Karen Volkman, *Nomina*. Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, 2008. 71pp. $16.

Karen Volkman's three volumes of poetry are linked by an obsession with numbers, and especially with the not-number, zero. Take one of *Nomina*'s fifty untitled sonnets:

> One says none is nascent, noon is due
> when two's bleak blinded hybrid twins the light.
> None says no one numbers less than two,
> the one who days, the one who darks all night.
>
> Noon's cold name is cloven, frigid height,
> a one-division in the random, fault
> split in fusion's faction, no one's bright
> eyeless acme arcing—cohesive vault.
>
> That one were none's skulled infant, second sight
> of two's twained woes, and tangled toxic root,
> nearer to nothing, nameless, sequent blight,
>
> as two's black ruse slits mind a riven fruit.
> These sumless parents, two and null, make one
> Queen of Quotient, who adds her x to none.

On one level, the sonnet offers a mini-allegory that literalizes—indeed, personifies—absence (zero), self-love (one), and union (two). But the virtuosity of Volkman's wordplay immediately amplifies and undercuts these narrative seams. Note the "operations" at play in the first stanza. "One" says" that "none" (no one, noon) is coming soon, apparently right about the time that one and two "twin" the light with a "hybrid" (this is what happens when one and two multiply). As a verb, "twin" can refer either to conjoining or dividing: the pun is perfect. "None" then declares one to be nothing (that's what happens when one and none multiply), and what follows leaves it unclear whether it is zero, one, two, or "none" of the above that "day" and "dark" all night. And this is only the first four lines: the blurring of numbers and names and narratives continues, ever denser, stranger, stronger. In the end, zero reigns as "Queen of Quotient," who transforms whatever it ("she"?) encounters. As in algebra, these lines assert, so in the romantic triangulation that marks the sonnet tradition: one figure is bound to swallow another.

The echo of Dickinson's "Queen of Calvary" above, like the playful adaptation of a metaphysical "noon," point to a long-standing engagement with that poet's style and thought. Volkman's first collection, *Crash's Law* (1996), takes its title from Dickinson, and opens with her famous lines: "The Zeroes – taught us – Phosphorus – / We learned to like the Fire." Just as in Dickinson's poems, zero is for Volkman a concrete exteriorization of the condition of lyric utterance, speech that emerges only by elliptical constraint, by way of the "circuit" or "circumference." In this first volume, though, Volkman's project is hobbled by strands of pattering alliteration, unbearable pet names, predictable syntactic deformations (nouns as verbs, abstract nouns as concrete ones), and other tics from the workshop woodpile. *Spar* (2002) has some of this, too, but here Volkman's aural intelligence guides a more substantial investigation—one that continues in *Nomina*—of the cognitive content at the border of nonsense. This is the site, for her, of what has to be thought of as a species of revelation, and zero emerges as its primary metaphor. As one prose poem has it, zero speaks a language all its own: "my zero, windy and sleepless, how to teach it? It speaks to the rain, the spare precipitation—it says, Desert conditions, but I fathom the sea—and rain in its meticulous sermon mumbles back…my zero, sum and province, whole howl, skies the all" ("There comes a time to rusticate the numbers").

The difference in *Nomina* is not merely that the poems are stronger but that the volume is so much more ambitious. The choice of the sonnet sequence is the first signal of this ambition. The keynotes of the Petrarchan tradition—unstanched desire, astrologic and providential fate, loss of the will—appear in familiar, if disorienting, forms. There is something here of the Elizabethan sonnet's heritage, too, most obviously in the acutely compacted and playful language. But like any successful engagement with conventionalized poetic models, *Nomina* is nevertheless difficult to place. An epigraph from Gilles Deleuze sets into motion the volume's strange combination of sensorial distortion, narrative shape, and logic: "She knows that the more the events traverse the entire, depthless extension, the more they affect bodies which they cut and bruise." In Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense*, this sentence refers to what Alice "knows" in the world of *Through the Looking-Glass*: that depth is an illusion. Alice is a hero for Deleuze because she understands that language is material, as objects are material. One *builds* with words. Deleuze is interested in isolating Fregean "sense" from "reference"—isolating that aspect of language that distinguishes propositions from one another even when there is no denotative difference between them ("the morning star is the evening star," is the canonical example). Having concluded that conventional analytic methods have not satisfactorily explained sense, Deleuze resorts to a nonconventional heuristic that combines fantasy (Alice's world) and the dialectical grounds of

paradox. *Nomina* takes up this project thematically; shades of Carroll lurk in Volkman's partly visible narrative (a questing girl, monsters, talking flowers and numbers). But *Nomina* also takes it up philosophically: these sonnets attempt to exemplify sense rather than analyze it, presenting intricate, shapely near-nonsense sliding freely among referential nodes.

The significance of Volkman's prosodic fireworks, then, is that they powerfully engage the mind even as they defer representation. Perhaps Volkman is, as Pound said of Swinburne, a poet who neglects the "value of words as words," that is, the meaning-bearing value of words. The salient question is not whether this neglect of conventional meaning is acceptable but rather what other kinds of value the poems urge on us. In the manner Deleuze describes as heroic, Volkman treats words as objects for reanimation; their significance is most apparent in their strangeness. Consider the volume's opening sonnet, another panegyric to zero:

As the dream a consciousness adored
beaches its semblance in a mist, a mere
oval emulates a circle, austere
lack, swart spiral. Opacities are poured

in midnight ciphers, alembic of the shored
remnant, naufrage the hours cannot steer
north of founder, and ruin is the clear
attar on the tongue, trajectory of toward

blue as blindness in the ocean's stare.
Oh the minus when it runed and roared.
Lucid cumulus (the wind's white hair),

indignant plural of the single word,
rages, retrogrades. Omega air
all formless fire, a body of the lord.

Naufrage (shipwreck) is an important word for Mallarmé, whose own powerfully aural sonnets anticipate (and might well have influenced) Volkman's own, and the "attar" of the tongue appears to borrow from Dickinson: "Essential Oils – are wrung – / The Attar from the Rose / Be not expressed by Suns – alone – / It is the gift of Screws –". Apart from tracing these allusions, though, what can be said of language like this? Is it designed to render us mute? Certainly, these lines do not allow the extraction of portable propositions that other poems might. One might begin instead on a more basic level, the level of diction. The antique language here shows Volkman's interest in lost semantic traces of familiar words (keep your OED handy) and in neolo-

gism by way of surprising combination. More basic still, note the number of times that one is forced to make an "oh"—whether of pleasure or pain it is difficult to know—when reading this poem aloud. All roads—aural, bodily, referential—lead in one way or another to an "austere lack," zero, the absence that haunts this entire volume.

Volkman occasionally relieves this high seriousness with lines of self-parody. In certain ways, these are the book's most instructive moments, for we see in them Volkman's own commentary on the project of naming and unnaming in poems: "How does a namelessness name?…jouissance of the burning to seem / occult, aureate, aspect, thread, / not number that nevers the scheme" ("Reticulation of a premise"). In other cases, she borrows elements of fable to keep poems that evade, blur, and self-devour from vanishing entirely into the air:

> Now you nerve. Flurred, avid as the raw
> worm in the bird's throat. It weirds the song.
> The day you die darkly in the ear all wrong—
> all wreck, all riot—the maiden spins the straw,
>
> the forest falters. Night is what she saw,
> in opaque increments deafening the tongue.
> Sleep bird, sleep body that the silence strung,
> myrrh-moon, bright maudlin, weeping as you draw…

With its tense oppositions and reversals, the scaffolding in place here offers clues of a tragic tale. The more familiar use of the verb "nerve," meaning something like "to strengthen" or "to embolden," may here also echo an archaic connotation having to do with ornamentation. (This possibility is reinforced by the adjective "flurred," or decorated with flowers, and the appearance of that perennial lyric figure, birdsong.) The "maiden" of this fable, like the Lady of Shallot, exists in a timelessness of sorrow. She is haunting precisely because she defies allegorization. Of true fable, then, this one retains only shape: almost any meaning could be poured there. What is most striking, perhaps, among these lines that so powerfully invite and defer narrative description, is the apparent faith that "weird[ed]" song, language that "eats its excess," will always bear fruit. "No word survives the color of the deep," Volkman writes, "this black unsinging"; yet these sonnets body forth demanding vocal performance. That is strange. It is really something.

Michael Hansen

§

César Aira, *Ghosts*. Translated by Chris Andrews. New York: New Directions, 2009. 144pp. $12.95

Argentine novelist, critic, and translator César Aira is best known for his cryptic novellas, which feature wandering narratives and a reflexive preoccupation with form. Aira claims to write a single page every day and resist all forms of revision; whether this claim is true, his fiction does press insistently forward, accommodating all manner of spontaneous digressions en route. These asides occur not only on the level of the page but on the level of the sentence—a series of forking paths that reveal the influence of Borges even while their universe is less intricately self-collapsing than wildly far-flung. In place of labyrinths and mirrors, Aira's work explores everything from disfiguring lightning strikes (*An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter*) to murder by strawberry *helado* (*How I Became a Nun*).

Ghosts, the fourth of Aira's novellas to be translated into English, is a story in which supernatural elements are treated as commonplace. The novella transpires over the course of a single sweltering day, at an unfinished condominium high-rise in Buenos Aires. That the day in question is New Year's Eve, and that the building sits in a suspended state of construction, are relevant facts to the trajectory of the narrative, which assembles the principal characters on an unfinished, upper-level terrace for a cataclysmic midnight finale.

At the same time, these details also reflect the novella's sustained preoccupation with thresholds—with the point at which a year passes into the next, or the moment when a construction site can rightly be called a building. Thresholds are legion in the book, and they're so intricately connected that it feels at times as if Aira is using fiction to graph some kind of complex mathematical function. The titular ghosts, for example—omnipresent on the site, floating "up and down, even through the concrete slabs"—not only straddle the realm between living and dead, but also crouch on the rim of a large parabolic dish, "a sharp metallic edge on which no bird would have dared to perch." Aira's corporeal characters perch similarly on edges—those boundaries marking adulthood, cultural assimilation, and financial stability.

For certain social classes, such boundaries seem hardly to exist—a fact that comes to frame the central drama. As Aira explains, the wealthy owners of the apartment "had their own idea of happiness; they imagined it wrapped in a delay, a certain developmental slowness, which was already making them happy.... They preferred to think of the gentle slope of events." Others find in the interstices mere opportunities for decorum: instead of gouging his clients—a practice typical of the "very rich"—the building's middle-class architect insists on always leaving "a margin, a ghostly 'buffer' of courtesy, between the asking price and the maximum that could be obtained." For the family of immigrant laborers squatting on the site, however, margins are not

opportunities for pecuniary politeness, but rather haunted zones of inquiry. Abel Reyes, the nephew of the building's hard-drinking night watchman, is stalled in his development and preoccupied by the existence of a neutron bomb capable of eliminating people but not things ("how could it…since they were so inextricably combined?"). Abel's meditation takes place in a supermarket checkout line, the boy juggling the ingredients for an afternoon *asado*; the situation is indicative of how Aira himself combines realism with speculative metaphysics. Abel's cousin Patri, meanwhile, races tirelessly between the unfinished building's floors, rounding up her infant siblings and meditating on the boundaries of aural perception. Under the impression that sounds and silence both increase with altitude, Patri pauses long enough in her frantic babysitting to reason that "if a man were placed at a great height, and he looked down, somewhere near halfway he would see two corresponding limits, floating like magnetized Cartesian divers: the limit of the sound as it passed into imperceptibility, and that of his own hearing range."

For half its length, the novella remains in a suspended state of becoming. It isn't until a ten-page manifesto masquerading as dream sequence ("it is possible to imagine an art in which the limitations of reality would be minimized, in which the made and the unmade would be indistinct, an art that would be instantaneously real, without ghosts") that a protagonist emerges. That protagonist, the dreamer, is Patri; her emergence marks both the crossing of an elusive narrative threshold and the crystallization of Aira's theme. The novella's second half describes Patri's tentative but unmistakable march toward self-awareness, and it features a more suspenseful, linear narrative, still pregnant with Aira's ontological and socioeconomic concerns.

Beyond class and national status—and in this way distinct from rest of her family—Patri is suspended just shy of womanhood, the future and past alike seeming to trap her. As she drifts towards the limit of this threshold, her "vague, indefinite worry and alarm" grows to "a specific torment, a pain, which was indefinable, too, but for different reasons." Conspiring together, her mother and aunt misdiagnose her plight all too conveniently ("If only she would fall in love!"), but the ghosts inhabiting the worksite have a different idea. They float past, chattering about a midnight party they want Patri to attend, and their voices are seductive in a meaningful way—"warm voices and words she could understand, in a Spanish without accent, neither Chilean nor Argentinean, like on television." Their invitation offers a way of prolonging the instant before an important threshold is crossed forever:

> Parties were serious and important too, she thought. They were a way of suspending life, all the serious business of life, in order to do something unimportant: and wasn't that an important thing to do? We tend to think of time as taking place within time itself, but what about when it's outside? It's

> the same with life: normal, daily life, which can seem to be the only admissible kind, conceived within the general framework of life itself. And yet there were other possibilities, and one of them was the party: life outside life.

Aira is such a prolific writer—sixty books and counting—that *Ghosts*, originally published almost two decades ago, may seem like an arbitrary candidate for translation. In fact it's an ideal choice, translation itself functioning to expand Aira's theme. A word like *umbral*, in its conversion from source to target, maintains the formal equivalence of "threshold" while the shadowy, occluded associations of umbra are cast into an intertextual gap. These gaps are what *Ghosts* relentlessly plumbs—the spaces between reality and unreality, built and unbuilt, childhood and adulthood, today and tomorrow, corporeal and incorporeal, life and death.

Nathan Hogan

§

Susan Howe, *Souls of the Labadie Tract.* New York: New Directions, 2007. 144pp. $16.95

The question of poetic vocation has come to the fore in Susan Howe's work. In "Personal Narrative," a prose piece in her recent book, *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, Howe returns to the epiphany in the library stacks that began her career as a poet: "I vividly remember the sense of energy and change that came over me one midwinter morning when, as the book lay open in sunshine on my work table, I discovered in Hope Atherton's wandering story the authority of a prior life for my own writing voice." Atherton was a minister in Hatfield, Connecticut, who was separated from his band of pioneers during a military excursion against a tribe of local Indians; he is a central figure in several of Howe's early poems. "Personal Narrative"—the title pays homage to Jonathan Edwards's recollection of his religious awakening—goes on to reinterpret this vocational moment, furnishing a close reading of the first word of Howe's 1987 poem about Atherton, "Articulation of Sound Forms in Time":

> "P r e s t"—gives the effect of rushing forward into a syntactic chain of associative logic under pressure of arrest. Ready for action in a mind disposed to try but being upset in advance of itself by process of surrender. "In our culture Hope is a name we give women."

"Prest" is typical of the archaic-sounding neologism one might find in Howe; the term is succinctly sprung in the phrase "pressure of arrest." To capture its many valences, Howe reworks the OED entries for "press" in rhythmic pattern:

def. 1, "ready for action"—def. 3, "ready in mind, disposition, will"—("Ready for action in a mind disposed to try")—def. 2, "alert, active, eager" ("rushing forward"). That final citation, "In our culture Hope is a name we give women" (grafted here from the poem's prose frame in Howe's *Singularities*), comments on the disparity between cultural naming conventions of Hope Atherton's time and our own (he would be a she, now). Why give us this interpretation? The answer is a new one for Howe: clarity. Howe seeks to show us, theatrically yet explicitly, the kind of cognitive and artistic work she is doing as a poet. The motivation of "Personal Narrative" is that the personal (the intimate as well as the autobiographical) not be lost in the work's difficulty and obscurity, its engagement with the authority of "prior lives."

Souls of the Labadie Tract contains two long poems that sketch encounters with such lives: French religious leader Jean de Labadie ("Souls of the Labadie Tract") and poet Wallace Stevens ("118 Westerly Place"). Howe has often and eagerly stated in interviews that Stevens is her favorite twentieth-century poet, and so his presence may come as no surprise to avid readers. And the two men are connected: Howe unearthed Jean de Labadie in the course of studying Stevens' genealogy. In 1684, Labadie led a communal sect of Dutch Quietists to a plot of land in the New World at the confluence of what is now Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland. The Labadists were one of many early American utopian Christian sects who traveled to the New World to find a Promised Land. Quietism involves physical withdrawal from the world to find absorption into the Divine, but the practice of detachment from the world comes in the context of communal congregation. As Howe elaborates in the poem's prose introduction, "They held all property in common (including children) and supported themselves by manual labor and commerce." Here is an earthly paradox: unity and separation, fellowship and seclusion.

The speaker in the title poem finds mutual affirmation within the Labadist commune. Indeterminacy here is not the product of the unstable wandering of a lyric subject—the violence characterized by the fragments of Hope Atherton's poem—but rather a result of gathering together many voices into the poet's own. This "we" contains "I" and "you":

> Indifferent truth and trust
>
> am in you and of you air
>
> utterance blindness of you
>
> That we are come to that
>
> Between us here to know
>
> Things in the perfect way

Howe begins by meticulously noting the closeness—etymologically as well as graphically—of "truth" and "trust," as well of being "in you" and "of you" ("indifferent" thus meaning "not different"). But we are cut off from coherence at first: an implied "I" is not quite here, and the "you" may be an address, but it may also be quotation; "air" might be the first of three qualities "of you," the antecedent of "you" or a description of what being "in you and of you" means. But when we cross the horizon of the stanza break, we scan a kind of resolution to the problem of indeterminacy through a pronoun shift: the "we" and "us" gather speaker and addressee(s) into an immediate present tense. While what "that" is remains beyond vision, "we are come" to it, we are "here"—geographically, spiritually "here" because the two are the same. The affirmation of mutual presence overcomes the indeterminacy of who "you" and "I" are.

Otherwise obscure references take on meaning within this communal authority. Obscurity in prophetic language conceals the divine, a visionary mystery made sense of by belief; what we can't understand now will be revealed in the light of future events. And it is belief itself, or the communal conventions of it, that sustains the speaker. One word missing from what is an otherwise religious poem is "God." The apex of "Souls of the Labadie Tract" may be this powerfully cryptic charge:

> There it is there it is—you
>
> want the great wicked city
>
> Oh I wouldn't I wouldn't
>
>
> It's not only that you're not
>
> It's what wills and will not

What is "the great wicked city"? Is the article here marking a particular city or city life as seductive to the pioneering Labadist? Probably, the city is wickedness itself, the Whore of Babylon, that "great city, which reigneth over the kings of the earth" in Revelation 17. And indeed the unknown speaker's emphatic denial suggests the agony of human frailty we trace throughout the poem. Partly, the flexibility of language sharpens the human's sense of his own frailty by contrast. "It's not only that you're not" works as definitional, attempting to describe what "it is"; and "It's not only that" is also a phrase of casual speech, meaning "it's not only the case that…" or "the matter doesn't only involve…." But the more profound frailty is the substance of belief: can we trust an authority greater than ourselves? We must actively choose to commit ourselves to deed, not just avoid the wicked city (the "will" triumphs over what "you're not"). Further, we must abolish ourselves in our

commission: it's *what* wills and will not, not *who*. Ultimately we are no more than souls waiting for rapture, caught in frail bodies. The phatic aspects of speech and formal prayer (where the former involves a human interlocutor and the latter a spiritual one) converge in this stanza. Obscurity is not about the instability of subject or object; it is about grappling with the need for and ultimate submission to authority.

The poem "118 Westerly Terrace" is dramatically different, and, with respect to its plain diction and clear narrative arc it stands unlike anything in Howe's oeuvre. The poet fictionalizes an encounter with her poetic master, Wallace Stevens; the poem dramatizes her care for and then ultimate rejection of the literary authority Stevens represents. Stevens made his vocation clear in a late collection of aphorisms titled "Adagia": "After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption." The Stevensian poet finds that life itself holds meaning only in poetry; additionally, poetry is for Stevens both a solitary activity and an expression of solitude. This inward focus emerges biographically in the isolation of Stevens's life, as well as poetically in a hermetic diction and an utter confoundedness regarding the inner states of other beings, especially in his later work (two titles from the 1947 book *Transport to Summer* are exemplary: "Continual Conversation with a Silent Man"; "Wild Ducks, People and Distances"). But for Howe, isolation and self-reflection cannot offer authority for poetry because they do not lead to communication and therefore community with others. There is no such thing as the private utopia for Howe. (And here the genealogical link might be motivated: embrace of Jean de Labadie might recover for Stevens a true lineage that he had forgotten or rejected.)

Howe's turn to direct, intimate language in "118 Westerly Terrace" makes a philosophical and poetic challenge to Stevensian hermeticism. That challenge through tête-à-tête engagement is partly literal. Howe stalks Stevens to his "house-island," as she calls it, (the title's street address belongs to Stevens's longtime Hartford residence) and makes herself at home: "Don't worry I go with the / house," she writes, "your living's where / you walk or have walked." The language here takes on an intimacy far from the abstraction of Stevens; it is at times casual, often clear. When Stevens cherishes the domestic scene in "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm," he savors the inscrutability of what the reader is reading and the silence of the house. Howe wants chatter and clarity: "I address you at random / on the subject of doors" she proclaims, gently mocking Stevens's abstraction and solipsism with the familiarity of a cohabitant. The "I-thou" model of lyric address grounds this wry scene in a hesitating narrative:

> For a long time I worked
>
> this tallest racketty poem

> by light of a single candle
>
> just for fun while it lasted
>
> Now I talk at you to end
>
> of days in tiny affirmative
>
> nods sitting in night attire

The halting of work at "end of days" is a gentle irony: not only the stoppage of daily writing, not only the end of a career, but of the world. The poet's youth is filled with language experiments (the "tallest racketty poem") seen in retrospect as "fun while it lasted"; in maturity, the poet turns to direct speech and the intimate gesture of "affirmative nods." There is something a bit ridiculous about these "tiny" nods, and this "night attire," though: She ironizes the urgency of her direct address in the staged tableau. She talks "at" Stevens; he's drifting off to sleep.

Language among cohabitants can be opaque to outsiders. Likewise, where obscurity surfaces in the poem, it is in Howe's attempt to find meaning in that most elusive of pronouns in Stevens's work:

> Face to the window I had
>
> to know what ought to be
>
> accomplished by predecessors
>
> in the same field of labor
>
> because beauty is what is
>
> What is said and what this
>
> it—it in itself insistent is

Standing at the window, she can see that the "it" of all things, inside and out, is "beauty"; right where he had stood a thousand times, she "had / to know" (that is, couldn't but know; and also desired, needed to know). Howe inhabits Stevens's gaze and finds language adequate to understand beauty but inadequate to communicate it. What is beauty? "What is"—what the poet writes ("what is said") and whatever it (what the poet sees) is.

This encounter with Stevens, an encounter with a poetic tradition, is not enough for Howe. The master poet withdraws into himself—whereas Howe's "I" withdraws into the "we" of the Labadie poem, into a community of believers. The concluding moments of "118 Westerly Terrace" recount the inevitable drift of the domestic relationship; first, cryptic detachment from intimacy ("I began to feel you turned / from me—if only turned / round then why not stay") and then physical split: "I haven't the / heart he said and

he raised / the latch and went upstairs." Howe desires to be with Stevens, but Stevens must be alone. In this turn, the poem expresses the paradox of Stevens's ultimate belief in poetry to sustain one's life: Stevens must find redemption in his own writing practice, but cannot allow others to enter into it. He thus writes for himself—an insupportable claim for vocation in Howe's poem. Nevertheless, in the conclusion Howe sees signs that do "authorize" her, inasmuch as they provide access to a prior life: "historical fact the / fire on hearth or steam in / a kettle year and year out." When the owner is gone, the house itself provides traces of its inhabitant. These marks of "prior life" are not poetry—but they prompt it.

Joel Calahan

§

Tom Pickard, *The Ballad of Jamie Allan*. Chicago: Flood Editions, 2007. 101pp. $14.95

Incorrigible, untoward, and intractable, eighteenth-century English-Scottish Borders musician Jamie Allan was the ubiquitous trickster. He stands in popular lore as an archetype of the bandit: as old as Reynard the Fox and as contemporary as *Raising Arizona*'s H.I. McDunnough. Tom Pickard's 2007 volume *The Ballad of Jamie Allan* began as the libretto to a chamber opera commemorating the Northumberland vagabond by British composer John Harle. Epigraphs from, among others, Michel Foucault and Eric Hobsbawn, a lengthy afterword, and a selected bibliography alert us to the ambition of this undertaking. Pickard's sources include depositions, or "informations," of associates and accusers found in the criminal records of the National Archives; Allan's own criminal and military records, the latter transcribed within the Book of Deserters; numerous chapbooks and pamphlets disseminated throughout the border regions of Northumberland; and a small number of biographies, including one, nearly 700 pages in length, entitled *Life of James Allan, the celebrated Northumbrian piper; containing his surprising adventures and wonderful achievements in England, Scotland, Ireland, France, India, Tartary, Russia, Egypt, and various other Countries of Europe, Asia, and Africa.* This is folk balladry as scholarly adventure.

Reverentially attuned to revenants heard, Pickard opens with the favonian invocation "The Charm":

> you who make music
> and music makes
> whose fingers fly
> make of air a song

your breath be steady
and the tune be long

As a poet, Pickard has made much of making—within common song, one is made, or comes to be, precisely in and through its distribution of belonging. He is also attuned to the unmaking of that making, to moments when labor, degraded and dispossessed, tenders an enfeebled sense of belonging and common cause. Consider the following lines from *The Order of Chance* (1971):

producers of heat
    confused in the cold

moon full above the dole

    sleep children of chilled night
whose fathers were black men

    sleep bairns, shiver now
ya fathers' gold is stolen

strong fathers of a harsh past
    despondent now
slag faces rot against the dole

your hands held hammers
    & demanded much
the moment passed
    bairns curled cad in the womb
("The Devil's Destroying Angel Exploded or Coal Hewers in an Uproar")

To these bairns (Scottish for "child"), a barren dispensation: not the inheritance of songs shared by the fire, but the burden of curses muttered over the coals. Pickard makes the most of this meager, tolling, and toilsome "dole." Richly accumulative, whether as a variant of deal (a part or division of a whole) or dale (a portion of a common or undivided field), dole also sounds out sorrow and grief, that some lot's fated to the dole, whether that dole be a baleful portion of ore and/or charity sparingly applied. A face as black as lungs, this is Pickard's History imaged, the dark dream to a Snow White singalong: "We dig up diamonds / By the score / A thousand rubies / Sometimes more / We don't know what we dig them for / We dig dig digga dig dig."

We may trace the once-proud lineage of these despondent, coal-dusted fathers back into the century of Jamie Allan: The faces blackened in resistance were those of the Waltham Blacks, who defiantly launched a campaign against

the intensifying enclosure of common lands. In reprisal, the 1723 Black Act measure criminalized any sojourn, without benefit of clergy, into wooded regions while in disguise or blackened face. Explicitly targeting those "wicked and evil-disposed Persons going armed in Disguise, and doing Injuries and Violences to the Persons and Properties of his Majesty's Subjects" (*The Statutes at Large*, 1763), the Black Act evolved into perhaps the most notorious and draconian piece of legislation in eighteenth-century England, doling out death out of all proportion to the least of property crimes. Thus, we first meet our hero—gypsy piper, beloved raconteur, affable scofflaw, occasional horse thief and deserter—broken down by law:

> Jamie Allan is seventy-seven years old and dying.
> The wind smells of the Wear, sprays rain on the wall
> and growls
> with an insistent swither.
>
> ("Durham Lockup, 13th November 1810")

As Pickard remonstrates in his afterword, "His crimes were for survival not accumulation. The after-effects of those crimes died with the criminal, whereas those of his contemporary betters, those who enclosed common ground, remain with us and shape the landscape." In rivers and winds, then, resides the antiphony: the opposition of sound and ear to the sculpting of lands, their being whittled and worn away. In giving chase to this vanished master of the Northumbrian pipes, I have found it necessary to notate my copy of *The Ballad* so that I might attune my ear to the "growls" and "insistent swither" Pickard's vernacular vocates and localizes. (I cannot help but take pleasure in the felicitous coincidence of "ballad" and the standard range of the Northumbrian pipes, D to b.) These rough hewn, ancient outcroppings of sound—*skran*, *skint*, *flaffs*, and *gaff*, *yem*, *yasel*, *Yetholmers*, *cloughs*, and *craic*—charm and *flech* (beguile, entice). Strange, eldritch cairns, seeming uncreate, not rightly observed, demanding much from a moment passed. Arrested before such forms, the diligent reader must take up pursuit anew.

The military and criminal records, along with various notices from the *Newcastle Courant* that alternate with Pickard's lyrical flights, amass particulars at the expense of the singular. With vacuous acuity, they take the measure of our man, "five feet, eight *and one quarter inches high* [emphasis mine], straight limb'd, and well made, a round large Head, flat Face […]" ("*Newcastle Courant*, 4th October 1760"). Ensconced within the redundant proprieties of pleonastic legalese, these prosaic "informations" seem to image enclosure and rule upon the page, their typeset blocked and orthogonal. By design, such prosaic accounts, of authenticated date and provenance, eschew the singular for the particulars. We have moved from the popular balladry to the public record, which properly speaking belongs least of all to the people:

> …his Grace [the Duke of Northumberland] was, on the above occasion, ushered into the county with every demonstration of joy and welcome, highly expressive of the popularity in which the noble Duke is justly held by all ranks, as well in respect of his public as his private character.[…] At the Durham Assizes, James Allan, of North Shields, the famous piper, aged 77, for stealing a horse out of the stables of Matthew Robinson, of Gateshead, was found guilty, DEATH.
>
> ("*Newcastle Courant*, 6th August 1803")

Pickard follows this brilliantly with the trickster misadventures of "Join the Army," a burlesque song recounting in the voice of Allan, a man of "fast fucking legs," one of his many flights from service:

> When I hid in the hills around Rothbury town
> the people just gave them a right run around.
> Have you seen him? they axed. Could you say he's about?
> He's slippy as eels and flash as a trout.
> We've looked on the fells and down in the dales
> and all that we catch is a sight of his tail.
> The people replied have you tried owa there?
> He's sleek as a fox and runs like a hare.
> There's no one can see him when he comes around,
> the dogs go all quiet and cats go to ground.
>
> ("Join the Army")

Armed only with a refrain, hastened on by galloping couplets, and perhaps a tune lifted here or there, the folk-ballad plays host to such "slippy" histories, accommodating between their banks a depth unplumbed by official chronologies. Their additive logic is one of elasticity and expanse. Admitting neither theft nor license, their interiors contain multitudes incommensurate to the span of a single life. With every iteration, the ballad both sheds and assumes identities with purposes mercurial and furtive. Yet, Pickard ultimately resists the elusion, the wrong righted, the narrow escape. Our poet, much the same of 1985's *Custom & Exile* who "knew that property was theft" ("Dawn Raid on an Orchard"), measures with keen and sober eye the juridical power brought to bear in defense of property.

Without some ballast, *The Ballad* would be nothing more the fascinating, roaring yarn of a charming rogue who, after a life spent taking the piss, meets with an unfortunate end. Informed from the first the story will not happily conclude, the reader is nonetheless left hopelessly unprepared for the desperation and emotional devastation which haunt *The Ballad*'s closing verses. When we first meet Allan's beloved, Annie Bennett, she tracks and traces the incarcerated Allan with a mournful refrain heard in a dream: "The sound of deep waters sang in my sleep / so I followed the stream to search for a thief. /

I followed a dark stream that ran underground; / by the sound of deep waters my lover was found" ("Annie Bennett, Her Information"). Annie (an undated "information") is an alluvion poured deep within the refrain "by the sound of deep waters my lover was found." She asks of Allan's jailor, "And what can we swallow, his babby and me, / if he rots, a ripe fruit on an orchard tree?"—only to be answered with that jailor's delight in cruelty. She re-emerges, finally, at volume's end. The river now having run its course, she takes her leave:

> Goodbye to the river, goodbye to the fell,
> goodbye to the days too loving to tell.
> Goodbye to the drink, goodbye to the craic,
> goodbye to the nights with you on my back.
>
> The river is black with peat from the fell,
> curlews are calling with nothing to tell.
> Leave me now and let me sleep,
> your thieving words are all I'll keep—
> and like the fox you shall grieve.
>
> ("The River Is Dark")

The brutal, sparing economy of these lines compels the reader to reconcile the celebrated trickster of guile and cunning with the tiresome scoundrel. Erotic assignations, however tender and loving, remain untellable. How is a family to find purchase in soil so precarious, this latter term used in its original sense: "of a right, tenancy, etc.: held or enjoyed by the favor of and at the pleasure of another person; vulnerable to the will or decision of others"? From such stuff is *ressentiment* made. *The Ballad* ends back in the same small cell where it began, the same notes of defeat marking a life held in too little esteem:

> I was horse thief to his majesty
> deserter to the king
> I played my pipes for a countess
> and made her poor heart sing
> I was horse thief to his majesty
> for dukes and earls I piped
> but I'm lying in a cell
> and dying in my shite
>
> they said no jail could hold me
> at the age of forty-four
> when jailors' wives and daughters
> opened up the doors
> but now that I am old and frail
> and cannot pick the lock

> I must die in Durham jail
> but will not be forgot
>
> the wind sings Jamie Allan, oh
>
> ("The Ballad of Jamie Allan")

The repetition and refrain of balladry ever permits a genetic repetition that, in the remembering and recitation, ushers in a fugitive difference. Like waters and drafts seeping through stone, the ballad abhors capture. The "oh" opens up the hunt anew, enlisting, welcoming, the pursuants in the party of the pursued. And off they go, as in "Hey Up and Away," which makes a *détournement* of "Matthew Robinson, His Information." His horse stolen by Jaime,

> Matthew crossed the border,
> he took the quiet roads
> looking for a tinker—
> *a man of no abode*.
> Then creeping down Thief Sike
> and owa Liddel Watta
> he heard the sound of pipes
> that whittled into laughter.
>
> ("Hey Up and Away")

The syntax here harbors an ambiguity, two readings that ultimately dissolve into one and the same. For whether it be the sound of pipes or of Matthew creeping down and "owa" that "whittled," the line imparts a secret lessened not by the telling. ("Whittle," in addition to bearing its common meaning, can also be variant of "whiddle," which means "to divulge a secret.") Turned informer, Matthew is in turn deformed and set upon and swallowed by a Rabelaisian laughter. In such moments we begin to reckon with the devious singularity of the ballad's multiple incarnations, and Pickard's adroit turning of history to timeless account. *The Ballad of Jamie Allan* possesses that recalcitrance of which Derrida spoke in *Shibboleth: For Paul Celan*: "The date must conceal within itself some stigma of singularity if it is to last longer than that which it commemorates—and this lasting is the poem."

J. Bassett