“As soon as we subscribe to a hierarchy, we circumscribe ourselves within a value system. This is perhaps the great conundrum of art—once we define a term, we impose a limit, thereby inviting both orthodoxy and transgression. Our concept of ‘art’ or ‘poem’ or ‘novel’ is, then, always in flux, and I think we’d agree that this is how art renews itself—through those who dare to challenge those terms. The making of art, and the evaluation of it, is always an act of self-definition.”

—KITANO, p. 37
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— Los Angeles Review of Books

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Canisia Lubrin’s The Dyzgraphist (McClelland & Stewart, Penguin Random House)
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Denise Riley’s Say Something Back & Time Lived. Without Its Flow (NYRB/POETS)
Fiona Sze-Lorrain’s Rain in Plural (Princeton Press)
John Elizabeth Stintzi’s Junebut (House of Anansi)
Serhiy Zhadan’s A New Orthography (Lost Horse Press)
Beggars and Choosers

“Ah Carl, while you are not safe, I am not safe.” —Ginsberg

I admit that I don’t really know how the internet works or the economy and when the newspaper says that the body of government is consolidating debt to make room for more credit, it sounds like a divorce or like when in-laws move in, this “making room,” the language of spatial necessity escaping me.

I’m learning a lot about lungs in the pandemic: glass opacity, x-rays of snow, organs embracing like adjacent continents in a bad winter. Mutual downfall. When I lived in Shanghai, I performed a ritual of water to ward off a hoax or a curse or the dead of heart.

I needed an amulet and bought an expensive piece of jade because I was in China and I was desperate and unimaginative. It was heavy, easily chipped.

I poured water into one glass and out of another.

I spoke to the horizontal incestuous gods—Apollo, Artemis, Athena.

I wished good things for you though now, a year later, I want evidence that you, too, suffered, generosity run dry or maybe wasn’t really there. Under lockdown, you get so lonely that you begin to personify furniture, and send me a video of your body dancing with a ladder, its long shadow cast wide against you. I hate your audacious whimsy, bright as a smashing orange against the sirens’ howl.

For every sick set of lungs speeding by, your feet quicken around the six-foot totem and I break, envious of the inanimate, its stoic presence, longing for any entanglement with your form.

The Poet and the Nurse

A few days before it all unfolded in NYC, a doctor was feeling my left breast and we made jokes until we were not joking.

Go now, she said, because now was all well, that doesn’t sound very sexy because it wasn’t. I went home and thought about my rotting chest. My prophetic breast.

A week later, that same doctor who sent me downtown is closing her practice.

I dig my cast of macabre angels, one foot in the grave, another on the internet. When my sister calls me from Texas after a long shift, I play piano for her to forget her day, but I muddle keys. They won’t behave. She doesn’t mind.

My sister bathed and bagged the dead.

She is not tortured by a bad melody, instead, she’d prefer pain not be glamorous or candlelit or ironic or theater. She knows that not everything holy has to hurt or cohere.

Autumn in New York, 2020

In Central Park, yellow leaves sink by the hundreds like orphan starfish in the pond, like mummies, soft and eternal. They stare straight up as we cross a crowded bridge. Once upon a today, all land became sea and we, an aquarium of the unclaimed.

My walk through this city is a riptide. I hallucinate orcas and swim parallel to the rivers. Somedays, I hustle from the Hudson to the East, kick the fussed seagrass dying in rectangular plots. The deadest blocks of Manhattan are where sandwich chains used to glow neon near the transit stations, places where nothing happened except dread or anticipation or return.

Once upon a today, the city chewed herself like a dog eating at its own leash, anchored to a desolate house. I count each patch of park as I move south and do a tour of the Lower East Side. I fall in love with a rose building that was once a department store where they sold velvet. And next to it, a German fabric shop that sewed uniforms for those humans this country enslaved.

Once upon a summer, I only read Etheridge Knight instead, she’d prefer pain not be
glamorous or candlelit or ironic or theater. She knows that not everything holy has to hurt or cohere.

Love Poem

Sometimes, I wonder if I would know a beautiful thing if I saw it. So often, I was miserable when I was young, even in California with the ocean close and fat seals munching flatfish, tonguing urchins in their molas, sunning themselves pink by the sandy primrose. I ignored the whistle of the rock-faced mountain and her chorus of dry hills, walked past the blazing stars and lemons in dramatic ripe. I was so sad out west. The truth is I am most exquisite on the east coast, meaning I am in rhythm.

I do not track the world by beauty but joy. That first bite
into the soft carrot of tagine stew while a storm wailed over the East River. The misfit raccoon bouncing on trash bins in Central Park after we saw a Japanese play. We almost crashed a wedding that night at the Boathouse but lost our nerve. We were not dressed for the caper, but even this felt like rogue joy. Yes. It was joy, wasn’t it? Even if it was ugly, it was joy.

Magical Realism in America

for Eleutherius “Teddy” D’Souza

We made our childhood tree a kitchen and a real estate office, a karate dojo and a radio station. We rubbed the chives into pine needles and baked them until they ran copper under the Pennsylvanian sun.

At night in the moonshine, my grandfather steers his balcony from India to America and crosses two oceans to descend to the land of this tree. He is tall, and his gait, slow and methodical, looks as if he’s playing chess with air. He packs plastic cards in his pocket and a note from my grandmother to instruct me on my smart mouth. I offer him our onion pines, our scallion trees. He puts down a three of hearts and kisses Judith atop her head.

I tell him all the bad things I will do when I am older and he sits, bony knees pointing, one east, one west. Remember the robin eggs, he asks and I am ashamed. I had taken them inside and tried to hatch them with a hair dryer. Blue, spotted oval planets. I held that dryer like a gun. And when the yolk slipped through the crack, I was devastated. Listen, I hate poems about birds and grandparents and childhood friends.

I hate poems about birds and grandparents and childhood friends almost as much as I hate poems that break the fourth wall like a cheeky high school play. It’s just too easy. But my grandfather’s grave is in Goa and now Judith has two kids so they must be summoned somehow when I am terrible. The three of us buried those sibling shells under our childhood tree, the canopy just long enough to cover my shame. No. The poem can’t end here. I’m sure he parted the branches and let in daylight. Even sour light, he might say, is light.

Megan Fernandes is a South Asian American writer living in New York City. Her work has been published in The New Yorker, Tin House, Ploughshares, and Denver Quarterly, among others. She is the author of The Kingdom and After (Tightrope Books, 2015). Her second book of poetry, Good Boys, was a finalist for the Kundiman Book Prize (2018), the Saturnalia Book Prize (2018), and was published with Tin House Books in 2020.
At the End of Our Marriage, in the Backyard

We’ve let the lawn go to wild violets and dandelions, to crabgrass, to clover bending under the weight of so many honeybees, our children can’t even run barefoot. We do nothing, letting ivy snarl around the downspouts and air conditioner, letting milkweed grow and float its white feathers. We do nothing and call it something—as if this wilding were intentional. If there is honey, I tell myself, we are to thank. All summer the children must wear shoes. We sit out back while they crouch in the clover, watching the bees, calling out when they see sunny crumbs of pollen on their legs. Maybe no one will be stung. Late in the season, we sit ankle-deep in weeds and flowers. In weeds we call flowers.

Small Blue Town

I built a small blue town inside myself—
blue chapel, blue steeple, blue houses, blue storefronts, blue school. A scale model of a place I’ve never lived lives in me. Always in shadow, the dark blue of deep shade—blue rooftops, blue windows, blue doors. Inside, you can see it: everything so steeped in shade, it’s soaked to the bone. Blue streets, blue lawns, blue barns in the blue hills surrounding. The sun never thinks to rise, to rinse clear with its light the small blue town.


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After many years, Gander recently rediscovered the original cassette tapes of this interview, which took place at his home with CD Wright in Rhode Island, June 11, 1995

FORREST GANDER
You've lived all over the world and there are abundant references in your work to foreign geographies and names and towns. I wonder what you learned as a poet from living in Paris, Denmark, and Greece? Are there different things that you picked up in different places that became useful to you as a poet?

JACK GILBERT
I don't think it's so much the places as what happened to me in the places.

FG
One of the places that's come up in the recent book that I know the least about is Denmark. When was that? There's an aura you have with a Danish woman who's nursing . . .

JG
Oh, that's in Copenhagen.

FG
Yes.

JG
You know, for me, the poem is about Infidelity. I'm not trying to suggest it. I'm not against it. But what interests me is that we have so little vocabulary about love. I don't just mean words. I mean concepts, models. What I like about the poem is I think it's about love, but it has a special texture to it that I wanted to capture. I'm not interested in morality, whether it's to be praised or not to be praised.

You know, I don't like traveling.

FG
No?

JG
No! It's a lot of work and I really don't go places for joy. I don't want to sit in the kafenio in Greece or dance in the tavernas packed with women from the American suburbs. I hope they have a great deal of fun, but that's not why I go. I go to use places.

FG
That's what I was hoping you would tell me about. How did certain places become useful to you as a poet? You've lived in a lot of different places and I wonder.

JG
The problem is—the problem in poetry—if you keep mentioning places it sounds . . . it's kind of annoying when people start dropping names, dropping countries. When I was in Kathmandu . . . All my life I was afraid of death. Not so much the death of being extinguished, but I was always terrified that I would die before I did the things that were important to me. I used to pray, I know you will kill me, eventually, even soon, but let me fall in love first. The second wish was, Don't let me die a virgin. [laughter]

FG
I imagine that one got resolved very quickly.

JG
You know, I was so afraid of death, I guess since the time I was twelve or fourteen, something like that, I used to make up lists of what I wanted to do before it was too late. As a matter of fact, by the time I finished coming around the world in 1976, I'd fulfilled every childhood dream I ever had. I spent two years sitting in a little tower—you know how when you're nine years old, you want to live in a tower? Well, I lived in a tower in the Haight-Ashbury, a huge house which somebody I know had kind of salvaged during the Haight-Ashbury days. It was so crazy there that the owner, a Swedish guy, just abandoned hope and left, went back to Sweden. It must have had 32 rooms or something like that [chuckles]. It was a double apartment house, and at the top there was a little turret, which was part of my room. I had another room for my study, and I sat up in the turret for two years trying to figure out what there was to want for an adult, because I wasn't much interested in having a lot of fun. I'd have a lot of fun in my life. But when it comes to doing what you don't, now, you may not have a chance to do it later. It's like photographers say, Take the picture now. If you can make a better picture when the sun's in a different place, do it when you come down the hill, but take this picture now.

I wanted to find out what there was for me—not what other people wanted. There were really important things for me to do that I hadn't done. Because I'd done a lot of things, not necessarily colorful things, but all the things that I'd wanted to do up until then, big and small. And I couldn't think of any more! I spent two years up in that turret trying to figure out what were the things I still needed in my life. My list was mostly like when you're a kid and you dream of being a poet in Paris—broke, the cuffs of your jacket fraying—and your heart goes boom boom boom inside and you get short of breath thinking about it. But what are the dreams for adults that make your heart do that? I guess a lot of people want money or power or something. Power's never been interesting to me. And I've been a little famous. When I was fourteen years old in Pittsburgh, growing up, I remember I once sent in a question for the Quiz Kids [a radio and TV series in the 1940s and 50s] and they read my name on the air, and I threw myself out of bed! I liked that stuff, I like being famous, I like being stopped on the street. It's really nice, it's fun. Because everybody's had the dream of walking through Greenwich Village some night, everyone else has gone home, there's soft rain falling, it's June, and there's a misty quality to everything like in a cheap novel. And a beautiful woman comes along and she stops, looks at you, and she says, “You're Jack Gilbert, aren't you?” And you say shyly—breathlessly—“Yes.” And she says, “Can I have your autograph?” That's lovely. Everybody should have that. When my book was first published, I used to sleep with it. [Forrest laughs]

JG
I'd wake up with it in my arms. And I think if every writer doesn't sometime along the way have his first book and feel the 14-year-old still in him who had all those dreams, it's a pity. At that time, though, in the tower, I couldn't. And I was mad because I think I'm very intelligent and imaginative and creative, but in two years I couldn't think what there was to have, or really to want. I had no responsibilities. I began a relationship with Michiko, but she didn't want to get married. She ran a language school, so I didn't have to take care of her. I didn't have a parent to take care of. I didn't have medical problems, I didn't have any money. But I could choose to have anything I wanted. I thought I could even go back to being famous, a little bit anyhow. Though I didn't really want that. I finally figured out why I couldn't think of it.

There were no models! Nobody used to live long enough to dream for adults. Everybody died. Life expectancy was 26 in Shakespeare's time, 35 in the Victorian age. Dreamers were—if you lasted, you became a kind of wise man living in a manor in black clothes. Or a woman in black clothes, her hair in a bun on her neck, shuffling around. Even to this day we have very few models . . . We don't know anything about adult love. I mean passionate, romantic love.

But somebody is going to have a vision of how to live as adults. And I think that's one of the things I'd like to do with poetry. And novels. I'd like to write about what's really important emotionally for real adults. Not adults trying to stay young and all that stuff.

FG
Well, that connects to the fact that you've managed to live on very little money for long periods of time. I wonder what the merits and demerits of working for money were for you. Which jobs, if any, were satisfying, and what did you gain and lose by giving up the traditional paradigm of job and family?

JG
Well, first of all, my dream as a kid, I didn't really dream of being rich or powerful or safe. Or of cars or ships, or stuff like that—owning stuff. I don't know, maybe it's natural to want those things, but I remember way, way back, I wanted to own myself. If I could just be allowed to have my days for myself, to do what I wanted with them—that's what I wanted. In order to do that, you can't have children. You can't have expensive habits like wanting an Infiniti—whatever those cars are. You can't want to do drugs, you can't afford it. You can't want. Compassion.

FG
And what do you gain by owning yourself?

JG
Owning yourself! You have your days. You don't have to barter them, you don't have to trade them in to get the money to live like—what? You know, if you don't have responsibilities, if you don't have parents to take care of, you don't have to pay the mortgage . . . I could teach for two semesters, even teach for one semester, and retire for five years. I did that for decades. But you have to have very simple desires. And it's not enough just to want to. It's like dieting. Dieting, as far as I can gather, doesn't work if it's hard to do, if all the time you're just desperately hungry and wanting food. You have to learn a different kind of diet. The same thing with living. If you feel that you're really, you know, just fighting all the time, and you want all this stuff that you're denying yourself, I don't think it works. I don't really mind that I don't have much money, as long as I don't have to ask anybody for anything.

FG
And family? Do you feel a loss about that?

JG
No. I never really wanted children, because I was romantic.

FG
Uh-huh.

JG
If I had children, I'd turn into just a terrible, bourgeois person. I'd worry if my kid had shoes or power or something. Power's never been interesting to me.

FG
And family? Do you feel a loss about that?

JG
No, I never really wanted children, because I was romantic.
So it's not really hard. I was walking through North Beach a while back, way after the Beat thing, and I ran into Herbert Gold, the novelist, who I don't know well, but whom I'd known a little for a long time—and it was a nice summer night, and he came over and he said hello. And I said hello, and I introduced Linda [Gregg]. And he said, "I just came over because I wanted to tell you how much I admire the poems you have in this issue of the APR, the ones about living in Greece." And I said, "Thank you." And he said, "So it's impressive that you have that courage, that you'd put yourself through that, that you have that kind of drive that you're willing to live that way. And I was kind of confused until I realized what he was saying, and I said, "But, Herb, you don't understand!" He said, "No, I understand that—without electricity, no electric lights, no running water, no real toilet, walking miles and miles to get a loaf of bread. I think that's really heroic almost." And I said, "But, Herb, those are poems of happiness! They're not poems of sort of pride in the fact that I could live a monkey's life. I love it out there!"

If it wasn't about deprivation.

No! When Michiko and I were together, and she was coming to spend a summer in Greece, I rented a villa! It was an old beat-up villa, it didn't cost much, I think it was $800 for six months or something like that. It had electricity. And it had running water, which made me a little sad! Because I used to love pulling up the water, you know, just before the sun came up. For me living that way up in the fields or out in the mountains, it gives me the feeling that I could almost touch reality. Like the absolute is just an eighth of an inch beyond my fingertips. I love that feeling. These are not symbols, they're not metaphors. The walks get hot, the clouds are white in the sky. It's wonderful. I wouldn't have allowed anybody else to live like that. I think other people might be miserable, but I yearn for that plain life.

I travel to these other places because I can find what I want. I go to Greece because, it's embarrassing to say these things, but I feel in Greece, in a certain sense, there are gods in the earth. I don't believe in "The Goddess" business—those Joseph Campbell ideas of myth—but in something else. I like the earth. I like being out there and kind of listening for it, walking around in the middle of night, in the moonlight. I shouldn't say that way because it sounds too colorful, but that's how my life is. I'm not colorful, I'm not being colorful. I do what I do because I like it! And if it weren't colorful, if it were stupid and boring—which most people would find my life—that's fine with me, because this is the life I want. I'm not going to live my life for anybody else. I don't ask them. I would never suggest they try to live that life. But I'm going to live that way.

Readers have remarked that your poems are often constructed from a simple vocabulary, which makes the poems sound very much like "keelhauls" ("keelhaul" is a word that is generally used to refer to a car). I'm interested in how you combine the language of the plain language, the Anglo-Saxon language, a language that doesn't preen. On the other hand, I'm in love with language. I'm in love with making the language show up. [laughter] And the words you mentioned: I don't want to load the poem with wonderful, obtuse words or with tap-dancing kinds of flourishes. I really want the poems to mean. For me, poetry is saying something to someone about something that matters, and in a way that they don't just take in logically. I'm interested in poetry communicating felt knowledge, so that the reader experiences what I'm talking about. After they've experienced the subject or the emotion or whatever, then they can say, "Well, yeah, but no thanks." But I want them to experience. That's what the arts are about. We have essays for lectures.

I love language. My earliest influences probably were them, and still, when I read them, I'm fascinated with the idea of making something out of nothing. When I was a kid I loved books like Robinson Crusoe or Swapsy Family Robinson or those books where you come to a bare island and the guy can just make a world there, make a life there. It's the same thing with poetry. I like to take that simple language—and change a person's life. Not by lecturing and telling them to be good or not good or to have sex or not have sex. I'm interested in the things after you get past the beginning. It's like with chess: I'm no good at teaching how the chess pieces move. It's good that some people can teach that.

I'm interested in poetry dealing with things on a graduate level, on a far-after-graduate-school level. All these standard things about love and death and loneliness and all those things. We don't know much about them, and I would like to write about them, and I would like to make models for them. I don't have to bear witness to what I've known. When people tell me romantic love is an adolescent illusion, I know two things. I know they don't have a record, they haven't been there. Oh, they've had crushes on girls in high school and they think that's what I'm talking about. I can say it's true because I have known Gianna [Gelman] or Linda [Gregg] or Michiko [Nogami].

How dare they, with their small emotional lives, sitting always in some kind of university, trying for full professorship, how dare they tell me about love? Or how dare the therapists, the psychiatrists tell me about love? They've been married since they were in graduate school! They had an affair with one woman before they met their wife. They had two affairs since, early in their practice. What do they know? Are they going to tell me about love? What are their credentials? You could talk to them, and they're kind of scared of the whole subject. They say love is repairing the marriage so they can go on and take care of their kids or love is being reasonable.

You know the world's not made like that. You have to grow up. You're talking about one of the two greatest things anyone will ever experience in a lifetime. I'm not talking about thrills, I'm not talking about, you know, you meet somebody on a vacation and you go to cloud-cuckoo-land for a while. I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about things that harrow the heart. Those people don't have standing in my eyes. They have to know more before they're qualified to have an opinion. They can't make it up out of books. It's like making up what humor is out of books. You ever read one of those books?

Let me ask you a question about poems and technique. Some of your poems are written in verse, economical fragments. "Before Morning in Perugia," for instance. Others seem to be almost blank verse in their syntax and vocabulary of your poems. In "Burnings and Fathering: Accounts of My Country" with its closing lines: "Pressure of that terrible intolerance / gets brandy in the welter. Such honey of that heavy rider." That incredible language. Or the strange images in "Pewter"—"Shrines flying under the lake. / Metaphysical sunglides / in the moonlight. / Yes, my king." What is the value of strangeness and how does clarity—a value that we've talked about in your work—does it accommodate such strangenesses?

I don't think I've ever understood. I don't think people who are just counting syllables still think that. I mean they might be making a poem, and they get good at it, and they just change the label for the next poem. So, this is a poem about injustice in Botswana, or this is a poem about how beautiful the trees are this autumn, but they're using the same mechanism for making the poem. I mean they may go from a villanelle to a sonnet, but it's still the same way for making the poem. That's a system. In traditional form or not. It's one of the things that sort of surprises me about recognition. You know, I have no complaints about that. I've gotten more rewards from my poetry than I've earned. And I've neglected my poetry more than I've earned. And I've neglected my career, so I have nothing to complain about. I feel blessed with what's happened with my poetry and I want to continue to be allowed to write it on my terms. But I'm crazy about poetry and I'm crazy about the craft of poetry. I don't understand about that. I've gotten more rewards from my poetry than I've earned. And I've neglected my career, so I have nothing to complain about. I feel blessed with what's happened with my poetry and I want to continue to be allowed to write it on my terms. But I'm crazy about poetry and I'm crazy about the craft of poetry. I don't understand what that means. I love craft, I feel responsible to the poem and its content. I feel responsible towards poetry. But craft is for me! [laughter]

I don't understand those people who are just counting syllables and then getting good at it, or making the thing efficient. It's strange to me, and I've always been surprised. I've had wonderful reviews and I'm very grateful for them, but almost never has anybody ever written anything about strategy. I really think my books are like museums of strategy. New inventions. I'm not objecting, I have nothing to object about, but I'm just puzzled why nobody notices.

There's a kind of strangeness that interests you, though.

I'm not interested in strangeness. I'm interested in effectiveness. I'm like Dr. Johnson in that I want what works. I don't like curtsying to the reader. That's not my aim in poetry. I want to do to the reader what I want to do, and I don't want to do it with a lot of arm motion, a big wind-up. I just want to throw the ball. Get the guy out. But I don't want to depend on speed. I love when I have something I want to write about, something I know. I love looking for the appropriate invention. Some people have the word "vigorish" in that poem. The fact that nobody knows
I don't mean felicities and clever little finger work. I mean to sneak up on the reader and penetrate his habits. Like suddenly you think, “What does earshot mean?” You know the Japanese have this thing about waking up in the middle of your life. That’s one of the things I’d like my poetry to do. I think what the arts do is to salvage the world. The world is constantly plundered from us by habit. What the writer does and the filmmaker, the painter does is not just to retrieve but to make things visible again.

Yes, language. We get so used to it. And I don’t want to refresh it by using crazy . . .

Like the Russian formalists, making the language new.

Yeah, but they mean it in a really crazy way. If I understand them they’re saying the way you make it new is to defamiliarize it. I think that’s nuts. It’s like saying . . . well, it’s like Emerson and his wife. He wasn’t very sexual, so they thought the solution was just to make love less and less, so the urge would accumulate. What it does, though, is kill your sexual drive. And I think it’s the same thing with defamiliarization. You think you’re going to discover the world by getting as far from the world as you can. I mean, try washing your feet on a real hot day. You’ve just climbed a mountain, you’re washing in cold water. Then you’ll know what the world is. You don’t have to defamiliarize yourself. You have to be awake, you have to be conscious, you have to notice. You have to love. Why do some people have to wrestle in such peculiar ways just to arrive at the earth? All we have to do is bite into the apple.

Yes.

I can see these guys sitting at their desks writing about being in the real world.

[Laughter]

With regard to influence, Jack, a poem such as “Music Is the Memory of What Never Happened” is another example—isn’t it? Its object sentences, its Mediterranean situation, and the nostalgic male regret—calls Hemingway to mind. Other poems in The Great Fires seem to invoke Wallace Stevens. For instance, in “On Stone,” your last line references “Athena’s owl calling / into the barrenness, and nothing answering” and is reminiscent of Stevens’ “listener, who listens in the snow,/ And, nothing himself, beholds/ Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.” And it might be said that your poem “What Is There to Say,” with its imagination of a heaven in which people would weary of “always / singing how green the / green trees are,” shares a sensibility and vocabulary with Stevens’ “Sunday Morning.” Do you feel an affinity with either Stevens or Hemingway and on what terms?

Well, I’m reminded of Wallace Stevens’ poem about the dump [“The Man on the Dump”]. The most immaculate dump in the world. And I think he struggled with it. He knew it. He couldn’t get the dump. He could make a marvelous dump. But that isn’t the dump. Maybe you have to have a knack for being alive, I don’t know. I don’t think there’s much connection between me and “Sunday Morning.” “Sunday Morning” is a little bit of philosophy, whether it’s about a sort of religious vision, or whether Stevens is trying to make the point that this woman with her silly peignoir has no chance at all. It’s almost like the strategy in Eliot’s “Sweeney among the Nightingales.” Fine, it’s a fine poem. I don’t think I work that way. I try to get to the thing pretty directly. I try to find a way to make it available. And I try in all kinds of different ways. I’m not going to do it in a pedestrian, straight-ahead prose way, because that’s not poetry. Poetry commits magic. I mean it’s incredibly inefficient. It’s like somebody watching somebody wallowing and saying, “What an inefficient way to get across the floor.” It does something that’s hard for prose to do. And so it may take odd ways.

And how about Hemingway?

I still love Hemingway. Even in his terrible books. And I don’t care that he became pompous and straitened around, and I don’t care that he was . . . Well, maybe it’s easy for me to say because I’m a male. But I feel the same way about Ezra Pound. I understand he was a racist. And he did radio broadcasts for which people call him “treasonous,” though if you know something about Pound, you know he thought that he was really trying to save America. I talked to the man that interviewed him when Pound went to the Italian radio station and asked if he could do this during the war. And the man told me, “We didn’t...

... So everything ends.

Divorce gets them nowhere. They drift away from the ruined women without noticing. See birds

high up and follow. “Out of earshot,” they think, puzzled by earshot.

That moment of self-reflexive, isolating consciousness! It happens also in your “Don Giovanni / His Way to Hell” when Don Giovanni becomes distracted from his lovemaking as he focuses on the countess’s unusual toes. In both poems, characters withdraw from event into an interiority that’s all their own and in which their vision or language startles and mystifies them. Such moments are rare. And if you use them habitually. I wonder in what way that self-reflexive consciousness also characterizes the writer of the poem and the poet? Whether for you, there come moments when you realize how much pleasure you’re taking in the craft in the poem?

Well, I certainly rejoice and I delight and I smile when it happens. Part of it is that, in a way, what I’m doing is trying to make the reader conscious of the fact that, you know, we assume we’re looking at the world, but the truth is—Oh, what I’m interested in is the nuisance of being. The middle
understand him at all.” Pound walked in, he didn’t ask for extra food because there was a scarcity of food, didn’t want any special privileges, didn’t want to be paid, but he wanted to make these statements because he thought America had gone wrong. And you say, “Well, it was idiocy.” Okay, maybe I’m wrong and he was just evil. And certainly he was wrong about the anti-Semitism, and he’s hopeless, as far as I’m concerned, as an economist and not a very good historian. But why not just say he was a third-rate economist? Say he’s guilty, let’s get it out in the open. He’s guilty! And this is shameful, some of it. And then we can turn to poetry.

I mean he’s one of the greatest poets that America ever produced. Nobody has done what he did. He wrote one of the only two epics we have in America. Why are the critics so willing to give that up? Because they have their speeches and they go to conferences and they say the same thing over again and over again. Or they come in and explain all the lines, what they mean. That’s not what Pound was doing. He was doing something else. I think his poetry is terrific. And Wallace Stevens had difficulty getting to the world unmediated by his mind. In fact he went back and tried it again and again and again. I think the “Snowman” is philosophically a wonderful poem. I don’t get any feeling of winter from it. And as a matter of fact, his snowman is more like a wintery mind, and the wintery mind is very different from winter. The wintery mind, at best, is weeping. I’d like to think that my poetry has a lot of thought in it, some of it could be called philosophical, but I don’t believe in poetry as a form for exposition—that’s what prose is. As I say, if there’s truth, if there’s something worth communicating, I want it to occur in the reader. I want it to be known by the reader. Not through being led by the hand or convinced or argued into it. I want him to experience it, to feel its实在. Gerard Manley Hopkins, I say, “Yeah, you know, I felt it.” That’s what these things you ask me about are for me.

fs: Mnhmm.

tj: They’re devices to make the thing work. You know, I like it, I’m delighted by some of the inventions, and I’d like the reader to be delighted. But basically the inventions are doing something. They’re not going into business for themselves.

fr: Right. Well, Henry James tells an anecdote about a wealthy woman who lingers in her loge after an opera, weeping over the performance. Meantime, her coachman freezes to death waiting for her outside in the snow. In your poem “Chas- tity” there’s witness to an accident towards which the moral impulse is quite different. A boy chooses to continue reading War and Peace rather than help a man who has fallen down the stairs nearby. For the boy, the art is more real at that moment than “real life.” Of course, art is real life too. Some say that only those who haven’t critically suffered from real life could blur the distinction between life and art. While you take responsibility for the choices in your life and while you describe your life as one that has afforded you a great deal of serious happiness, your life has been harsh relative to that of many North American poets. What insights has your perspective granted you regarding the inter- woven values of art and reality?

tj: Well, first off, let me tell you—as with almost everything I write—what happens in “Chastity” is literally true. The man didn’t fall down the steps, but he collapsed at the bottom of the steps—where I was. He wasn’t coming up and down the steps. He was just walking along on a Sunday afternoon and had a heart attack on the sidewalk. I mean I’m not correcting you—it’s just because we’re talking about reality. And I’ll say again, you have to understand. I don’t see my life as stark or difficult. I see it as rich. I don’t know anybody who has a life as rich as mine. People I know can’t spend their time walking around looking at the trees. They can do it on a vacation or on an occasional Sunday. I think that’s one of the inventions, two or three most influential books in my life and I read it young, and I always wanted to try it—so when they invited me to live at the Robert Francis house [in Amherst, MA], I stopped using heat. There was a little fireplace, but you had to sit right in front of it, and even then your back was going to freeze. Those are tough winters in Massachusetts. I used to wake up sometimes, it would be 20 degrees below zero inside the house! [laughter] It was wonderful! [laughter]

I mean you’re so aware of everything you do. If your hands slip out from under the covers, you know it! You sit down on the toilet seat and you make a sound. It’s cold at that hour in the day.

tk: What about the choice that the boy makes, choosing to stay with his book instead of helping someone?

tj: Well, first off, as I said, it’s literally true. I had been for a year trying to learn to be honest. And not because of the opinion of the people around me or . . . I’d get an even worse reputation than I already had. At that time I was . . . an extremist. I would not compromise. As it says in the poem, I found I had started to go down to help even though I didn’t want to go down. And it was War and Peace. So I turned back to the book and started reading again. Something in me felt guilty. I didn’t want to acknowledge it. Those tonalities . . .

So I’m not interested in whether the boy was good or bad. I’m interested in the texture of the sensibility of that state of being young when you don’t understand what honesty is. It’s like you think you have to tell your mother all the terrible things you’ve done, or your grandmother. That’s not honesty, that’s cruelty. What’s the point? I think honesty is the willingness to relate to people I’ll lie to corporations [laughter], I’ll lie to insurance companies. I don’t care. And if they drop a bag of money in the street, I’ll take it home. But I won’t steal from anybody. I won’t cheat anybody out of a job or anything like that. Not because I have great moral standards. That’s the way I’m made. I know sometimes it’s complicated and you have to think it through. But it’s not that the boy in the poem is right, and it’s not that’s a villain. That’s a remarkable event to me. Something is captured there. Like my poem being unfaithful to my wife that you mentioned, “Try- ing to Have Something Left Over.” I don’t know another poem that captures that and you have to think about love. It’s not like the whole, all-of-Italy love I had for Linda. You know that’s major stuff. But what I’m writing about in “Trying . . .” wasn’t a major thing. It was a very special thing. And those nuances, they are just little kinds of felici- ties. I went back to Denmark twice to try and find that woman [with whom Gilbert describes having an affair in “Trying to Have Something Left Over”]. Because something happened to her. She asked me, the only thing she asked was, “Don’t forget me. I know you love Linda and I know we won’t see each other again and I don’t ask any- thing. But in some place in you, don’t forget me.” And I wanted to go back because something bad happened, a male misunderstanding. And it makes me, even now, years later, sad that she will think it . . . just like what happened to me, so I didn’t forget “If I you tomorrow,” or “I meant it when I said I loved you,” and they’re gone. I didn’t want to do that to her. It’s no big deal. Maybe she didn’t even notice. But I feel very bad about it. And I tried twice to find her in Denmark. Not to get in bed with her. I don’t want anything from her. I just want to say, “Look, here’s the poem. I didn’t forget.” It’s an important part of my life. It wasn’t a major part, but it was a very important part of my life.

fw: Well, what about fidelity? You have a number of poems about infidelity, a hard thing to write about, but to what does the poet need to maintain fidelity? And then a separate question: Why do you think it is that our species has such a hard time with marital fidelity? But to what must a poet maintain some kind of fidelity?

tk: If I start telling you I’ll go into a frenzy. [laughter] They’re devices to serious about your marriage or the woman you love, usually you end up hurting that person a lot. A lot of sadness in infidel- ity. There are times—people will think I’m really nuts—when I think you’re morally obligated to be unfailful. But if I had known how much Linda would suffer . . . It’s the only thing in my whole life that I really feel guilty about. That I wasn’t careful enough or wise enough or understanding enough about what was going to happen to her. I regret that. I feel guilty about that. But infidelity is also about something that matters. It’s not just that love is faithful and forever, that you’ll never respond to another human being as for long as you live. That’s nonsense. Anybody who says that has no knowledge of human nature. I would say the same thing about women. Sometimes women have more of a responsibil- ity to be unfailful. It’s not just men. But not for thrill. Not for fun. Not for pride. I don’t believe in that. But sometimes something very important is at issue. How can a man not be curi- ous about other women? I mean my whole life has really been centered on not only the one I love, but on trying to understand women. Different kinds of women. Different situations. And it’s not to be a great Casanova. I feel thrill like any man does if somebody tells him that he will allow me to be in her body. That’s not only some- thing to be grateful for and proud of, but amazed by. I mean the intimacy of that to me. I under- stand that for a lot of people it’s not an intimacy. It’s pleasure. They’re allowed that. But if you ask what I think. We’ll. I don’t believe in going around hav- ing experiences to fill up the time. Like if the world is going to be destroyed by the atomic bomb in half an hour, to find somebody quickly to make love with. That’s a waste of half an hour that you have in your life. I would go find the woman I care about or a woman to talk to or a woman to hold, maybe to comfort her or wipe away the tears. Those things are important. It’s not just that the body did this to another body and there was a little spasm of pleasure at the end. That’s nice, I like the pleasure. But that’s not why I would be unfailful. I admit my ego gets involved, but that’s not the point. Sometimes other people say “I’m happening or the affair shouldn’t be happening. I don’t expect anybody to agree, I don’t ask them to agree, but if you ask me why in my case . . . You know, a large part of it is not for physical sex. I like physical sex
and I get excited by seeing a woman I’ve never seen take her blouse off. That’s an event. That’s—Well, there’s a story in ancient Greece. A woman has done something very bad and her lawyer can’t save her, and so she’s going to be put to death. So her lawyer goes up to her and grabs her tunic and rips it off of her and says to the tribunal, “Could you destroy that?”

That’s the way I feel. I’m crazy to see what they have in their closet. I’m wild to read the notebooks they kept when they were in second grade. What you do is, you’re allowed into not just the body, but you can cross over into the privacy of another human being. I’m not much interested in the privacy of males, but I’m very much interested in the privacies of women. I’ve spent my life listening, not my ear to the door so much as my ear to the ground.

JG While also looking “At the full moon above the sea.”

JG Well, yeah, to the moon too though the image I was thinking of, it’s inappropriate, but it’s that poem by Roethke about the man who’s running wild around the landscape, and he comes upon a little hole, and he sings into the hole and puts his ear to it, and he hears somebody singing back to him. It’s like that. It’s the otherness. I mean we’re supposed to all be monads, and we’re trapped in ourselves, but there are times when . . . you escape a little bit. And I had to be punished for it.

It’s not like something you do every fifth week or something. To me it’s something very large. Doesn’t have to be heroic, but it matters to me. I don’t understand how it’s come to be so trivialized. You know, apart from AIDS, apart from caution, it’s such a thing. I don’t mean just infidelity, I mean living. Being alive. Finding your life and the otherness in that life. Sometimes, like when I live out in the fields in, say, a shepherd’s shack, you’re so aware of yourself. Living with yourself. It’s a wonderful feeling. You can hear yourself as you walk over the stone floor of the house. It amazes me to wake up, that I’m there. And the same thing with women. The woman is the chief test of this. Whether you’re able to go some place remarkable.

LG Are you up for a couple more questions?

JG You know, because, you can tell, this interests me. I don’t care about the interview so much, but the subject interests me.

LG Me too. Well, I had to ask this—LINDA GREGG (coming into the room) Are you playing chess or not?

LG No, he already beat me.

JG He’s a terrific chess player!

LG Was it hard to win?

JG It was hard not to be killed. Yeah, I struggled through half this game tip-toeing around trying to stay alive.

LG Is it true?

LG There was a moment in the game where there was a shift, and I couldn’t tell what had happened. But I knew at that point I’d lost. I couldn’t see it, because it seemed like I was still winning and he was still on the defensive. But his moves, although they looked defensive, were offensive.

JG It was a real pleasure. You know, because it’s nice to play someone you like a lot, who you’re not just beating. You’re really playing the game.

LG I want to ask you a question. I was talking to CD [Wright about Carolyn Forché’s new book. CD read Forché’s manuscript and helped with it, I guess as a reader. I was talking about this aspect of Carolyn [Forché], how she’d had a hard time writing for about ten years, and I wanted to know what that had to do with Forché using dramatic images, you know like the ears on the table.

JG Well, that’s what I think messed her up. She relied on that kind of false energy to carry the poem.

LG But why is that false energy?

JG Because it doesn’t arise from her! It’s always dependent. She’s using it to find an edge.

LG That’s what I said, but when I said it, it didn’t sound as good as when you said it. That’s what I said! CD said, “Well, you’re intense too, Linda.”

JG No but she’s exploiting people being killed in order to get the imagery. I’m glad she’s on their side. But why is it she always gets her energy by tapping into the horror or the suffering of other people?

LG But . . .

JG My version of this is: I just think she’s happy sitting there seeing those ears. Something in her is saying “Well, what a wonderful poem.”

LG And you call that false energy?

JG Yes, it weakens you as a poet, because you depend on this enormously exaggerated material. It’s like confessional poetry, when people talk about trying to kill themselves or an abortion that went bad or their mother’s madness. The material has so much drama that you can just write it. You don’t have to be a good poet.

LG So why would this contribute to Forché not writing?

WEST : FIRE : ARCHIVE

The Mountain/West Poetry Series

Iris Jamahl Dunkle

“West : Fire : Archive, Iris Jamahl Dunkle’s magnificently wide-ranging new book, traverses both ground and history to create a new genre: a dual biography [Charmian Kittredge Turner’s “frontier thesis.”] Each section is presented as if it is an archival box filled with artifacts, the first of which opens to the monumental life of Charmian Kittredge London the wife of the famous author Jack London. The poems unstitch and resew her life, invigorating the old narrative with her forgotten attributes: her disregard of gender norms, her pioneer heritage, and her sense of adventure. The second archival box examines the act of autobiography. In it, Dunkle writes through the complex grief of losing her mother and her community when it is devastated by wildfires and reflects on how these disasters echo the one that brought her family to California, the Dust Bowl. The final archival box questions the authenticity of the definition of recorded history as it relates to the American West.

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“It isn’t just catastrophe and cruelty that American myth has erased: it is also the particular wonders and journeys of its real love stories. In excavating a family history that is known and the unknowable—beyond heritage, beyond gender—these poems offer the thrill of a newly discovered vista, while never straying far from our planet’s formidable powers, our brief existence. Carefully researched, yet cognizant of ‘the hole in the narrative’ of historical document, oral history, and our own recollections and perceptions, it is Dunkle’s formidable twin characteristics of skepticism and heart that make this book so riveting and crucial as we step cautiously into the new frontier.”

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jg: Because you spoil the wellspring from which poetry should come.
lg: Oh, so you have to rely on that all the time.
lg: Well, more than that, you can damage the wellspring. It's like the people in South America who clearcut trees and expect them to come back. Within two seasons, the soil is hard and everything dies because they'd tried to force it to do something that land is not supposed to do. I don't understand how anybody could search out so much suffering and not be damaged.
lg: Well, that's funny, because I was trying to talk to CD about this, and I said, "Did you see Shalom?" Because they made a film about the Holocaust with what's left over. And so these quiet filmmakers came, you heard their voices, quiet, slow, and they've gone to the places where the concentration camps were, and what they're filming is a very large . . . empty field. And then a farmer comes along and he says, "When I was a boy, I used to be on a little boat on that river over there." And a man comes in, and he's been asked to tell his story and he's tall and skinny and he sits down on a chair right facing the camera. And he sits there like a good boy, like he was told to do it, he had agreed to do it, and all of a sudden he drops his head and stands up with his head still down. "I can't do it," he says. And leaves the room. And this is the film, this film about the Holocaust. Very, very . . . You really get a sense of the Holocaust and its history not through the violence but through all of the erasures. Nothing spectacular.
jg: I'm not saying people shouldn't use dramatic stuff. But to pin on the sensational? I think that ruins the part of you where poetry originates. You're using the power of other people's suffering to derive your own energy.
fg: That's the amazing thing about Charles Reznikoff. In all his work but maybe particularly in Testimony, where he's writing about the Holocaust using documentary accounts of the Nuremberg trials. And he's "about" from the poem. It's all their words. It comes across with an almost unbearable power. At the other end of that spectrum is the poet who's always visible, posing in a leather jacket in front of the burning city.
lg: Actually, when I asked this, I was thinking it was more my issue. I don't think it ruins the part of you where poetry originates. You're using the power of other people's suffering to derive your own energy.
fg: Poetry lasting and not needing it to last. . . .
jg: Yeah, but there was something else I very much wanted to say . . . Oh! I don't understand why people will pay so much in order to be famous. I mean, they give up their whole life, you know, networking and going to conferences and everything. But it's not a factor in my writing poetry. I really don't want to, except in a kind of shallow way. It doesn't matter to me to leave the footsteps in the sands of time.

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Didn't have one argument in 11 years and she was not passive. She was lovely, sweet, and quiet, but she was a strong woman. Not once in 11 years.

fg. Well, that reminds me—

jg. But about Linda. Linda is extraordinary. I mean to be around Linda is a treat. And it's also baffling. Her mind is so different from mine. The way that poetry works. I've been trying to steal from Linda for over 30 years. I've stolen a little bit, but it's hard to find out how to do what she does. She really is wonderful.

fg. What's continued to grow in your relationship with her?

jg. Well, for one thing you grow different. Therefore if you're lucky, you're new to each other. Usually it runs the marriage, of course. But there's more to Linda now. When I met Linda, she was a lamb. She was unbelievably satisfying in the sense that men dream. Someone said to me once, "I don't understand. You've got the greatest chick in the Haight-Ashbury, and you want to change her. Why? Why do you want to send her back to school? Why do you want her to learn all this stuff and improve her poetry? I mean, why change somebody that wonderful?" He was right in a way, but boy, to be with an adult woman who has all that stuff. If you're with a lamb, well—it's hard to be with that person because there's too much of a discrepancy. You can love that quality, adore it, thank God for it as I do and did, but it's different when she grows up. And she understands more and there's more to her. Therefore—

fg. Therefore.

jg. Or as Pound says, "Meanwhile. . . ." She's also beautiful. Strange.

fg. I like that. You know, I wanted to ask you a question in regard to the poem "Looking Away from Longing." There you describe the end of a relationship as Orpheus might:

. . . A small him
and a smaller her with long black hair,
so happy together, beginning the trip
toward where she will die and leave him
looking at the back of her turned away
looking at a small tree.

And in "Recovering Amid the Farms," you describe a less intimate relationship, but also as Orpheus might describe his last vision of Eurydice:

. . . It is too far for me to see
but there is a moment of white if she turns her face.

More overt references to Orpheus and Eurydice, to their inevitable separation, abound in your poems. It might be said that the women in your poems are most indelible when they turn away. Of course, the Orpheus myth is attractive to you because it ends in failure. Your frequent use of the sentence fragment, too, might be said to emphasize your devotion to the broken, the shard, the ruin. Do you think that your poems—you sort of started to answer this for me with the Icarus poem, that new Icarus poem of yours—do you think that your poems both in technique and content romanticize failure?

jg. Well, first of all, I don't know how to answer things that you say, not you, but everybody does this. The fact that there's broken fragments means that you are afraid to be with the person, or whatever they read into it. I don't work that way, because it doesn't get to truth. It's clever, and the critics make a career out of it.

fg. Right.

jg. But that's not the way things work. That's not how a poem is written. You don't sit down and say, "Okay, I'll use this broken fragment."

fg. Because it signifies—

jg. Yeah, no real poet writes that way. Let's see, where to begin. As I say in that poem, we were just talking about, there are things too difficult for human beings. We had a wonderful time. But marriage died there. A love affair died there. And what the poem captures is another model of what happens in love. It's not just, "She doesn't love me anymore . . . the bitch." I'm not interested in that. I'm interested in the quality of that marriage, that relationship, what happened there out in the barrenness. I think it was too hard on any woman to live that way. Nobody to talk to. Except me. It's hard. It puts all the pressure on you, on the relationship. The purity of it and the sadness of it. Two people that really did love each other, who had been major places together, I mean inside themselves. I'd never known a love stronger than the love with Linda. And it died. But I'm not interested in grieving over it. I'm interested in finding a way of registering it. We need more of that. We need to find the tonality of it. The difference between it and something it's not.

And Michiko and the poem about fish mountain ["Looking Away from Longing"]. I'd like it to be a gentle, sad poem. You know, at the time, you don't know she's going to die. You don't know that you're walking toward death. And when it occurs, you remember the earlier day, how we came down off the mountain, the fields were full of either mustard or probably, more likely, rapeseed. It's just incredible, miles of this perfect yellow. And we were so, so—to say in love means something exciting.

But it's so muddled, it was almost like moonlight. Total. And being in love with Michiko was absolutely different than being in love with Linda. Indescribable, the perfection of that love with Michiko. The sweetness. The dearness. The closeness. Not needing anybody else. I mean Michiko liked people, but it was like a world we were together. And that's what she wanted. She didn't really want that other stuff. And to try to capture the tristezza of that moment, of this woman on her way to death—as we all are—but to not know it. To walk hand in hand into that future and not know it will come to rule my heart. Not because it's tragic. But because of the sweetness that's made more . . . maybe sweet is not the word. Knowing that they didn't know at that point where they were going. And then afterwards you do know, and you look at it and you feel so tender, so tender. Like The Catcher in the Rye, you want to save them from going over the cliff. It's not a tragic feeling, it's a kind of rejoicing. Rejoicing in the death in a way. It sounds . . . stupid. But somehow it's like that. I wrote Kochan about her death.

I told the man, the fellow who published it [Allen Hoey at Tamarack Editions], "I don't want to write an elegy. I don't want to write a book about pain. I want to write a book that somehow in telling that story makes you realize how wonderful it was to be married. That marriage. Of course, the marriage with Linda too was marvelous. It was stupendous. It was like being in love with Paris. Imagine marrying Paris. That's what it was like being married with Linda. With Michiko, absolutely like another planet. Not that one is better than another, but to hold on to each one's tonality.

fg. Particularity.

jg. Particularity. Sensibility. Whatever those good words are.

“Pilkington is also a poet of great heart. And human dignity. Playing Poker With Tennessee Williams is a must-read by a poet at the height of his powers.”

—Stuart Dischell

Forest Gander, a writer and translator with degrees in geology and literature, was born in the Mojave Desert and taught at Brown University. Recent books include Be With, winner of the Pulitzer Prize, and Twice Alive, just out from New Directions. Gander translates books by poets from Spain, Latin America, and Japan.
Paris Syndrome

Paris Syndrome (n.) a psychological condition experienced almost exclusively by Japanese tourists and, to a lesser extent, Chinese tourists, who are disappointed when the city of lights does not live up to their romantic expectations. The syndrome, considered an extreme case of culture shock, causes symptoms such as an acute delusional state, hallucinations, anxiety, dizziness, and sweating. Single women travelers are most afflicted by this disease.

June was a parade of Chinese brides, their trains spilling into the gardens. Blooming gloom, purple sepals—sweat crowned their frowns, wet diadems of dread. Hems, rough hedges—their heads groomed doll-like for their grooms to glower at.

•

June smelled like perfume and piss. Chewing stale bread on the bridges, I tossed my misgivings into the river. How I loved the marble women in the Tuileries, their inconsolable weight. To be a monument, stone-carved, to sorrow. I wandered in search of my own pulse between the Monet panels in the l’Orangerie.

In an airless apartment room on the Rue Eugène in the sixteenth Arrondissement, I wrote letters never sent to friends long gone. The paper dead weight in my suitcase. I didn’t talk to anyone.

Disconsolation prize: a meal, wet innards.

A patisserie of one heart pickled in many jars.

•

The inability to access the joy you stored in a safe to open when the time comes, when you’re somewhere else. The joy you hoped for in a beautiful country.

Before you could go, you imagined it. The possibilities. Wet cornices. Plump roasts. It was this longing, this bewilderment, that made you feel like you could live again.

•

To burn is to burnish a dead kingdom with fine lighting. Lightning in the sky each night, clawing out the sordid eyes that watch and watch you as you sleep.

Red Tide

The winter that the oysters died, what was left of their shells made a leaf in my hand.

I could see the veins where life stopped, but to my astonishment, there were tiny vessels that led, still, to the sea.

I thought: what more is possible inside a catastrophe—wreckage, wrack of flesh and bloodtide—creatures married to their beds, unable to survive? If they won’t, how will I? Toxic algae blooms, fevering the water like a poppy field, and I, I was ready to give up, hurl myself into the widowed waves, until I stopped to mine the deeper oyster beds, probed the sources I’d forgotten—one, three, five pearls rolled onto my palm against the fata morgana, the eventide.

My pink seeds, my darlings! Made during a massacre, too precious to plant on so doomed an earth, too stubborn to sleep forever in darkness.
Out West

On my worst days I believe I’ve lost the race. Like I’m down to a crawl now and the whole road is empty, asphalt burning through my sneakers, sea blisters on my thighs, the sun perfecting its sting—even the scorpions hobble past me, even the recluse spiders, their brawny legs, even the copperheads skid past, ignoring me, on my knees, help, I beg for the mercy of their venom but no one stops, no one listens, the road scrapes me bloody, dear God, will I make it? I see the mountains, pale like never, pink light, cactus blooms, red aster on my ankles, sand dollars on my chest, no finish line in sight, line that marks a woman healed, oh, look at what she’s overcome, look at what she’s had to outrun, one year ago she was a torn retina, one year ago she was the eye of a wound, one year ago she was a missing person, and now and now and now and now and now and now and now and now what is she

The Desert

I. MARFA, TX

I drive over clods, past the agave blooms. Javelinas curl into and chew on prickly pear. Their marauded leaves remind me of something distant now—is it my heart? Red plum / beetjuice / antelope soaked in wine reduction. How the light here makes any face blush. On my way there sleepless after flying from Miami, over the river, Juarez—Border Patrol in brown uniforms. Are you a citizen? they ask. Rootless, radio blares. So many seek home in inhospitable places. I wasted my plane ride weeping. Nothing known about the future: a blank expanse, yet again. The desert teaches me how to love this lack. The desert teaches me how to be okay.

II. VALENTINE, TX

I want to leave this world a little better. Make it more dear for those who, like me, desire an exit. The deer pacing up the road: why does its neck bend as if to break? On the freeway, signs outside Marfa point to this town called Valentine. The fields all veined in jasper, the singing winds seducing me with sibilance. I spent the week depressed in a house vacant of the poets who came before. I imagined their routines, their soaps, their smells.

What coffee they drank, what songs they heard. I put on the tapes of Lucille Clifton and the whole house fills with her voice. Before she reads “a dream of foxes,” she says, It’s about loneliness. I was embarrassed to read these poems because you don’t want anyone to think you’re lonely. It’s as if we conspire in our loneliness across time. In this desert house at the crossroads of Plateau and Washington, I read each empty road as an unwritten poem. The loneliest country in the world perhaps, don’t you think?

Lucille asks, then chuckles. I take the exit off the 90 because the name of the place sounds gentle. By exit, I mean pull over in the dirt, open the window, let the wind inside. Yes, Lucille, we are a lonely country. The sun coming down like any lover’s good name.

THE DESERT

Respect the desert for both its hardiness and fragility. Forgive her if she does not give you what you want. The wild cumbine, the willow-leafed catalpa—the desert savior’s brush—all are hers. Didn’t you know? She shares her root with words like desolation. Descent. Desertion.

She’ll desert you to the elements, if not the jackals. Even if you beg, she will not bring you water. Even if you freeze, she will not light your fire.


Midwest Poetry

By Paul Stroble

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The Walls Became the World
All Around

18,000 years ago
my ancestors burned
bones and hematite
in the Lascaux caves.
Equines and stags mid gallop
on walls of calcite.

I imagine them gathering
in their own blackness.
As a boy I thought
brown and black
were stalked by death.

I try to imagine
the 17,000 years
Lascaux were left
alone in darkness.
If you read about the caves,
historians will say
they were discovered in 1940.

55 years later on my first
day of kindergarten,
a girl said hi to me
and I hid behind Mama.
She’s black and fat I said.

When I look up
the definition for black,
I find fifteen entries
with negative associations.

Black holes burn
at billionths of a Kelvin;
astronomers say that makes
them ideal black bodies
since they are impossible to observe.
Unfinished steel is said to be black.

When I look in the mirror
I feel shame for my six year old self,
much of me is unfinished.

Soil that flooded the Nile
was said to be black,
which meant glorious and fertile.

I know the awe of blackness.
The night sky marveling
in hope of the infinite.
Galaxies drift
in a blackness greater
than our understanding.

I think of Mama pouring
molasses by the spoonful
in her ginger snap cookies.

She’d let me have a spoon
after she was done with the batter.
The mineral taste almost iron.

When the Stillness Comes

September 3, 1838, Frederick Douglass

I’m sleepless & everything
is covered in uncertainty.
I board the train from Baltimore
disguised as a sailor

with a red shirt, a tarpaulin hat,
and a black cravat tied
carelessly and loosely about my neck.

The conductor merely glances
at the papers I borrowed from
a sailor, much darker than me.

I know the dangers ahead.
I dread the train from Wilmington
and then the steam-boat
I must take to Philadelphia.

Though I am not a murderer
fleeing from justice,
I feel perhaps quite as miserable
as such a criminal.

Beyond the frame
—a windswept hillside
marks the end of this journey;
my eyes are tiny
fires from a lit match.

The ship & night
broken at the seams,
impressive ribbons of dark water.

I am without home, without acquaintance,
without money, without credit, without work,
and without any definite knowledge
as to what course to take.

When I look out at the Delaware:
its waves clear a savage light.
I forget what I was
in the beginning.
Oh, how I’ve effaced
darkness in God’s name!

And, let me tell you, now,
the constellations light
what is familiar
at the edge of my grave.

A strange accident
that I have witnessed,
I cannot forbear recording it.
Oh, the days pilfered in my loss,
that I am a stranger and a free man,
could be a schism to my faith.

This expedition & my own will to live
go ahead, I say to myself, go ahead
how much was sacrificed
hoping the journey means something,

how strong the pull can be
& how desolate
go ahead, they say, go ahead.

Shamar Hill is Black, Cherokee, and Jewish. He is the recipient of numerous awards including fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts, Cave Canem, and Fine Arts Work Center. He has been published in Poetry Northwest, The Missouri Review, and Washington Square Review, among others. He is working on a poetry collection, Photographs of an Imagined Childhood, and a memoir, In Defiance of All True Things. He is the Director of Institutional Giving & Stewardship at the Academy of American Poets.

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Haven’t yet been anywhere I want to scatter my ashes. This sea life, the tendency to believe that whatever kills us is stronger than we are. The middle bar of the closet, then, and the exhaust pipe too, a knot that won’t release. Too much of anything is poison, too little of anything an ataxia, and the light that scatters is defined by what it reflects.

Amish Trivedi is the author of Sound/Chest (Coven), Your Relationship to Motion Has Changed (Shearsman), and FuturePanic, forthcoming from C汗uePress in the fall of 2021. He has an MFA from Brown and a PhD from Illinois State. He lives in Maryland.

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PORTRAITS OF COLONIAL ENTANGLEMENT
Contemporary Afro-francophone translations

TODD FREDSON

MARKERS OF SEGREGATION

Previewing Tanella Boni’s LÀ où il fait si clair en moi /
Where it’s so bright in me

U.S. readers do not hear much from African poets, less so from African poets who do not write in English, and less again from African poets who are women. Irène Asaba d’Almeida writes in the introduction to the anthology she edited to help remediate these problems of access and representation, A Rain of Words: A Bilingual Anthology of Women’s Poetry in Francophone Africa (2009), that “the history of poetry published by women in francophone Africa is a very short one. Indeed, the beginning of francophone African women’s poetry can be assigned to a specific calendar year”—1965. More books have emerged but still they “have rarely been reprinted, their poems rarely anthologized and even more rarely translated into other languages, and thus the poets receive very little critical attention.” Afro-francophone writer Tanella Boni is one of the most prominent figures in contemporary African literature. Her work spans 35 years. She has won the Ahmadou Kourouma Prize for fiction as well as the Antonio Viccaro International Poetry Prize. She is the author of nine poetry collections. And, yet, only a handful of translated poems have appeared in English-language anthologies. The first full-length collection of her poetry in translation appeared in 2018, my translation of L’Avenir a rendezvous avec l’ombre / The future has an appointment with the dawn, a 2011 collection that reckons with Côte d’Ivoire’s recent civil wars.

Boni, who is Ivorian, self-exiled to France during Côte d’Ivoire’s first civil war (2002–2007). She returned to Côte d’Ivoire following the country’s second civil war (2010–2011) and continues to split time between the two countries. As an African migrant in France, she confronts the aggressive anti-migrant nationalism roiling Europe. In Côte d’Ivoire, she lives amid the violent expansion of Al-Qaeda’s Maghreb faction and the Islamic State in West Africa. Boni’s most recent poetry collection, LÀ où il fait si clair en moi / Where it’s so bright in me, pries at the complexities of difference—race, religion, gender, nationality—that shape these 21st-century geopolitical conditions. The collection won the 2018 Prix Théophile Gautier from the French Academy. The poems here are excerpted from that collection.

There where it’s so bright in me is arranged in seven sections, though scenes and conceits develop across the sections. Boni begins with a dedication, “To my children,” and an epigraph from 18th-century philosopher Denis Diderot, from his article “Sur le femmes” (“On women”): “Either women silence themselves, / or often they don’t seem to dare say / what they are saying.”

In “Words are my preferred weapons,” the first section, Boni’s speaker wanders the once-familiar streets of her home city. She considers how, after years of exile, the names for things no longer mean what they did. Having been othered from herself, the speaker feels out where such distinctions of self and other—and of belonging—are tested. There within some matrix of place and language, personal memory and collective memory. . . .

In “The path of ephemeral lives,” the second section, Boni shifts to a setting dominated by a white historical narrative. What is it to be an African migrant in France as the downriver effects of centuries of colonialism begin to reshape the profile of Europe? Passing through the U.S., she sees what it is to be a black body in the U.S. How do the heart and the mind contend with the hatred and anger directed at African migrants in an era resurgent with European and white nationalisms? “I have the impression of living in the 19th century,” writes Boni.

“Memory of a woman,” the third section, interrogates the Reason invented by men such as Diderot, a Western Empiricism that has determined and rationalized categories used to divide humans unequally. And in “What needs to be said,” the fourth section, Boni illustrates the consequences of these divisions through personal experience and observation. “Who wants me restricted to this space / of a tribe / for the sake of my authenticity,” she asks.

The fifth section, “Might take the dreams as well,” becomes less interrogatory. Boni shares a tale of African refugees trafficked across the Mediterranean Sea. The migrants become anonymous bodies who reside in that stateless but carefully patrolled space. Dreams of safety and opportunity are pierced in front of them. The migrants die at sea by the thousands (over 19,000 since 2014, as of January 2020, according to the Organization for Immigration) or their boats are intercepted by the European Union–funded Libyan coast guard—or the boats are reported as missing and disappear, with passengers unaccounted for, becoming “ghost boats.”

“Those who are afraid of naked women,” the book’s sixth section, responds directly to the Islamic extremists who are expanding their presence in West Africa. Between January 2015 and March 2016, Islamist militants carried out major attacks in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, in Bamako, Mali, and in Grand Bassam, Côte d’Ivorie. Boni uses the slogan of solidarity spread in the wake of the Grand Bassam massacre, “we are Grand Bassam,” as a refrain throughout this section. Boni and those “like her” are threatened by neighbors in both West Africa and Europe.

The book’s final section is “The ladder and the spark.” Coordinating with a speculative realm, the speaker receives a new word, one that harmonizes the borders that segregate, including the social, political, cultural, personal, and historicizing forces that enthroned us, lose their dominion. The speaker seeks access to a place of relation that is unwounded—“there,” as she says, “where it is so bright in me”—and from which address can be made without harm. It feels as if Boni has unflinchingly absorbed, processed, and rendered the grief of the injustice at hand without growing cold, vitriolic, or indifferent. She is not disaffected. The poems exhibit compassion and empathy. Her language is not delicate or precious, not heightened or overtly elegant. These poems are precise, capacious, imagined, and presented in a plain language.

FROM “_WORDS ARE MY PREFERRED WEAPONS”

Every departure is also a return
You leave with your dreams
You leave with life your memories
Like the slow-footed camel
You carry your baggage on your back
At the end of your arms
From stop to stop
Until the return
Your first departure
Into foreign countries
You walk down the lanes of your city
Where the trees of splendid dreams
That shelter against the weather are rare now
In these foggy conditions the leaves
Are umbrella covers

. . .

Your heart may live
In the dry grass of this turmoil
Your heart that can barely accept
That path home has opened
Charcoal still embers
In your clenched chest
Guarded by the immense silence
Of what is now unspoken in peace time
The fire that scorches your gaze
Seizes your throat
Each time you approach
The front step
And the harmattan blows
Like a bad memory
Across these coals
Through the fragile ashes
Although the fault isn’t in the weather
Blame the humans who think they are right
On a course of action
Who will not deviate one iota

FROM “THE PATH OF EPHEMERAL LIVES”

Who could appreciate the intensity of my voice
Me who has watched emerge a generation of ephemeral lives
Born under the Colored sign
Undesirable
Humans in their insecure
And conspicuous lives
Humans who live with peace in the soul
Without hate without grudges
Seeing straight through
Until the horizon-destroyer
Crushes their big plans
Humans who hustle on the streets
The place reserved just for them
It’s a story of here and elsewhere
A story noticeably
Written on the foreheads of travelers
Crossing borders
Even those on the right side of the law

* * *

The Other
Unstable site face of the One
But I can’t imagine the uniqueness of the One
The One always various
And the Other does not see itself as the Other
Since it takes itself for the One

I’m searching for any possible meaning in the relationship
Composed via the squaring of a circle
Made by victims and aggressors
Atrocious circle shaped by hatred and rancor
I’m searching for the lucidity
That fashions doors and windows
That casts light into this trove of projections
And boxed-in dreams
Light for the ideas without wings
I’m searching for a brightness
That bursts through the clouded horizon

* * *

Next to the word negro
Once thrown in the face
Of those who embodied
The difference
The unseen plotter of the path
For ephemeral lives
Operates amid a thousand congested lanes
He gives himself time to trim away
These margins of the world
Probing the scribbles
Of small truths
Which are felled by some stroke
Other than common sense
For those who think they run across
His body invisible inaudible
Like a bad science-fiction film

There is nothing to see mills in the mind what matters
Is elsewhere
Each human guards his own dignity
It’s my dignity that speaks within me

FROM “MEMORY OF A WOMAN”

I face the depths of the abyss
When the holds of the slave ships
Have disappeared from my sight
I went north to south
East to west
The cardinal points admired
The lightness of my steps
But I haven’t found my country

Where had I intended to aim my boat
Now I know where I come from
Unsure of which sea I sailed
I don’t move from my home
I’ve carried forward in my head
My memory of beautiful days
My woman’s memory
Which saw everything heard everything

. . .

Here I am at the day’s longest door
There where it is so bright in me
My reason refuses the blunt secular clarity
That separates humanity into unequal portions
Humans so divided so mistreated
And looked through
This self-hood that I’ve inherited
Invisible because of my skin
Which makes me so visible

This skin that has given me everything
This skin of which I’m so proud
My woman’s skin that
Makes its own rules
Rules that are only a tiny part of me

FROM “WHAT NEEDS TO BE SAID”

I have walked through the world in a dream
I didn’t want to know it
I forbade myself from seeing
The actual state of it
My self-righteous speeches
Ended once I stumbled
Into this corner of the day

Where the day in fact rises
And the sun shines on
The sufferings
That do not fade
The injuries
The abuse
The failures slow to scar over
The slight truth of difference
Since it must be named
Pokes into our guts with its tentacles
Slowly relentlessly
Until breathing
Is cut off
To breathe
There is only this one sacred verb
That sings with the sense of life
Those who no longer breathe are countless
And every murdered name rumbles
Thundering with media amplification
As the actual memories flake away

Faceless faces
Stone hearts
But the dreams of the muzzled are nourished
By love and reason in the garden where sharing
Better's resistance
To all of this cruelty in the world

**FROM “THE LADDER AND THE SPARK”**

If there was no river to cross
Its music would be missing from the world
If there was no salt in the ocean
There’d be no poems

Take the music as it comes
Staccato rhythmic melodic
It is jazz and a balafon
It is drum and trombone
And the flute that makes a bouquet of our emotions
When the music softens
And the words float from one world to the next
Life is like that never monotone

Love is born from headwinds
To better align
Our incompatible moods

---

Tanella Boni is a poet, novelist, essayist, and philosopher. Born in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, she did her advanced studies in Toulouse, France, and at the University of Paris (Paris-IV, Sorbonne), returning to Côte d’Ivoire as a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cocody-Abidjan (now the University of Félix Houphouët-Boigny). She served as President of the Writers’ Association of Côte d’Ivoire from 1991 to 1997. Boni is one of the most prominent figures in modern African literature.

**DEPTHFINDING**

Previewing Henri-Michel Yéré’s *Mil Neuf Cent Quatre-Vingt-Dix / Nineteen Ninety*

Henri-Michel Yéré’s 2015 poetry collection, *Mil Neuf Cent Quatre-Vingt-Dix / Nineteen Ninety*, reckons with the push for democracy in West Africa’s Côte d’Ivoire across a span of time. The book’s title, *Nineteen Ninety*, identifies the single year that forms the psychological core of the collection. The book’s three sections, “Mil Neuf Cent Quatre-Vingt-Dix / Nineteen Ninety,” “La nuit, le poète . . . / The night, the poet . . . ,” and “Jet d’Eau / Fountain,” create an arc of reflection for the speaker. As a student in 1990, the poet was present for widespread protests demanding multi-party democracy in Côte d’Ivoire. Workers from across sectors participated in the protests, but the protests were largely organized out of the universities. After police shot and killed Kpéa Domin, a 14-year-old student, people took to the streets in unprecedented and, often, uncontrollable ways. The government shut down schools for the 1989–90 school year—l’année blanche/ the blank year.

In the first section of the book, “Nineteen Ninety,” Yéré regards the contest between the state and the unrelenting force of the people. The contest is like a storm, a flood surge of primal waters. Yéré mixes the figurative with documentarian imagery. “Mornings . . . emerge from a cloud of tear gas” as “the street’s asphalt becomes the new blackboard.” He widens the frame, situating Côte d’Ivoire’s protests alongside other pro-democracy movements that came to a head in 1989—the demolition of the Berlin Wall in Germany as well as the standoff and massacre in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, China.

In the second section, “The night, the poet,” the poet quests toward that part of one’s self that engages something more universal and ephemeral, toward that expanse that we might call the soul. Night, symbolically, becomes a cloak for the poet as he performs his own accounting of how he thinks of himself, and what he is responsible for. Night also becomes the curtain that hides African lives from much of the world, for which stock images of Africa obscure the multiple realities of African lives.

Finally, in the third section, “Fountain,” the poet surveys the post-deluge landscape. The turbulence has receded and left the expanding shores muddy. But “[w]ho could not see the puddle . . . ? Who could not guess . . . the bitterness of the old trap?” asks Yéré. The fountain comes to signify the artifice of composure—the primal water controlled, its release measured,
its abundance coopted, its flourish trained. This is the decorum expected of state subjects awaiting the promises of Western democracy. Here, hope is supposed to spring. And, yet, haunting this section, this supposed hope, is the historical reality. The fraught changes of power in Côte d’Ivoire in the ’90s gave way to a decade of ethnic violence and civil war in the ’00s, and to emigration and refugeeed exiles. Ivorians, like other Africans, have struggled to follow the flow of capital out of their country and into Europe.

The collection’s arc of reflection does not offer reconciliation. It ends in Paris, where the turbulence re-emerges, where African immigrants are isolated in a climate of increasing xenophobia. What follows is a sequence of eleven poems in translation, a sequence that I think represents the book’s thematic arc and also demonstrates the range of poetic forms employed.

FROM “NINETEEN NINETY”

II

In the blink of an eye
—unstable and stubborn—
we were  off-sides
out-of-bounds
beyond the whistle

Around us
the tornado blew
time had no purchase
we held the gusts like buoys
time had no purchase
The red of the fires spelled our names

In the blink of an eye we became stones because we had to be stones in order to dimple our way across the water

It was a long swelling river

A flood
Yes, a catastrophe
A tautology
Unconscionable
Debauchery
Hysteria
Heresy

The river’s arms offered and took, fed the body’s anger
The river’s legs kicked out to the river’s mouth and the new seas

It was a long swelling river
We chose to lose ourselves in it
We will become fighters.

V

We will dredge
what we confused for excitement
from our memories
we’ll open the door again
to that noisy little room
in a calm house
we will look closely
at the abrasion
while we wait for the scar
we will call it what it is
this is
a wound
a combat wound
that still marks the glossy
new skin
that we refuse to let wrap itself around our fighting bodies

We will draw in
the blood-light’s radiance
and speak in the manner of stubborn torches
so that the sky itself
doubts night is around the corner
That morning the stone spoke
was like a morning stretched languidly after preying on the night

Nineteen ninety
still shines in my memory
shards of rain
that on certain mornings
you dumped on Abidjan

Nineteen ninety
have they washed
the blood of the youth
off your floors
appealed to the poets’ memories
so that we may sing it
till the sun no longer rises?

Nineteen ninety
those of Berlin
those of Beijing
introduced you from mountaintops
they broke the wall
they broke the rock
where was that trouble’s first spurt
the water that flushed
the bottoms of the hills
lifting away sediment
to quicken the pace of the world
to become this river

Kpéa Domin

Kpéa Domin
as the sun stared at your body in disbelief
they tried to hush
the details of your martyrdom
the way one swallows a pill
ashamed.

How to console your mother without lying to her . . . ?
That cop, that pig
—whose name settled into ooze at the river bottom—
in mixing your blood
with the rabid River water
that derelict unknowingly ordered the dam’s rupture.
Still how to console your mother without lying to her . . . ?
your coffin
was it worth it . . .
that flood that followed?

FROM “THE NIGHT, THE POET”

We depart, plump with the danger of these long nights set according to the timelessness of black holes. We do not exactly deny the night. Instead we aspire to organize its slide over the ledge; we want the night to land serenely, back from its wandering. We feel we are of this place where night lets us glimpse its belly full with what has not yet been but which roils in our sleep; like the lightning we’ve seen in our nightmares of late, that fire. This mirage where we strike against the compass as it needles towards truth; this shapes the nights. But mirage, now that we have dislodged
you, you are naked. I insist: we do not exactly deny the night. Simply, but firmly, we cry up the shining of our secret stars, the behests of our hearts.

The night seems vulnerable to the sun’s first rays, yet dawn does not harry the darkness: of course the dawn is a distant curtain, away from its windows, while at the same time its tethers hold open the graves dug in plain sight.

This, it is your night, evidence you do not want to discuss elsewhere; these nights fertile with water and humus prepare, plotting themselves into floods, theorized to the end of dreams.

* * *

We’ve come from the same bark, the same trees. The leaves rattle together with the same song. Only, where has the seed come from? And, moreover, who has worked this soil from which the trunk rises?

So it is with these nights. They track one another, look alike, but do not meet. They are often confused. But we must separate mica from graphite, jade from obsidian. We must come out of the earth and seed. Mostly we must scream out our lungs and wait for the echo. If it comes, then you are surely locked into their night. In ours, your voice is free and finds the wind.

* * *

The poet who does not seek to shape a body of work but gives time the room to sculpt his face to twiddle his teeth into rosary beads to recount the shudders of bombs in his soul

This poet makes risky appointments with the inky tips that aim to pierce his heart specifically focusing their vital force into a patch of sentence stretched across your white skin, girlfriend, when I am about to eat you

* * *

Dress rehearsal for the embattled word: the negotiation. It makes your hair stand with the same electricity. In packs, the clouds move forward and behind them, with the discretion of dreams in foment, the word finds its precise nature, watches its muscles stretch toward that which we cannot yet divine. Even without knowing its destination, standing in the sovereign night, the word is a wave in the Pacific, a volcano, a blade of mica slivered into time’s flesh.

At night, I don’t know where I have come from, but, I think, maybe, I myself am my destiny. The nets into which I fall are of ancient silk. Far from holding me back, they guide me toward the birth of my thoughts—which leave but loose change scattered across oblivion.

We fell, dropped like a dead leaf spinning tales for the passing breeze. The night like swamp mud that swallows each step, like bushes so thick across our faces that forward is no longer a direction. Here resting is the same as death.

FROM “FOUNTAIN”

_Bingué_¹

To Aya of Yop City

In the land of _Binje_ —Bingué to us—

The Grégoire, some Grégoire dreams heaped at the foot of the Eiffel Tower heartbeat in rhythm with the Metro
taste of attiéké still on his lips
still the oil of salted fish
no reflection of the sun
on the surface of the Seine
. . . Welcome!

In the land of _Binje_ —Bingué to us—

One-upped

The Grégoire, astray in the eye of the Arc Surfing the waves of an old computer: “It’s cold here But I’m okay But I’m okay But I’m okay . . .” Grégoire hides behind his @ sign because he has understood that lying is a required dignity Wisely he becomes the Champs-Elysées’ flattering griot

In the land of _Binje_ —Bingué to us—

Ventured

Three ventriloquist Grégoires soaking in the Colonial Debt
The whole colonial debt in a supermarket parking lot on a Saturday afternoon with the help

---

¹_Bingué_ is a pseudonym for Bingué Yopougon. The text by Bingué is reprinted with permission from the author and the publisher, Avenue Book Publishing.
of smiling African children
Tall girl dressed in her eternal hunger
In the land of
Binje
—Bingué to us—
Grégoires seized by the belt
Grégoires packed into police stations
And Grégoires
on the benches
searching through the pages of exams
searching for a return ticket in the final tallies
Grégoires failing—it’s that the soul has resigned
There in the Metro no end to the waiting
Their voices swallowed in the corridor
“We don’t give a fuck about you whites
WE DON’T GIVE A FUCK . . . !”
Grégoires in the night clubs
hips belted in nostalgia
Coups Décédés
Passed over
Rediscovered
—In the run-up to the fresh violence of Monday morning . . .
In the land of
Binje
—Bingué to us—
Grégoire
alone
chasing after the hours
and ahead
akin to his shadow
the back of
the meaning of things.

Henri-Michel Vérit is an Ivorian and Swiss poet born in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire. Vérit published two poetry books in 2015: Mil Neuf Cent Quatre-Vingt-Dix (Panafrika) and La nuit était notre seule arme (L’Harmattan). Mil Neuf Cent Quatre-Vingt-Dix was shortlisted for the Ivor Prize for Francophone Writing in Abidjan (2016) and the CoPrize in France (2016). La nuit était notre seule arme received a Mention Spéciale du jury, Bernard Dedali National Prize for Debut Writing in Abidjan (2016). Vérit studied economics at the University of Caen, France, received a BA in History and Politics at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, then an MA in African Studies and a PhD in Contemporary History, both at the University of Basel, Switzerland. He is currently a postdoc fellow in Sociology at the University of Basel.

THE POLITICS OF MYTH
Previewing Azo Vauguy’s Zakwato
I was introduced to Azo Vauguy and his book-length poem Zakwato while in Côte d’Ivoire as a Fulbright Scholar in 2016. I was working with writers there and studying literary responses to the ethnic violence and civil wars that had dominated the first decade of the new millennium.

Zakwato is a myth that Vauguy has adapted out of its oral keeping and ethnic language, Bété, into written French. The myth tells of a man’s psychic and physical transformation. Trusted by his village to watch for enemies, the man dozes off. His village is ambushed while he sleeps. Faced with the massacre, the man departs to find a distant blacksmith who covers his eyes. The man becomes Zakwato, a warrior who will see the oceans. It is in these tests of modesty that I show my bravery, that my genius expresses itself valiantly. I am valor.

Faced with the massacre, the man moves into the role of narrator, describing Zakwato’s travails while offering encouragement. . . .

Grégoires seizing—this is the title. Vauguy situates the Zakwato myth within the contemporary sociopolitical landscape. Bété land—and, by extension, the southern part of the country—is overrun. Those for whom the landscape of Zakwato’s journey, with its southern flora, fauna, and topography, is familiar, are those who belong. The hero, Zakwato, transforms himself from an inattentive guardian into a singularly focused defender of his homeland. He is a model for the “true”—the patriot—Ivorian, which is cast in terms of a Bété ethnocultural heritage.

Translating the Zakwato myth out of the Bété language and oral keeping into a version written in the more official and widely used French language, Vauguy claims some real estate in the national imaginary. It is important to note, however, that the work is neither simple political allegory nor propaganda. Zakwato is a compelling and thoroughly rendered poetic work. It is a resourceful work of documentation as much as invention; Vauguy’s knowledge of Bété culture and cosmology is deep. As poet Henri N’Kounou explains: these are “[n]ot [h]e knows because he has long sucked the breasts of the village, its tradition, before coming to settle in the city.”

There are several footnotes in what follows. They provide context for Bété expressions and it may help to read them first. I’ve provided an excerpt of Zakwato that I hope demonstrates Vauguy’s implicit argument: that the physical and spiritual dimensions of this land—much of Côte d’Ivoire’s fertile south—are in unique correspondence with Bété life. You will see in the excerpt that, as is common in oral forms, Vauguy switches points of view. He invokes Zakwato, then he speaks as Zakwato, and frequently he moves into the role of narrator, describing Zakwato’s travails while offering encouragement. . . .

ZAKWATO!
I am Zakwato, father of courage. Even reduced to ash, I rediscover myself in the waves of the oceans. Metamorphosis! Me-ta-morpho-pho—is fifth of the oceans. It is in these tests of modesty that I show my bravery, that my genius expresses itself valiantly. I am valor.

ZAKWATO!
I am eternity!!
People of Éburchi.2 Woooa!3
Here is Bagnon4

who is “truly” an Ivorian may be a fool’s errand. But, as with any nation-state construction, inclusion in the national imaginary provides cultural and, even, territorial protection. As the violence indicates, stakes are high. Côte d’Ivoire produces 30% of the world’s cacao, for instance, but political cronynomy has stranded much of the population in a fight to the death over crumbs. State policies meant to accommodate foreign investment often rewrite land tenure conventions and disrupt traditional and informal land-use agreements. Which communities will be dispossessed of land? Who will retain the right to a subsistence living? Who will benefit from development projects?

Much of Vauguy’s journalism career was dedicated to Notre Voie, a journal that supported the Front Populaire Ivoirien (FPI). The FPI was formed as an opposition party and contributed to the pressure that forced the Ivorian government into a multiparty system in 1990. At that time, Notre Voie was lauded for its human rights work. It exposed political corruption. In 2000, following a military coup d’état, FPI founder Laurent Gbagbo became the Ivorian president in a disputed election. However, in the fierce and bloody political fight for the presidency, Gbagbo’s push to democratize the country took a sharply nativist turn.

Gbagbo’s push for a “second independence movement,” as he called it, became increasingly xenophobic. Decolonizing meant not only burning bridges with France and much of the G8-led international community, but also chasing out those who had migrated from neighboring West African countries to support the agricultural sector as it was expanded for export markets. Many of these migrants belong to ethnic communities that exist across borders, communities both in and out of Côte d’Ivoire. And many of the migrants have resided in their Ivorian communities for multiple generations. Many, in fact, have just moved around within the country. Ethnic and factional violence gave way to civil war during Gbagbo’s presidency.

The first Ivorian civil war, from 2002 to 2007, ended with a 2008 reconciliation agreement. When Vauguy published Zakwato in 2009, the first presidential election in a decade was on the horizon. Vauguy opens the book with a note of dedication to Gbagbo, “whose counsel has guided my pen.” Vauguy addresses Gbagbo as Séplos, a pathfinding bird in the Bété culture. Both Vauguy and Gbagbo belong to the Bété ethnic group, which is one of the country’s largest. Located in the fertile south, the Bété have historically been excluded from the country’s political structure.

Vauguy appendez Pour que ma Terre ne dorme plus jamais / So that my Land never sleeps again to the title. Vauguy situates the Zakwato myth within the contemporary sociopolitical landscape. Bété land—and, by extension, the southern part of the country—is overrun. Those for whom the landscape of Zakwato’s journey, with its southern flora, fauna, and topography, is familiar, are those who belong. The hero, Zakwato, transforms himself from an inattentive guardian into a singularly focused defender of his homeland. He is a model for the “true”—the patriot—Ivorian, which is cast in terms of a Bété ethnocultural heritage.

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People of my country: Woooa!
Here is the man of refusal
Here is the man who carries, since
the cradle, the garlands of truth
People of Ébûrnie: Woooa!
Here is Bagnon

This day, it rained. It rained, rained, rained. It rained like there had never been the thousand sheaves of sun. It rained, rained, rained until it had blinded the eye of the earthworm! It rained. The sky having long inhaled all the sins the earth had cried. The sky wept.

. . .

Let us plunge thus into the entrails of my infant dreams, contemplate the beautiful plumage of the parrot and accompany the melodious songs of the wood pigeon who laments the stupidity of humans. Zidogplou,2 you who spread a cadaverous odor, listen to the weaver birds stitch their nests. They sew to the perfect rhythm of life. Goplou, kill death so that the soil of earth, that insatiable monster, never again devours its children.

ZAGRÈGUÉHIA6

Child-thing taken from the depth of the giant palm, centuries-old tree whose milk has served as beverage to my elders! Zagrèguéhia, let us hold hands, let us open our chests to the human warmth. That our hearts have long and brusquely entwined to create new brotherhood and new friendship. Let us embrace. Lift our hands flush with burning embers, fiery diadem of our existence. Zagrèguéhia! Child-thing, I carry to you the inextinguishable flame that sweeps the path of those who wrestle for freedom. Zagrèguéhia, sparks sprung from fireflies in the paddy fields, earthly stars which hushed my youth under the drunkenness of liberty, we are building together a new homeland.

May the martial song raise itself and give rhythm to the bravery of triumphant Kanègnon7 and may the voice rise that gives rhythm to the angry zeal of the rebel at the foot of the cliff.

. . .

At the cock’s first crow, Zakwato surrendered himself to the heart of the Ibo8 River’s waters. He knows that its mouth, plowed through by the sullen beings, those of negative vibrations, will help him to undergo life's circumstantial trials. Zakwato took the water in the hollow of his hands. Four times he gurgled to purify his heart and soul, then, jolted by the shivers browsing his body, Zakwato made incantations. Mysterious water that connects two worlds, those of the living and the dead, you crawl, since ancient times. No human memory can divine the date at which the placenta delivered you into this war of existence. Zakwato unsheathed and strung his bow in order to assess his skill at combat.

Father Bocali Bogo,9 guide my pace toward the distant smithy of Blègnon-Zato in order to assess his skill at combat.Africa . . .

Children of Ébûrnie, let’s peer onto the horizon that is flowering. Let’s go to the forge of Blègnon-Zato. Let us go to ingest the reinvigorating flame, the origin of ingenuity.

Zakwato walked. He aimed himself toward Blègnon-Zato’s forge, there where the sun never leaves its cocoon before blushing the iron. But while the way stretched out its one tongue, the chain of mountains, having their heads in the celestial vault, blocked his passage: Kohoun Gnènègbe10 the father of the father of my father. Gnènègbe the ancestor of ancestors spoke: “Courage quickens bravery and defines the fate of the hero. The strength of the chant uproots the mountains whose feet serve as beams to the house of the governor of the underground countries and also as the ridges that are a play space for the children of the angels.”

I am Zakwato. Zizimazi, that’s me. Gofo-Gnimwi15 the brilliant wading bird, that’s me! Zakwato the ungovernable, that is me; and who dares to face me faces a monster.

In order to cross the multiplying mountain ranges stretched like an iron curtain, Zakwato transformed himself into the long-legged bird. Gnènègbe! Dodohi!10 Come, ancestor. Father, touch my head subject to this ringing, stretch out your arms, rouse the courage of your double, Zakwato. The sky and the earth, in a few moments, will couple and their pleasure will produce the sweet fruit of universal covenants.

Notes

1. “Binje” is a play on the sound of the word “Bingüé.” Both refer to the same thing: France, the West, Europe. “Mbengué” is a word that Ivorians have borrowed from Cameroonians, who use it to talk about Europe. In Nouchi, a language that has emerged out of ethnic languages, onomatopoeias, conventional French, and slang in Abidjan, the largest city in the Ivory Coast, “Mbengué” became “Bingüé.” The poem’s dedication to Aya of Yop City refers to the graphic novel of that title written by Mar-guerite Abouet. Yop City is an abbreviation of Yopougon, which is one of Abidjan’s most populous suburbs. The poem references Grégoire. Grégoire is a character in Aya de Yopougon. He is a young man who goes out with one of Aya’s friends and has her believe that he lives in France. He is actually based in Kουmassi, another of Abidjan’s suburbs. Here he becomes that figure of a young Ivorian incessantly dreaming of Europe. In this poem his reverse includes coupé dalcé, a musical style. Though its innovators are Ivorian,
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We’re so grateful for the support that our readers around the world have shown the magazine and the poets we publish. We hope you will join us again now, in our 49th year, to keep The American Poetry Review going strong.

In 2020, we published six outstanding issues representing the work of 135 writers, including Keith S. Wilson, Carrie Fout- tain, Benjamin Garcia, Faylita Hicks, Jenny Browne, Ada Limón, and many more. We published the 23rd volume in the APR/-Honickman First Book series: Great Exodus, Great Wall, Great Party by Chessy Normile, selected by Li-Young Lee, and we awarded the 11th Annual Stanley Kunitz Memorial Prize to Joy Priest. Priest’s winning poem, “A Personal History of Breathing,” appears on the feature page of our September/October 2020 issue.

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Your donation pays poets. We believe that to have a thriving poetry community, we must support writers. We are grateful for donations of any amount, and all our donors are acknowledged in the magazine (unless you request anonymity). In thanks for your contribution, we are offering books by poets who have appeared in our pages this year: Kontemporary American Poetry by John Murillo (Four Way Books, paperback); Pulitzer Prize winner The Tradition by Jericho Brown (Copper Canyon Press, paperback); or the 2020 APR/Honickman First Book Prize Winner, Great Exodus, Great Wall, Great Party by Chessy Normile (APR, paperback). For a gift of $100, you receive one book; for $250, you receive two; for $500, you receive all three.

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Sincerely,
Elizabeth Scanlon, Editor

Told Fredoni is the author of two poetry collections, Century Worn (New Issues Press, 2018) and The Crucifix-Blocks (Tebot Bach, 2012). He has made French to English translations of books by Ivorian poet Josué Guébo, Think of Lampedusa (University of Nebraska Press, 2017) and My country, tonight (Action Books, 2016), as well as Ivorian poet Vanille Boun’s collection. The future has an appointment with the dawn (UNP, 2018), which was a finalist for the 2019 Best Translated Book Award in poetry and the 2019 National Translation Award. Fredoni’s translation of Bou’s collection Where it’s so bright in me is forthcoming from UNP. Fredoni’s poetry, translations, nonfiction, and criticism appear in Boston Review, Jacket2, Warscapes, Research in African Literatures, Best American Experimental Writing 2020, and elsewhere. He is the recipient of Fulbright and NIA fellowships. Find him at toldfredoni.com.
**Bubble**

Inside now fifty-three days
the everywhere child won’t listen
my head invented by water heaves up
pours forward I shake out the sparks
minnows hitting an edge
growing up after some strife
boss and stop and No still ringing
in the wake of slammed doors my mother left
to sit in the rusted Subaru never leaving
its sealed cavity enough I’d check
for the halo of yellow hair for the end
of her cigarette a tiny star she breathed from
to still the crashing waters
before she’d come back inside
defrost the chicken place the lettuce in a bowl
us looking from the other room
us at the table eating what she’d made
offering freely what we didn’t like
and she alone taking it

2020

In the past ten years, more CO₂ was emitted than
in all of human history up to the election of J.F.K.
—Elizabeth Kolbert

Our language our burping cars our cows which is
our problem the atmosphere receives
it is our luck our common lake the atmosphere
that holds our persons proliferating our non-thinking
under sky over land about the atmosphere
a middle place veined by trees as we fly planes
through its open mouth the word trespass abstract
among the hatching fires whole countries burning
the atmosphere taken in on a long slow breath
then huffed out on a wide sigh that feathers
into the arms of the atmosphere it is our luck
we’ve bated with neglect this our cradle
where the residue of our living big swims free

**He Says Cool Dress**

At the grocery store be a person talking to another
non-historical person just two people expressing social impulse
in a time of social distance under Easter egg balloons
a simple exchange the taste of oat milk lifted to a belt
be a polite say thank you person doing the work
of holding back hunger through purchase of foods
not managing for a moment the moment or expense
be a person in a grocery store
not a woman responding to a man glad at being seen
squinting also not hips not brackets for a horizontal scar
exit point the child if here would ask for gum ask ask
Dr. Pepper nut butter you don’t have to smile for the benefit
of others’ looking in you’re not a wife here a target nor
bright flower not 23 on an airplane holding
for his unloaded destination not a
washing machine his quarters not a body a snow drift
sinking toward a heavy state taken by the dozer of insomnia
you can be a person who quips thanks and goes out
solid on bare legs a player in the theatre of back and forth
an exercise in human dialog basic visibility proved.

**Blue Hours**

I think of my mother her hands in soil as soon as the ground thaws
she doesn’t own gloves she keeps her nails long and polished
do birds see her clawing up the earth or piecing it back together
she’s a small god to bees six states away I’m a service station
listening all day for the bell my child needing something I stand by
without a seed planted what is my art what is my taste
for fast and slow music how do I climb out of the crumpled ocean
at intervals gone smooth I think from the bottom at this hour
I filter feed on the dark parts this state of mind where the cold
fans out before the sequence ends starts over in better light

**Nest**

Saltine dinner licorice fried egg kept plain in the new house
while I sit I make eyelids while I stare at the hole in the floor
a liver is born and fingernails I move between large rooms
with large echoes a paralysis of boxes start where you sleep
was suggested for painting I wear a heavy mask I muzzle
next to you taping off windows sealing in heat the color
I choose boy blue it’s quiet I’m sky matching it doesn’t
talk back the ceiling holds but morning light powders the walls
first thing they go medication blue high volume plastic
bucket blue splashed with milk unpleasant as blue scrubs
outside the hospital you say it’s okay as I come crying
we can go back and change it this we can do.

Sara Michas-Martin is the author of Gray Matter, winner of the Poets Out Loud Prize and
nominated for a Colorado Book Award. Her essays and poems have appeared in The Ameri-
can Poetry Review, The Believer, Best New Poets, Copper Nickel, Denver Quarterly, Kenyon Review and elsewhere. She teaches creative writing at Stanford University.
Transfigure
Imitation is the highest
Form of flattening.
A woman on top is
A woman in charge.
Far be it from me, to stand in
The way of what a woman wants.
She said she doesn't want
No middle man.
Horizontal. Halfway between
A horse and a copycat god
I crossed over,
Switched my ass from her
Left-hand side to the right,
In my palm, a token of
Tokenism. It is unlike me
To turn into a coy boy
When aroused.
Ruler. Take measures.
At great lengths, tell me
The size of my extremity.
Within inches of life,
I wait with bated breath.
Even in silence
I am spoken for.

Garden of the Gods
As a matter of black,
I will trade a mountain
for a river. What does
that tell you about my makeup? I once met a
cowboy. I said,
let me
hold your body. You know
I'm good for it. He gave his
consent. I wore him out.

On paper thin sheets
I scissored a woman,
her expression hard
as a rock. She—a cliff
dweller, a figurehead
alien to my bizarre
beauty. I—a queer mare,
a stallion in the hands
of an angry god.
To be human is to be
homeless, the furthest
removed from grandeur.
I've met my makers in
flowerbeds of milkweed.
No birds-of-paradise
were there, only crows
dark as echoes, juniper
trees alive with want,
coyotes aroused by the
sound of cold glass. Between
me and the world is a wind
section of awe, inside me:
a desert of thistle. I've had
enough of the belief in
numberless fish, in
something other than
longhorn skulls.
Next to the vermilion
spires I feel small, my
nature second to none.
Watch the gods scurry like
daddy long-legs, moved
by a higher power.

springtime again

after Sun Ra and Danez Smith’s
“summer somewhere”
again, a spring, in the step of boys
headed to meet their maker.
a swagger, a darkness sprung
with the obsession of flies.
sunflower seeds litter god’s front porch,
the yard overrun with dandelions,
yellow starbursts picked over for the pinks.
again, snow, angels. girls named hope and faith,
their braids capped with black and gold beads,
glimmer of fireflies affixed with rubber bands.
the stork is actually a blue-footed
booby. the babies. come alive.
summer and sally walker
swaddled in brown liquor.
johnnie takes his spirits neat,
summer and sally walker
swaddled in brown liquor.
johnnie takes his spirits neat,
summer and sally walker
swaddled in brown liquor.

why must I chase the c.r.e.a.m?
because cat rules everything around me
young blood in young world of
pussy-whipped buffoons. i see you;
can you see me watchin’ you lovin’ it?
whether microscope or telescope
my body of work is accustomed to gaze.
an in-between state contributes greatly
to a country of longing. when in flux,
i have a strong constitution.
i no longer have a home in the present.
my sleeping bag splayed on dante’s fire
escape the circles of hell are a spenserian
stanza, a rhyme scheme of ugh! na nah na nah.
when judgment comes, ain’t nowhere to run.

spring snow is how time disciplines its children.

pride cometh before the fall.
The redhead oaks made our
blood boil. i don’t believe god
was ready to call me home but
now was as good a time as any.
when asked my regrets,
i just remembered, remembered
freedom was life’s great lie,
remembered body is another
word for cage, remembered
night knew my name before
i ever had reason to fear.

some days are measured by caesuras,
some hours by snakes in the grass.
only a foolish king would
mistake the forest for the trees.

this is how we are reborn:
again resurrection sunday
we pour out. a trail of cadillacs,
rabbit feet and gator teeth hung
from rear view mirrors. the trunks
thumping so loud it’s enough
to wake the dead, to dust the dirt
from shoulders, to make room
for the elbows, and capsized knees.
in the end, we knew what was ahead
post-apocalypse was our present tense
we sold key chains at the pearly gates,
light-up toys, and airbrushed t-shirts
two for ten or three for twenty. the hustle
never dies it just changes, and the more
things change, the more they stay the same.
Phillis Wheatley Takes Turing Test

with nods to Franny Choi and Antonio Porchia

We will begin now if you are ready.
I was born awake.

Are you game?
No, but I can tell
You are a boar.

What is your name?
I am not subject
To definition, or any
Sound you might make
To beckon me.

How is the weather?
It is hard to breathe today.
Air, as unnoticed as necessary,
Often has its way with me.

Are you a man?
A man is an unruly horse
Contained in a tortoise shell.
I am no more the rib of a man
Than smoke is a signal of war.

Are you white?
Whatever supremacy
Governs this moment
Is the tool by which
I color my threat.

How old are you?
As old as any number
Divisible by conquest.

Who do you answer to?
Amorem.

Are you Christian?
Height nor depth,
Nor any other creature,
Shall be able to separate
Us from the love of God.

So, are you a believer?
Faith is an ocean of rage
At rest, a merciful calm
That thumps in my chest.

Where are you from?
A darling collection of cells
Blood-dazzled with sunrays,
From two beings welded in delight
From the lull of lullabies
Earth hums to split open.

Where do you call home?
My body—the mirage
Of a wooden bowl with
Water held in its mouth.

Letter from the End of the World

after Lisel Mueller

The reason no longer matters,
The why, the how—irrelevant,
The politicians, the smooth
Of my love’s bald head, him
Saying, it’s okay to be sad.

The point is I miss crab leg boils,
Fried chicken, and french fries.
I miss dragon fruit, pineapple,
Cantaloupe, and honeydew.

The point is I stew in the house
Of my body, navel a small bowl,
The rooms full of funk, my face a
Window to air out dirty bottoms.

At first the mountains seemed
Stone cold, gathered together
To bid me good riddance.
The trees, in rare form, grew tired
Of everything I represent.

But I learned to pussyfoot around,
To lower my eyes when I cough, to never
Throw a rock and hide my hand.

I learned death is no excuse,
That I am what I take for granted,
The sun does not owe me a thing.

The point is I’ve yet to see a horse cry.
Pardon me. I wasn’t right to begin with,
Race—a product of a sick imagination.

I started out as a girl
Without a shadow of a freedom,
My pocketbook and opposable thumbs
At the ready; at the end of the world
I was bananas, a woman
With a mouth full of golds.

If you don’t like this ending,
Implore the children to make up
One of their own.

Alison C. Rollins currently works as a Visiting Assistant Professor at Colorado College. She is a 2019 National Endowment for the Arts Literature fellow. A Cave Canem and Callaloo fellow, she is also a 2016 recipient of the Poetry Foundation’s Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Fellowship. In 2018, she was the recipient of a Rona Jaffe Writers’ Award and in 2020 the winner of a Pushcart Prize. Her debut poetry collection, Library of Small Catastrophes (Copper Canyon Press), was a 2020 Hurston/Wright Foundation Legacy Award nominee.
On Thursday, December 29, 2020, Jasmine Dumile posted a caption and photo of her husband, Daniel Dumile, to his Instagram page. A loving and thoughtful statement, Jasmine’s short, paragraph-long message would reverberate throughout the music world with heartbreaking resonance.

Begin all things by giving thanks to THE ALL!

To Dumile

The greatest husband, father, teacher, student, business partner, lover and friend I could ever ask for. Thank you for all the things you have shown, taught and given to me, our children and our family. Thank you for teaching me how to forgive being and give another chance, not to be so quick to judge and write off. Thank you for showing how not to be afraid to love and be the best person I could ever be. My world will never be the same without you. Words will never express what you and Malachi meant to me, I love both and adore you always. May THE ALL continue to bless you, our family and the planet.

All my Love
Jasmine

Transitioned October 31, 2020

The immediate response around the world was utter shock and disbelief. Daniel Dumile, aka MF DOOM, was dead. In the months since his death (really ever since Dumile first emerged as DOOM in the late ’90s), there has been much ink spilled and keys clicked, in an attempt to “sum up” DOOM’s work and the complex mythological world that animated it. Famously, DOOM was never photographed without his signature mask. Dumile would create different characters for the many releases in his prolific discography. Much like the MF DOOM character, monikers like Viktor Vaughn and King Geedorah each came equipped with their own backstories and specific mythologies. To think that Daniel Dumile, the man, “inside himself” into a myth is not to listen to him closely enough. More than anything, MF DOOM and the cosmos that he occupied were the product of Daniel Dumile’s imagination ignited by the cultural touchstones of his youth.

In a 2011 Redbull Music Academy lecture with journalist Jeff “Chairman” Mao, DOOM gave detailed insight into his approach to creating characters and his own role in orchestrating the stories that he act out:

The idea of having different characters is really to get the storyline across. The idea of having one different character all the time, to me, makes—to me—the story boring. I get that mainly from novels, that style of writing, or movies, where there’s multiple characters that carry the storyline. It might be written by one director or writer or directed by one director, but there’s multiple characters. You need it. So the more, the better with me. This way I could come from one point of view, another point of view. They might even disagree on certain things. I think a lot of times, especially in hip-hop, artists get pigeonholed into being, “You’re the guy.” It’s kind of limiting in a way. I look at it like I’m the writer. Same way with the skits. Have the record tell a little intervals and cut scenes. Everything flows better when I got multiple characters to portray the story.

In the years leading up to the 1999 release of Operation Doomsday, Dumile was staring down age 30, refining his craft as an MC and beatmaker and facing a significant career shift. As the famous and tragic story goes, in the early ’90s, DOOM’s former group KMD was signed to a major deal with Elektra Records. Following some minor success with their debut album, Mr. Hood, the group would run into some serious challenges with the (attempted) release of their sophomore album, Black Bastards. During the time the album was being created, DOOM’s little brother and KMD member, Dengilizwe Dumile (aka DJ Subroc), was struck by a car and killed on the Long Island Expressway. An unbelievably sudden and cruel event, Subroc’s passing was the first in a series of events that would ultimately destroy KMD.

Once the album was finished, it was packaged with a cover image that depicted a cartoon of a little Black Sambo being lynched with the album’s title spelled out in the ground below the gallows. As the story goes, in 1994, Terri Rossi, a former columnist at Billboard, got wind of the image and penned a critical article, blasting the group and the album. Elektra used this minor controversy as an excuse to shelve the album and drop the group from the label. Just like that, Daniel Dumile was back to being a regular MC, no more magazine spreads, no more videos on Yo! MTV Raps, but he still held on to a mastery of the craft of MCing that got him there once, and a deeper exploration of that craft would take him to even higher heights of fame and creativity than he had ever reached with KMD. That ascendance would require a great deal of devotion to the inner workings of his own imagination.

On the evening of Thursday, April 24, 1997, DOOM made a guest appearance for listeners who hadn’t heard DOOM since the KMD days—the contrast in styles had to have been shocking. DOOM cracks jokes with Stretch, Bob, and the crew in the studio, and freestyles, spitting the rhyme that will end up on Operation Doomsday as “Go with the Flow.” While Stretch cuts up the instrumental versions of Kool G. Rap’s “Truly Yours” and “Road to the Riches” here, DOOM’s verses are dynamic and flush with allusions and pop-culture references. His delivery is loose, but there’s an underlying dexterity that reveals itself as he goes on. About two minutes in, he requests the instrumental to Cappadonna’s “79 Mentalty.” Over RZA’s minimal, drumless track, DOOM goes off, delivering the opening verse of the song that will become “Hey!” and introducing whoever was listening that night into the twisted world of the metal-faced supervillain:

I only play the games that I win at.
And stay the same with more rhymes than there’s ways to skin cats
Matter of fact, let me rephrase:
With more rhymes than ways to fill setimes in these days
With the path of the black one.
He the Supervillain.
He wrecks clubs for deif in a drunken stupor, chillin’
Ready and willin’ to inadvertently foil that
Plass of them rhymers, they whiners like spoiled brats
Who get no more shitter flows than snotty nose?
And holds mics like he knows karate body blows?
Nobody knows the trouble I see
From the MPV’s fly dirty tailins the eye bubble eye thirty
For the record; this is some shit I just thought of, y’all
Science fiction that’s not permissible in no court of law
Zounds!
I came to rock mics in 3-D . . .

In 1997, underground rap in New York City was flourishing. Small but mighty indie labels like Bobbo’s Fondle ‘Em, Rawkus, Tru Criminal, Raw Shack, Hydra, and more were pressing thousands of singles on 12” vinyl. These releases were not only artistically challenging, they were the core of an active network of venues, record stores, whose ethos positioned itself as a hostile opposition to mainstream rap, which was on its commercial ascent at the time. It was against that backdrop that DOOM became DOOM. Having already gained and lost a major label deal during the KMD days, DOOM was embraced by the underground. His idiosyncratic style and complex wordplay were a natural fit in a scene that valorized talented mavericks. From his first two singles, “Greenbacks/Go with the Flow” and “Dead Bent/Gas Drawls/Hey!” to his now-legendary performance at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in ’98, DOOM’s rare appearances at the time were memorable, and this activity would set the stage for his debut release and monumental second act.

Released sometime in 1999 (the official date has been disputed) on Bobbo’s Fondle ‘Em Records, Operation Doomsday is a rich and singular work. The narrative of the adventures of a diabolical supervillain is filtered through a unique set of cultural touchstones and references that are specific to Daniel Dumile as a Black Gen X-er who grew up on Marvel Comics, Saturday morning Hanna-Barbera cartoons, and Hip Hop. The album opens with “The Time We Faced DOOM,” a skit featuring a sample of dialogue from Wildstyle, Charlie Ahearn’s 1983 dramatized documentation of New York’s early Hip Hop scene. In the skit, graffiti artists Fab Five Freddy, Daze Ellis, and Lee Quiñones debate whether or not Lee should perform at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in ’98, DOOM’s rare appearances at the time were memorable, and this activity would set the stage for his debut release and monumental second act.

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comics, a rich repository that he would pull from frequently. Speaking with Jeff “Chairman” Mao for a Redbull Music Academy interview in 2011, DOOM explains how the late night Hip Hop radio mix shows of his youth inspired him to begin building these skits into his albums:

“We used to listen to these late-night radio show. This was like ’81, WHBI was a station out of New Jersey. I believe. It was the Zulu Beats Show, that’s what it was. And they used to just spin breaks, but they’ll have voiceovers on pieces on top of it. But then you’d have “Funky Drummer” or “Apache” rocking, and then you’d have like an old comedy joint on there, a Monty Python piece would be playing. I always found that real bugged out, because I ain’t know where it was coming from. It was like another layer of digging. Not only did you have to find out where the break was from. You get to figure out, where’d they get that voice, you know? It was all interesting to me. I always like to put a bit of that in to make that style.”

DOOM’s unique ear for sampling would also play a role in shaping the album’s instrumental DNA as well. At a time when most of his underground rap peers were still engaged in an arms race centered on gathering up samples from increasingly obscure funk, soul, jazz, psych-rock, and library music, DOOM pulled generous loops from popular mainstream acts like Sade and Steely Dan alongside samples from smooth ’80s R&B acts like Atlantic Starr and The Deele. These well-known ear worms were molded into rough but sweet sonic backdrops for the metal-face villain to get busy on. On “Doomsday,” the lush keyboard chords from Sade’s “Kiss of Life” and the rugged drums and sharp scratches from Boogie Down Productions’ “Poetry” collide in a perfectly imperfect way. The keys hold down the tune’s center of gravity, while the drums bump and stumble beneath loosely. DOOM lets loose a wide spray of disjointed imagery, grand boasts, straight-up threats, and wholesome pop-culture references:

“Bound to go three-platinum, came to destroy rap
It’s a intricate plot of a b-boy strapped
Feminist cats get kidnapped
Then release a statement to the press, let the rest know who did that
Metal Fist terrorists claim responsibility
Broken household name usually said in hostility
Um . . . what is MF? You silly
I’d like to take “Means to the End” for two milli’
“Doo-doo-doo-doo-doo!” That’s a audio daily double
Rappers need to fall off just to save me the trouble, yo
Watch your own back came in and go out alone, black
Stay in the zone—turn H2O to Cognac.

Arguably the most electrifying cut on the album, “Rhymes Like Dimes” showcases DOOM’s twin mastery of the art of rhyming and sampling. Taking a four-bar snippet of Greg Phillinganes’ synth solo from Quincy Jones’ “One Hundred Ways,” DOOM loops the passing section, molding it into an infinitely catchy track.

“A lot of ’em sound like they in a talent show
So I give ’em something to remember like the Alano
The game is not only dangerous, but it’s most strange
I sell rhymes like dimes
The one who mostly keep cash but brag about the broken times
Joking rhymes, like the “If you just happy to see me?” trick
Classical slapstick rappers need Chopstick
A lot of ’em look like they in a talent show
So I give ’em something to remember like the Alano

For the track’s outro, Bobbito giddily grabs the mic, giving shout-outs to “mashed potatoes” and laughing like a maniac. It’s an incredibly silly moment but it speaks to the charm of the album. With its cartoonish skits, the rough but impassioned vocal performances, your homeboy getting on the mic and saying some goofy shit, Operation Doomsday sounds like the rap tapes and demos that I and countless kids like me would make in basements and bedrooms around the world. At a time when rap (underground and mainstream) was starting to sound a little too “professional,” DOOM’s imperfectly perfect loops and rough-sounding vocal takes, coupled with his obsession with cartoons and comics, reminded us that before rap was “a grown-man sport” it was often a childhood endeavor.

In his wonderful 2009 profile on DOOM for The New Yorker, Ta-Nehisi Coates points to Hip Hop’s confrontational nature and the rich ’70s and ’80s pop cultural stew that Daniel Dumile grew up absorbing as foundational influences on the DOOM character. Hip-hop feeds on the aggression of post-pubescent males. And Dumule draws on the aggression of a particular type of male who came of age in a particular era. When he claims to “eat rappers like part of a complete breakfast,” when he challenges other m.c.s to battle for Atari cartridges, when he yells “Zoinks!”—mid-rhyme, he’s signalling those who grew up with Saturday morning cartoons and “The Dukes of Hazzard.”

In the same piece, DOOM articulates to Coates that for him, MCing is a product of this enduring childhood impulse. A little bit of his youth that lies at the heart of his adult craft.

“When I do it, I feel like I’m thirteen again,” Dumile told me. “I remember, when we were that age, everybody was nice, and everybody was getting nicer. That same well of energy we were drawing from then, I go to there. . . . To me it feels like that time was richer, every second was really five minutes. Being older now, grown, I’m like, what do we really do that’s fun? I’m kind of sorry when you think about it. What could I rhyme about? Let me see, um, I gotta pay the rent today.

It is on the equally creepy and campy opus “Hey!” that the DOOM character fully melds with (or emerges from?) the confines of Daniel Dumile’s childhood psyche. The drums enter into the song’s intro like they calling those who grew up with Saturday morning cartoons and “The Dukes of Hazzard.”

Joking rhymes, like the “Is you just happy to see me?” trick
The one who mostly keep cash but brag about the broker times
I sell rhymes like dimes
The game is not only dangerous, but it’s most strange
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John Morrison is a writer, DJ, and sample-flipper from Philadelphia. A regular contributor to The Wire and NPR’s All Songs Considered, his latest deep-dive essay on The Roots’ Do You Want More!!!??! is out now from Halfway Books.

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R.I.P. MF DOOM, his son, Malachi, and his brother, Subroc. Peace to his wife Jasmine and everyone who loved him.
Unhoused from my own body, sickness comes, hollows me, leaves. Survival, they call lucky, weighs heavy as a gravestone with its asking for a new language, but I go on borrowing

tired and taxing wordage as a way to guard this disembodiment, hovering above the wilted wreath of being. Continuance isn’t a tombstone but it carries a millstone:

why alive when so many dead? Why breath, pulse, limbs mobile, speech at least sputtering when so many have shuttered, been shunted into the dark bed? Where is the lullaby
to pack this wound, heal this hollow? I’m alive. You’re dead. Where is the word for this despair?

Simone Muench is the author of six full-length books including Wolf Centos (Sarabande, 2014). Her recent, Suture, was co-written with Dean Rader (BLP, 2017). She is an editor of They Said: A Multi-Genre Anthology of Contemporary Collaborative Writing (BLP, 2018) and founder of the HB Sunday Reading Series in Chicago.

Jackie K. White recently retired as Professor of English at Lewis University, where she served as advisor for Jet Fuel Review. She has published three chapbooks, along with the forthcoming Hex & Howl (BLP, 2021), a collaboration with Simone Muench. Their poems appear in Bennington Review, Denver Quarterly, Pleiades, The Journal, Ecotone, and others.

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.
ON SELF-CENSORSHIP, FAITH, AND THE UNWRITING

G.C. WALDREP

Many years ago, at an arts residency set in the capacious grounds of a former country house in the north of Ireland, I attracted the ire of another poet. The poet was a senior poet from my country—someone whose work I admired. He seemed to ground his antagonism in what he inferred and imputed about my religious beliefs. The gist of his critique seemed to be that a religious person could not be an honest poet. The way he expressed this was in terms of self-censorship: you cannot, he told me, be an honest poet and an honest religious person at the same time, because your religion would be censoring your poetry, or vice versa. The implication seemed to be that either my poetry was dishonest or my faith was. When I asked him for an example, he cited sexuality: “No religious person can be honest about sexuality.” This was news to me.

Eventually his antagonism became severe enough that I avoided locations where I might encounter him. It bolstered at dinner one night, at table. A painter from Belfast reproved him sharply for being a bully and a boor. He left his residency, early, a few days later.

Prior to that, I had protested that I had never knowingly censored any of my writing, on the grounds of sexuality or anything else. But his accusation stayed with me, as a question.

My writing is generally intuitive: I take dictation, in the Spierian sense. I don’t plan poems. If I know where a poem is aiming more than a line or two ahead of the act of composition, that is—a lot to know. (And the more I know, or think I know, the more likely the writing will veer into prose, which is the idiom of knowing, as opposed to seeking or receiving.) Sometimes, I plan an experience that is meant, with any luck or grace, to foster poems: opting to spend a month at a former country house in the north of Ireland, for example. Only rarely do I set myself a topic and then try to work within that topic. Usually this results in my scholarly instincts kicking in—too many years working towards a Ph.D.—and the results are prose.

For a poet who is a Christian—for any artist whose faith inheres within a prescriptive religious tradition—there is this nagging question, I mean about the uses to which we or others put the word. In Christianity we are admonished that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” That’s a heady amount of baggage for language to carry, since every word descends, on some real or imagined level, from that ur-Word.

We are also admonished to “try the spirits, whether they are of God.” In Christianity there are many spirits but only one Spirit. Discernment is called for.

For me, as someone who hopes to be an honest poet as well as an honest believer, the question is not one of self-censorship. It is a question of trial. (Fortunately, one has a long run of guides, from Ephrem the Syrian to Mechthild of Magdeburg to Flannery O’Connor.)

For me, this trial is part of the revision process—often an integral aspect of that process. Yes, one is evaluating nouns, verbs, and images in terms of vividness, gestures in terms of music, form in terms of content, content in terms of form. But there is also the question of how a given poem is to be read, if not in the Spirit than in light of that Spirit, by me or by anyone.

There is a sense in which all poems are true, on their own terms. I’ve never been persuaded by arguments concerning poetic “authenticity.” How can a machine made of words—Williams’s definition—be anything other than what it is? Poets can be inauthentic, as human actors—and I suppose some are, at presumably the same rate as other human actors (although somehow we expect more, and better, of poets). But a machine is not “authentic.” It either works, or else it does not, or somewhere in between, depending on its design and handler.

Poems are “true” because they exist, as artifacts in language. Sharable artifacts. What we know about the poet, context, or circumstance may or may not enter into our reading of a given poem. Certainly I bring a different set of expectations, associations, and desires to a poem than you do.

A few years after my sojourn in Ireland, I had a heated conversation with another poet, a friend, who accused me of “not throwing enough away” (of my draft work). As this friend was, at the time, suspended between his first and second book with no outcome in sight, I suggested that perhaps he was throwing away too much. But then this question of self-censorship came up again. No, he told me, discarding mediocre work was not “self-censorship.”

What else could it be?

For the record, I set aside most of my writing. Because at some point, it fails the tests—the trials—of revision, the re-visioning that is an essential part of any artwork’s journey from the artist to the world. One of those tests (or sets of tests) is craft. But I also take the spiritual trial seriously. Is a poem speaking fully from or towards the most authentic expression of my experience—including my faith experience—that it can? (“Authenticity” used here in terms of congruence, not a static congruence but a quickened, even anticipatory congruence: certainly a communicable congruence.) If it isn’t, why not? Where’s the difficulty?

I’ve written elsewhere that I don’t write directly, that is to say in terms of discursive anecdote, about my life in a religious community.

That’s because I take seriously the otherness of the lives of my coreligionists. They did not sign on to a high level of spiritual intimacy in order that I feature them as characters in poems. On the rare occasion someone or something recognizable seems to feature in a poem of mine, I always ask the other person(s) how they might feel about my representation of some shared experience. Mostly I avoid writing those poems, or I write them as honestly as I can from within my own limited perspective.

Is this censorship? Or is it deference? To me, it seems like a trial of spirit: a deference to the irreducible otherness of others. And to consensual intimacy.

For me, the poem—the memorable poem, the valuable poem—not only recognizes that consensual intimacy: it extends it, as the poem moves from hand to hand, mind to mind, heart to heart. The poem is a consensual enlargement of intimacy and experience.

As it happened, at the time I was sojourning in Ireland, I was plotting—literally—a long poem, a poem-as-experienced by one of the members of one of my great-grandmothers. She was born in a small town in Pennsylvania to a working-class family. She found she was pregnant shortly after her 14th birthday, was turned out of the house, and lived for some years roughly in Trenton, New Jersey. There is some evidence suggesting she worked as a prostitute. She certainly became the moll of a local gangster. He beat her, and eventually she fled—from a Hoboken tenement—embarking on a long odyssey that took her to many American cities. She marched for women’s suffrage in Minneapolis. She kept her child with her (often one step ahead of what passed for social services in those days). She worked as a milliner. She may also have continued to work the streets, which would explain how she met up with an older widow in the Boston suburbs who converted her to Mary Baker Eddy’s Christian Science. By the time I knew her—briefly, in earliest childhood—she was what one might call a dowdy Christian Science missionary woman. As far as we—me, my cousins, my mother, and my aunts—knew, she had only one sibling. Later, one by one, we found out about the others.

I have some training as a professional genealogist, and after years of trying to work out the questions of who our family child (she, my great-grandmother, was a conniver of disinformation; she faked the family Bible entries), I nailed it. The Pennsylvania Department of Vital Statistics coughed up my grandmother’s birth certificate, which they’d be withholding for a century. Was it the Trenton gangster she later married, whom she ran away from? Had it been my child (she, my great-grandmother, was a conniv-
interviewed my grandmother’s one surviving first cousin in the Philadelphia suburbs. She spoke hesitantly but remembered my great-grandmother’s brief, extravagant streaks across her childhood, the scandal those caused. She, too, asked me not to write about this. “Not until I’m dead,” she specified.

It is a poet’s job, first and foremost, to write. “Not until I’m dead,” she asked me not to write about this. “Not until I’m dead,” she said, to me, and it ended in me. As some poems do.

I went to my bishop and expressed some of the concerns I was having, the question of whether laying this project down was a betrayal of vocation. His answer was, “If this is truly part of your vocation, then you will have a spiritual argument for the necessity of the work.” His instruction was to seek that argument and get back to him once I’d found it.

But my argument was lame. It was, essentially, “this is a really cool story I have access and some notional ‘right’ to through my family connection and it would be interesting to pursue it.” My bishop’s response was to nod and say, “Is that enough?”

One of my aunts called back with a different question, or set of questions. “And if you do this, and I learn something new about my mother, my grandmother—what will that do for me, or to me? How will that change who I am, the life I led, the lives I could have led?”

Those are good questions, too. I ask them of myself every time I encounter a work of art or literature that seems powerful to me, that exerts power over my being. I ask them every time my experience—spiritual or otherwise—leads me back into the presence of my God.

I don’t use any of the names here for fear of doing, here, what I decided not to do, in the event, in the poem.

I could tell you I abandoned this project because of my bishop’s concern, or because of my relatives’. I could tell you that finally solving the mystery of my grandmother’s paternity—at least in the eyes of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania—drained some of the mystery and urgency away. I could tell you I didn’t get the grant I expected. I could tell you that about this time, a composer I admired released a song cycle (David Lang’s Match Girl Passion) which used the literary device I was planning to deploy as the heart and scaffolding of my own libretto, Andersen’s narrative of his. I could tell you I struggled with this as ausable, or necessary, or edifying, to every person, in every moment. Is one lesson, here.

Was this “self-censorship”? It certainly didn’t feel like self-censorship, if self-censorship is a process of obfuscation accompanied by guilt or blame. It felt a bit like running a race—exhilarating, then exhausting, then, finally, done, leaving me satisfied but with nothing to share, no artifact to pass from hand to human eye or hand. In this case, the journey, the experience of the journey, began in me, and it ended in me. As some poems do.
Let us be quick to claim. Gnaw gnaw like an orchard in the grip of an August thirst. What knowledge took us this far, towards the intromission of tenancy. It clings to me like a crown. A legible devotion, the angles that bring into focus all our truest blames. You may run your hand over them if you like. Consider the lips of animals as one more check signed by God, one more IOU. I present their wars to the assembly which falls silent for a brief period because we have so many wars, why not feast. Early fruit of the season split and roasting on a fire the world obscures with its ragged hem. Strong muscles of the throat meant for wings goes one argument, not necessarily mine but how the scars constrict when paraphrased, by oil or wine. This all takes some time as I’m sure you know. I place my rage in my bag. It is not what you think.

Writing on the nature of friendship Aelred fell deep into the archaic crush of prescriptive fear. Of course he was drawing from nature, what else is there to draw from, mixed pigments sweating in their wooden bowls. Soon it will be possible to take the life of a man you’ve never seen, a form of taxidermy that relies upon the soul as its armature, then clothes it. As with gratitude. Glass eyes where the actual eyes had been. It's hard to remember isn’t it glass as something new, glass as one substitute for the natural tendency to shine a bright light, or turn away. Be sure to record all the shadows cast by the beast, that is, by the assembly when it settles into the posture of appetite. Sketch every one. In the meantime practice the management of water, as of fire. The difference is, one can fall into water (though of course one can also fall into fire). Ropes tied around the perimeter to prevent any such accident. But they are flammable too in turn. And soluble, should they remain submerged.

I’m talking about ropes then. Ropes now are made from synthetics that will last forever. Watch for them in paintings by the Renaissance masters, Bartolomé Bermejo perhaps, how he manages to burn without painting actual fire which is also something ropes can do when they run too fast through your hands. Or paintings of ropes through paintings of hands, little physics experiments. It had been Lent but that was some time ago, spurned archive. Little moan, disavow thirst’s hollow fingers, a foaming thread. And I said *lustral unmeasured skeins*, or so the chronicle insists. It is possible. I do not recall the moment clearly. It is alleged the Victorian children’s author Anne Jane Cupples once corresponded with Darwin about a possible position for her husband, and later Darwin “corresponded with her about her observations of emotions in dogs.” This seems a fair trade. There are so many more forms knowledge can take than fire, a problem photosynthesis tries to solve. We watch it submerging the orchard. We watch it strip thorns from the raspberry canes. Not like in the story where the dead man remains dead, not like that at all. Although that is a story each of us knows by heart, indeed carries with us in each heart. That little parable of where the blood flowed and where we caught it in our various receptacles of glass, stone, wood. This is text, it could just as well have been blade flying through theories of parthenogenesis. I will now stoop to sweep up the dead flies that have collected in the forecourt. Nothing else.

G.C. Waldrep’s most recent books are *feast gently* (Tupelo, 2018), winner of the William Carlos Williams Award from the Poetry Society of America, and the long poem *Testament* (BOA Editions, 2015).
My father and I sit at a sushi bar in my new city sampling three different kinds of salmon nigiri.

He tells me about a great funeral speech he recently heard a son give for his father.

The speech was structured around regrets everyone assumed the father didn’t have, interspersed with hilarious stories involving boys driving the family van and fishing mishaps.

The ivory salmon is pale and impossibly soft.

The sliver of steelhead, orange enough to pretend it’s salmon. How else to say it.

I am my father’s only child, and he is my mother.

We dip our chopsticks into a horseradish paste dyed green and called wasabi. I know his regrets.

I could list them. But instead at his funeral I will talk if I can talk about nights like this, how good it felt just to be next to him, to be the closest thing he had.

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I. VALUES

In Harold Bloom's introduction to his selections for *The Best of the Best American Poetry, 1988–1997*, he claims that the 75 poems he’s chosen for inclusion pass what he calls his “personal test for the canonical: I have reaped them with pleasure and with profit.” He notes that, of the ten volumes he was asked to select from, one is not represented at all: the *Invention of America* Poems. He claims that he did not have a single poem worthy of inclusion. He writes:

“That 1996 anthology is one of the provocations for this essay, since it seems to me a monumental representation of the enemies of the aesthetic who are in the act of overwhelming us. It is of a badness not to be believed, because it follows the criteria new operative: what matters most are the race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, and political purpose of the would-be poet. I ardently wish I were being hyperbolic, but in fact I am exercising restraint, very difficult for a lifelong aesthete at the age of sixty-seven. One cannot expect every attempt at poetry to rival Chaucer and Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth, Whitman and Dickinson, Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane. But those poets, and their peers, set the measure: any who aspire to poetry must keep such exemplars always in mind.”

A glance at the table of contents for the 1996 anthology gives a sample of what Bloom must find displeasing—I see poets that were instrumental to my own development as a poet, including Marilyn Chin, Wanda Coleman, Kimiko Hahn, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Gary Soto. I note, also, that the 1996 anthology was guest-edited by Adrienne Rich, who, in her selections and introduction, takes a stand (both political and aesthetic) that infuriates Bloom’s inclinations.

Responses to Bloom’s (at least in my opinion) profoundly obtuse and blinkered view of what constitutes a good poem abound, swift and incisive. The entire exchange is available in *Boston Review*, with responses from a number of poets, including Mark Doty, Thilias Moss, and David Mura. Rita Dove responds in a pithy two paragraphs, saying, “I am tired of taking time to address some frightened cultural fundamentalists.” She announces, “If I define greatness as literature that infuriates Bloom’s inclinations, I’m learning to can—compute, to circumscribe.”

This is one instance in a long and ongoing history of assessing the merits of literature. As soon as we subscribe to a hierarchy, we circumscribe ourselves within a value system. This is perhaps the great comundrum of art—once we define a term, we impose a limit, thereby inviting both orthodoxy and transgression. Our concept of “art” or “poem” or “novel” is, then, always in flux, and I think we’d agree that this is how art renews itself—through those who dare to challenge those terms. The making of art, and the evaluation of it, is always an act of self-definition. No wonder, then, that we are accused of navel-gazing, of living in a bubble or an ivory tower, of that ultimate death sentence within a capitalist society—our impracticality. Once, at a dinner party, I was seated next to a woman who had spent her professional career as a lawyer and now, in her retirement, had decided to return to school to earn a master's degree in history. She was a few weeks into the semester and utterly disillusioned with what happens in a graduate-level humanities seminar. “Problematize!” she shouted. “That’s all these students want to do—problematize things. Don’t we have enough problems to solve without actively seeking out new things to problematize?” But it is hard not to do that. We are confined by a tradition, though we learn through imitation, our job is never simply to do what is already being done. Skilled writers may imitate what they see in a journal or magazine with aims of being published in that same journal or magazine and thus contribute to the zeitgeist. But the goal of any artist is always greater than this. Prolific publishing may provide immediate rewards, monetary or abstract, but in either case there are far easier ways of making a living. Donald Hall opens his essay “Poetry and Ambition,” in which he famously coins the phrase “the McPoem,” by saying, “I see no reason to spend your life writing poems unless your goal is to write great poems.” Or, as Gwendolyn Brooks writes in “Song of Winnie,” written in the persona of Winnie Mandela, “I am tired of little tight-faced poets sitting down to shape perfect unimportant pieces.” Implicit in these formulations is a distinction between a poem that is serviceable (publishable) and a poem that is great. Greatness transgresses, greatness dares, greatness pushes.

Which brings me back to the concept of “problematizing.” If we define greatness as literature that, beyond mere pleasure, also instructs, and we aspire to greatness, then we must first seek the cracks in the poems we intend, not just to elucidate, but to transgress. What do they gesture toward that remains unsaid? Is it our job to identify where these poems fail as a means to make entryway for our own work. Perhaps this is too strong. Let’s say it this way: We read what people are writing, what people have been writing, in order to figure out what to say next. Writing is always part of a larger conversation. So problematizing is not the empty exercise of critique for the sake of critique, but the active investigation into what still needs to be said. It is through this investigation that art progresses, in balance or tension between aesthetic innovation and political relevancy. Aesthetics are never distinct from the social. Profit, therefore, not distinct from pleasure. And yet as I write this, my email pings with notes from the chair, the dean, the various campus task forces asking how to streamline the college experience for our students. Our steadily declining enrollment numbers have, in the current COVID-19 pandemic, reached a new low. The word “dire” appears in email after email. In an all-campus meeting, an administrator says we need to be on the lookout for “profitable and unprofitable majors,” sending my distressed stomach into yet another anxiety spiral. So when someone on the Academic Program Prioritization committee asks how they might help to “streamline” the curriculum, they are not politely asking how they might enhance the learning experience for our students. They are asking me, point blank, to defend why it is essential that I teach a course titled Introduction to Poetry.

In framing this defense, whatever reservations I may have about Harold Bloom, it’s his stance—that the reading of literature provides an essential purpose, both pleasure and profit—that immediately comes to mind. But where do my words diverge? In his introduction, Bloom rails against his mistaken assumption that aesthetic merits are secondary to identity politics in Adrienne Rich’s selections for *The Best American Poetry 1996*. This way of thinking clearly and loudly encapsulates the implicit assumptions at work when someone, whether a student or a New Critical literary scholar, says they evaluate art on aesthetic merit, as if to consider autobiographical information or historical and cultural contexts were to debase themselves. It’s easy to laugh at the extreme example, but this way of thinking infiltrates most workplaces I’ve participated in, often masquerading under the term “craft.”

Bloom’s misstep arises in his failure to acknowledge that what to him seems external to the work of the poet (“race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic origin”), what we might also simply call the identity of the poet, has in fact never been external to the writing of a poem. Bloom’s personal canon of poets—from Chaucer to Dickinson to Stevens and Crane—are all just as shaped by their subject positions as anyone in the 1996 anthology. Bloom’s complaint is akin to an English speaker in a restaurant who hears a family speaking Spanish and complains about the volume. Whatever is new, or different, or foreign, seems to announce itself simply by its existence. This forms the basis of Bloom’s objection, that a poem as a space should be somehow separate from the poet’s biography and sanitized of all those supplemental details that are political rather than aesthetic. But, in practice, we know this is never the case. A poem is not separate from the poet, and it never has been, whether we’re reading Wanda Coleman or Chaucer, Komunyaka or Shakespeare. Furthermore, Bloom offers no metric by which he measures value but relies on appeals to tradition—who doesn’t love Shakespeare? As a reader I am dedicated to both tradition and innovation. If I read this code, so I turn to my craft vocabulary to describe it—a good poem is one that provides tension, that creates a dynamic relationship between form and content. And to use workshop jargon, a good poem is one that “takes risks” and ultimately “earns” that image or ending. But what do we mean by these terms? Are they now just as risky as risk in a poem? Who decides what constitutes tension? Though I rely on my craft vocabulary, these terms are really just stand-ins for the always ultimately inchoate emotional reaction of what I like and don’t like. And this reaction, this taste, is not natural or innate, but instead shaped by what I’ve read, and much of my reading has been done in an academic setting. For this reason, I’m sure that my metrics probably align closely with Bloom’s, that for both of us the poems that offer “profit” are the ones that enhance and challenge the boundaries of the tradition we teach. But where we depart, or where I’m learning to depart, is in awareness. While Bloom seems to hold that the canon is the canon for self-evident reason, I’m learning to acknowledge that the tradition I’ve worked for so long to learn is simply a construction, and there-
fore, reflective not of divine goodness or truth, but of the people who have found benefit in keeping it in place. As an English professor, I am complicit. But as a writer and woman of color, I easily see the power dynamics in play. How, then, might we better envision the term “profit”? Putting aside the endeavor I need to write to the Academic Program Proposal committee, the defense of the merits of poetry is as old as Plato, who, almost 2500 years ago, banished the practitioners of the “imitative arts” from his ideal republic. Plato has no question about the pleasure of poetry; instead, his concern arises over its social utility. He offers an argument to prove that there’s more to poetry than mere pleasure, that it can have a beneficial effect on society and human life, in open to reconsidering poetry’s inclusion in his republic. This invitation spawns a tradition of defenses of poetry, most of which take “pleasure” as a given but work to make explicit how literature has “beneficial effect on society and on human life in general.” Fast-forward a few centuries and we have Horace, who in his Ars poetica writes: “Poets aim to either do good or to give pleasure—or, thirdly, to say things which are both pleasing and serviceable for life. . . . The mode of addressing truth useful and wins every suffrage, delighting the reader and also giving him advice . . .”5 For Horace, it is this third point, the balance between good and pleasure, that has the most value. The original Latin phrase, “dulce et utile,” we translate into sweet and useful, delightful and instructive, or pleasing and profitable.

To paint in broad strokes, these defenses of poetry, from Aristotle to Sidney to Shelley to Wordsworth, assume that poetry offers both pleasure and profit to bring the reader closer to an origin, whether we define this origin in terms of Plato’s forms, as truth, the divine, “real” human experience, or another abstract concept. This paradigm offers order and therefore provides the grounding for a means by which to evaluate the success of a poem, measured by its proximity to truth. And therefore, in the Western tradition, poetry’s social utility has rested in its moral urgency to truth. The failure to communicate this experience or idea, then, is a larger power behind our work, a divine order that, through our individual study and practice, can, like a magnet, pull our work into alignment with good, with truth.

The appeal of this model is obvious. Writing is hard. There is comfort in knowing that there is a larger power behind our work, a divine origin that, through our individual study and practice, will, like a magnet, pull our work into alignment toward that origin. Where to communicate this reality is simply a matter of the author in their selection and arrangement of words. In this view, there is a correct and an incorrect way to communicate information, therefore a correct and incorrect way to write the poem.

The traditional workshop model, to some extent, affirms this belief. I have had this experience or an idea, I use words to write a poem that communicates this experience or idea, then I bring it into workshop. I stay quiet during my workshop so as not to give hints or direct my peers’ interpretations. When I hear that they are reading my poem and receiving meanings I did not want or intend, I realize there is something incorrect about the words I’ve chosen and the order they are in. In revision, I rearrange these words, maybe choose new words, and ideally, when I bring this revision into the next workshop, everyone reads the poem correctly. The language on the page matches the expression of reality I intend. Success!

Of course, anyone who has written anything and shown it to another person knows that this is rarely how writing works. So, for centu-

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prejudices and hierarchies of the time. Eliot, who publishes “Tradition and the Individual Talent” in 1919, wants to push back against use of “tradition” in the negative sense. Tradition is not simply “blind or timid adherence” but must be interrogated and worked for: “It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour.”10 Eliot explores the tradition of which he speaks when he writes, “the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.” For Eliot, a writer is tasked not with comparison among their contemporaries, but with the whole of Western tradition, going back to Homer. I appreciate Eliot’s challenge. And, as a writer writing in English and living in the U.S., the bulk of my history is the Western tradition. Eliot may make assumptions about who he speaks to, and it is likely he did not imagine me, an Asian American woman in upstate New York in 2020, as someone who might hope to be a poet of significance. Nevertheless, I insert myself. I take up this challenge.

In 1925 Langston Hughes publishes “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” in which he calls for the recognition of a tradition different (though, I argue, not necessarily distinct) from the one Eliot has in mind. The essay opens: “One of the most promising of the Negro poets said to me once, ‘I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet,’ meaning, I believe, ‘I want to write like a white poet,’ meaning, subconsciously, ‘I would like to be white.’ And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself.”11

Hughes likely refers to Countee Cullen, a fellow poet of the Harlem Renaissance, known for his use of traditional European forms as opposed to free verse. I hesitate to speak for others, but I imagine this thought—I want to be a poet, not an X poet—has run through the minds of many writers who write from marginalized positions. It certainly ran through mine. In college, I refused to take the one class on Asian American literature, thinking that it was not for me. In my own work, I might have even used this same construction—I want to be a writer, not an Asian American writer. And though I would have bristled at how Hughes carries out the logic of this idea, he’s not entirely wrong. When I said this, I meant that I didn’t want to be confined to certain topics; in my head, Asian American literature was epitomized by The Joy Luck Club and other narratives of immigration and struggle. I wanted to imagine other stories for myself. At the time, I was a fiction writer and thought Steinbeck was the greatest writer of all time. So yes, I wanted to be Steinbeck, not Amy Tan. And by this logic, yes, I wanted to be a white man. It’s true that this was what I imagined when I said I wanted to be a “writer.” And implicitly, to be anything other than a writer, to have a prefix added to writer, meant something less. Hughes writes, “[t]his is the mountain stand­ing away at lines, searching for new and fresher ways to continue working on the craft problems, hack­ing away at lines, searching for new and fresher ways to continue working on the craft problems, hack­ing away at lines, searching for new and fresher ways to continue working on the craft problems.”

What do we do with this history, this contradictory tradition, these multitudes? To return to Horace, how do we write poems that offer profit, knowing that what dictates “profit” is a shifting goal, socially constructed, and often elitist and exclusionary? In this post-post-modern moment, what values can we strive toward in our work, and how do we articulate these values? Though what I offer is oversimplified, I have found the following framework helpful in teasing out social and political assumptions that inform my own work. When I think about the social dimensions of a poem, I think about it in this way: A poem can:

- reinforce and reflect dominant ideologies/social structures
- critique and challenge dominant ideologies/social structures
- imagine alternate ideologies/social structures

This framework does not dictate an inherent political view. Imagining an alternate ideology, for example, can manifest either a socialist or liberal utopia, or anything in between. Whatever our political leanings, as artists we generally value work that fits somewhere into b or c, work that, to return to my dinner party companion’s complaint, works to problematize the current social order. Ideally, problematizing leads to progress. For example, if I name the dominant ideologies that structure my everyday existence in the United States (the terms that immediately come to my mind are capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, and white supremacy), then in the drafting and revision process, I can ask myself how the poem I’m working on either reinforces these ideologies, critiques them, or envisions alternate ideologies. Embedding these questions into my writing process can help address the gap that sometimes seems to appear between the poem’s aesthetic and social concerns.

To provide examples, I will share two versions of a poem of my own. The poem is part of a sequence about the Japanese American incarceration during World War II, in which I imagine a speaker narrating her experience at Topaz Concentration Camp in Utah. This poem in particular was inspired by the paintings of Chiura Obata, a Japanese American painter too uncaring at Topaz, who painted bleak, haunting Utah landscapes from behind barbed wire. The draft takes its title from one of his paintings, “Moonlight Over Topaz.” Here is an early draft:

**Moonlight Over Topaz**

After the painting by Chiura Obata

This evening, at the edge of camp, a man
propped an easel against the fence to paint
the last of the geese before they pass over
for good. For all we know, forever. Above the clouds, they float like fish. He mumbers to himself about stars, about how starlight arrives from stars already long dead. I make no reply,
and the geese cry out in their bird-language.

He’s painting the landscape: topaz mountains,
white dust, low, yellow moon. Barnack, guard-tower,
Fence. No people. Elsewhere, lives go on, but here
he paints only the moon, the pale birds,
the mountains awash in ghost-light. Elsewhere,
lives go on, but here we are timeless, almost
immortal, and surrounded by light that fails
and falls to reach us. His hand is steady.
The brush captures the birds before they disappear beyond the edge
of our small circle. The fields go silent.

Once again, it is night. Alone I stumble home through the widening dark.

I was trying to write an ekphrastic poem, one that would capture in language the feeling of simultaneous calm, desolation, and disappointment that I feel when I look at the painting.

Unhappy with this draft, I struggled to figure out what, from a craft standpoint, wasn’t working. I tried each different line. I tried making it a prose poem. Each iteration brought slight changes, but there was something at the core of the poem that wasn’t right.

At the time of working on this poem, I was also working on a research project with a scholar who was born in the Manzanar Concentration Camp. I was described to him as

>“I’m tired of everyone playing the same note over and over. Of course the camps were wrong. Why write a poem that functions just to say this?”

He was right. Though as a historian he had nothing to offer about the poem’s aesthetic elements, he identified the poem’s social failure, its inability to expand the conversation, its failure to add new, tried making it a prose poem. Each iteration brought slight changes, but there was something at the core of the poem that wasn’t right.

The poem functions as a playground, the challenge being to translate the emotional experience of the painting into the emotional experience of the poem. But there is little social function to the poem. It doesn’t do or say anything that the painting does not, and given the vastly different historical contexts, this proves jarring. In other words, in terms of pleasure, the poem barely scrapes by, if at all. And in terms of instruction, the poem offers nothing new. These twin failures are not unrelated. As the writer, I had to decide on my course of action. I could continue working on the craft problems, hacking away at lines, trying different points of view, trying new combinations of words. Or I could direct my energy toward the social problem, and try to re-envision what the speaker had to say. In craft-speak, why is she speaking?
In theory-speak, how does the poem challenge dominant narratives about the incarceration? But really, these are two variations on the same question—how does this poem offer instruction? In other words, how does this poem dig into the complexity of reality?

I include the revised version of the poem, but the point of this is not to say that I solved all the problems or that the poem is finished, or even that this revision is better than the previous draft. Instead, I share this process as simply an example of what new possibilities can open up when you attend to the poem through multiple lenses.

I Will Explain Hope

But not today, not when the wind carries only the voices of greeee crying but sailing far above our human heads. Down here I’d swear I feel the earth’s subtle tug on its slow travel around a distant sun. But I’ll also believe time stopped within this path of desert. That elsewhere, lives go on making marked progress but we remain stranded within a stalled circle, surrounded by a light that fails and fails to reach us. How far and fast it travels, this light that is already dead. How far and fast it must journey, the prayer whispered in the dark.

What choice but to forgive such a brave failure?14

When I look at this revision, I know that it better aligns with the work I want the poem to do; it offers a more complex, nuanced speaker, one who struggles to make sense of her situation rather than simply narrating it. It’s no longer an ekphrastic poem, and though I was sad to leave behind Chiura Obata, I recognized that this poem exists in a different space from the painting and the tension of conflating these two spaces was a distraction. I might have gotten to this revision focusing on point of view, syntactic inversion, emotional distance, or any of the other terms we might use when discussing a poem in workshop. But I’ve found it helpful in my writing process to more actively consider the social conditions alongside craft considerations. It’s taken me time to figure out how to articulate this, but addressing the social contours, that is, the dreaded “political message” of the poem, is not separate from what we call “aesthetics” or “craft.” They are two sides of the same coin.

IV. CONCLUSION

After a year wracked by a global pandemic, renewed calls for justice following the murder of George Floyd, and a harrowing election season, I turn to Adrienne Rich’s introduction to her selections for the 1996 Best of American Poetry:

... reflected in this collection—both by what’s here and by what is not—are the circumstances of North America... in the century’s final decade: a decade which began with the Gulf War and has witnessed accelerated social disintegration, the lived effects of an economic system out of control and antihuman at its core. Contempt for language, the rivalization of meaning from words, are cultural signs that should not surprise us. Material profit finally has no use for other values, in fact maps benefits from social incoherence and atomization, and from the erosion of human bonds of trust—in language or anything else. And so rapid has been the coming-apart during the years of the 1990s in which these poems were being written, so stunted are so many at the violence of the dismantling (of laws, protections, opportunities, due process, mere civilities) that some of us easily forget how the history of this republic has been a double history, of selective and unequal arrangements regarding prop-erty, human bodies, opportunity, due process, freedom of expression, civility, and much else.15

In other words, we’ve been here before, or we’re still here. The historian David Reynolds describes 1850s America leading up to the publication of Leaves of Grass as such: “Politically, America was in some ways closer to chaos... Corruption in high places was rampant. Although a broad middle class was developing, the gap between the rich and the poor was wider than ever before. Immigrants arrived in unprecedented numbers, changing the nation’s ethnic makeup and fostering antiforeign sentiment. Urban death rates soared.”16 I read from this passage when teaching Whitman and my students all recognize that it sounds eerily familiar. Has nothing changed since 1855?

Though I’m faced with the immensity of the world in its current situation, I will say it, even if I don’t always believe it—since 1855, yes, we have moved toward justice. This movement is painfully slow, murderously violent, and seemingly recursive. I don’t believe that I can write a poem, no matter how well-crafted or socially engaged, that will bring immediate change. But I also don’t give up hope that the work I do in my own practice, the work I do with my students, matters. David Mura, in “On Race and Craft: Tradition and the Individual Talent Revisited,” writes:

We turn to literature to find expressions of our reality and our consciousness that are more complex and accurate, that expand our understanding of ourselves and our world. In this way, literature involves a struggle against the cliché, the stereotypical, against untruth and facile assumptions. Such a struggle often poses political implications; as John Berger puts it in an essay in Portraits: “Reality, however one interprets it, lies beyond a screen of clichés. Every culture produces such a screen, partly to facilitate its own practices (to establish habits) and partly to consolidate its own power. Reality is intemperate with those with power.”17

It’s up to each of us to decide what we want our work to do, the values we want to work toward and uphold, the balances we want to strike between form and content. But as Mura and Berger remind us, there are reasons why we work to push past cliché, toward work that challenges dominant narratives, that helps our readers to feel the complexity and nuanced strangeness of reality. How we choose to do this, of course, is an individual journey. But we do this work with the awareness that the function of this literary endeavor is not elitist dilettantism but instead the drive for connection and communication. Through this communication, we make action toward change possible.

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Notes

A version of this essay was given as a lecture at the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College in July 2020.

2. Rita Dove in Boston Review (Summer, 1998)

7. Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself” (1855)
8. Langston Hughes, “I, Too” (1925)
9. Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself” (1855)
12. Ibid.
17. David Mura in A Stranger’s Journey: Race, Identity, and Narrative Craft in Writing (University of Georgia Press, 2018)
II
The endless gesture some far-seeing eye might notice:
asking for this lone object of desire.
Black curl on the forehead, the night, the incessant
parody of enthusiasm. Reducing it to three things
four things later forgetting the fluctuation
the nothing interesting the sad romance of
total solitude. How to spread a net toward the invisible
to lengthen this fighting arm, to say please
I don’t want to be a dog animal of the shadows
I no longer want to beg bare-faced
for night’s cover. Let forgetting enfold me
Until the next astonishment
Until another heaven.

III
No, with my honest heart I do not ally myself.
It is too pure . . . —Pier Paolo Pasolini
He is too honest, he who trembles
and barely moves the water exploring something
similar to oblivion. If he wants to hurl himself
turning vertebra by vertebra into a wild beast
interweaving with the unloved eye of the world
—let’s say multitude—that other, so lost
in the forest, in the fog. The beast fears
the foul blow, ignorance
stupidity spills from the tin can, without realizing
the sharp edge provokes it. And so,
on a beach, at night, hidden from any other
maddened figure, the image groans from the deep
searching for a victim. Of what innocence do we speak
of what octopus that takes, devours without mercy
explodes the blood he wants splattered?
He burns for a moment while he bites
splatters, groans and devours. And we were talking about the world
also, The Other Edge, the inaccuracy of all interference
and Candor, still saving immensities
running through the thicket, to save
To save himself.

IV
It yields, no one knows why
the budding tip begins to punch a hole.
It crosses the remains of the fawns’ feast
rejoicing in themselves, their splendor in conceited brilliance.
Everyone looks and calculates putting it to one side or
the other; as girls, being left to separate wheat from straw
was a good way to learn.

What if the straw was wheat?
What if the wheat straw and I didn’t realize it?
What if in the end it was straw because of a charm cast by a poor woman cornered
by those who don’t enchant anyone, as suddenly alone in death’s waiting room,
by the art of fear in her pupils, she changed straw into gold?

You shake your head looking to separate what is able
becomes inseparable. Something sprouts at the start
of the terrible spiral; sometimes a river of powerful origin flows

What if the firebird falls into the trap?
What if you always sought the same thing fumbling
against the sun’s shining radiance?
What if there’s blood under the collar
and it drips lightly on the party tablecloth?
What if no one notices the blood?
What if someone notices and drinks it
as ritual wine?
What if everyone sees it and contemplates it?

What if the party goes on and she’s eaten by all
among laughter, the girl who tried to tell wheat from straw
and straw from gold?

V
Consider, my soul, this texture rough
to the touch, which they call life
—Rosario Castellanos
Consider, my soul, this which is a compact structure
for a moment, and then diffuses, among the clearings that the shadow
seeks. Trying to grasp this watery memory that evades you
sumptuous, like silk through your fingers.
To a primary root it bows, but it doesn’t give up.
It doesn’t reach the inaugural water, doesn’t get wet.
Stone by stone the building of lines rises against the sky.
The patios. The silence: the gardens.

And the recovered shadow is back
With diffuse air, with the afternoon that evades
all possibility of memory, the stone of the awning.
To whom does this texture speak, wet gravel on a large
surface, on a barren land?
Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove,
my undefiled: for my head is filled with dew,
and my locks with the drops of the night
—Song of Songs

Rest, my sister, my companion
there are clouds on your emerald face
that yearning turns to your side. We
speak of leaves, of small leaves with
inaugural gold, with the first winds. But you,
you painstakingly try to go out and start
the carnival. Only you know the weight of the earth
from one side to the other. That debate occasionally
in vain, other times absurd; we sometimes
called dark forms of treason,
a horrible trap for an unprepared foot.

We talked about the Soul as if talking about tea,
somehow the sultan of brutal depths
transfiguring the attempts, the encounters you never
named, and all that would be sealed in my memory
gestures, pieces of words, hands.

Of course days will follow, gusts of wind
nights and fevers, and eras will return to the earth
passing in times counted another way. The puma
that hides from the tumult and crouches maybe lingers
as well, hiding, appearing
for beings like you, between herds and herds without faces.

Of course, the day will return with that dawn like the first
prepubescent blush, and it will sing the life blooming
because it always blooms, and always returns.

Close your eyes, my companion in high solitude
of larches and have for me an unfathomable fragment of
this spiral trajectory.

Remember sometimes—in halting fragments, under an
incessant gold dust slightly hindering vision—,
sultans yield, to the shaking of the prepubescent
first leaves of autumn

Silvia Guerra (1961, Maldonado, Uruguay) is an Uruguayan poet, critic, and editor whose books include Un mar en madrugado (2018); Pulso (2011); Estampas de un tapiz (2006); Nada de nadie (2004); La sombra de la azucena (2000); Replicantes Astreales (1999); Idea de la aventura (1990); De la arena nace el agua (1996); and Fuera del relato (2007), a fictionalized biography of Lautréamont. She is a member of the executive boards of both the Mario Benedetti Foundation and the Nancy Bacelo Foundation. In 2012 she was awarded the Morosoli Prize in Poetry for her career.

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(EARTH), THE
NATALIE EILBERT

Oh problems, I’ve never
been resilient anyway. The ropes
eventually biodegrade around
my wrists. Phosphor is a pretty
pretty word, even as it modifies
runoff. When I tell academics
we’ve entered a threshold without
bugs, they laugh and say I should
come to the South and say that. It’s like the
senator who brought a snowball to Congress,
together we walk into private conveniences.
What we do is to spend it. I am not empty
of metaphor; I am tired of multitudes.
The indelible crush of leaves. Grass
upturned in battle for the ball. Gravel,
gravel. Animals grow bigger at the end
of their epoch. The wind soothes only
when we need confirmation. Close
your eyes to breeze. I am not the promise
of forgetting. I merged regretfully
and I too missed the point. No tonnage
no respirators. No Edenic twist.
Oh chronic, heavenless now. Look—
a scorch mark in California lumber
resembles the tilted shape of Saturn, the
pretty pretty rings of disaster, crashed
moon cores why I’m done with
landscapes. Below this beauty,
nothing lives. Disaster, my hands shake with
its white vantage. Oh problems,
my plastic movable cunt, disaster a word loved
by what comes after, and we
without stars, our bodies alive, thickened—

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