She plays the concert to its end. It’s like a conversation the soul—or, consciousness—might have with itself, on emerging from Plato’s cave long enough to recognize the paradox of consciousness itself. The very word “Ukraine,” often translated as “borderland,” has in the past generated considerable controversy. Can a nation that describes itself as a borderland really be a country? (But what to make of the Netherlands, which has recently scotched “Holland” from its self-identification?) In “A Definition of Poetry” the poet imagines her own death: “I know I will die a difficult death / Like anyone who loves the precise music of her own body.” As her soul leaves her body, the writer in her refuses to miss this rare opportunity:

"Stop!" it screams, escaping, On the dazzling borderline Between two worlds— "Stop, wait. My God, at last. Look, here’s where poetry comes from!" Fingers twitching for the ballpoint, Cowering cold, becoming not mine.

The liminal, ill-defined spaces, the amorphous regions are precisely the territory where imagination flourishes. They give us room in which to shape and create new selves as fully our own as they allow. Adashol Melnychuk has published ten books, including four novels. He is the founding editor of Agua and Arowsworth Press.

Adashol Melnychuk has published ten books, including four novels. He is the founding editor of Agua and Arowsworth Press.
The Trees of Kraków

I was naked in bed, where I panic less, reading, and wanting to go somewhere fun next summer, because fun will help us age.

Let us go to Kraków together, since I know a little Polish, I know the word “cupcake” in Polish is babeczka—babeczka, I say to my little toe. In Kraków, I read, “The City Council has proposed a ‘renewal’ of the trees surrounding the Błonia by removing all of them at once.”

What will become of the sparrows of Kraków? The sparrows stumble about the Błonia as the accountants of Kraków pedal furiously to the mortuary, elbows wide. The alphabetical schoolgirls of Kraków line up to visit the next monument, and the Vistula River changes its mind again. The traffic cops of Kraków wave on, wave on.

Love, lie next to me, I am sorry I am so cuckoo with the clock. Let us plan a trip to Kraków, before the City Council kills us all.

Love, in the oven of my chest, I have baked a cupcake, babeczka, take a bite.

Breakfast

It’s not just sentimental, no, no, no . . .
— Otis Redding

Once there was a blueberry in a bowl of granola. The bowl was Melamine, the table was wood, the kitchen was linoleum and metal and wood, and the house was brick and cedar and aluminum and wood, and the roofing material in the shingles was fire-rated Class A, don’t worry.

There were trees: hawthorns and one river birch. There were azaleas and a Lindley’s Butterfly Bush. The sky was 78% nitrogen and 21% oxygen, with a trace of argon gas and ice in crystals.

Space was an almost perfect vacuum, with a few hydrogen atoms per cubic meter. Maybe the blueberry and one hydrogen atom were cousins, cosmically and/or metaphysically. The spoon that held up the blueberry was aluminum, the shine a little worn, and the blueberry was violet in a gradient, a tad puckered, still with a bit of stem.

Today, class, we will all be astronauts. We’ll begin with breakfast, and then we’ll search the universe for tenderness.

Alan Michael Parker is the author of nine collections of poetry, including The Age of Discovery, just out from Tupelo Press, and four novels. He is the recipient of three Pushcart Prizes, three Randall Jarrell Poetry Awards, the Fineline Prize, the Brockman-Campbell Book Award, and the North Carolina Book Award. He holds the Houckes Chair in English at Davidson College.
Entreaty Now
after Joanna Klink, for Mary Oliver

Go out barefoot to the car for what you left,
for what you didn’t have enough
hands to hold.
Go out as a soft offering for gravel.
As a practice swing at walking
farther and farther from the comforter,
from the sighing waiting body
you hold when you want to,
from the steady windowpane shadow
cast by a night so bright
even minor constellations get to speak light.
They are furnace-ready pilot lights
when the rest of the power’s gone out.
They are all the failed matches
that couldn’t get the cigarette lit,
a persistent sign to go back inside of your life.
To make each night a ripe stone fruit.
To split and pull the pit from it.
To bite the flesh of rest and let it drip.
And when you have made a mess
of yourself, to know there were rows of orchard
planted in you before any other knowing.
We are daylight animals.
We still confuse the porch light
with something that could burn us.
How much is enough quiet for you,
a bucket of quiet a highway a tundra.
The brownstone block and its bus line.
And its cloistered cement backyards,
the pace at which gentle weeds grow them green.
Weeks of absence loud with countdown.
Was the daytime grocery quiet enough,
linoleum enough? Was the exam room
a little chilly when the nurse left you
alone with yourself? How often
you awaken screens at a phantom sound of love.
The refrigerator breathing to you in the night.
Our blueprint plans are drawn and unbuilt and soundless.
And what are we to do?
Here, a life—
a sudden and short rain. Too quiet
and you won’t be certain it was real.
Let go of the compass.
It never had answers.
Let the paper drop to your feet.
Go now.
Run downhill toward the creek,
run toward the thing that you think
will mean a happiness without hesitation.
Feel the swift force of your own mass
behind decision. And legs churning,
tall grasses stinging against skin,
iron taste in your mouth from how
your heart pounds. There is a thrill
in the fear of tripping at this speed,
of grass becoming sidewalk, of coming up bloodied.
You don’t have to be good at this,
at anything.
You have to run headlong into this life, pumping,
hair wild, sweat wild, emptying your pockets as you go.

Rewinding the Lesbian Sex Scene on a Flight from Denver

There were years I feigned sleep to close the eyes of desire.
Years I tried to see truth only in periphery,
years I tried to look anywhere else.

The entangled couple beside me,
their sock feet,
the cloud
captured in their small view
of the open sky
wisping itself apart.

There were years I stayed a satellite far above the earth.
I am still looking over my shoulder
for whoever whispered my shame to me.
I am watching them walk down the aisle,
I am trying to keep my elbows and knees
out of their way.
I am reclining my seat every inch
of unconfinement
it will yield.

Which is not much.
So I am held close to this reflection.
Spit slick lips and
hands in hair and
reaching inside and
what I know well—
head out of the frame.

My gaze held unbroken,
by their bodies.

Who said you can’t drag your finger back across the screen of what you want?
Who said you can’t do it over again? And again?
Who said you can’t ask for more?
Who guilted my fingerprints into anything but a caress
smudged across our surface?

Whoever you are—whoever you were—look over my shoulder.
Watch me fall in love, seeing myself.
In economy, in the thin air,
seatbelt at my waist
like I am something
to protect for this duration,
like her hands on my hips,
pulling.

Alicia Mountain is a lesbian poet and scholar based in New York. Her debut collection, High Ground Coward (Iowa, 2018), won the Iowa Poetry Prize. She is the 2020–2021 Artist in Residence at the University of Central Oklahoma.
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A PERSONAL HISTORY OF BREATHING

JOY PRIEST

We woke to life in the 80s. The air dying from industry & industry dying. Train brakes groaning to a stop & that singular scent of horses, their muscular lather & manure moving down river to Mississippi. Our grandfathers chain-smoked Viceroy’s in the house & we developed asthma before vocabulary, read books & held our breath, spelled but didn’t speak. In our bodies, humidity thickened into an argument with speech. When we joined our fathers’ households they trashed our plastic bags packed tight with medicine bottles & inhalers curated over the years by our mothers, who smothered us our fathers said, mumbling something under their breath about being a man. We were daughters. We were Black & so, sons too. They vowed to make us stronger, big-lunged, lit our cigarettes, handed us grip-pleated paper bags in place of pills. In the 90s springtime, we suffered through neon particles of pollen suctioned film-like to all blooming surfaces, innocuous in natural purpose, but perverted by a chemical monopoly modifying plant sex & the work of bees—we became allergic to apples because we were allergic to apple trees. At the plant our fathers were talking their coworkers out of the ku klux klan while we hooped on our still-segregated basketball teams, outgrowing childhood over an iron-rimmed summer at parks oxidized to rust. At 14 we went to work at drive-thru windows, fried batter air settling in our hair. Black n’ Mild smoke breaks freaked to extend time. & some of us went off to college with polluted memories. & some of us ended up at the school clinic with anxiety & traumatic stress, acid reflux & lactose intolerance, the nurses said was genetic, we didn’t have the phrase environmental racism yet. & sometimes we just forgot to breathe or realized we’d been holding our breath. We tried kombucha & herbal teas, yoga & meditation, signed up for classes with suburban moms on Xanax & Ambien & we acted brand new. Until a man hawking cigarettes, second shift side-hustling like our fathers, stopped breathing on a sidewalk. A man who talked to plants like our fathers stopped breathing in this state-sanctioned chokehold. & we found ourselves pacing the brainyard on a cocaine flight unable to locate our lungs, left arms going numb saying, this is it this is it with our heartbeats running out, leaping & whimpering & lying down long-nosed in the grass, huffing, panting out. The train of our childhood chugging backward to a slow stop in our minds, come to take us to the afterlife. Its ghostly porters, mask-less, finally, leaning over us with our father’s faces, reaching toward us with a bag to breathe into. The trail of white buttons down their uniforms like a blinding current peeking through.

Joy Priest is the author of Horsepower (Pitt Poetry Series, 2020), winner of the Donald Hall Prize for Poetry. She has received support from The Frost Place, The Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference, and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, where she was a 2019–2020 Fellow in Poetry.

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