





# CHICAGO REVIEW

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# CHICAGO REVIEW

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JOYELLE MCSWEENEY

## DEATH STYLES 8.18.21

Why don't you rinse your blonde child's hair in dead champagne  
to keep it gold, as they do in France?

Why don't you have every room done up in every color green?  
This will take months, years, to collect, but it will be delightful—a  
melange of plants, green glass, green porcelains, and furniture  
covered in sad greens, gay greens, clear, faded and poison greens?

—Diana Vreeland, *Harper's Bazaar*

Why don't you  
stand before the door  
black bows on your wrists  
in one of two identical pairs of shoes  
this one with rubber soles for wet days  
any cobbler can do this  
why don't you  
palm frond, breadmold, emerald, seabladder,  
filing cabinet, verdigris, eau du Nil—  
this morning I stood before the door  
I studied it like a riddle

the riddle was: When did I forget how to open doors  
I carry a ring of keys like Bluebeard's bride  
beerbottle, greengage, keylime  
it is always tugging down my pockets  
except when I wear a denim jacket!  
with little rivets  
that sing like birds in the eye  
the keys are looking smaller than they did before  
another riddle  
each one intricate and baffling  
I look closer and one bears the profile of the Royal Pavilion in Brighton  
even smaller than it did before  
when i used to go there  
i wore a half slip for a skirt and my hair in artful knots  
as memory hooks on to memory  
the cortex darts with pins and knots  
the doorknob is replaced with a skyknob  
something like the handle on a tankard  
but how do you turn a key in a mug

or turn the key in the sky  
of course eventually i shove with my shoulder  
and tumble into the house to do my chores  
how can you  
why don't you  
in order to better concentrate  
i decide to buy the milk later in the day  
to clear time to write and now all i think about is milk  
milk milk  
i crawl all over the house looking for dirty bottles  
rubber nipples and plastic collars  
“like nebuchadnezzar”  
i set em in the sink to further rot  
mid-morning sun ticks across  
the Royal Pavilion at Brighton  
a pier gently rots into the sea  
and throws off a gas which heats the sky  
when i was there  
nothing but a halfslip between me and the pier



and, contrariwise, my blackest, heaviest shoes,  
a pigeon rotted rudely, exposing its chest  
a fish rots from the head and a bird from the chest  
quoth the pigeon  
who were dead  
what were being diagram'd there  
above the pier  
the vampire's house  
rose skinny as himself and his bride  
shouldering twin sons  
one of whom would later fall to his death  
from millstone to millstone  
where the sea grinds the cliff  
then they flew off to LA  
why don't you  
move to LA  
traipse along a catwalk  
above the sign  
that tells you where you are

wash your face in it  
why don't you  
wash your dead child's face in champagne  
i did wash her face in blonde  
no-more-tears baby shampoo  
to release the residue of tape  
when it was too late  
I had already learned the scent of her: a shock  
of alcohol that shook the brain  
like priests and goblins shake the pews with censors  
scrabbling up the aisle toward the altar  
there to deposit our eyes  
but will we ever arrive  
every thirty days i  
receive a text from apple  
urging me to delete the images  
that eat my memory up  
*delete them, or I will*  
says the apple

I won't  
i have my own  
pursuits  
i have my own  
evil routes  
i learned from reading a burning book  
in a burning library  
while the baby was alive  
& J sang  
*the factory is closed*  
*let's go to venice*  
*down the left ventricle*  
*ill dress you in white denim*  
*with a darted placket*  
*and rivets to sing*  
i made that last part up  
je voudrais  
aller à venise  
and i would like

to sing it now  
i'm singing it now  
from the lip  
of the throat-decaying pier  
you can hear it  
wing into the air  
baby's breath  
on every sanitized hand  
look angel:  
pass over, or don't  
i don't care  
i'll just stand here on the threshold  
feel the wind you bear in your ratwings  
rinse my hair  
i can't find the door  
I can't open it  
i can't remember how doors work  
blow the house down  
eat the door



green buckle, green udder  
green that freckles the gravestones  
eats the carbon diox  
with green teeth  
chlorophyll endorphin  
ebony green  
as weeds in the gutter  
wave from the second floor  
why  
why don't you  
claim every green as yours

## Dirtbag

My therapist has adopted the word to use with friends, she confesses. The word I offered into the spuma of our quasi-medical discourse. An attempt to shorthand my doomy habits. I mourn its lost intimacy.

In the video client she is effulgent, freckled, unaware: a dynamo one to two years younger who shocks and revels at the sound of her own guffaw. By her skin and shine I know she can, if she wants, ape the dirtbag. But she will never be the dirtbag in the way I am now: ineluctably glinting with couch lint, street dirt, and miniature tumbles of my own hair.

My mood is underwritten by my isolation, punctured only once a week by my therapist, the sweet-chinned helpmeet. We speak into screens as a way of speaking to one another. She does not need to ask how I am doing! We are years past that. Instead, I pour utterances into the fiber-optic cables and she fishes them out, one by one.

“What does it mean, *dirtbag*?” she asks finally, after her months of admitted self-interpretation and use. Perhaps it is tactical that I have let her engage in such fancy, all in the name of a future gotcha moment such as this.

“To refuse any instinct for health, profundity, and wholesome pleasure. To do nothing that makes you feel good. To revel,” I say, “in dirt.”

“Literally?” She is fuzzy on my screen yet plainly agog.

“Yesterday in the store I told a woman to cover her nose. I had no compunction. Her nostrils were huge. She cursed at me but then obeyed.”

“Is that a dirtbag impulse?”

“Not particularly.”

“What would be a dirtbag impulse?”

“Kicking bits of dropped food under the stove. Requesting daily deliveries during a pandemic. Using ziplock bags.” I prod an ingrown

hair on my chin and go on. “Wearing jeans you haven’t washed in six weeks...”

“I feel like I do most of those things, that many people do—” she begins.

“Only they’re not jeans, they’re jeggings and smell of vagina. Or not vagina but crotch sweat. And letting mildew climb up the grout in the shower, pink and gray and processing into a kind of vellum. And using the same water glass for a week, the lip in the light revealing your many days of spittle—”

I see that I have at last blanched her. The audio signal burrs as I wait, twisting the hair at my nape into a knot. When she repossesses herself: “Do these things give you pleasure, do you think? The way that you talk about them seems to give you pleasure.”

The knot at my nape pulls like a lead. “None of it feels good, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Do you think you want to feel good?” It is a dull barb, matte and doughy as it emerges from her mouth.

“The crux of being a dirtbag is that you do these things, these demonstrations of neglect, and if you secretly hope it will get you somewhere new, it relievingly gets you nowhere.”

She wants to talk about “demonstrations of neglect” and whether the “demonstrations” are indicative of actual neglect or simply performance.

“Why not both at the same time?” There is a genius for compacting efficiency in the dirtbag life, a foie gras stratagem of gross grossness.

Then, because it seems delicious to do so, I empty my cache into the air: “Watching TV. That’s the motherlode. I use TV to evacuate myself from the room.”

“Are you terming enjoyment self-annihilation? Is that part of the dirtbag impulse?”

I can tell she doesn’t think it is a big deal, watching TV, but she doesn’t know how much I stream, while microwaving and eating surplus food, in a hot bed while the radiators whine, occasionally even in the shower with my phone propped on the sill; she cannot fathom the energy I demand from remote server farms, if that is how that works. I think, I can be sitting still on my sun-faded couch and destroying the earth, if not all by myself then joined by a mass: an international faceless cadre of dirtbags all evacuating their own human

lives in favor of other human noise, other human noise they need not relate to or retract from; let us be like stones in a clear creek, the audio and video rushing over us, smoothing us into rank obeisance...

My therapist looks at me. I have been sitting wordless for a long time. A dog barks, on her end or mine.

She checks the time on her phone, offscreen, or that is what I assume she is doing. In a reciprocal gesture I too check my phone and see that our time is slivering. Nothing has happened; this is a weekly occurrence. The point of therapy isn't weekly catharsis but rather the slow and minor reassembly of one's understanding of one's own life. To my chagrin, it seems to be working. Its slowness is, as they say, a feature and not a bug.

At last, she speaks: she has been reading a book about laziness. I ask eagerly, "Is the concept of laziness a product of capitalism? Is that what the book says?"

"No," she replies. "It's just about the restoring value of rest. I think you might be lying down, but I'm not convinced you're giving yourself—"

A clatter cascades into my headphones: a scraping and then a scapping and then a rat-a-tat, during which my sweet-chinned helpmeet exits the screen at a bladed angle. Next, a chest-rattling bark. She appears back on screen incrementally, in slapstick lurches, holding the collar of a large white mutt dog. The dog's head is challengingly wide and I am jealous of the way its drool shines in boasting strings. "I'm so sorry!" she says. "He's usually so much more chill. This is Archie."

I tell Archie that it is nice to meet him, dredging my dry reservoirs for charm. She laughs in response; it feels like I have won something small, as it always does. I am wild about her.

Archie, jowls swinging, begins to bark directly at the screen, rumbling and then ejaculating hair-flattening woofs, in a repeating cycle that is almost music. My therapist seems strong but she cannot match her pet's tenacity, and as she wrests him out of view he goes on rioting. I sit folded in. He is too much to know, a transgression: Archie. I wonder if his paws smell of corn chips, if he is allowed to sleep on the bed, though I do not want to know either answer.



She says she'll be right back. I nod into the empty room. Behind her desk there is a framed picture of a man and a woman. I assume she is the woman, and her husband—who she has spoken of, blandly—the man, but this is only an assumption as the picture is beyond the frame of focus. So too the spines of her books, relievingly. I had not formerly desired data-based evidence of the differences between this actual person and my impressions of her. These impressions I have organized into an unsteady cairn of want. I am used to a certain intimate anonymity: our hours are customarily of my invention, a slant project of fondness. I want to be, therapeutically, stroked, and she is so gentle in her touch. My self-hate tidily explains that I have manipulated her into this.

When she returns her shirt collar is newly and unevenly ovaloid, as if the dog in his wrestling has pulled it from shape. The barking resumes but is remote and we, together and gracefully, ignore it. "I'm so sorry," she repeats. "That's never happened before."

I tell her I needed some life's excitement anyway. I don't try to make it sound sincere.

Again she looks down at her phone, or what I assume is her phone and—with a sigh so round and full of meaning I imagine it's rehearsed—says: "I'm leaving my practice."

"To where?" I ask dumbly, wavery, breathless in the event of it.

"To not be a therapist. To restore the value of rest, like I was saying."

I ask her what she will do. There is a spicy nag of pressure in my nostrils; I don't want to cry at this. So I do a cliché dirtbag thing: I pick an ankle scab and then wipe the little blood across the table. It makes a comet and its tail.

"For a time I think I'll probably just chill out and try to adjust... This year has been so hard...I'll help you find someone else...We can talk about this next week...It's a while off yet." She speaks in sentences like this, parallel to one another, with meaningful spaces in between, spaces I do not have time to mine, because she is leaving already; she is gone; I can see it. Was the dog a device: to lighten, to divert, to demonstrate the increasing distance between one of us and the other. I cannot imagine the week between this session and the next. The notion pours like rancid oil across my chest.

Someone is ringing the buzzer but I haven't ordered any food and I'm not waiting for a package, so I sit there, receiving the bristled peeling—it happens a lot, it's a big building and someone is always receiving something from someone else—and I have to say “What?” when she speaks again. “Time to go,” she repeats. “More next week.” The sheen of my helpmeet then wanes. She says goodbye, apologizes again about the dog, wishes me a good week. I put on a fake smile to slice her and wave. The browser window grays, asks for a rating regarding the quality of the call.

**LANA TURNER**  
**A Journal of Poetry & Opinion / 15**

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Rae Armantrout, Sawnie Morris, Tawana  
Malalu, John Wilkinson, Mark Levine,  
Sandra Simonds, Henri Cole, Mars Tekosky . . .

**Essays**

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Craig Dworkin on Robert Thurman's Diagrams  
Cal Bedient on John Wilkinson  
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Karen Garthe on New York during Covid  
David Lau on a Red Decade  
Monica Youn, Rae Armantrout, Lyn Hejinian  
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**Art**

"Nudie," a series by radical Australian  
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TONGO EISEN-MARTIN

## A GOOD EARTH

I talk facing away from the dead  
They replace me with the change in my pocket  
A penny that has yet to be invented

They say, “You have to know how to cut a throat on the way to  
cutting a throat”

After sleeping on a mattress made from two garbage bags of clothes  
I became content with the small gestures of plantation fires

Playing with couch ashes, I realized how weird the universe was. It  
exists in so many places. So many random things. It interrupts me  
when I am trying to dream. Like your clay correspondence, Lord

To be transparent  
I have twenty books next to a bullet  
Like an old man giving advice at the beginning of a revolution

I’ve really done it, Lord. Explored the mumbles of my mind.  
Explored what’s naturally there. And I found no brainwashing. I  
found Africa, Lord

I have a future  
It takes place in the diasporic South  
I have morning possessions  
Modern militancy  
I mean windows to the South  
I will walk on a missile for food



I guess you will not want flowers for a few years, Lord

Will I be tied face to face with the country I murder

Merge with us, Lord

our old metal vs. the new metal

our old metal vs. a pool of meandering imperialist faces

A multiculturalism of sorts

The dead replace me with a comedian's chest cavity

Instead of a chest cavity held tight

It takes a violent middleman for me to talk to myself

Stories that travel through other people's stories

A song about a song

A hemisphere about a hemisphere

Stories that travel through a conquered poet

My mother remembers Africa, Lord

She killed on behalf of you, Lord

I wore a machete all winter and no one asked me what it meant

I read one thousand books in front of the world

What I do is fight poems

And sleep through decadent San Francisco prayer circles

Watch people play for post-working-class associative surfaces

Or Recreations of a governor's desk

ruling-class art of utility

Playing find the sociopathic bureaucrat

A day white people scare even easier  
TV in a basket next to a ceramic baby  
Wearing ceramic armor  
Musket progeny fantasizing through the art of the poor  
Their trendy latches locked before God  
Black art hunted down like a dog

Hand over my friends, Lord

Lord, I think that I am going to die in a war

Unelected white people in my small house  
Like a blues song of no spiritual affect  
or dollhouse H-bomb  
A pony show near dead bodies  
Apartheid weddings that go right  
Apartheid white people who give birth to mathematicians  
The spiritual continuity of barracks and police stations  
The chemical interpretation of a Sunday trip to church  
Church smells in their pockets  
A river mistaken for a talking river  
No autobiography outside of small personal victories of violence  
and drug use  
Made in the image of God's trinkets  
What white abolitionists confided in their children about  
Chemical assurances that  
They will switch from Black artist to white artist  
Black God to white God  
Black worker to white worker

I think about you cautiously, Lord  
In the same way I think about my childhood, Lord

Foxhole Friday nights  
Most of life is mute

Comedian points out the planter's field to the priest

King sugar cane  
King cotton  
King revolutionary

The bottle is central  
Containing all modes of shallow introduction  
Introducing an unlisted planter class  
Speaking about fever and balance sheets  
And reassuring the masses  
That we can figure out our fathers later

A priest took my mother lightly, Lord  
Stood in front of the parishioners re-raveling  
Fantasies about Black art  
Priest reading confidently  
Before I broke him  
And broke his parallel

After today, I have never been a poet before

A little brother watches his big brother's friends  
They lean rifles on shelter walls  
They agree with me and call it literature

It's a simple matter this revolution thing  
To really lie to no one  
To keep nothing godlike

To write a poem for God

## THIRD IN THE WORLD

Societies wander together like hopeful drops of a virus

Citizen-testaments bent on offing me

A nation of breadwinners to hold me back

like it's a Brink's, I wrinkle the concrete sometimes

like flesh, my Martin Luther King permanence

turning away from a podium into the reeds

Like God is the dangerous twin

Black August to the mountaintop

balcony on my bedroom floor

They steal you from the earth itself and suspend you and your broken neck  
from their fullest euphoria

from the loyalty oath of their gray superstitions

loyalty oath of their agrarian reform

I return to my mother

completely disrespected

For peeling the heat off of purgatory, they kill poets like me

Walk me away from my poems; never to be heard from again

in this final industrial complex or bloodlines picked over/picked through  
A sport in spiritual death or your devil at least half made

Police become a pretty word



I'm reading a lynch mob's shoestrings like they were tea leaves  
Teaching you how to write about cities

It's the 25<sup>th</sup> century in the mirror, people  
Tyranny against your chump change  
You're a chump to be mocked even with a gun in your car

A cubit of needlework spelled tomb for the proletariat  
The relapse ministry

Talented people curled up in the fetal position next to a diamond dying

Just another service day in the theatrics of teahouse fascism  
In a bouquet of surveillance cameras

In the poverty of God

New blue eyes  
Corpses of water  
Newly potted presidency or one big shiny coin  
if you ask an animated capitalism and other non-literal voids

Killing is white freedom  
The deification of hyphens  
Medicine bread and picture shows

Gray protestors in LA  
Guests of our ink  
drop-kicking roses in a graveyard  
D.C. mink

Like a stone torn in half  
    the pen advances despite cia guideposts  
    despite non-Afrikan pasts and futures

a metaphorical but not surreal day in a horn-ridden life  
horn player improvising King

Like a radio prizefight featuring Shango himself  
A real hand sweeps the land of racism

May I return to the ground  
May I make progress with the gun  
My Mother Emmanuel

They put on music that evening  
A swinging-type body language  
For you to drink with fermented five-dollar bills

For your body language, some applause  
My past stomach lining

Neither a good thing nor a bad thing  
Like being psychic on the way to a lethal injection

It will sit you down with Lady Day  
Lady Day leading youth who surrendered their souls to Afrika too soon

Polity thought floating in the cup of water she saved me  
Accessing my stomach  
Accessing the love of the american lynched

Coat sleeves wooden and avalanching to the wrist  
Our Mother Emmanuel  
avalanching to the sharp keys

Pain...the deal you make with pain

a piano makes sense for them  
laying hands on the world gradually.  
addressing the bend of necks on the streets of the North.  
travelers sailing in pain / repeating pain in the North.

ten trigger fingers on that piano  
if Harmony would have me

Putting a hundred fights on every direction offered her  
Lady Day leaning on trees again  
recruiting the countryside itself

Lay your plan out on this lightning  
Make your poems the corner pocket of men

I've greeted the Blues itself  
america may clean my dead body, but will never include me

there goes the poet—killing without killing—don't mind this...this  
painting of your language

may I be a meaningful lynching

a crow's passing

good and dead by the afternoon

## A SKETCH ABOUT GENOCIDE

A San Francisco police chief says, “Yes, you poets make points. But they are all silly,”

Police chief sewing a mouth onto a mouth  
Police chief looking straight through the poet

Flesh market both sides of the levy  
Change of plans both sides of the nonviolence

On no earth  
Just an earth character

His subordinate says, “Awkward basketball moves look good on you, sir... Yes, we are everywhere, sir...yes, unfortunately for now, white people only have Black History...we will slide the wallpaper right into their cereal bowls, sir...Surveil the shuffle.”

I am a beggar and all of this day is too easy  
I want to see all of the phases of a wall  
Every age it goes through  
    Its humanity  
    Its environmental racism

We call this the ordeal blues  
Now crawl to the piano seat and make a blanket for your cell  
Paint scenes of a child dancing up to the court appearance  
And leaving a man,  
    but not for home

Atlantic ocean charts mixed in with parole papers  
Mainstream funding (the ruling class's only pacifism)

Ruling-class printing judges (fiat kangaroos)  
Making judges hand over fist  
Rapture cop packs and opposition whites all above a thorny stem  
Caste plans picked out like vans for the murder show  
anglo-saints addicting you to a power structure

you want me to raise a little slave, don't you?  
bash his little brain in  
and send him to your civil rights

No pain  
Just a white pain

Delicate bullets in a box next to a stack of monolith scriptures  
(makes these bullets look relevant, don't it?)

I remember you  
Everywhere you lay your hat is the capital of the south  
The posture you introduced to that fence  
The fence you introduced to political theory

If you shred my dreams, son  
I will tack you to gun smoke

The suburbs are finally offended

this will be a meditation too

## THE CHICAGO PRAIRIE FIRE

First, I must apologize to the souls of the house

I am wearing the cheekbones of the mask only

Like a pill bottle whose name is yours

Name tagged on the side of a factory of wrists

Teeth of the mask now

Back of the head of the mask now

New phase of anti-anthropomorphism fending for real faces

Stuck with one of those cultures that believes I chose this family

I am not creative

Just the silliest of the revolutionaries

My blood drying on

my only jacket

the police state's psychic middlemen

Evangelizing for the creation of an un-masses

An un-Medgar

Blood of a lamb less racialized

or awesome prison sentence

Good God

A right angle made between a point  
On a Louisiana plantation  
And 5-year-old's rubber ball  
3 feet high and falling  
like a deportee plane  
to complete my interpretation  
(of garden-variety genocide)

I am small talk  
about loving your enemies  
A little more realistically

About paper tigers  
And also gold...

I need my left hand back  
I broke my neck on the piano keys  
Found paradise in a fistfight

Maybe I should check into the Cuba line

Watching the universe's last metronomes  
some call Black Jacobins

Just wait...  
These religions will start resigning in a decade or two

Some colorfully  
Some transactional-ly

In a cotton gothic society

Class betrayal gone glassless/I mean ironically/my window started  
fogging over too  
Wondering which Haiti will get me through this winter  
Which poem houses souls

Which socialist breakthroughs  
Breakthroughs like ten steps back  
Then finally trying stillness

Like introducing Gabriel Prosser to Thelonious Monk

I remember childhood  
Remember the word “Childhood” being a beginning

Scribbling on an amazing grace

I rented this body from some circumference of slavery

Remember being kicked out of the Midwest

Strange fruit theater

Lithium and circuses

Like-minded stomachs

The ruling class blessing their blank checks with levy foam...  
with opioid tea

Sentient dollar bills yelling to each other pocket to pocket

Cello stands in the precinct for accompanying counterrevolutionaries

My mother raised me with a simple pain

A poet loses his mind, you know, like the room has weather  
Or first-girlfriend gravity

“The difference between me and you  
Is that the madness  
Wants me forever”

A pair of apartments  
Defining both my family  
And political composure

Books behind my back  
Bail money paved into the streets



Playing:  
Euphoria  
Euphoria  
Cliché

Bracing for the medicine's recoil

Sharing a dirty deli sandwich with my friends  
Black Jacobins  
Underground topography  
Or grandmother's hands

Psychology of the mask now

Teeth of the mask again

YIN XIAOYUAN  
Translated by the author

*from* ATMOSPHERIC SCIENCES SERIES

## 22 DEGREE HALO

All of a sudden, the cirrostratus clouds were blown away,  
Like a shoal of fish pushed away by ocean currents, like a gardenia  
flower shedding its petals

“It feels like event horizon here, or an acoustic vacuum, as if you are  
temporarily deafened by a big blast;  
countenances of all seraphs above are shifting and melting away in  
the scattered light.”

—Little Joe, what are you so absorbed in?  
—The way tiny salt grains falling on a sheet of damp watercolor  
paper and blooming into giant snowflakes  
is something other than dissolution, more similar to erosion, which  
breaches strokes of color around it  
—Salt is like solitude itself, wiping out everything in its way

He twisted off the lid of his fern-green thermos, and found a beam  
of sunlight hidden in it like a fledging bird  
Then he opened a box of biscuit sticks, near-expiry, sprouting new  
bones day by day

Windmills lined the road, Roman aqueducts were everywhere too  
“Blue hiking jackets are not for you...  
It takes a buffer zone as wide as the sky to cool you down.”  
She was at 5 o'clock, wearing a scarlet scarf,

Talking while walking away from you  
("There are two different versions of this paragraph:  
A: He asked her for directions  
She was the only living thing he met, when he drove through all  
those deserted ghost villages  
As if all were recently vaporized  
B: The woman was just a reflection, on the soap film of his vision.")

He abridged and revised, smoking one cigarette after another,  
luckily the disturbing telephone had not rung once yet  
Whistling kettle in the kitchen quieted down too  
So he took a sip, and stamped on the paper with the wet lid—  
No words on it survived, for many centimeters around

## 22度日晕

风吹散鱼群如梔子花瓣。

“这是声音的真空——好比爆炸后的瞬间失聪。  
百里内的他们和它们，有融化在光芒里形状莫测的面部。”

——乔治，为什么盯着它发呆？  
——盐粒落在湿水彩纸上呈现雪花形状的过程，  
不像化掉：它仿佛腐蚀掉了周围原本的颜色。  
——也许盐，是一种以孤独吞并一切的物质。

他拧开烟绿色暖水瓶。日光藏在里面如一只雏鸟。  
一盒条状饼干，尚算新鲜，每天都在长出新骨头。

前面的村落有风车、罗马式引水桥。  
“蓝色冲锋衣不适合你，  
它并没有天空那么大足以让你冷却下来。”  
这是一个红色头巾的女子，在5点钟方向，  
一边说话，一边离开。  
（“这个地方可以有两个版本，他拉住那个女子问路，  
要知道他走过的村庄和农场，没有见到人、猫、犬类或牛羊活物——  
空荡得就像蒸发掉。  
或者那女子只是他的眼睛和心在夕阳水边制造出的另一个自己。”）

删改。一支烟接着另一支。电话安静下来。  
沸腾的水壶安静下来。  
他端起杯子，以主人公的名字为中心按下一个水印圈——  
是的，方圆几厘米，再没有美妙的名词存活。

## CLOUD SEEDING AGENT

Pieces of jigsaw slowly constructed their facial expressions, but what was that? The flash across the cinema screen?

A spindle-shaped flock of birds?

“The seal of the sky has been torn open by a strong wind, where should have been several masterstrokes as paperweights, nailing down the overlapping corners of the quarters of the panoramic vista (but disappointedly they never revealed themselves...)”

“Everything started raining sideways, in the topsy-turvy plot of the drama.”

The sky was concave like a sucking disc at first, with its silver fibers stretching downwards tightened like strings on a guitar

Rain spots... They vanished from the body of a Dalmatian, and then emerged again on the leaves of *Aucuba japonica*

“They gathered up like apparitions, driven by the cloud seeding agent, And displayed themselves in a fast-forward mode...”

The trigger was an onomatopoeia: “Boom!”—a boat severely tilted over by the wave front, which was raised by

the first drop of rain

The story grows wildly:

“She cut off the pair of 25-year-old antlers growing out from the foggy mirror, Time must be the last thing standing, bleeding to death.”

They waded through the alternating currents of days and nights A smell of white rhinoceros and luminescent insects on the prairie

“She cut off the 25-year-old pair of antlers growing out from the foggy mirror, Time must bleed to death.”

Among the fictitious firewood of cold and warm clouds and their  
colliding ice crystals entwined high up in the in the air sweeping  
over the skyscrapers with their trembles/remote sensing/  
complication/omens/sugar/glimmers

They waded through the alternating currents of days and nights A  
smell of white rhinoceros and luminescent insects on the prairie  
“She cut off the pair of 25-year-old antlers growing out from the foggy  
mirror, Time must be the last thing standing, bleeding to death.”

Scriptvariablesaccelerationandvelocityandwhitenoisewereallgluedup  
togetherandthewholestorywasgettingoutofcontrolatlast...

Nouns, personal pronouns, predictions, foreign words and silent letters a  
sudden change in weather hyphenated tides of words are overflowing  
now

Among the fictitious firewood of cold and warm clouds and their colliding  
ice crystals entwined high up in the in the air sweeping over the  
skyscrapers with their trembles/remote sensing/complication/omens/  
sugar/glimmers

They waded through the alternating currents of days and nights A  
smell of white rhinoceros and luminescent insects on the prairie  
“She cut off the pair of 25-year-old antlers growing out from the foggy  
mirror, Time must be the last thing standing, bleeding to death.”

## 播云剂

错乱的拼图正被他们的表情呈现。扫着银幕一闪而过是什么？  
纺锤形的鸟群？

“风吹开一个缺口。那里本应有重量级的词汇，  
起着红色图钉的作用：固定住四张图景交汇的一角……”  
“它们将歪斜，如这场违背顺序的雨。”

雨最初扁平如吸盘，拽着天上垂下的藤蔓状的银色电线。  
圆形……从斑点狗身上隐去，又从洒金桃叶珊瑚上显现。  
“它们以魂魄状聚集，播云剂给予它们驱动指令，  
而它们则使所有片段快进。”

丢掉的是一个拟声词：呼！——舢板被浪头掀翻的声响。  
那是第一滴雨！  
整个故事狂乱生长起来：

“她将镜子里二十五年雾气长成的鹿角割下。时间必须站着流  
着血死去。”

他们和它们 自由越过昼夜 草原翻涌着白犀牛和发光甲  
虫的味道  
“她将镜子里二十五年雾气长成的鹿角割下。时间必须站着流  
着血死去。”

在冷暖云与冰晶的虚拟柴禾间 他们高出百兽的部分在空中缠  
绕 加剧的颤悚/遥感/纷繁/征兆/甜腻/辉光刮过摩天大厦顶部  
他们和它们 自由越过昼夜 草原翻涌着白犀牛和发光甲  
虫的味道  
“她将镜子里二十五年雾气长成的鹿角割下。时间必须站着流  
着血死去。”

脚本筹谋变量加速度逐渐嘈杂逐渐澎湃逐渐白热逐渐失控整个故事长成了片.....

名词、称谓、预言、外来语、哑音字母 突发天气或情绪的引力 字符连成潮汐高出纸面, 现在章节开始横流

在冷暖云与冰晶的虚拟柴禾间 他们高出百兽的部分在空中缠绕 加剧的颤悚/遥感/纷繁/征兆/甜腻/辉光刮过摩天大厦顶部 他们和它们 自由趟过昼夜 草原翻涌着白犀牛和发光甲虫的味道

“她将镜子里二十五年雾气长成的鹿角割下。时间必须站着流着血死去。”



## INFRARED CLOUD IMAGES

Quiet please, ladies and gentlemen! As is widely known, the famous writer, Professor Bernard H. Lightman, wrote 561 works during his lifetime.

From which we have chosen 6 unpublished novels, for a game we are going to play here tonight.

We have inscribed the 6 beginnings and 6 endings of them, all scrambled, on the 12 metal boards.

Now we will ask a reader to come up the stage and put the 12 pieces on the 12 faces of the twin cubes.

If all the opposite faces turn out to match, which means they are the beginning and ending of a same story, the cubes will be automatically unlocked.

The winner will get a portable hard disk, which contains priceless materials about Professor Bernard H. Lightman and all his works. Who wants them?

Beginnings:

I:

Two figures, one in a long black robe while the other in white, were walking side by side in the dark forest. Feeble beams of light fell on their shoulders from between the branches, like pale morning glory flowers.

Beside a pile of newly shoveled-up earth there was a stream, and a dagger lying in it, like a fluorescent moon

II:

“This is no amber, but a puddle of venom...” by the faint glow of a flashlight they discovered a steel tape, curled up like a snake, Their faces over it looked like rain clouds: focused and suspicious.

III:

Lucky that paper sheets were objects of high toughness.... So all letters were sent out intact when it happened.

Tablecloth, curtains, piano, cupboards and everything else fell apart, ruining the peacefulness of the room completely.

“Not me, it’s your Fate calling.”

After all, moths lay eggs in hollow souls only.

IV:

Lavender-color thunderhead over the village.

Babies were born like icicles—cold and fragile.

The first cry was even harder than a mole’s learning to have a sunbath.

V:

Like a mirror to me, he was young, sensitive and irritable, walking around restlessly. He put on another coat

And went somewhere else—but always straying into my crime scenes accidentally,

And getting accused as a scapegoat.

VI:

A “puzzle” was like an octopus, four upper limbs and four lower ones, switching roles periodically,

Sometimes airtight and sometimes unfortified—The prologue

Endings:

A:

He was lying there, unrecognizably disfigured, I could not identify that face:

Skinnier than me, with cardamom-color hair longer than mine—like leaves of a perennial plant.

B:

“Right conclusion but wrong reasoning, as always. Admit it: I’m a genius!”

He sat in that chair, long-limbed, like a greyhound.

The flint stone of a lighter was not meant for a cigar, the suffocating smoke swallowing up book piles and notebooks buried his last secrets.

C:

She sat on the deck of the ship, with a smile rippling across her face, She remembered the feel of old clothes torn off her skin, like an eagle losing its broken beak, talon and weak feathers

The burgundy sun happened to look like a full moon at that moment, rolling in the grass on the horizon.

D:

“Everything is in this portable hard disk, that’s my only legacy—an open-ended story.”

E:

No bandaged pigeon, no handwritings. There was only a number on the wall of that house—ZERO, like a symbol of balanced revenue and expenditure. That was what I’ve left there for you—

It was so “even,” when you fall, it would never fall apart with you.

F:

Roger's bones were never found. He dreamed of Roger more than  
once, lying flat in a flame,  
gnawed by Monarch butterflies, like a piece of gold sunk to the  
riverbed,  
blanketed in silt and mud.

A black(suits)-and-white(flowers) funeral, their fingers got burned  
by the petals of roses they lay on the coffin.

—You've done it really quickly, but unfortunately, the twin cubes  
did not open, which means stories did not match up.

—Yes, I guess the standard answers were:

I with B—a serial killer; II with F—a dog-eat-dog archaeological  
team; III with C, the revenge of an abandoned woman;  
IV with A—the biography of Professor Bernard H. Lightman; V  
with E—Mysterious twin murder case; VI with D—an explorer  
who died young.

But I prefer the other way: I with C—the resurrection of a beauty;  
II with D, a selfless archaeologist; III with E, a woman who said  
goodbye to her gloomy past;  
IV with F, hero from a small village; V with A, ever-connected  
twins; VI with B—the master puzzle-solver.

## 红外云图

请各位安静片刻。大家知道，伯纳德·H·莱特曼先生生前创作了561部作品，今天我们选出六部尚未出版的，每一部提供开头结尾，打乱顺序，喷印在这些白板上。请一位读者上来，将它们贴在这两个魔方的12个面上，如果相对的两面正好是同一部小说的始末，魔方宣告解锁，你将得到储存有有莱特曼先生毕生作品的硬盘。Wow, 多么诱人的奖品！

开篇：

编号1：

一黑一白两个穿长袍者走过林间，零散的光线如牵牛花落在肩头。

浅咖啡色的一丛新土，匕首蜷缩在溪流下宛如月牙。

编号2：

“这不是琥珀是一汪毒液。”电筒光里卷尺如蛇跃起。

他们的脸是它不可触及的暗云：在上方，带着专注与怀疑主义的眼神。

编号3：

多么庆幸纸张是韧性的东西……信寄出后，房间里的桌布的朽坏声和橱柜木质的分崩离析声都成了寂静的破坏者。

“不是我，是终结在召唤你。”

必须有空心的灵魂供那些蛾子孵卵。

编号4：

鼠尾草色阴天像一片水渍浸泡那个村庄。

婴儿们生来如屋檐冰挂——寒冷而孱弱。

学会一声啼哭比鼯鼠学会晒太阳更加艰难。

编号5：

这年轻、脆弱、易怒、走动的镜子。披上别的大衣，去了别的某个地方，也许很远——但他会恰好出现在我的现场，穿上我的罪名。

编号6：“‘谜’是一种八足动物，上下肢不断相互转换，有时天衣无缝，有时杀机四伏。”——楔子

完结：

编号A：

他躺在那里，我几乎不能将他称作“我”。

瘦削一些，有更长的桔梗色的长发，宛如顽固的多年生植物。

编号B：

“你们蒙对了结果，却永远无法获知过程。我是一个天才。”

他坐在那里身形秀长如一只灵缇。

那些掀开打火机盖不为点燃雪茄的夜晚，书堆与笔记上青烟燎去万物的假象。

编号C：

她坐在轮船上，笑容的涟漪黯然荡开，

她记得旧衣服从皮肤上撕下的感觉，如同拔掉残羽裹上兽皮。

太阳。酷似月亮的酒红色太阳。在远处野草丛上滚动。

编号D：“所有一切都在这硬盘中，这是我留给世人唯一的东西——一个敞开的世界。”

编号E：

没有缠着布条的灰鸽子，没有字迹。房间里只有一个数字——零。

就像多年后终于收支相抵的账簿。那是我留给你的，

它如此平，以保证你倒下时不会随之坍塌。

编号F：

罗杰的骸骨一直下落不明。他常梦到罗杰在突然的光焰中，

被食人黑蝶啃食殆尽。“就像一块沉溺的黄金，

被乌黑的树影和淤泥裹缠起来。”

白色的西服炫目的葬仪。他们纷纷被放下的玫瑰烧伤。

——这位先生，您非常迅速，但魔方没有打开，很遗憾您的拼法不正确。

——我知道标准答案是：

1与B，连环杀手案；2与F，尔虞我诈的考古队；3与C，弃妇的复仇；

4和A，伯纳德自传；5和E，利用双胞胎身份掩人耳目的谋杀案；6

与D, 不得善终的探索者。  
但我更喜欢1与C, 复活的美人; 2与D, 无私的地质学家; 4与E, 来自穷乡僻壤的英雄;  
5和A, 孪生兄弟相互怜惜的一生; 3和E, 走出阴郁的女子; 6与B, 解谜高手。

## MONSOON CLOUD CLUSTERS

—When you navigate your mind through monsoon cloud clusters,  
space-time becomes fragmented and flocculent

Ethereal shadows loomed up: father of cyclones, artisan of  
hurricanes, he was there in the shattered beams of white light

—Report your current location! Your last recorded coordinates  
were: 127°32'28" E, 34°2'45" S, which you have been drifting fast  
away from

—This zone I am in now is high above your latitude-and-longitude  
perspective, gravity-free...

—Wake him up, and tell him he is drifting away

+++++1. Clouds were like a long sweep of gossamer silk ++5.

Diving into the grey layer of still water 7. His was sprawled in  
the penumbra, with curls of smoke rising from his finger 15.

Translucent, deconstructible cells

++ 4. Sharks, like anthers blown off stigmas by a strong wind +++2.

Wrapping around a tender verdure embryo++ 19. Which just  
fended off a hungry wolf

++6. Before waking up 8. As capricious as fluttering Eucheuma 21.

On the delicate petals high and low +

+++++ 10. They swan through it like through fleecy air +++

+11. "Their temperature was drawn out and trickled into a container  
of dreams"++

+++12. When their shapes were fully occupied by superior spirit  
activities 13. And turned into empty shells +++

+++14. Without magnetic field or infrared light 16. Formed a  
waterfall... ++18. His arms

+17. On the northern waters, a captain was standing on an Amazon-  
water-lily-shaped piece of ice floating downstream +++9. The  
salmon have become more and more aggressive



+3. The ocean has been switched over to “foggy” mode  
20. Like rime falling from above 22. This is the ritual of an  
abandonment at dawn  
—23. After that, stratus clouds all thawed into flowing streams

—Number all the fragments above, and then? Thread them up?  
—Create anchor links for the key words. For example: 1=a vase;  
2=a postman; 3=a murder; 4=an invitation  
So “2-4-1-3” and “3-2-1-4” mean different stories

Known creatures attack people from deep water...nobody is  
logically safe  
4:21 March 19, 12:21 September 23, 23:21 February 8...  
Fetch the pieces and glue them back to your timeline.

## 季风云团

——当你穿越季风云团,时间与空间呈碎絮状。

那些幻影:气旋的父亲,暴雨的匠人,他坐在绞碎的白光里。

——请报告你的坐标,我们观测到你离上次的东经127°32'28"南纬34°2'45"有较大偏移。

——经纬不可及的界域不受地球重力约束,除非你唤醒他,告诉他他正在漂浮。

+++++1.玻璃纹状的云彩++5.洒在灰色里7.他摊开曝露于水烟的手指15.反光性质、或可拆解的细胞结构

++4.蕊状的鲨鱼群+++2.裹紧抽丝之绿19.从狼的撕咬中挣脱)

++6.醒来之前8.保持麒麟菜的飘忽不定21.渐次落满高低莲花盏+

+++++10.穿越它们如无物。+++

+11.“它们的温度被抽走,装在梦境的透明容器里不轻于一副肚肠。”++

+++12.当它们的形体被更高的灵魂活动占用13.它们空成shells,+++

+++14.没有磁性、红外线、16.直到它再次液化倾倒下.....++18.他刚苏醒的胳膊

+17.(北方水域,船长在王莲状的最后浮冰上,+++9.攻击性渐增的大马哈鱼

+3.海已调成雾模式

20.高处的水滴。22.这是东方泛白后的扬弃

——23.层叠的云被放平为水。

——给所有碎片编号,然后呢?将它们缀成纵向链条?

——只是一种关键词锚定。花瓶标记为1号,邮递员2号,谋杀案3号,邀请函4号,

这样梦中的2413和3214就指向不同的因果。

它们会从深水区攻击你当你作为完整的人形.....这有些危险。  
3月19日4:21, 9月23日12:21, 2月8日23:21.....  
请去这些地点按顺序把自己收回。

VINCENT BROQUA

from PHOTOCALL†

caresse le  
retournement des

sentiments faciles des  
hommes entendus comme

vêtements en  
lambeau animal de

soupleses d'un  
toucher d'un appareil à

, *délic* du torse de sa vrille au *clac*  
paradent , *snap* mets-toi d'horizontale

retire enlève bouge en face ici  
*tac* c'est ça allez bien , on y est

montre souris ta main ta main  
baisse , un peu là *clac* ou parle

s'extrême tes yeux en , flash  
viens on y est là , vraiment je crois

---

†/ Copyright: Vincent Broqua, *Photocall, projet d'attendrissement* (Paris: Les petits matins, 2021).

caress  
his returning of

easy feelings of  
overheard men like

clothes in  
tatters animal of

smoothenesses of the  
touch of a device: camera

, *click* of torso its twist a *clack*  
parade , *snap* lie down horizontal

pull remove move opposite here  
*tack* ok that's great , that's it

show smile your hand your hand ,  
take off your would you , *click* or speak

extreming your eyes in a flash  
come , that's it really I believe

like – lèche  
parties du corps

comme des  
body-parts

part / partner  
com /

part / partenaire  
compagnon

a company  
an

compagnie  
entrepreneuse

false company  
is like face-release

fausse compagnie  
comme perdre la face

a parting  
together

en partance  
tout avec

prendre les jambes  
ou l'art de nier

and take to your heels  
the art of denegation

entreprendre or  
between takes  
makes

entreprendre or  
entre les prises  
pose

body-art comparison  
of *garçon fecit*

art-corps comparaison  
de *garçon fecit*

= pense-corps →

think-body  
not porn or not

pense-corps  
porno non ou

not techno-body  
but real picture

pas techno-corps  
mais image réelle

body-care  
ideas / speech  
for the

corps-soin  
idées / discours  
pour le

sun of skin  
embrace

soleil de peau  
embrasse

= photo-call 2 →

pris volé enlevé

italien de ton dieu-nature  
derrière, l'appareil

m'appelles «toi mortel»?  
dis-tu malléable?

images-cristaux peluches  
métamorphosent lévitation  
en sous-vêtement

appelle-moi : ne voulais pas être pris  
photographié – piqûre audible

de ton appareil – action  
insecte de feu, flash

= taken stolen →



taken stolen abducted  
fire insect lucciole

italian of your nature-god  
behind, camera

do you dare call me “you-mortal”?  
did you say: picture-love?

image-crystals of plush  
metamorphosing levitation in  
underwear

call me: didn’t want to be taken  
photographed – audible bites

of your camera – action  
insect of fire, flare  
*lucciole, te*

= ... →

... disparais tes  
lignes vert-couture

étends-toi *h-h* aspire  
ton souffle de jambes mains cheveux

noirs de nuancier

colle tes papilles  
aux murs repeints

étale *h h* ton souffle *h h*  
*hic* ton albumine

blanche

parie tranchées *hh* *lignes*  
*of the erected mortal*

dis : kidnapping  
dis : blessure épidermique  
dis :  
*h*

= *h* →

*h* disappear your  
lines green-seam

stretch *h-h* inhale  
your breath of thigh hand hair

black-spectrum

stick your taste buds  
on the repainted walls

spread *h h* your breath *h h*  
*hic* your albumen

white

bet *severed hh lines*  
du mortel érigé

say: kidnapping  
say: epidermal wound  
say: *amoroso*  
*h*

= quelle forme prendras-tu la  
prochaine fois? →

## Discrepant Communities: An Interview with Vincent Broqua

*ZS: Your writing, translation, criticism, and organization of events—in particular as cofounder of the Parisian reading series Double Change—all seem to be actively interconnected. How did it all begin?*

VB: It began a long time ago, probably when I received my first poetry book at the age of seven or eight. Since then I've been involved with poetry, and with a sense that poetry is both something that you immerse yourself in, through the relation you create between yourself and the writing, and at the same time something shared: people share poems. You recite poems at school; you are made to recite poems, so the poem is a social occasion that can take many forms. For example, there's the occasion of the poem you read when you bury someone, but there are many others; the poem creates a different temporality and a different space. With Double Change, Olivier Brossard and I had been impressed by what was going on in the US, where poets could read in bars and cafés, in venues where there wasn't such a sense of the necessary dignified space for poetry, but instead a space where poetry could happen as a social event, and with more conviviality than the events that usually happen in France. I didn't know at the time about the reading series at the ARC, the Musée d' Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. The sense was that there was a lack in France, and something missing in terms of how contemporary poetry gets circulated. Because of our interest in translation, poetry, and anglophone poetry, we decided to create something that would be like the model that we found in the US, and particularly in New York and in Los Angeles. That was the starting point, the idea that Paris needed something different in terms of community, in the social sense of how you share poetry and how poetry creates an ephemeral stage when it is read, recited, or performed, in all the new forms this may take.

There's a difference between the way that we think about community in France and in the US. In the US, community is something you look for; I think it is something inscribed in the way that the US built itself, and may be related to church congregations, although perhaps right now people are starting to think differently and it's read more in terms of politics. My sense of community—and maybe this has to do with who I am—is always of a discrepant community. I've tended to hate communities; I've never liked collective sports, not because I'm an individualist, but rather because of a felt difference as a queer body in my youth, a queer body that knew itself as such and yet tended to refuse itself. For example, I hated the way most of the other boys behaved and I hated the shared macho masculinity of collective sports. As I was bullied in *lycée* by sports majors, my distaste for collective sports only increased. I have a clear sense of the social and what it means, and also how people articulate their individuality to society, so I have a vision of community as being both with and without others. I think it is reflected in *Double Change*, as well as in the poetry I write. People come together at *Double Change*, but they're completely free to leave whenever they want. Once they've attended the reading, they will stay afterwards to talk over a glass of wine or whatever; sometimes we don't see these people for a month, and then they come back to the next reading. It's not a community that creates constraints, but one that allows its members to be free. There's a sense of freedom as in Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community*, or the notion that I really like in Roland Barthes's *How to Live Together*, where he talks about idiorrhythmic gatherings, communities where people would be together and alone. He argues that these two things are important to conceptualize together. If you're just a community, then the community will tend to coerce the individual into feeling they must abide by the rules of the community. So it's this duality between individuality and the community that I think is important, and that I try to translate into writing, more explicitly in the latest books that I've written.

*Lyn Hejinian says the community creates the context in which the work's happening happens, and it seems that it's a community of happening that you're interested in, a coming together.*

Yes, totally, it's a community of happening and it's a double thing. It's the community of happening, and it's making the community of happening possible. In the introduction to *The Language of Inquiry*, Lyn Hejinian talks about how the Language movement tried to create the spaces and communities that allowed their poetry and their thinking to happen. They needed that type of community and they created it—it was an environment that arose. I think that there's an element of what you might call performance or happening in the communities I like. They may be somehow transformed and reconfigured as they go, and that's what we've seen with Double Change. We created the first Double Change, and then it changed, and then it changed again and again, and I like communities that keep evolving and changing as they happen.

*Abigail Lang's new book, La conversation transatlantique: Les échanges franco-américains en poésie depuis 1968, traces a history of the relationship between French and American poetry, looking in particular at the roles of orality and literality. Do those areas resonate for you? What are the key areas in your own transatlantic conversations?*

What I write is not exactly French writing, and I cannot define myself as a French writer as such. Because of my training, and also because of learning English at a very early age, my relation to US writing and UK or anglophone writing, broadly speaking, is fundamental. I sometimes have the feeling that the English I speak destroys the French I speak, and so sometimes the two languages collapse, and I just don't know where I am. It's a very complex story of construction and destruction that creates the poetic space I'm in. In terms of what the US brings and the conversations that it created, many of these have changed. We created Double Change in 2000, and I've evolved considerably since then. Some of the conversations that are extremely important to me now are around alternative forms of teaching and pedagogy, how this is connected with what poetry can do, and what it can make or create. I'm thinking of Anne Waldman's Naropa, or the original Poetics Program in Buffalo. I've been speaking recently about Amiri Baraka and Gwendolyn Brooks, and the way that they tried to reconfigure themselves in order for poetry to be not just writing or words on a

page but words that act. It's a concern right now for me to try to think about how words act, and yet how they remain words; there's this contradiction that they are nothing and at the same time the most important thing—and they can act. These are conversations I've had with Anne Waldman, Kevin Killian, and Dodie Bellamy around *New Narrative*, which have been instrumental in displacing the Frenchness that I'd never felt I had in me. I feel that there is a paradigmatic change in what's happening in North American poetry, or even in global poetry, and I think that I just don't know exactly where I am. Recently I've been saying that I'm in the fog, and I like this situation because it's a space of possibility. I like the clearness of open skies, but I also like the fog: you don't know exactly where you are or where you're going; you're feeling lost and at the same time you're wrapped in this meteorological phenomenon and maybe that's where poetry happens—in this fog. It doesn't explicitly say one thing or the other; it just tries to keep the language flowing and the contradictions at work.

*One interesting area in North American poetry is the multilingualism in certain poets' work. I was thinking, for example, of M. NourbeSe Philip in Zong!—that dense interweaving of languages—and it seems that what you're doing is a mirror to that in some ways. In Philip's work there's a maneuver against English and a creation of opacity, which is a different thing from fog, isn't it? Although fog can also be quite opaque. As well as addressing specific histories of racial violence, it's a move against English to create forms of solidarity. In the very different context of your poetry, you're welcoming the foreign into your work as a move against Frenchness, but I wonder what happens when the foreignness that's coming in is English, which is already such a dominant colonial language. How does that change things? Is that something that you think about?*

It's something I think about a lot. The foreignness that is in my texts is the foreignness I have in me, meaning that I come from a family, like we all do, that's made of bits and pieces and stories, and a foreignness that wants to obliterate itself. My grandmother, for instance, was Spanish, but she always claimed that she was French and she never spoke Spanish to us because she felt that she was French. It's also a story of burying your foreignness. I was taught English at a very young

age and it became part of who I am. I had this foreignness in me and people were fascinated by it, but at the same time they reproached me for being too fluent or saying words in English where I shouldn't in a French sentence. It's a sense of not being coherent, nationally speaking. I like this feeling, and I also like the psychological effects that the presence of other languages creates. These past two years I haven't been to the US or UK, and when I go back, I'm sure that the first feeling I will have is the sense that sentences come without my prior knowledge of being able to form them. It's a clear sense of the *unheimlich*, and I enjoy it.

But to come back to your question about English being a major language, yes and no. Yes, it is a major language, Globish. It is the lingua franca, or maybe it's no longer the lingua franca but I always related to it as a possibility for myself. I should also add that I learned Chinese for six years starting when I was sixteen, as a movement out of this Franco-English relation, another language that was radically different, and I just loved it. I've lost my Chinese now because I couldn't practice it, but that was a clear move, very early on, at the end of middle school, out of European languages. To come back to the multilingual, I work a lot on writers such as Harryette Mullen or Caroline Bergvall, M. NourbeSe Philip and Theresa Cha, people who create other possibilities in language geographically and historically; they keep the language moving and they keep it dissenting from within, so it's a language that dissents, a language that is built in relation to the English language, but it dissents. That's also what I try to do in my poetry collections, such as my recent one, *Photocall*. I had poems that I wrote in English first and then translated back into French, because they were first written to be sent to a person who doesn't read French. Suddenly in this process the French and the English merged and contaminated each other, and so they've created a form of dissent, or fractious writing. It's as if language was questioning itself and clearly opposing itself from within.

*Yes, you go inside English and then dissent from inside. The use of sound and the multilingualism in your writing are very striking: there's a lot of homophonic translation and a certain intersemiotic playfulness. I wonder how much of that has come from the practice of actual translation, and which translations have been most formative for you.*



I guess it's come from Double Change, from the orality in Double Change, and the fact that you translate someone that you don't know and then you meet, and suddenly the person reads and you're supposed to read the translation aloud with her or him. So something happens or it doesn't, but there is a sense of the sound, what effect sounds create and how rhythm works between languages. There's a relation between languages but not in terms of replicating what a given text does in another language—it's something more complex that could be qualified as a relation. What I do with sounds, and with the consciousness of sounds and rhythms, certainly comes from the experience of translating and reading live with another writer, immersing myself in someone else's writing to try to write a text that I could voice, and that my body could be comfortable or uncomfortable with. It's a way of negotiating with and relating to that text and making it other. What's been the most formative text? I don't think I've ever translated Stacy Doris, but she was extremely formative in the way that she read her translations, in the way that she conceived of translation and performed it. Then I guess translating Caroline Bergvall's *Meddle English* with Anne Portugal and Abigail Lang has been important because of the form of the book but also because of the reputed untranslatability of her work, which in fact is translatable, because we did it. We did change some of the parameters, but it was significant because of the text itself and also because of the relationship with my cotranslators: Anne Portugal as a poet, Abigail Lang as a wonderful translator and writer, and of course Caroline being here sometimes with us to help us, although we sometimes went against her views. That was extremely formative in thinking differently about literature and freeing myself from more academic forms of thinking and creating that space, that other space which one needs in order to write and to escape the sclerosis of some academic discourse.

*In the early 2000s I would find out about French poetry via listservs from the USA. Paul Auster says that US poetry is divided between British and French influence, but in the UK, US poetry has often been a channel for discovering the poetry in translation of our nearest neighbors in Europe. Maybe it works the other way too, in that you mention Caroline Bergvall, who has been really central for you, and she's somebody who's very much on the same radar as US poets.*

That's what I argue when I write about her work, because by training I'm supposed to be a specialist of US writing. She's in conversation with these writers and she's been published in US presses, so I know of Caroline's work through US writing. I know of Dell Olsen's work through US writing and through Charles Bernstein, but also through the fact that she edited *How2*. It's these triangular conversations that circulate through the US as a space where poetry is particularly active. It creates a bias or perspective whereby only a sort of fringe of French poetry is taken into account, and it's dependent on the friendships that have been formed over the years by the Waldrops, Claude Royet-Journoud, Hocquard, Bernstein, and Jean-Marie Gleize. The fact that Jean-Marie Gleize's *Tarnac* was published in the US, translated by Joshua Clover, Abigail Lang, and Bonnie Roy is extremely important in that conversation. Abigail called it *La conversation transatlantique* because it really is a conversation, an asymmetric conversation, but influenced by friendship. Of course it has to do with similar aesthetic grounds but not all the time. I don't think Jacques Roubaud's writing is particularly close to Charles Bernstein's, for example. There are points of contact, like Gertrude Stein, Zukofsky, and David Antin, which Roubaud and Bernstein share, but it's not the exact same ground on which they stand. We can't escape the consequences of the conversation that Abigail describes, although we might now try to broaden that space we're still the inheritors of.

*You've mentioned Charles Bernstein, who is an enthusiastic supporter of your work and included in your books. If I hear a relation to Language writing in your work, it's through a warmth and humor that I think isn't always spotted by readers in an anglophone context, particularly in the UK. Language writing has a reputation for being somewhat removed or difficult, but it seems that your encounter with its orality in a live setting allows you to inherit that line with a much lighter sense of it than some people have.*

Yes, I've been fascinated by the fact that Language writing has been described as elitist, cerebral, and depersonalized. I've been struck by how Lyn Hejinian has this incredible tenderness, and with Charles it's just constant humor, abrasive humor sometimes, and speed—the way that he engages with whatever you say. For the same reason, I was

fascinated by David Antin. I'm not going to say that in France people don't talk—as you know, the French are famous for doing that—but at the same time it's not the same kind of engagement and free thinking. Maybe I'm caricaturing here, but coming from the French academic system where we were taught not to speak at the wrong moment, or not to speak at all but to listen to the teacher, to encounter people such as Charles or David Antin, who create a dialogue, is just wonderful. To come back to levity and gaiety, it's true that I'm fascinated by this aspect in Charles but also in Anne Waldman's work. She is so funny and this doesn't discount the more serious aspects of the world we're in. I think it's fundamental for poetry to be that. I also take my cue from Anne Portugal and Olivier Cadiot, people who are on the side of extreme lightness—of course seriousness in what you do but also lightness. Just today Anne Portugal was texting me and she said, "Lightness, lightness, we need lightness!" which is almost exactly a line in my book *Photocall*: "*la grande légèreté, légèreté,*" which was also a nod to Anne Portugal. If we want to go further back in history, Diderot was also important for that aspect of my work.

*This reminds me one of the characters in Photocall, who "is not opposed to social media, but is opposed to the seriousness" around it— but there's also a tremendous intensity in the book. In discussing Photocall, you've previously mentioned the galvanizing moment of the Manif Pour Tous, a right-wing movement against Le Mariage pour Tous (Marriage for All), a law that opened marriage to same-sex couples. The demonstrations of Manif Pour Tous fueled homophobia and racism across France. Could you say more about the role of lightness as a form of political response?*

There were horrible right-wing demonstrations when Hollande wanted to pass that law in favor of marriage for all—which by the way I didn't like because I thought that maybe we should have something other than *marriage* for everyone, something like marriage for no one. I was completely appalled and frightened by the resurgence of right-wing movements, and so part of the book was a response to that. Of course it could not stop it, but I could create other kinds of parades, parades of words. As Hawthorne says, "We have yet to learn again the forgotten art of gaiety," and I think that's exactly what I wanted to do. And I will continue with that program in my next books.

*I wonder if it also links back to other kinds of social space. I'm thinking of what Véronique Pittolo said about Photocall as an update of the seventeenth-century Carte du Tendre, a mapping of intimacy in the context of the literary salon. You're posing the question as to whether people love differently now or what's changed, but I wonder also about the relationships that form around poetry and the tenor of that sociality. There's an erotics of the text, as Roland Barthes describes, and the cohabitation of languages seems to spill over into flirtatiousness of references. These relationships in language are deliberately not familial, and neither is the social world they project—it's got a different shape and a different structure, which is interesting in the light of the political moment to which you're responding.*

It's not familial, not because I don't like my family, but because of the politics of gayness or homosexuality or queerness, which cannot be familial. It cannot adhere to that model because that—to use old-fashioned vocabulary—is the bourgeois model and that's precisely what gayness has resisted, and what queerness resists and interrupts: bourgeois society. Yes, words flirt with each other through the metamorphosis of beings and words and things and elements, and in the first part of the book, I wanted to write a new *Metamorphoses*, where a single gendered pronoun, *he/him*, would transform into an image and dissolve into a purely rhythmical element, or sometimes a syntactical element, or into just the world, so it would dissolve into what it's not and what it may be. *Metamorphoses* and the thinking behind it is still important in our contemporary moment; it's a powerful model for thinking about fluid or shifting identities and what these mean.

*Sociality also comes into the incorporation of dialogue and response, where you create a kind of performative gathering. In Récupérer there's the onomatopoeic section where you bring in other poets to provide examples. It's a form of sociality as well as a means of playing with identity. In "On n'est pas des casinos" in Photocall there's a wonderful conversation that's as if you invite readers to be part of the book, except that it's far more brilliant and polished than a real conversation. It's a modeling of identity and a sociality that comes together in these performative moments, very much as you describe Double Change.*

Yes, it's a continuity, totally. I'm really committed to those forms of community which I describe as idiorrhhythmic, meaning again with Barthes that everyone lives according to his or her pace, and at the same time there's a sense of togetherness. You have moments where you meet and moments when you don't. My books are a reflection of that utopia of a noncommunal community. This is why I have a dialogue at the end of the book. Although all the characters are invented, I think dialogue in the form of the conversation is absolutely crucial now.

*The reappearance of a photo from long ago prompts the investigations of Photocall. In some sense it's the classic theme of lyric poetry: love and death in the confessional mode. In thinking through screens, technologies, and the body, we might arrive at Barthes and the punctum, or a spectral death in life. But you're doing something different with the strangeness of encounter: it's another language making the body strange to itself, or the point at which language opens to strangeness.*

Yes, and it's channeled though Denis Roche, *La Disparition des lucioles: Réflexions sur l'acte photographique*, where he speaks about photography, his own in particular, and the survival of glowworms. The photograph in *Photocall* is a purely autobiographical element that created the very beginning of the book, a photograph of myself that a lover took in the summer of 2000 with an analog camera. He sent it to me in 2014. What does it mean for this photo to suddenly come back to the real through digital means, scanning, and Facebook, while I'm on the train? What does that eruption of the photograph of the past mean in the hyperpresent that those tools create? What does it mean in terms of desire? How do we desire in this world of the hyperpresent, where even photographs do not so much summon the past as actualize the present? With Instagram and all that, they are not exactly about the past but about who I am in the present. What does that mean for loving, desiring, and flirting if the past is the hyperpresent?

*I loved what you were doing with the materiality of technological exchanges, for example in "Mon Cloud," where you make virtual space thick and tangible. I was interested that Double Change chose not to go*

*online in these recent times. Do you feel that virtual space is inadequate for poetry? What would need to happen to them to make it viable?*

It was really a community decision. We were exhausted and felt we couldn't survive—we could barely survive teaching, so we didn't need another Zoom in our day. We felt that sometimes we connected to readings or conferences and there was a deep despair afterwards. You close your Zoom and you're at home, alone. It's completely antithetical to what we tried to create in *Double Change*, where after the readings something else happens, not like being at home with the post-Zoom blues. That said, of course there's the fact that we're having this conversation now on Zoom, and videoconferencing allows for many things to happen that couldn't happen before. At the same time, it really pushes us into virtual, two-dimensional space, which is not without its problems. For instance, I'm seeing myself right now and I'm not supposed to see myself constantly when I talk; this is completely antithetical to speaking. I have the impression that either I'm rehearsing something, like a dancer rehearsing in front of a mirror, or that something is wrong, like when Antoine Doinel endlessly repeats his name in front of the mirror in Truffaut's *Baisers volés*. Poetry projects something out of the narcissism that one has, but projects it outward and tries to dissolve it. Maybe this just doesn't work in a Zoom session. What we thought, though we didn't have the courage to do it, was that we might ask writers to record little capsules of one or two minutes that people could watch and listen to whenever they wanted. Of course, if the world remained the way it is now, we would need spaces where we could talk, because we need to talk across the boundaries. We need to talk locally, but we also need to talk translocally, to continue to rethink ourselves.

*The fixed screen can feel like a barrier, can't it?*

Screens are a space of projection, but our computer screens don't project much, and we do not project much on those screens. They're not cinema screens. They create ghosts and ghosting, and I'm not sure what this does for or against poetry. It's becoming its own medium, so maybe something could emerge out of this, but I don't know what. This is what I tried to address in my meditation about screens in

*Récupérer*, soon to be released as *Recover* by Pamenar in an augmented version translated by Cole Swensen.

*While areas like sound poetry have adapted to this context, with poets discovering a new creative channel through Zoom, it seems that in France the relationship to the book is really strong, much more so than than in the UK.*

I think it has to do with the way that we've kept our bookstores. It's a governmental decision to keep the bookstores and to have a single price for a given book. I've just read in the *Guardian* about how French bookstores are thriving.

*This may have to do with what connects poetry to physical spaces, because then you have a physical reading and an object to launch at an event. Thinking of those spaces, I wonder what has been the value of travel to your own work and how you see the future in that respect? What is the future of these social exchanges around poetry?*

I've always had a difficult relationship with travel because I hate flying. I feel that to be able to travel is a very privileged position, which I addressed in the poetic essay "The negative capability of the migrant." I've always had a conflicted relationship with traveling, but at the same time I used to like it if I traveled for work; if I traveled as a tourist I was less happy, I guess. But traveling to the US, the UK, Canada, and other places has been crucial to thinking differently. Certainly attending readings in different spaces is important. Rachel Levitsky, who wrote *Against Travel*, was very important to me in terms of talking about Belladonna\* and the activism that she put in practice through that press. Intrinsically, it was not the travel that was important but meeting people, creating conversations, and keeping those conversations going. For me it has been a way to escape myself and to escape the French way of thinking—of course there's not only one French way of thinking—but it has been a way to alienate myself in a positive sense.

HANNAH BROOKS-MOTL

## ART IS NATURE

What's good for the codfish is good for the dog

What's right on the canvas bleeds into the myrtle

There are common bugs with no special status, I suppose they  
invite one to question the composition

Juveniles pose by the hole of a vicious god and feed on  
mums, ragweed, or horseradish

The chosen have fat diamond patterns in common but some  
also lack this—they are cloudless, essayistic

Perched upon flowering legumes are false beetles, false  
underwings, and the familiar bluet

Caught in undulating effort at being itself the damselfly flirts  
with that prehistorical something

Can idealism ever be accurate?

When nature was dying and when art died too and the dewy  
petal of the corn plant and virtues—

The heavy pollens, the bony fishes, the source of all edits

When no one knew the source of the edits

I blended right in with my poem



With its imitatio and its dramarama

The cold loamy lyrics exhorting this moment

Its partyers, parasites, radicals, losers, the brave

I give them a leafblowing nod

## POVERTY MOUNTAIN

Endure was her only name, she found it on the mountain  
Our Lady of Fatima shining over there  
and right here the shitty restaurant (Portuguese)  
we go to any time anybody dies

At the intersection of all data  
flowers  
are keto to an energy healer on the phone  
her small house in Detroit to convene  
the fallen soldiers the paperwork  
of poets upon some carpet  
in a lounge

one experience of representations is there  
in there or around and the boring depths  
which mobilize what I do

Was It permissible  
Who should Be firm

The automata in a crazy way discovers the word I'm searching for—scree : so I pee beside the scree and reason all-form, each-use my voice in development.

Glove on a stick by the can of Busch Light along the rocky nowhere of this train of thought a little word connector word murmur image and feeling of consequence, generality of one woody grape so dilated it includes all variety of opinions takes a piquant elixir, appealing to the emotions : unruffled, aphoristic.

O beautiful accents of composite selves collaborating with analysis happily when absence can be pointed to—you have no mouth—you have not started to exist yet—abstract as two hairs in the book in support of hesitation a tidy hill with three kids smoking by the quality of rounded stones weather portion of belief in the green hand positioned by growth as though waiting for a stylus—dissolving into collective apotheosis fantasy to spread or extend to banish finally I'm replicating.

Purple Fiesta pulling up pulling out all of joy much of pain that clear familiar place I would die even a college kid knew that, even though college. Out of an abundance. Some obstacle. Out of abundance and fusion, dead petals floating down from Heinrich Heine in bed one opening of Heine propped up against the chest and a certain page just fluttering out one secret to prosody I sought to love that secret first clear duration are we in it yet.

Elegant persons of a month ago unattended and clean valiant at restaurants/bars valiantly taking a swig child in a pink coat three dogs picking grasses saying you're a monster not a monster you're a monster repetitive slow beads of surfaced dew scaling blades of grass. Call someone on the phone take the disco to the meeting : where do you get your scraps.

I go to the mountain each day, have a dutiful dialogue with fallen leaves Pringles cans upon these wasted knuckles the beautiful kind repairing fictions eternity is coming take a walk with the outside the same mistake made in writing the same sentence as before. Same unit. Now fill the page.

Fridge around three am sounds like an ocean's inside semi-aquatic volume shifting against or upon the present buying yellow roses pulled back the trees deposited future to the soil said how it was with them it was April, April four everything behind doing predictable on a bad day on the z vector is that the one that comes right at you crawls right over I wanted to joke in bed with my lover we were in the middle of death I was dancing with friends they came along and we shoved. The lilacs were starting a warm and welcoming day all people out with their trials and joys I walked bare legged in a skirt smoked a cig people everywhere with their trials and we too sympathized it's somehow torrential and sad, the miniscule spiritual part... finished Kyger's journal in the bath last night indulgent but maybe she'd approve the mix of gossip no it's just facts as they'd matter if you were trying to keep up who came over what they ate or drank Gary doesn't give her as good of presents no need to make commentary there it is kittens and lilies trying to vanquish taking a boat to worry about poetry—when—is it / it's not obscene pattern sounds so that new sounds emerge fully no slackness! a wreath swords few words adhered stone sky god yes and experiencing fury regular hunger I'm profound to this, this to me incorporated.

Renounce the basic premise the preamble pregnant prodigal the postdoc all haters and sentimentalists will never own this faculty the arrival of details remembered from the world : free love nudists holy beggars led by women in protest of avarice and tyranny all principles remade based on visions decades wars people don't belong there and yet it cannot but be—peopled speaking well, of comment.

Walk up the mountain there is conversation does it flow freely? A large too large to be merely vine hangs down little trunk inverted stop and marvel now a leaf goes right by gotta claim all the range : grass unmowed dandelions a few flowering trees the kind of place that might've been park just anyone's, everyone's there. Consult the Madonna in the claw foot in the garden is the house properly abandoned rotten insidious urgency of ego smooth downward slope slick gliding fast bitumen a coating through the encounter where was I originally? Later it would occur

driving north in a poem practicing the names for time where the valley comes from it's our poverty so a kind of pity obtains a kind of violet outside god that mammal at night the edge of this milky

garment as the daughter flees the times provoke some renegotiation.  
Was sleeping when the myth came up on my left the first era on the  
other side of age : ogre writing a whole book underneath this leaf  
saying it's a shitty time shitty to develop the language and stems!  
stems! stems! come, I'll find you a subject

“After the crystal became a closed system”

“Let the angels spin you in the air”

Life in a house that ruined the world

“Enough! or Too much”

Now of paragraph, at the edge of vocabulary ordinary  
important notions weak gestures opening the book placing the comma  
enjoying the sun in the sun now from the being or back to the being  
being within the being human-all or not little gold flecks—freaks—  
fully selved emboldened exposed on the rostrum ; assassinations  
murders dragged with hooks hermits and martyrs do not make a  
world in the promised sense, hostility survived dipped in the crime  
of politics and organism thinking everything's religion the biggest  
theology literally dusted off the bible just now googled Aquinas and  
Paul who prays.

In the training was taught meaning is immanent emerged a  
rose like a smell nothing above one gesture holding my hand position  
of bodies to contain something coercive walking down Ranger St  
turning left on Lorraine fairy lights spelling Hope on the fence names  
ensure the accuracy of talk metaphysics come in handy rarely but their  
trouble is constant, the very platitudes

Marie Tharp who first mapped the ocean floor unsung drafter  
for Maurice Ewing and his all-men she drew the trenches at the bottom  
of the sea have you had a marvelous biography?

Turning onto Tampa St at some point turning off the computer  
what did the minerals say the rocks that had been put inside to give  
us all to each other now I'm like humanity you too an evil stick by  
the slab. Average pleasure,

A poem with no research in it

Full of gait

That captured extant habits now it's silly a designation kind  
of communism for much of the night a new religion an hour north of  
Sacramento examination lasting many lines I stir it up, a confidence.

Going into fog resident coming out changed faith wasn't happy in the fog came forward amplified gathering chaplets a sentence with my foot sharp on the red globe

where energies confer a friend a grandmother fire pit white cement buildings all of history asks why did you exist, read steadily through nouns—a golden quilt synthetic slippery cushions spread out to make a bed dogs children cars going in a circle why if I could bring paradise take a sip hold it in sit cross legged or on the floor and when you howl...

An area that had changed been changed a zone of conifers underwater deciduous trees their branches stuck way out over clouds. People walk through alive it felt like a living scenario where death forgot our future, waking up into that sensitivity remote strata browns and bright red but here a curtain's blowing in summer, a flowered curtain's advancing the single figure at the front of that at the end of that. Makeshift homegrown self-taught I'm getting presumptuous, confessing this :

nothing cures time.

open the vents

Dichotomy

Purple cabbage flowers      broad leaves  
spill  
somewhat wastefully, an inefficiency  
supports      the      heart

garden friends on painted rocks  
american spirits  
woman in a blue shirt, black leggings      bleeding from  
her head

a reference qua the epics  
an evening  
“coming out of my wormhole”  
into the hollow  
what’s good for the scurfpea  
to be like the soul  
crispily transpicious



there are variations  
though I believe  
in eternity  
swaying untranslated  
rude acorns  
drubbing the roof  
certain animals  
awake in their bowls  
a pit covered by water  
old timey cabin  
or shack transported  
piece by piece  
perched over  
looking olive moss  
golden Camrys  
an imbalance  
in concepts  
niche  
of the moment  
ascended as a pilgrim  
plateaued  
the glorious way  
I've huddled  
against you  
the government's  
contradictory whine  
if I name it  
it's high over us  
second to  
jollity, gloom  
and goes  
to the monument

this kind  
of order now  
taking me up  
beyond poverty  
or the flag  
ten years ago  
in the autumn  
months  
the guardian  
came over  
the bridge  
led by a little  
King Charles  
deprived on the floor  
there's a place  
beyond all regard  
stupid with quartz  
sufficient  
to all

Sleep in a field  
Take off your clothes  
Psychically  
That's probably  
What heaven means

## In the Absolute Balloon

There are dozens of reasons, many good, not to go for a ride in a hot air balloon. These might range from contingent factors like poor weather or lack of access, to more essential but also essentially subjective factors such as the fear of heights or plain lack of interest. None of these objections are wrong, and neither is the moderate view that it might, after all, be nice, but not nicer than anything else that's nice, so that in the end you wouldn't do it. But down on the ground are also some of what might be called accidental non-balloonists, who want to fly, who wouldn't balk at the rental, but who despite that, even in fine weather, regard it all as too much trouble. Perhaps they're perfectionists, distractible, or weak-willed, feeling undeserving—there's no need for fine taxonomies here, except to say that it is to this latter group that I belong, the group of flightless birds with wings that work. In theory. I want to, I can, I even ought to, but up to now, I haven't.

In spite of my best efforts at introspection, this flightlessness has had for me the character of inert fact. I've rifled the soul area repeatedly for any conscious or unconscious objection to flight and found none. Yet at the end, which will come, I would be very unsurprised to die having never gone up in a balloon. All that would have to happen is for tomorrow to be like today a few times, until there are no more of them. A true balloonist might see such a life as making a rhyme with the slothful Belacqua, whom Dante encounters in purgatory. Dante was a balloonist before his time; he once described the sky as a "sapphire sea." To sail on it is precisely the point.

I only know about Dante because I have a friend by that name, Belacqua. B is the only person I've met who claims not to enjoy music, and as far as possible, never to have listened to it intentionally. He goes too far in his refusal, I think. He seems actually opposed to it, like Casaubon. I have a whole theory of it. It isn't a very interesting theory: I think he's anhedonic, depressed, and rationalizing that.

But I don't press the matter, because I have no solution for him, and nothing is worse than insight without relief.

What I couldn't resist saying anyway is that it can be very consoling to take a grim orientation for honesty, because then your misery becomes your dignity. You alone have withstood the bitter medicine. You alone have the truth, and since everything else is ruin, you've got the only thing anyone can have. I think it would be very dangerous to remove that consolation all at once. I'm not sure what I could put in its place. Possible that medication would loosen the knot? B prefers exercise and soldierly discipline.

When I think of a life like B's, without music, I see a life in some way unlived or failed. I don't think that's a particularly controversial attitude, a minimal form of epicureanism, with a small E. Maybe that's an odd choice of words. I think most people would agree with me about B, but I also think most people would reserve the term epicurean for someone who holds this view not only of subnormal musical experiences like B's but also of ordinary ears like mine. Jim, for example, once told me that he regards a life without a true appreciation of Brahms in the same way that I might regard a life without music in it at all, and that therefore I was in no position to judge B. I wasn't sure if he was exaggerating, but it did seem possible that Jim saw me the way I see B. I wondered too at how he said it, as though we didn't both know B. It isn't theoretical. It's like they're invisible to one another.

Even Jim, however, doesn't go too far. To see how far he goes, I might define a maximally epicurean person to be one who holds the intensest and best realization of some domain of experience, say, music, as the meaning of life, without qualification. A peak-experience chaser. We can easily imagine a man who bankrupts himself going to the opera every night, or an obsessive pianist who ruins his hands by over-practicing. Jim doesn't do anything like that, so he must not hold the maximal theory, though nothing that he says ever contradicts it. He seems to be moderate in all things, including his epicureanism, which probably brings it closer to the classical meaning of the term, about which the less said the better, if only for reasons of time. Actual balloonists are, I think, mostly epicureans of this moderate variety.

There are certain excellent wines which, owing to their special process and miniature scale of production, are never exported.

Pictures arrive from France; the gourmands are traveling as a pair of couples, with a playful suggestion of scandal. If you don't travel, they say, you will never taste this wine. That's true enough. But a certain sort of gourmand will go on to say, hyperbolically, that if you haven't tasted this stuff, then you haven't lived. The absolute gourmand is the man who means it.

Just as there are very few absolute gourmands, who would stop at nothing to taste even the decayed, the deadly, or the forbidden, there are very few absolute balloonists. It's the difference between a mere restaurant connoisseur, who nowadays might photograph his food or publish an essay about why he's stopped photographing his food as part of a "digital detox," and the man who would risk his life to taste *casu martzu*, blowfish, certain protected whales. Or, say, the flesh of man. This sort of edgy eating is constantly brought up in a tittering way by people who imagine someone with stronger desires than themselves must be a moral wild card, or even that a high degree of epicureanism is a matter of the strength of desire rather than a differing evaluation of its importance. I think we're very ordinary. Just a matter of knowing what matters.

In the absolute balloon, it seems we would reach some hard limits very quickly. Only a handful of crewed balloons have reached even the beginning of the stratosphere, and in many of these cases the ballooning was only the setup for a record-setting jump, not an end in itself. The current record is held by a technology executive, Alan Eustace, who in 2014 plummeted forty-one kilometers in four and a half minutes, having ascended in a specially made balloon and wearing an equally specialized pressure suit. Fine, but that's just money.

In the upper atmosphere, the air gets very thin and cold and the pressure is near zero, so the suit is a serious matter. Is it possible that, like divers, we could get the bends going up too fast? It seems possible to go a bit farther than Eustace, but not much farther. Thermosphere jumps, especially beyond the rather arbitrarily defined Kármán line, marking the beginning of "space," seem completely out of the question for a crewed balloon, even if a small number of weather balloons have reached that height. In any case, even to ascend to the stratosphere seems to change the mood of ballooning: one begins to feel like an astronaut or a fighter-jet pilot, or, like Eustace, a

record-setting jumper. Ideally it ought to be possible to preserve the moustachioed nineteenth-century charm of Jules Verne's adventures, which had more innocence and less of the ego about them, not to mention less of Major Tom.

To me, this kind of record setting is a parody of the absolute balloonist's ethics of experiencing, which has as little to do with maximizing altitude by all technological and financial means as the ultragourmand has to do with gluttony. The absolute epicure prefers just the right portion of unicorn charcuterie and wouldn't prefer it if you found an ortolan the size of a turkey. Portion setting is part of the aesthetic experience, and while there may be something delectably wrong about eating caviar from a pig's trough and bathing in vintage Madeira, the wrongness nearly always outweighs the delectation. Such experiences are occasionally whispered, but no one does it twice, and few even once. It's a matter of the fullness of experience, not of its quantifiable intensity.

I find it difficult to give a clear account of this fullness, but it seems related less to satiating an urge than to a kind of information. Our delight, per the most reflective of the balloonists and gourmands alike, may be in the experiencing apparatus itself.

I am, as I mentioned before, at least up to now an accidental non-balloonist. Since I've never been in one, the epicurean question for me takes the form:

"Just how disappointed ought I to be if in my whole life it never happens, or that it never has?"

According to the provisional taxonomy we've arrived at so far, if I were minimally epicurean, I would feel I was missing out; moderately, I would feel my life had taken some definite wrong turn; and if I were an absolute balloonist, as I sometimes suspect that I am, I might feel that my existence on Earth was no life at all.

In any of the three cases, I wouldn't feel this sense of wrongness or disappointment every day. The best way, probably, to determine my feelings on ballooning would be to just go on as I have been, without disturbing anything, and to take note of any feelings of desolation that arise, recording their strength. That I haven't done so up to now reflects either my unscientific character or the same pitiful irresolution and distractibility that has prevented me, to date, from driving the

three hours to the field, chartering a balloon, and ascending the sapphire sea, as my friends on the ground, who I consider thwarted balloonists at best, lose specificity, then being, becoming specks, then green.

Of course I wouldn't be alone. They'd never let you do it alone, not at the field, for insurance reasons, even if they know very well that you know how to fly safely. Skydiving is the same way. I'd have to spend the whole time talking to the jaded, friendly tour-guide character, or tell him to be silent, which would be its own agony. I think I'd feel approximately as guilty about silencing as I would for tipping him over the edge, through a cloud so I didn't have to see him hit the ground. No, we'd have to talk. I'd have to explain why I'd never done it before, and have the basics of the subject explained to me by a man who probably takes no true interest in ballooning himself and knows less about it than I do. Ballooning, for him, may be merely a summer job or the family business or something for a story. Dante had Virgil, whose best quality might have been his walking on quietly ahead. There are no Virgils here. So when I go I will have to go alone, and with my own equipment.

I called B on the phone again, and again we talked about balloons. He has some aviation experience as it turns out—small craft, that's his military background—and he'd recently been hang gliding. He insisted that I ought to do that instead, that to go up in a balloon was worse because it's passive—I don't think it is, but it's true that you can't steer—and he offered that I could come with him. His whole life, he said, was passive now, and it was important to have hobbies that weren't. They had to confirm a feeling of agency, and of athletic resistance. Of Life, he said, and I could tell when he said it that he capitalized the word. As far as I can tell, Life means lifting weights.

I don't think he takes steroids, so right there you can tell he doesn't go all the way to the limit with it. It struck me that B's relationship to athletic resistance and maneuver was like Jim's relationship to music: in both cases only moderately epicurean. Ordinary people, slightly dialed up. To each, what others call ordinary life is a failure. In fact, each sees the other that way. Not even the extraordinary escapes condemnation. Trouble is, they're dilettantes.

I'd like to reconcile B and Jim, because I think the world needs both of them very much. Although Jim only listens to records and



doesn't add to music or even write criticism, I conceive of his life as part of the life of Culture which has a big C for him, just as Life, for B, has a big L. I have no special love for Culture or for Life, but I do depend on them being there tomorrow. I'm pretty sure that if no one loved music immoderately, no one would teach it or play it well. And those who love it absolutely don't teach. Perhaps they don't play either, they simply cry over their Suzuki books, finding the sound too beautiful.

In order to understand Jim, I've begun to listen to recordings of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau's Brahms lieder. When I told him this, he immediately shot me a text message asking whether I was streaming or really listening and what kind of headphones I had.

There must be people in this world with ears like Jim's, entirely uncultivated, who live joyless lives because their ear is too perfect for any ordinary music. I suppose if that were you, Jim's snobbery would be a gift, something that could set you on a path to realizing the perfection that you had up to that moment not known but had nonetheless obscurely belonged to. There's something beautiful about that, the discovery of an order which all along was the secret meaning of your dissatisfaction. It's with the hope that something like that would happen that I've always attached myself to people who are very severe and, in small ways, been enlightened by them, as in some Zen koans, with the stick.

What I always say is that it takes all kinds and all colors. But I wonder if I'm fooling myself about that. My pluralism of passions is at the end of the day a pluralism of very unpluralist intensities. I can't even get my friends to like each other. Are Jim and B more honest than I am by just ignoring one another? And does it follow that I should ignore them?

I'd like to believe that Jim and B could recognize a common pursuit of intensity and the so-called peak experience. But in fact, abstract concepts like "experience" and "intensity" aren't really a part of their lives, and perhaps it's only verbally that they are part of mine. Jim and B live in complete contempt for one another—and for the rest of us, and to imagine them feeling otherwise is to imagine their edges slightly dulled. They would be different people. It stands to reason that from the standpoint of the absolute balloon, I ought

to feel the same about their tiny lives down on the ground. Is there a particular altitude where that happens?

From the standpoint of the absolute balloon, a flightless life is as un-lived as a life without sex, or without laughter, or as an always-dreamless sleep might be to someone who bothers with any of that. Of course, I specify out of politeness, these may be true lives too, but not—and this is the point—from the perspective of the absolute balloon, which I have here. Tomorrow, weather permitting, I will go up in it.

OPENS SEPT 1, 2022

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# WITNESS LITERARY AWARDS

*\$500 prizes in fiction, nonfiction, & poetry.*

*Runners-up receive \$250. Entry is \$10.*

JESSI GASTON

*from* THE PROCEDURAL BLUES

I

Tralala's sung & soppy is the feeling. So drunk & musty  
singing tralala tunes & sopped up, here, in the wood-paneled back  
of a room that's oh so musty.  
This song does stumble on from a lilt in the pith, & outshine the  
din like a suit-wearing mustee.

So so many things depend upon these goings on of alcoholic songs  
suffused with brightness 'midst the dreary.  
Said the drunks' songs sung amass an outsized meaning; they  
spread lightness, yessir, amidst all their dreary.  
Ask any sclerosèd their weapon against annihilation, they say that  
warble, oh so afebrile & feirie.

& so flies the blues, then, like smoke from a cigarette.  
"Ain't that the blues!" cried out past his menthol cigarette.  
But can't you see ebullience, too, boy, with your eyes squintin'  
through the right lorgnette.

"When things go askew now, & I am on the ground, I know to keep  
myself drugged up."  
He said, "If I am to be blighted cattywampus, Lord, let me also be  
drugged up."  
So intoned into his bottle, in the preamble to a slump; he smiled so  
brightly, content was he, the bar's mugwump.

Of the baker's dozen ways a' seeing it, all say it's omniferous.  
Truly, it's blues that's omniferous.  
But lookin' 'round here & seein' all the brown skin, a person might  
think it's an ailment particular to heads laniferous.

But do we darkies live so purely at the moaning blues' behest?  
Are we black peoples for life Cain-marked to live at moanings'  
behest?  
"Yes, ma'am," says the world, which delects in a dirge, "song's your  
only fated acquist."

||

Blighted are we who must go on, with all our sorrow so euphonic.  
& certainly our sobs are euphonic.  
For not just in the bar, but all about the cursèd world is this  
existence of ours seriocomic.

E.g., there's my ancestor who once hid the head of some dead  
klansman who'd kicked up a hellish hullabaloo.  
On my uncle's honor, that klansman died for all his hullabaloo.  
But what here's so funny's that hidden head not returnin', no  
matter his klansmaiden's cryin' tu-whit-tu-who.

Uncle slain, of course; for encroaching on their savagery was fatal  
impropriety.  
Uncle had to die for his impropriety.  
But he laughed against the lynch tree. He the victor having bested  
all the world's nimity.

V

Kid the old man's just a withered stone with no viscera.  
The old man named Kid for reasons unsayable, he lay as nothing  
on a creek bed, has no viscera.  
His skin's shining web a message, illegible as the dark in his  
interior, long since eroded away his intima.

Spoke Kid no human tongue, thought Kid no thoughts at all. Just a  
husk denuded, livin' out a lifelong hush.  
Kid, all callous, lay on his stones awaiting...nothin', in a hush.  
Deep dry crack, stark & lifeless vein, he does not await your water's  
cool rush.

Do not seek his illegible land, for its illegibilities still metastasize.  
Do not go out in search of him, for Kid's sickness ceaseless spreads,  
his darkneses metastasize.  
One cannot be alongside Kid & hold those traits made one  
personalized.

Heed me now & see you leave him, Kid, alone to face his patch. Let  
him to his unadornèd sunlight  
alone & let it burn through him, his leather skin. His pure embrace  
of sunlight  
like, of Jehovah, devoted Russellites.

Kid, set down in unthinkability, sang none & from that none, nor  
from his sheen, could none divine a fitting libretto.  
Leather's webs' words aseptic, remnants left un glossed of Hell or  
Heaven's libretto.  
Kid's hide's secrets hid from reason's fire, the God spot 'neath the  
blind white Papal zucchetto.

'Neath the Sun & dry, dry trees, Kid lay deathless to this day. Deaf  
to all birds' caws.  
Not parched nor wanting any, but still his breath, unheard, so like  
all the caws,  
goes on. Kid the hidden caliph in his maksoorah.

Now, existence has an impure bent.  
What throbs throbs, I say, on another throbbing thing's expense.  
All existence has an impure bent.  
& what numbers the many charred by virtues fulgorant?

So for Kid's nothing weep not. For supine Kid's ground-wise stasis,  
don't you but rejoice.  
Weep not for him that is than you less wretched, him whose eyes  
missed misting for you & does not rejoice,  
him in his context devoiced.

The waterway, waterless, is nefarious.  
His hearth, so hard, of excess heat, cold & exposure, in its divots  
holds something hard & nefarious.  
Not by cause of Kid's particulars, yet nonetheless a surplus  
malevolence seeps out & coats its ground, glimmering &  
calcareous,

indiscriminate in hate, intolerant to all variance, no matter how  
slight. The least of Kid's,  
calcareous, moored, static, is still too much, for that least of Kid's  
is Kid's & not the dead river's, & his not-quite-inertness leaves his  
bed not appreciative.

But what to Kid is nature's rancor? Naught, rigid.  
Hatred ebbs yet without err his senses' vacancies are rigid.  
Paralysis about him piecemeal weaves, of his inaction's thread, a  
shield by methods bombycid.

'Pon his frore & stony hearth, supine Kid of an endless winter state.  
Black bastard's fate, zero Kelvin winter state.  
Just parts' aggregate. Between each's nothing to differentiate.

Yet there is one thing ambiguously fleshèd Kid still senses. His  
scent, his stench, that wafting malodor, pain.  
His only animating disgust, his only, this malodor, pain.  
For to live is to be, you heed me, consumed by one's own smell with  
no escape each calendar day.

Kid's rot plagued Kid. Concealed  
in his dry dry bed: rot magnitudes more intense & its friend,  
disgust unchecked, monotonous suffering concealed.  
Its agony &, too, its scent recognized in the bloody dew strewn  
morning after of a battlefield.

Smell the reek of him & think, "Why'd a onetime man take, laying  
down, life so caustic?"  
His funereal decay's graveyard caustic.  
But, as all, queer Kid's a simple hostage.

Motion pours on the Earth's surface, we drown beneath the spout.  
We worms, our dirt to live in which we smother's under motion's  
torrential spout.  
Yet to be movement-free's no get-out,

for within Kid as you & me, motion creeps, as motion won't be  
stymied.  
Motion, legion, crawling, zigzags Kid's interior, digs its pits;  
ceaseless it will not be stymied.  
Kid like a mausoleum is gradually ivied.

But hush, now, on his husk. Shriveled Kid has been & is & shall be  
always nothing, boring, old.  
To contemplate him too long & commit these pointless words risks  
a fate worse than stench: boredom existential, dreary & old.  
So by hushing I've, the world's boredom, polled.



## NOTE TO THE PROCEDURAL BLUES

*Written with the following constraints:*

- *To determine section length: two random numbers between one & three. Divide first by second. Multiply overall number by six. These are the number of three-line stanzas in that section.*
- *All sections must be distinct somehow.*
- *To determine stanza end word: flip to random dictionary page, use random number to determine how many entries deep on that page you go. For second word, repeat flip but start on second column. Third for third. Etc.*
- *To determine line length: random number somewhere between five & twenty-one for each line. That number determines the number of words in the line.*

## A DECLARATION

I, a dumb-dumb,  
have cause now to announce an irrevocable chaos, whose emissary  
I am, of import to the smarty-pants  
-es of the world and the normals, too, a chaos meant to usher forth  
the silly billy  
-'s age, in which, among the head-ass  
legions, I will be as absolute sovereign with my shit for brains  
and with a brutality unmatched, and grace, subjugate you windbags

(leaders, thinkers, doers, orderly husbands and organizers, geniuses  
stolid and flighty both, high and low, all poets that don't rhyme  
and most that do, the makers of premium cable shows and in  
fact all members of the business community by virtue of their  
doing mentality such that some or many stupid people, too,  
will be caught up—and, no, the peripatetics and rogues among  
the academic set will not be spared either, being as they are still  
over-stuffed with thinking, still windbags)  
and so subject you, too, to tortures heretofore unseen in this, our  
dumb-dumb  
existence, whose side I am on, and who beckons the chaos *Come*  
and loves us shit-for-brains  
-es so much for having seen us suffer the excesses of you smarty-  
pants  
-es' dictatorship, for having suffered itself under your yoke the  
suppression of its head-ass  
-ness—which, were you not so stuck up, were you not so  
predisposed to find the silly billy

way vile—were you instead of your myopic selves right and true  
adherents to the silly billy  
lifestyle, I mean—you would see is at the center of every beauty—  
who hates windbags  
so much it has broken its erstwhile endless implacable silence with  
mankind to tell me, *Head head-ass,*  
*chief moron of the aeons, chaos comes to clean the slate for you all,*  
*my dumb-dumb*  
*children, to wage near omnicide against those smarty-pants*  
*-es, to save finally from devastation all you shit-for-brains*  
  
*-es and silence all the plans of those smug dweebs with not-shit for*  
*brains,*  
*who think that to think clever thoughts not made from shit is to be*  
*ruler de jure, but you, silly billy,*  
*are sole rightful claimant to a universal throne, deigned not by*  
*smarty-pants*  
*law but thinkless fate and dumb existence (who is me)'s mandate to*  
*seize from the windbags*  
*all they hold dear and crush them like itty-bitty buggies, and in my*  
*heart of dumb-dumb*  
hearts these words spin still, and will continue spinning as the  
head-ass

armies march and chaos flies dense enough through the skies to  
blot out your stupid Sun with all its shades of subtle meaning  
on the dawn of the age of the supremacy of the head-ass  
scourge, and still they will spin as I, with my shit for brains,  
decide to lock all of you away in one great neo-oubliette, as atop the  
rubble of your once great civilization the endless dumb-dumb  
reverie continues, in which we sing our silly billy  
songs and rut and fuck without regard or shame (because both  
were windbags  
-es' inventions), while you, enchained, think, *Oh, why, why, why do*  
*I hold tight to these smarty pants?*

*Could I take them off if I wanted? But I cannot but be a smarty-pants sonuvabitch loser, because of my various weaknesses and how I hate life, its absurd and pointless no-brain head ass especially, which my stupid leader loves without condition. Oh, why am I a windbag?*

to which I will say, if I hear you crying out, that in my shit for brains

I have no answer to your agonizing, that I am busy being a silly billy, giggling and carrying on with the endless, billion-strong party of beautiful dumb-dumbs,

an endless tableaux of happy pointless goings on like that painting by that smarty-pants named Bosch, but not at all like that because there will be no point in looking at it from afar and no way to, either, because all will be a dumb-dumb,

just a single one made up of the billions of us head-ass silly billys. So, here, I announce it like I said: incipient is the triumph, over you boring old windbags and all your blatherings, of all my many foolish lazy siblings; we will make manifest on Earth a new and polyvalent freedom free even from ideas like freedom, perversity, and such and only for us, forever; of this I am certain in my shit for brains.



EMILY WILSON

## THE RAIN

Will I find there nothing  
nothing rakes the summer woods  
no light, no rain, no rain spell mustering  
the packed leaves, the sods  
of softened leaves, the same

Nothing I shouldn't speak of  
nothing where, nothing of the cropped  
exchange, the verdant usage, love  
nothing hardly stooped  
with the ferning grain

Nothing is so nothing nearly  
ceded, the graduating scaffold  
scaping of our tree  
and they say you won't grow cold  
for the other's fail-safe

Nothing, in the fields, no  
nothing, of the briefness of that  
turning under the plain  
far-off thunder, that begs on  
the smell of the rain

## TWISTEDSTALK

Along the ledges  
the ribbed rock  
root-work twining

up more or less  
with a wren's sound's  
spates and verges

the way we've come  
over-woven  
to be cleared

split from the trail's  
crop-offs—  
things tugged and

wounded with their blades  
flails and fragrances  
that show now

under the rick-rack  
perfect leaves  
the berries' blaze

## HOURGLASS POND

Breaking inward into  
the cloud cavity, vitreous  
swirls rust and fern  
—cut mask cameo cedar clamp—

Poke pins of the dead  
sparring horizontally  
one against each other  
what do I know

Amn't even in the picture  
anymore dropped out  
scuffing the nobody  
stones bulked at the edge

Cramming clouds  
and spatterdock just  
to get clear of this



## OUTLOOK

In view of several thoughts  
the pond amid

hemlocks levered up  
obtuse rocks, the tripe

winding traps along the crops  
itself shifts

the mountain  
loose enfolded

shimmed at the roots and there  
exacting drifts

the merging surface green  
the bracket fungus

## ROUNDEAF

Spare, sparred and  
tender green, porcelain-  
green collocations

shot from the darker stem  
stifled around afloat  
the hasped household

orbiting in this  
sump accrued among  
boulders, slanting

masked with moss  
humming inside the  
pitching shades

redundances—  
fleshy abstract  
at the rapt

root striking—  
lofted, alone—  
off a mountain!

## REDOUBT

One keeps oneself apart  
from the brute world yes  
keeps oneself off

In woods where wind  
alters the cloud puts  
pocks on the mountain

Gleams then wipes  
out gleams  
marking that place

One keeps for oneself  
the girdering  
glypting spruces' terrain

Turns and begins  
to break down this  
brittlest scene skirted with

Bits of its cones

## NOTCH

One is apt to strategize  
—wedges and blocks,  
back-knits, flinchings up  
the wall along the cracks

Traveling texturally, into  
the boulder jumble, where  
to clamp on is ditching half  
your filaments, down the sheer

Interface, subway, hinter-  
place, locked in mysterious  
gels packed dubiously—  
or rolled up edgewise—

Aglisten when you come  
the way through



## Go Blue

I burnt down our bathroom. Almost did the apartment too.

My idiot parents were separated, soon to be blessed with a divorce they'd need to survive this shit world of theirs we all lived in for now. If ever there was a pair of people who should've been separated so they didn't hate-fuck each other to death, it was those two.

The four of us avoided them daily in a decent-sized Hoyne Avenue apartment up on the North Side. Two bedrooms; one for the juvenile parents, one for my baby sisters, and a sunporch for me and my little brother.

I was tired all the time, worn out from dropping my eyebrows at the fights they had on the other side of the walls, not because I was disappointed in them, which I was, but because they only fought at night, whenever the old man decided to traipse his drunk ass through the back door, and I always had school the next morning. The daily dodges and intricacies required of a twelve-year-old gangbanger were exhausting. The last thing I needed was a fucked-up home base. I was years asleep, eyes wide open, until my grandfathers dreamed me awake, saved me. If I was going to live, I'd have to celebrate the day that came when I knew my parents' struggles were strangling us and I, at least, could find some peace and focus. It's when I started to actively root for their divorce if not their demise. Kids should not have kids.

It was a munky-ass apartment, had weird smells and a weirder landlord's kid. Sat on the corner and dearly paid for its location when a station wagon (probably a Buick Roadmaster or some other '70s tank) drunk drove into its basement windows one night. The gaping hole it left behind forever smelled like raccoons and possums had used it as a convenient shitter on their way to better places in the neighborhood, and the landlady never really closed it up, just kept the insurance money for booze and smokes. The stench, of course,

floated up into our crib, and though we were on the second floor, it seemed to make its permanent home in our apartment.

§

Sure it reeks, but it's home, so yeah. Laying up in the back room with a minute alone, the old man not home, ma in her room on the phone with whatever other pill-popping neighbor who'll yow out with her all high on blue and clears and six pots of coffee and Vivarin and twenty-eight smokes an hour with two in the ashtray at once, and it's like trying to put those feelings into words when you hear a song that takes you out of the back of the bus or the el or your grandma's car, when they finally pick you up after promising for two years to take you the fuck out of here, to somewhere not here, but you don't have Jose Feliciano's sad, slow guitar to accompany you, to add that flavor, those salty tears, that urge, the color your words need, so it all plays behind your eyes, but you can't share because you don't know how and no one would care if you did? That's when you sit on your hands and chew the inside of your lip and tell yourself someday you'll be able to say it, express it, share it, even if today ain't that day.

The neighbor comes down, ma's in the middle of her rambling, shit-talking day, Marlboro 100s whirling around her head, and he says to her, hey, we're going camping. Would love to take the kids.

She don't know this fucker from Adam so of course says yes, sends us away with this hippie and his weird hippie wife. What the fuck does she care? NO KIDS.

Well just the boys, he says. The girls are too young.

He says it a little strange, but sure, she thinks, consigns us to this giant weird Viking-looking fucker, name DJ. It's your parents never so happy to be dropping you off with some people you ain't even know so they can get their freak on or pop some pills in peace or whatever they're into. Thanks. Doesn't even ask where we're going.

But you might.

So yeah, we're fixing to go camping in the Kettle Moraine State Forest, Wisconsin, USA.

Dude. I've never been camping in my life. Seems to me one of the objects of life is to not have to sleep outside, but ain't nobody listening to me.

Kinda cool though, I guess. This guy DJ knows what the fuck he's doing anyway. Brings all the gear. Pitches a couple of tents. Has us dig trenches around them in case it rains, and those'd take the water away. That seemed smart. I had thought about a whole lot seeming not smart as I sat in the back of his old rickety-ass Volvo all the way to Wisconsin, the first time I'd been west of Cicero Avenue and north of Davis Street in my life. Saw signs for the Dells; made me wonder about Tommy Bartlett's Water Ski & Jumping Boat Thrill Show for years.

About ten minutes after we dig those smart trenches, we hear an explosion. Not like an M-80 or a quarter stick, but like a wet one with a loud bang, like a right-away shot when someone takes a .38 to the meat in the leg or something. We head out from camp, want to take a look around. DJ's red beard wiggles, a mouth in there somewhere says let's check it out.

We hustle a bit, looking for the source of the sound, me surprised by all these trees and shit. It's kind of raining too, so I think good on me for for-real digging all those fucking trenches. It drips away on us. I got a hoodie on so I'm OK, but after a while, the rain slow drips on my face. I've never seen this many trees in my whole life. We're walking like there's a murderer out here and we're gonna find him. I ain't about it, but I'm stuck with these people. My little brother sulks along, eternally pissed at the world.

He forever had a storm that played around his head wherever he went. Like Pigpen's blanket, but little thunders and gales, lightning and dust skirled in front and back of him. I'd watch his eyebrows come together, who knows what thoughts roiling behind his folded brow. He was scary as a kid; his perpetually unemployed adult ass is likely off the charts. I don't really know; I haven't seen him since he tried to cut my head off with a Tizona Cid I bought in Spain thirty-five years or so ago. Fun night. They say people are afraid to merge—that's something to think about anytime, sure. But applied to your own family, it makes it come alive in the saddest of ways. I'd say I'll see him on the other side, but I won't. You know how you meet people in your life you've known before? Yeah. He ain't one of them. I'll never see him in ten lifetimes. He was like an alien dropped into our lives on a cosmic bet.

But off we go, in search of that sound.



We find it at a campsite about a hundred woods yards away.

The four of us roll up on this olive-green pup tent site, a dude looking deadass like Mitch Hedberg about to launch into his Dufresne Search Party bit, army jacket and all, covered in SpaghettiOs.

He looks up at us through oversized, yellow-tinted aviators and says,

“What the fuck?”

DJ goes, “What happened, man?”

“I was cooking a can of SpaghettiOs and they exploded,” he stares into the fire.

“How the hell did that happen, man?” DJ taps out finger exercises, eyes never leaving Mitch’s dripping head and shoulders.

“I don’t know,” Mitch shrugs, little Os rolling onto the log he’s sitting on.

“Explain the process, man,” DJ pushes his glasses up on his nose.

“Well, shit. I got the fire going—”

“Yeah.”

“—and then, well what the fuck,” more Os roll away.

Ellen looks at us like we ain’t never heard the word fuck before. I just grin.

“So yeah. When did the explosion happen?” DJ was losing his patience.

“I put the can on top of the fire. Shit, man. I built the Boy Scout pyramid thing.”

“Yeah...wait.” DJ holds up a finger.

“What?” Mitch glares at it.

“You just put the can on top. Did you open it?”

“What do you mean?” Now Mitch was getting pissy.

DJ’s big red beard tilts back and splits open with enough laughter to shake the last drops of rain off the big pines.

Mitch looks at DJ like he stabbed him with a butter knife.

“You didn’t open the can first?”

And let’s be real, I’m just thirteen waiting here for my seventeen-year-old self to arrive, ’cause there ain’t no self like it, the one lounging on the park bench early in the morning, waiting for the day to burst full, one with warm and not-too-humid air, sun flaring just over the field house while you’re reading a book from your back pocket and later in the day two chicks are gonna fight over you and you’re just

pulling on a brick of Richard's Wild Irish Rose at two in the afternoon and you're fixin' to live forever and goddamn if the Creator ain't just smilin' down on your summer-brown ass in the middle of the city going about its business all around you in this neighborhood cradle that hugs you, its favorite son, and rocks you in its quiet-at-5-then-loud-at-9-a.m. arms, cars screeching with wild shots you never worry about, drive-bys by Kings that'll never hit you, while you make deals with Spanish Cobras and hit the weed eyeing the utility box behind home plate at the back of the third baseball diamond you're gonna sleep behind if you can just get a couple of tallboys that'll help you through the night, never cold enough outside to need a blanket, you and your hoodie calling it good around four in the morning or so. Summer is the real deal in the city. Ain't nothin' like it nowhere.

Until "Africa" pops on the boombox and you think of what could be, of being anywhere else but here.

But right now, Mitch is talking.

"No. Why would I do that?"

I can see DJ wants to lecture him in fluid dynamics or some shit like that.

"Well, man," he starts.

"What the fuck, dude," I say. "You gotta at least pop a hole in the can."

"Yeah. I think you're right, little dude," Mitch shrugs off a whole clump of SpaghettiOs.

DJ folds his arms, breathes out through his nose. Ellen puts her arm around him.

Little brother squats down, throws a fat cream-and-brown toad he just found onto the fire.

Mitch takes his aviators off, starts wiping at them with the corner of his red-and-black flannel.

The wind dies down, the slow-dripping pine forest shakes its head at us, sighs.

## §

We picked our way back to our own campsite, assured Mitch knew how to cook some motherfucking SpaghettiOs without hurting himself or anyone around him. We were none too sure about the thing with the

toad but wasn't nobody talking about that. Little brother was melting into his hoodie, hands jammed into his pockets, keeping them away, for now, from any other potential fuel for the fires burning inside him, any thoughts he might have on the subject known, thankfully, only to him. I thought about how cold it was getting, worried about keeping warm later on.

Surprise, too, I was wondering what we were gonna eat. Normally I didn't think too much about it, never ate a whole lot anyway, but here we were in some fucking wilderness and survival shit was kicking in. I pulled my black hood up over my head, thought about how to get away to sneak one of these two smokes I had hidden in my sock.

Even though it was almost full dark, I didn't worry about getting back to our campsite. This DJ dude was pretty fucking woodsy, knew his way around. It ain't easy to count on grownups for much, but we were so far from home I didn't have a choice. Sure enough though, after about twenty minutes, I recognized the trenches I had worked so hard on digging.

Maybe it was the cold, maybe the country-ass air, maybe all that walking through the woods, but I was dead tired. And hungry, too. Shit, I even woulda wrestled Mitch for a couple bites of SpaghettiOs. Little brother wasn't talking, as usual.

"Hey man. You hungry?"

Little clouds, maybe some lightning danced under his hood, crackled along his brows.

"Guess so."

"Shit. I hope there's some food here. Prolly gonna have to eat some granola or some shit."

"Whatever."

Yeah. That was about all I'd get out of him for at least a couple of hours. I'd take it.

"Well, I'll see what's up in a minute."

Low thunder under the hood.

We got to camp. DJ pointed out the little pond that had collected downhill from the trenches we'd dug.

"Yup," he assessed.

"Yup," I said.

"Yup," Ellen agreed.

:" little brother added.

“Well, I guess we should eat,” DJ offered.

“Mmmhmmm,” I replied.

“Let’s get the fire going first,” he said, looking down at our own Boy Scout pyramid.

I had no idea how this worked, hadn’t even seen him build it. Must’ve done it while we were working on the trenches.

He bent down to the fire pit he’d lined with rocks. Pulled a handful of peanuts out of his pocket.

I bet he ate those when no one was looking. Who knows how many he had in there?

“Ever seen this?”

Shiiiiit, I thought, I seen peanuts. What the fuck is he talking about?

He put the peanuts in the middle of the stack of wood, on top of a bunch of leaves and bark and shit.

“Peanuts burn and burn. They’re full of oil.”

Okay, homes, I thought. Do you, brother.

“Watch this.”

He pulled out a book of matches from the side pocket of his cut-off army pants, lit a couple, and set the pile of peanuts on fire.

Holy shit. It worked. I didn’t think you could burn a peanut. What the fuck kind of hippie black magic is this?

“Yup. They’re a great fire starter if you ever need it.”

Okay yeah, we do Molotov cocktails and shit, but sure, I’ll remember, if it makes you happy, man. Whatever. But sure enough, in about a minute, shit was starting to burn. Pretty cool, I guess.

“All right. Now the fire’s going, we should eat supper.”

Now you’re talking, I thought, said,

“Yeah. Sounds good,” wondering what the fuck supper was going to be, after the whole peanut thing.

“I’ll be right back.”

Ellen sat in a folding chair, stared into the fire.

Little brother threw kindling and god knows what into the pile, the flames flaring higher every time his hand flicked forward.

I tuned into my life four or five years from today, marveled at what was coming.

## §

DJ used his elbow to slam the back gate on the Volvo wagon, dust puffing into the air even after all this rain. His arms were full of food I could smell from here. He made his way over to the campfire, sure-footed sandals slapping in the mud.

Well look at this. A serious motherfucking treat. KFC. A whole-ass bucket, and this is the '70s, so old-school red-and-white-striped bucket, off-color pic of the old man hisself, big ol' biscuits, mashed potatoes and gravy, honey packets, holy fuck. Maybe they were crunchy hippies, but this chicken was the truth. I ain't had KFC since my grandma and grandpa and some aunties, uncles, and cousins drove down from Michigan to visit, stopped by the Colonel's 'cause she never did trust my ma's cooking, and she was right about that. She wasn't being shitty, even if my ma always thought she was, just grandma's got a certain sense about things, and she was right. My mother couldn't cook to save her ass.

Dude. We grubbed. It was luscious as fuck. So good. Me and little brother used our dog teeth to crack the bones and eat the marrow. DJ and Ellen gave us some looks but didn't say nothin'. Much appreciated. We didn't get out much, me and little brother, and we didn't get a whole lot of chicken, so we took care of business when we did.

We finished eating, threw the little bit of gristle and hollow bones left over into the fire. I needed a smoke bad, shot my shot, asked where the can was.

"There's an outhouse down that path about a hundred yards," DJ said.

"Cool. I'll be back in a bit."

I headed off. The path seemed alive, things in the brush off to the side waiting under the moonlight for your ass to trip up. Looked back at the fire after a minute. DJ was staring straight into it, Ellen looked conked out. I reached down and hiked up my pant leg, pulled out one of the Marlb 100s. Dropped off the path behind a tree and lit up. Daaaaaamn. That's a good smoke, outside in the woods, pitch black, after a KFC feast. I blew out the smoke in a semicircle around me, mosquitoes flitting away in the still air. I smoked half, knocked the cherry off into a pile of wet leaves, blew out the dead air, and stuffed it back in my sock. Hopped back onto the path and headed toward the outhouse. Looked over my shoulder to see nothing at the campsite had changed at all.

The rest of the night was quiet. No SpaghettiOs exploded, no dogs howled, the forest barely rustled. We sacked out in the tents; musty sleeping bags never felt so good. Crazy enough, we got up early and, no shit, went fishing.

## §

DJ rented a boat with oars and a small outboard motor. We putted out to the middle of the lake. Little brother and me had never been fishing like this before, so DJ had to show us how to do everything, thread a worm onto the hook, use a bobber, all that shit. It was...interesting. Seemed like a useful thing to learn, anyway. And fishing was cool, just gambling really, when you got down to it. Folks tell themselves they got a system, and maybe some do, but yeah, seemed like a lot of luck and using the force, yeah?

After three hours, nothing was happening. Maybe I got bored, maybe little brother got unlucky, but I winged back my little Zebco to cast a deep one and bam! hooked my brother deep in the arm. Holy shit, I had to laugh, couldn't help myself, but that fucker was buried in there. Blood was just running. DJ looked, shook his head.

"It's all the way through."

Yup. The point was just sticking out a little ways from where the shaft went in.

"Gonna have to cut it."

Little brother said,

"What the fuck do you mean?" a look in his eye like maybe DJ meant his whole arm.

"I mean we'll have to nip the barb."

"I don't know what that means, but you need to fix this," he said, his lips ashing indigo.

"Yuppyup. Don't worry about it."

DJ pulled a gnarly old multitool out of one of his many pockets.

"Hang on, man," I offered.

He cut the hook just above where it poked through little brother's skin, pulled the whole rig through the backside in one motion.

"There we go."

Little brother was a bit clammy and paler than usual but seemed OK. He cast his line back into the water like nothing had happened at all.

Jesus Christ.

After a while, I landed a bluegill. Hey, pretty cool. First fish ever.

DJ hadn't caught anything all day, seemed kinda pissed, but he was chill, 'cause hippie.

The sun beat down. I got browner by the minute; DJ pinked up so bad I could smell the blisters. We drank pop, ate chips, listened to the deerflies head our way from the shore.

## §

Little brother got a bite on his line. A real fighter. Holy shit.

He's really freaked out. I laugh.

We get it up in the boat. What a weird-looking fish.

"What the fuck is that?" I ask. "Is it a catfish?"

"It is. Called a bullhead," DJ says.

I got no idea what that means.

"Oh, yeah," I say.

"Here," he says to little brother, "take it off the line. Snatch it behind the head."

He grabs it. One of the spines sticks in his wrist, and then it twists around, bites him in the crotch of his thumb. He shakes it from his hand. It flips and twists in the sun, dangling from his upraised pole, angry hide throwing water all around, slow-motion droplets and rainbows flash in the molten sun that lights everywhere, on the water and the weathered steel edges of the boat.

Hahahaha. Shiiiiit. I laugh my ass off.

"Fuck you," he gives me the look.

"God damn," DJ says.

We get it off the hook, land it in the bottom of the boat.

"Now what?" I say.

"This," DJ says, pulls a big Buck knife out of one of those musty pants pockets, holds it backwards, and smashes the butt down on the bullhead.

It thrashes, tries to bite him.

I laugh some more.

"Jesus Christ! This fuckin' thing!"

Little brother laughs too, having tried to grab the fish, pulling away his three middle fingers covered in pinprick bites that well up with blood. He says,

“Let me see the knife.”

DJ hands it to him. Little brother flips it around and stabs the fish in the back of the head.

“There.”

There, indeed.

The fish is now dead as fuck.

Dark brown/black, skin slick and scale-free, he flips it over.

Its milk-yellow belly shines in the sun. A long pinkish scar cuts down the middle of its chest.

This fish has been caught before, speared, and thrown back. Probably on account of its ugliness. Or bitiness.

“Well, it’ll taste pretty good,” DJ says. “Had a lot of fight in him.”

I figure it’ll taste bitter, all that hate in one fish.

“Fuck him,” little brother says. “We’re gonna eat his ass either way.”

“Let’s call it a day,” DJ says, yanking the pull cord, firing up the little motor.

The bullhead gets dumped in our tiny, unambitious creel along with my crappie from before. I thought it was a bluegill, but DJ says crappie, and what the fuck do I know? It’s the first fish I ever caught on a line. Sure, I’ve been smelting on the pier down at the lake back home with quarter sticks of dynamite we used to stun perch we pulled out with nets, but that ain’t the same. That ain’t *fishing*, I suppose. Anyway, he eyeballs his dead cellmate down there in the water off the side of the boat, flips his tail, and slips over to the edge of his cage. I feel kinda bad, but not bad enough to forget how delicious he’s probably gonna taste in a bit.

We bring the boat back to the rental place. The old dude in the Badgers baseball hat goes through the motions, did ya catch anything, how’re yer bug bites, ya know we sell bratwurst so’s ya can bring some dinner back to camp, hahahaha, all that country rube horseshit for the city slickers, but DJ is a big dude and is all, oh we put a bunch of fish in the car already so we’re set thank you very much, and Horst or Reinard or whatever the fuck this two-toothed huckster behind the counter is called says, yeah OK fine den, and gives him his deposit back and I buy some Hot Funyuns while DJ grabs two lemons and we’re out.



The drive back is quiet. Ronnie Milsap almost rocks me to sleep as I feel the stored sunlight vape up out of my skin, shirt off, head thrown back on the weird square rest in the front seat of this decrepit Volvo. DJ hums along but doesn't know the song. We hit a big pothole in the road and I look back to see little brother passed out, chewing the inside of his front lip. I settle back in for the ride, kinda wild since my parents have never owned a car and this is pretty cool. An epiphany I'll get some day later hits me as we bounce along. What I don't think we realize is that the Carpenters haunted our whole-ass childhood, a fact made even more fucked up because we didn't know it until we were in our thirties, forties maybe.

### §

Before I know it, I'm waking up and we're at home base. We're on our second day of camping, so shit's pretty routine. Still, weirdly enough, I'm comfortable hopping out of the car, grabbing our shit out of the back, and strolling over to our tent like I go camping every weekend or something. I set down my shoes, which I've taken to not wearing out here in the boonies, unzip the flap, and throw my rolled-up t-shirt inside. Little brother stumbles through the opening and throws himself down on his borrowed sleeping bag, determined to finish his nap. I look over at the fire, where Ellen is sitting on a log, drinking out of a tin camping cup. I don't know if it's whiskey or tea or coffee. Maybe it's all three. They're hippies, after all. DJ seems a little pissy, but again, hippie, so I can't really tell. Ellen rolls up a doob and they get high. I shake my head; weed ain't really my thing, but to each his own, yeah?

I walk around, still freaked out by all these trees, but more disturbed by how the forest has moods. This late-day sun streaming through evergreens, unfiltered and highlighting every bit of dust, every speck of pollen, every mote, every spore, and clouds of gnats ain't nothing like the caul that yesterday's rain cast on your eyelashes, made them itch with anticipation for the next drop, made you pray for the lord of the woods to decide one way or the other to either downpour or cast off the low-lying clouds that clung to your face, made it hard to breathe whether with anticipation or apprehension, neither mattering when the hail came, smashing leaves and spattering

the glass of windshields, nature's unrecounted power a reminder of your shivering self in the timbers that laugh at any anchor you try to give yourself that you think provides any purchase in a world giving far less than two shits about you or your sad human dreams, all you have praying at that moment you don't drown standing in place or are found by your family facedown in the mud, a page-five footnote about how you died in a freak storm off the lake, a tiny statistic in some writer's research grasping for a half-decent country ghost story, or worse yet, a rural noir footnoting your death as dreary background for a lakefront bar meet gone wrong.

We eat. I learn how to clean and fillet a bluegill. Little brother does the catfish, something that doesn't have scales. I didn't know you need pliers to pull the skin off, but he seems to, or at least relishes the job. DJ slices up the lemons and lays them across the fish in the aluminum camp pan, sticks it over the fire. Shit, he even pulls some hunks of butter out of who knows where. A little salt and pepper and this is just as delicious as I thought it would be. We eat and head off to bed. DJ and Ellen stay up, smoke weed. Years later, little brother told me DJ tried to do stuff to him that night. I have zero memory of that, don't even know how it would've/could've happened. My brother and sisters have all told me stories like this, how adults had done stuff to them, but I have nothing for my siblings, even less for myself. Maybe my brain shut it all down, but isn't that what you do, what your spirit does? Isn't that how self-preservation works?

About five o'clock that morning, I got up to take a predawn piss. I'm not sure of the exact time, but I'm exactly sure about this:

I walked out of the tent  
made my way down the soft dirt path  
no shoes  
no worries  
and I stopped in my tracks

to see what looked like an ottoman in the lane. Not a Turk, not a footrest, but a solid, solid piece of something that looked like it should be at the end of a couch in front of a TV. My city ass thought well that's a weird-looking dog, but it looked, it still looked like an... ottoman.

And then its tail (yes, the ottoman produced a tail) flicked and it walked over to the garbage cans lined up, metal sentinels against

the trashing of the earth, and it reared back one right-handed paw and laid a can open. Trash spilled everywhere. Not like comic books, but like real life, like butter; metal slashed and guts laid out, and this ottoman gave not a single shit, cared not for the trash on the ground, just sniffed and walked on.

This fucking wolverine said no not for me not today, and I made my way to the pisser and did my business and didn't think about it until this day

So  
here we are  
Me  
You  
and this  
wolverine.

## §

I never told anybody about it, never mentioned to red-bearded DJ or mouse-brown Ellen or to my chain-smoking mother or my ever-furrowed little brother or even anyone I ever met subsequent who was from Wisconsin but yup, it was what I saw that day.

When we got home from our trip, the one where so much unspoken happened, all I wanted to do was smoke this last cigarette that had made the odyssey with me.

I went into our bathroom, stuck my head in the linen closet, and lit it with a match, blew it out, and threw the match in the back of the closet, because that's what you do at twelve years old. I finished the whole smoke and went out into the neighborhood, 'cause that's also what you do. I told stories about our trip, but none about the wolverine, 'cause you do that, too.

When I got home, there was lots of smoke, plenty of smell, and a thoroughly pissed-off ma.

I had to ask myself, did I do it on purpose, did I try to burn the house down?

But that wasn't really the question I wanted to ask.  
What I wanted to know  
was

Does tragedy bring people together, even if it's to beat your ass?

JOYELLE MCSWEENEY

## THE SILENCE AT DARIEN

The silence of death is the worst kind of silence, because Rulfian silence is accepted and Rimbaudian silence is sought, but the silence of death cuts the edge of what could have been and never will be, that which we will never know. We'll never know if Büchner would have been bigger than Goethe. I think so, but we'll never know. We'll never know what he might have written at age thirty. And that extends across the whole planet like a stain, an atrocious illness that in one way or another puts our habits in check, our most ingrained certainties.

—Roberto Bolaño,  
*The Last Interview & Other Conversations*<sup>1</sup>

Is there a silence in poetry so stunning and so fatal, so inundating and so full as the one at the end of Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer"?

Is there a silence so plural?  
Is there a silence so deep?  
Is there a silence so perfused?

Is there a silence so much like being hit on the head?<sup>2</sup>  
Is there a silence so much like being brained?

I always thought it must be like that when the Muse arrives. To be brained. To be crowned with a blow that alters one's thinking.

I always think of that silence at noon when the sun stands over the style.  
Fatal attitude. Art's arrival.  
I always think of a wreath of poison blooms.

In Looney Tunes,  
when one is hit on the head, by an anvil, safe, or a club  
wielded by infant, mouse, or chicken, one comes to slumped  
against a barn wall, rock, or trunk, one's head orbited by a wreath

of whistling birds and stars, pound signs, dollar signs, exclamation marks, other diacriticals. The eyes bulge, the wig zags out, and the tongue wags.

First, lights out. Then, staggering around under Art's crown.

It altars one's thinking.

### §

This is an essay about error. It begins as an essay about an apparent factual error, but widens into a contemplation of error in its widest possible sense—a moral error, that is, a mortal sin. It's possible here that I draw the connection between factual and moral error, and consider sin a type of moral error, because I am Catholic, and learned to sort my sins via the Baltimore Catechism, that is, to list, by rote, those that could be survived or worked off in Purgatory, i.e., the venial sins, and those that condemned one to Hell, i.e., the mortal sins. To make a factual error while reciting one's catechism might be itself a venial rather than a mortal sin, but at any rate, the connection between sin and error was here, I suspect, cross-coded in me. To consider a sin an error in the etymological sense of *errare*, a wandering or straying from the path, is a convention of Western Christianity, as allegorized in any number of knights' tales, in the straying-from-the-path that opens Dante's *Inferno*, and, most iconically, in James 5:20 in the King James Version of the Bible: "Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins."

The reach of this error stretches centuries, and is planetary in scope and still happening, like a hiccup in the proteins of cultural code that keeps inscribing itself into each new cellular edition, until the chain of error stretches away like a cordillera into a Sublime, obscene vanishing point where, to paraphrase Dickinson, one cannot see to see. To fathom such an unfathomable error, I will isolate just one peak. Typically one looks for peaks, pace Shelley, "on high," but in keeping with the theme of error, and with the essential reversibility of the Sublime, we will look for *our* peak down low—that is, at the bottom of a sonnet by Keats.

On First Looking into Chapman's Homer

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,  
And many goodly States, and Kingdoms seen;  
Round many Western islands have I been  
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.  
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told,  
That deep brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;  
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene  
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:  
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
When a new planet swims into his ken;  
Or like stout Cortez, when with eagle eyes  
He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men  
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—  
Silent, upon a Peak in Darien.<sup>3</sup>

There's the sonnet, and there's the Peak, but where's the error? For the first forty-five years of its existence and circulation, first in Leigh Hunt's *Examiner* and then thirty-one more times in a broad effloration of sonnet compilations and commonplace books, this sonnet was not perceived as erroneous. Then, in 1861, none other than Alfred Lord Tennyson spotted a factual error in the eleventh line. Where Keats placed Cortez upon a peak in Darien, staring at the Pacific, Tennyson penned, "history requires here *Balboa*—(A.T.)."

Critics have clashed noisily about this supposed error ever since. The scholar Charles Rzepka has written concisely and persuasively about the conception, drafting, and publication history of this sonnet; the state of Keats's and his contemporaries' knowledge of the Spanish conquest (extensive) and attitude towards the then-contemporary Bolivarian revolutions (positive); the muteness of thousands of pre-Tennyson readers of the sonnet on this supposed error; and then the critical forever war litigating Keats's supposed mistake.<sup>4</sup>

What all this debate and counter-debate point us towards is the truth that has been accruing all along over 200 years: this is a poem *about error*. About the gravest errors. About crime. About graves. About hemispheric, multigenerational crimes so vast that they are still happening, a total climate of damage that began with the Conquest

of the Americas and the enslavement of both African and Indigenous peoples, a crime lodged into the tissue of American-led global culture as anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity, a free-formed hate-response to difference mirroring the colonizers' own status as matter-out-of-place. Scientists have lately given the name Anthropocene to those epochal, planetary effects which had their inception at Conquest, the human megadeath on American continents that led to the brief Little Ice Age followed by its inversion into persistent and deleterious warming. The harm of Conquest both as a crime of genocide and an engine of enslavement, capitalism, and environmental degradation is continuous and persists across the globe, dispersed particulates, damage lodged in every coral reef, slime mold, bird brain, human lung. This is a crime so temporally, geographically, morally huge in scale it can barely be spoken with the everyday (that is, compulsory, colonized, majoritarian) apparatus of human speech but requires a different speech, a different hearing.

This is the context in which I hear the silence at Darien: it is the silence of the dead and disappeared, a silence so intense it is both "loud" and "bold," so intense it inverts peaks to declivities, heights to graves, a sky to a sea, fuller than full. This is a silence so immense in scale it can truly barely be grasped but requires a poet's Sublime hyperbole.

A wild surmise.

### §

When I close my eyes and think of "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," I think of it from the end, that is, from the bottom up, that is, from the silence, from under it, standing at the foot of the peak, looking not at a sea but up its sheer peak toward the vanishing point where vision cancels out. I'm immobilized by that silence. That silence stops up my ears like a stopped clock.

Instead of the sea, I am a watcher of the sky, and that sky is a total sea that fills the holes of the head and blanks out thought. Drifting in that sky: colorless shreds of decaying matter. With my eyes closed, I feel it brush my face. I feel it cross my jawline, brush my throat, looking

for the gills. I feel it drift towards my ears, where my teeth used to be, where, 120 million years ago, my ear bones left my jaw, allowing me to separate hearing and chewing. *Strange baits*, I think. *Strange baits*.

Strange baits rain from the sky. Surprising bait falls upon the sea. Down below the ocean, up above unusual clouds on a clear day. Surprising baits rain on the sea. There was a love raining, there was a clear day that's raining now on the sea.<sup>5</sup>

This is the opening passage of Chilean poet Raúl Zurita's *INRI* (2003), translated by William Rowe—a litany with a fish in its throat. Like all of Zurita's work, *INRI* opens its throat for a generation tortured, killed, and disposed of, their bodies concealed in mass graves or dropped into ocean, mountain, and desert by Pinochet's junta. Zurita himself was a victim of the junta—an engineering student and nascent poet arrested on September 11, 1973, tortured, terrorized, and held in the galley of a ship, jammed in with other prisoners. The imprint of this experience cycles through Zurita's work over the past five decades, including the interlocked motifs of harm and (sacrificial) self-harm and of being subsumed into the blurred and pluralized body of mass captivity. This imagery of fragmentation and pluralization of the living but victimized body in Zurita's work frequently becomes continuous with the mangled and commingled bodies of the dead—an intimate relation among the living and the dead that makes porous that supposedly most absolute of boundaries. In this way, Zurita's vast poetic works, performances, and earthworks form a continuously efflorating zone which has outlasted the junta but cannot be wider than its harm.<sup>6</sup>

In 2001, the then-president of Chile confirmed that the junta which ruled Chile from 1973–90 had disposed of its victims in horrific ways, including loading the dead onto airplanes and helicopters and dropping them into the Pacific, the Andes, and the Atacama Desert.<sup>7</sup> This rain of fragmented bodies into icons of the Chilean landscape is the “strange baits” falling continuously throughout Zurita's body of work and specifically in *INRI*. *INRI* obsessively charts the troposphere



of the “strange bait” as it plummets into an immense landscape of mountains, desert, ocean, sky, where the scene of the crime becomes the Sublime: “All the bodies thrown into the mountains, rivers, and sea of Chile float on the wind. They have been returned to the sky and they float” (91).

This rain of strange baits—both particulate and plural—spills from the wound of the specific historical crimes of Pinochet’s junta. In its exquisite particularity and expansiveness, it renders the landscape paradoxical, somehow both “down below the ocean” as well as “up above unusual clouds.” Even the clear day is inverted and is raining. Every binary, every Cartesian *either-or*, becomes an impossible *both-at-once*, an impossible *and*.

These essentially Sublime contradictions are evident in the dicta Zurita inscribed in a variety of ultimate locations in the 1980s—in the sky, in the desert, on sheer cliffs that crash into the Pacific. These writings entail a re-presenting, an inversion of powerlessness, an overwriting of fascist-nationalist geographies, and a claiming of Sublime scales for the Dead.

Contemplating Zurita and his Andean cordillera, his Atacama Desert, and his Pacific Ocean (now hardly peaceful, but charged with Death), all inverted and converted via the song of the strange baits, I realize that I locate Keats’s “peak in Darien” as a part of this supra-geographical Sublime, part of that multitemporal cordillera of crime. Everywhere the strange baits are eternally falling, a spine of crime stretching back to the Conquest, to the invention of Latin America as a flexing and ambivalent designation variously striated with both coloniality and anti-imperialism, to the Cold War and its *golpes*, smashed generations, contemporary US interventions, anti-Indigenous campaigns, capitalist predations and extractions. *Strange baits*, the material of History, the bodies of the genocided, femicided, poisoned, enslaved, exploited, experimented on, and Disappeared, falling down to convert the landscape, flipping heaven and earth, falling and rising. “The Andes are dead stars at the bottom of the sea of stones. The Pacific also is a dead star at the bottom of the sea of stones,” Zurita avers (65). This is my peak at Darien—a peak at the bottom of a sonnet, a stone at the bottom of the sea, a sea of crime, a crime scene *invertida*, a mass grave, Sublime, “The ocean waves

float across the sky,” a sky which is a silent sea of crushing fullness, a fullness bold and loud as Silence itself (91).

Mount Crime.

§

I wonder if my reading would be so strong if I had not been raised Catholic, a subject and object of conquest, inducted into the language of mortal moral error, the birthright of mortals, moral gravity, and the grave. And not just the language but the sound, a golden bell with a peal so high it cancels hearing. The sight: human sufferings both shrunk and multiplied in the oceanic swirling of gilt frames. The odor: incensed and sinking, saturate, weaponized, a censer swinging from a chain like a mace. Lessons in vertiginousness. Important things happen high up. Jesus crucified on Golgotha, the Mount of Skulls. In Latin: *Calvariae Locus*. In Greek: *Kranion*. The part of the skull that covers the brain.

I wonder if my experience of the brain-blow, the full cranial force of the silence of Mount Crime, would be so strong if I had not begun losing my hearing, little by little, over the last ten years. Per my audiogram, I'm only moderately hearing impaired. Yet I have lost the contours of conversation, whole registers of volume, tone and pitch, dire alerts, friendly asides and quiet confidences. The experience is decidedly benthic. I feel I'm alone on the bottom of the sea. The silence in my ears feels full and fluid, a total regime. Like old telephones in a landfill, my audial nerves ring and ring. The ringing feels wiry, tinselly, and communicative, like my nerves are firing of their own accord rather than relaying a signal. After years of being mediums, now they are trying to tell me something of their own. I lean into the private sound. I close my eyes. I picture the canals of my ears, the broken hairs like broken reeds, that refuse to carry godly or mortal sound, the silent fosses and plata of the brain, above me, the little seams where the skull plates fused in infancy, a fused sky, this enclosed and interior landscape like classical models of the Underworld, its meadows, rivers, and fields. Its locked hydraulics. I picture every channel so stilled, so locked with fluid that no noise can travel there. The reeds are broken, all the little hairs.

And yet it does sound, this silence. A stopped clock that includes all the times and all the crimes, all the mortal sins and venalities (which are, after all, adjacent), it is saturated with fatality, and I am forever listening, forever listing through its signs.

§

I heard extraordinary plains raining on the sea (10)

I heard an unending field of white daisies (21)

I can hear the rabbit stunned by the headlights (22)

In these lines from Zurita's *INRI*, a new kind of hearing is initiated, a hearing that attends to the silent and the silenced. A hearing of impossible sounds, a collapsing of distances, a Sublime equivalency of large and small scales, a hearing become synesthetically spectacular.

You can hear whole days sinking, strange sunny mornings, unfinished loves, goodbyes cut short that sink into the sea. You can hear surprising baits that rain with sunny days stuck to them

[...]

You can hear the sky. (8)

So Zurita calls and responds to himself:

I heard a sea and a sky hallucinated, I heard suns exploding with love fall like fruits, I heard whirlwinds of fish devouring the pink flesh of surprising baits.

I heard millions of fish which are tombs with pieces of sky inside, with hundreds of words that were never said, with hundreds of flowers of red flesh and pieces of sky in the eyes. I heard hundreds of loves that were stopped on a sunny day. Baits rained from the sky. (9)

This is the silence that locks the peak at Darien. A silence of total, impossible hearing, plural and particulate, saturated with crime. The sea-sky locks it in its fluid thickness. A pure serene, a knockout punch. You breathe it and your lungs remember to be gills again, remember to be stone. A fossil sea, which is a desert. A sky which is a sea and a peak which is a grave.

§

I'm at the foot of Mount Error. And the air is thick with error.

~~Yet could I never judge what Men could mean~~

This is a phantom line of Keats's poem, included in the first published version (*included* from the Latin: *includere*, to shut in) but subsequently *obscured* (from the Latin: to hide in shade), apparently because Keats found the line "too simply wondering."<sup>8</sup> I consider the line a covert signature of the poem's true theme: error. It startlingly inscribes Keats-the-novice, Keats-the-uncertain, Keats-the-late-arriver, as the speaker of the poem. When the first person asserts itself in the first line of the sonnet, the "I" blows in like the sonnet's confident helmsman on a gust of figuration, construing the speaker as well traveled on the seas of classical literary knowledge. Yet reading backwards from the foot of Mount Crime and gazing back to this first line, the mention of gold feels shaded, shadowed, made sinister by its association with the mortal error of Conquest, the lie about the Cities of Gold, and the total attitude of extraction/rapacity which mobilized the conquistadors, justifying the melting down of Indigenous sacred objects to gold bars for shipment back to Spain and the enslavement of both Indigenous and kidnapped African peoples as labor for gold extraction. This mortal moral error is *the crime* of Mount Crime, it turns a peak to a Mount of Skulls and sets Cortez on top—Cortez, the conquistador most emblematic of genocide. *Eagle eyed*, like a bird of prey. It represents the inception of massive racist and extractive crimes that persist to this day, eating holes in skies, turning rivers to poison, shredding lungs and seeding human tissues with plastic, clotting whole populations with outsize pandemic blows, crimes infinitesimal

and specific in their pinpoint cruelty but alike and continuous in their deleterious effects, crimes which cannot and will not conclude on any conventional time scale, but call for cosmic, anachronistic, mythic, and anti-Cartesian reversals.

In this deleted line, Keats-the-novice speaks out a little too frankly for his own comfort about what he lacks in status and stature, what it feels like to be excluded and locked out of classical and contemporary wealth, even the wealth of cultural inheritance, the loot and the gold. He must conceal this, must instead characterize himself as confidently traveling, happily breathing the air up there, its “pure serene.” He must adjust the line in the direction of insufflation, of literal inflation, to stay on the path, proceed through the foothills of the octet, to keep Mount Crime in view. Yet once he sounds the trumpet of Chapman’s name, the octet’s big buffeting claims drain out through holes drilled in the base, through the typographical mark of the colon, like this:

§

Now something can pour. Now something can swim in the sky (strange baits). Lying low, a nonheroic *watcher of the skies* peers up to see a fetal planet swim through the sea-sky, inside the dura mater where the brain with its own thinking swims a sea of ken, as the reader breathes the lush figuration through her own gills, taking in the sensual particulates of the poem in through every hole via the erotical flexibility of synesthesia—in which to be able to sense is an essential capacity, more essential than the senses themselves—a negative, inverted capability, wherein hearing is sight, the sky a place to swim.

After two lines of this hushed, fluid immersion, the word “Or” is introduced. It inverts the scene from the bottom of some sensuous cranial sea to some aerie. The big full clauses which comfortably filled the first ten lines go awry, dashes disrupt the clarity of the syntax, so that we don’t know how to confidently distribute the final adjective, *Silent*. The dashes lead the searching eye backwards, as like a bolt of electricity the current of that Silence leaps backwards up the poem, attracted, in my reading, to every hard “I” sound—the *wild surmise*, the eagle *eyes*, the watcher of the *skies*, the “I” of line nine. Then the current blunts against the colon, rebounds and runs down through the sestet again, till it reabsorbs itself in *Silent* and subsides in the short “e” of the last syllable in the poem, so quiet it points to a still fuller Silence in its own wake.

*Darien.*

This is the calm of the bottom of the sea, fixed in silence, gazing back up into that stunned asphyxiate sky.

§

You don’t go and read Chapman’s Homer after reading this sonnet.  
The colon after the octet releases you from all that.  
Once Keats takes a hit of that pure serene  
which lets him hide away all his doubt  
He reads with his mouth and inhales sound  
He throws his gaze up to the skies and sees a planet swimming  
swimming in a sky turned sea  
a planet swimming in the maybe amniotic sky  
which is the same as his “ken,” his new knowing of crime  
yet could I never judge what men could mean  
but I felt I like or I felt like  
a fit of likeness, like and unlike  
zaps the synapses of the sonnet, convulses with currents of association  
till I’m standing so minutely on a placename in a map  
and I’m staring into the vanishing point and I’m squinting my eyes  
and the whole planet wants to race away from a crime like that  
but can’t

What is the capacity of this sonnet to hold this crime  
it cannot hold it so big a crime  
it's drilled full of holes for drainage  
it collapses like a lung  
posthumicity is contagious  
and not always serene  
you have to learn to breathe (like Keats) without your lungs

§

Over 200 years later, it's amazing to me that critics remain concerned with the supposed mix-up in Keats's sonnet rather than the incalculable crimes emblemized by the tableau Keats assembles, with its miasmatic atmospherics, its total saturation with moral error. When we gaze up Mount Crime at Cortez, we are granted no glimpse of the Pacific, nor even Homer, let alone Chapman. Instead, Keats's compulsive simlizing proposes a torrent of substitutions linked by "or," which further saturate the scene with moral uncertainty. With its decidedly Western-looking gaze, this poem uncomfortably dramatizes the physical approach to crime and the slow dawning of one's sense of complicity, of reluctantly "looking into" the matter of adjacency, of one's initiation into the sinister endeavor of predation. In one brief poem this dawning half-knowledge is figured three times—in the concealed admission "~~Yet could I never judge what Men could mean,~~" in the mention of the fluid, just-planet-altered "ken," and in the infamous "wild surmise" with its wide, long "I" sounds, which to me stand in for the white saucering eyes of the supposing, not-yet-comprehending men, eyes which do not see but express affect, as milk is *expressed*—express the white material of "wild surmise." To half-know three times is to more-than-know, to know too well and too much. When one stands at the base of Mount Crime and gazes back up at the opening lines, the dubiety of the Age of Discovery is admitted to the poem through the double lie of the realms of gold and Keats's claims to know them, knowledge which, in the colonial enterprise, is akin to and supportive of possession itself. While the word "sun" is missing from this poem, two centuries later, at the end of Conquest's daybreak, with the full noon of consequence beating down on the planet, suspended in its inundating harm, we must turn our eyes, our wild surmise, on what we fully know to be Mount Crime.

## NOTES

1/ Roberto Bolaño, “Positions Are Positions and Sex Is Sex: Interview by Eliseo Álvarez,” trans. Sybil Perez, in *Roberto Bolaño: The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2009), 91. First published in *Turia* (Barcelona, June 2005).

2/ For this orthodoxy I nod to Dickinson: “If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry,” as extracted from the 1870 letter to Higginson known as L342a. For ease of access see “The Later Years: 1865–1886” on the website of the Emily Dickinson Museum, <https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/emily-dickinson/biography/emily-dickinson-the-later-years-1865-1886/>.

3/ This is the final version of Keats’s sonnet published before his death. I like its emphatic (and pneumatic) punctuation, and sourced it from Charles Rzepka, “‘Cortez—or Balboa, or Somebody Like That’: Form, Fact, and Forgetting in Keats’s ‘Chapman’s Homer’ Sonnet,” *Keats-Shelley Journal* 51 (2002): 42.

4/ For the fullest account of this debate I direct the curious reader to Rzepka’s article, above.

5/ Raúl Zurita, *INRI*, trans. William Rowe (Grosse Pointe Park, MI: Marick Press, 2009), 7. Subsequent citations given in text.

6/ I’m thinking of Dickinson again, and her poem, “The Brain—is wider than the Sky,” which fairly spatchcocks the brain.

7/ This is discussed in the preface to the English edition of *INRI* and, among many other places, in the 2010 documentary *Nostalgia for the Light*, which focuses on the efforts of survivors to sift the Atacama Desert looking for fragments of the bodies of the Disappeared—another parable about the impossible relation of minuteness and vastness.

8/ For this version and for this remark from Keats, see *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 570.





## REVIEWS

Kay Gabriel, *Kissing Other People or the House of Fame*. Rosa Press, 2021.

A few months back, I read a spate of articles about pandemic dreams. Publications like *National Geographic*, *Scientific American*, the *New Yorker*, and networks like CNN, CBC, and the BBC all ran stories about how intense and vivid our dreams have become during the long miseries of COVID-19. The daily bulletin circulated by the university where I teach offered a primer on the research reported in these stories, interviewing a group of scholars who were working on pandemic dreams. Pandemic dreams are important, they said, not just because of their vividness or how memorable they are. These dreams matter because “people everywhere are sharing common experiences, even while asleep.”

I was a bit surprised by this rationale. Isn't the unconscious mind supposed to be the most individual part of ourselves, the deepest, hardest-to-reach, and most unknowable core? The accounts of dreaming that we receive from psychoanalysis certainly seem to suggest this. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Sigmund Freud describes our sleeping thoughts as a heady mix of wish fulfillment and prohibition, fantasy and censorship. For him, our dreams are important because they reveal a mind tangled in conflicts with itself. But if we look back further, past the horizon of the previous century, the idea of dreams as social—or, at least, as socially significant—is much more prevalent. In medieval poetry, for example, dream visions turned to public purposes, imagining sometimes-radical transformations in the church, the state, and gender politics.

This long-standing, if often forgotten, sense of the social significance of dreaming animates the poet Kay Gabriel's new book, *Kissing Other People or the House of Fame*, published late last year by the communist collective Rosa Press. Gabriel's book takes the second half of its title from Geoffrey Chaucer's medieval dream vision *The House of Fame*, which purports to communicate the poet's dreams from the “tenth day...of Decembre.” Chaucer's poem deals with the problem of what poetry can tell: How much truth is in the written record? What is the role of the poet in reporting on the lifestyles of the rich and famous? While Gabriel doesn't actually seem to share Chaucer's interest in fame, her book is closely attuned to the question of what poetry can do as a document of social life.

The collection begins with six shorter poems harkening back to the New York School of the 1960s and '70s—one even references Frank O'Hara's infamous "Personism" manifesto in its title. These poems are largely concerned with being awake: "our bedrooms, private hospitals, discharged / us onto the streets well we ditched them first / they had nothing left to teach us / no Bon App no bedhead coffee." From the opening, we see a New York not always reflected in the New York School's better-known poems: "black-mold NYCHA apartments" and a "torched / precinct" fan out toward stomach upsets in Princeton, NJ, and the "hot pink armpits of Canada" (13, 30).

If the New York School is often remembered for its shorter, *voicier*, *vervier*, and more immediate texts, Gabriel extends and expands these qualities in her title poem, which appears right after the six shorter ones. "Kissing Other People or the House of Fame" is a long sequence in prose paragraphs composed out of a dream journal that Gabriel kept from April 2019 to April 2020 and that she presents, for the most part, in reverse-chronological order. Documenting her somnolent thinking, the poem includes fanciful, ludic, and downright strange elements, pressing these into proximity with everyday concerns:

I live in another apartment with organizers  
from the grad union but we're being harassed  
by anti-union leafletters outside the front door,  
then I am walking with Candy Darling we  
covet lipstick tubes and I'm the named adjunct  
on the knife table.

(104)

This stanza's quick combination of political organizing, harassment, housing problems, sticky desires, and encounters with friends and queer icons reflects the concerns of the dream vision as a whole. As Gabriel writes in her acknowledgements, the dreams documented in her poems are a "continuation" of the contexts in which she lives (107). But dream logic lets the documentary and the visionary come together. There is the flourish of union activity, vibrant and direct. There is the reanimation of the 1970s, and the possibility of communing with a trans elder. There's adjuncting, and then there's being "on the knife table"—perhaps one and the same? Gabriel's presentational, almost factual tone mimics the way dreams slide between the improbable and the everyday, veering occasionally into flat horror. She shows that the "I do this, I do that" method associated with the New York School can be untethered from what we really do and repurposed. This is one way

to understand the importance of her dream visions: they offer a view of a world otherwise, familiar and recognizable, but reconfigured.

Gabriel's combinations of the possible, the impossible, and the indispensable might read as a response to Freud's theory of dreaming as a mixture of fantasy and constraint, where the dream simultaneously reflects a disguised wish and its repression. But these contrasting impulses also indicate her approach to some of the most important movements in late-twentieth-century poetics. On the one hand, her poems take up the gossipy, socially situated, and sexually frank practices associated with the New York School (as we have seen), and also with the New Narrative movement of the 1970s, '80s, and '90s. On the other hand, but relatedly, Gabriel's writing partakes of the Language poets' poetico-political practice of changing language in hopes of changing the reality to which it corresponds. At many points in the title poem, I was reminded of the great New Narrative writer Dodie Bellamy, whose prose sometimes skips glossily across incidents, leaving me unsure how to respond: "H. like a vampire or a guest his hands all over me in a large house in London, walking up bicycle ramps over large swaths of the city" (95). At other moments, "Kissing Other People" brought to mind some of the more overtly political Language texts: quippy images like a "cooler vision of myself as both an ecoterrorist and a fellowship headliner," or of a cock "fashion[ed]...out of Rice Krispies," made me think back to Bruce Andrews's work (95, 91). Probably the most important precedent for Gabriel's writing, though, is Bernadette Mayer. Similarly to Mayer's great works *Memory* (1971) and *Midwinter Day* (1978), "Kissing Other People" is animated and held together by a time-based constraint: it documents a year's worth of dreams. In setting this durational limit, Gabriel shows, in Mayer's words, what is "always there, to be entered." Like Mayer, Gabriel takes up constraint-based practices without remitting to an aesthetic of austerity—the limit of a year yields a fulsome series of paratactically connected dreams.

Gabriel and Andrea Abi-Karam, with whom she edited the important book *We Want It All: An Anthology of Radical Trans Poetics*, explain that serial poems have a special significance in contemporary trans writing. Serial poems imply "that part of the project of writing is that a series could keep on going forever, like Fibonacci numbers marching into an ellipsis." Reading serial poems "requires a commitment to their duration—which is what you could call a formalization of resilience."<sup>†</sup> This formalization of resilience certainly illuminates Gabriel's durational dream vision: rather than the single, unique dream—the unparalleled "swich a dreem as this" ("such a dream

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<sup>†</sup>/ Kay Gabriel and Andrea Abi-Karam, interview by Peter Mishler, "A Year Later: Andrea Abi-Karam and Kay Gabriel Reflect on Political Radicalism, Inventive Aesthetics, and the Publication of Their Anthology," lithub.com, Literary Hub, October 28, 2021.

as this”) seen in Chaucer—the serial presentation of many dreams implies ongoingness and openness, commitment and endurance. The serial dream vision, as a document of changing conditions that demands interpretation, can “help prime people to be better readers of their own situations and... the currents, patterns and forms of struggle and consciousness developing around them.”

The idea that poetry about dreams might teach us to interpret and analyze our waking lives points directly back to the medieval dream vision, which often did exactly that. In Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, a character reflects on the conflicting understandings of dreams operative in the Middle Ages: either they are divine revelations, effusions brought on by fasts and gluttony, or hellish illusions—but really, “Who woot in soth thus what thei signifie?” (“Who’s to say what they signify?”) If we think of this who’s-to-say as a real question, not just a shrug, we come close to what’s most significant about Gabriel’s reanimation of the dream vision. At stake in our engagement with dreams is the question of meaning making: how we do it, who gets to do it, and other such problems are right at the forefront. The presentational structure and tone of “Kissing Other People” tosses the work of interpretation back to you, “yes, you,” as Gabriel’s acknowledgments insist (107). The “you” indicated by this apostrophe might be an implicit addressee, a loose, open figure for the reader as specific-but-unnamed someone to whom the poem is directed. Or, in line with Gabriel’s relationships to her New York School and New Narrative forebears, it might be the members of the social scenes named in the poems (and many of these are poets and thinkers recognizable at least to some readers immersed in the worlds of contemporary writing: Diana Hamilton, Shiv Kotecha, Stephen Ira, CAConrad, and so on). In declining to perform the interpretation of dreams within the poem that documents them, Gabriel does something more important: part of the dream in this poem is the poem’s handoff, where the text is turned over to someone else, who must take it up and complete it. In fact, one of the short poems early in the book, “STOFFWECHSEL” (German for *metabolism*, but used by Marx to describe how capitalism produces ecological crisis), dramatizes exactly this: the poem addresses “Andy,” saying, “I dreamt about you.” This dream was “the occasion of my poem, which is the reason for telling you / the epiphany of a poem called STOFFWECHSEL / this poem was by you in fact it was penned in your hand” (14). If the Language poets were convinced that activating the reader into the task of meaning making is a socially liberatory capacity of poetry, in “STOFFWECHSEL,” the addressee is the author of the dream-poem that is the source of the real poem. Readers aren’t just waiting in the wings to receive the poem; we are already connected to it, embedded within it. Dreams aren’t just fodder to be interpreted; they are interpretations

of our world and its social practices. Sometimes the recipient-interpreter of the dream, like Andy, is also its star.

Another way to think of the collaborative work of dreaming is to put it in conversation with critic Anthony Reed's recent theorization of the poetics of Black communism, which he defines as a "desire for communities committed to the imagination and practice of freedom beyond the value form and its governmentalities and subordinativities."<sup>†</sup> Although Reed is specifically concerned with mid-twentieth-century Black aesthetic practices, his speculative use of the term *communism* helpfully illuminates Gabriel's writing—she, after all, is well-known as a Marxist theorist in her own right. Reed explains that the term *communism* "brings into view the world imagined from within the positionality of the logically excluded." "Communism," he writes, "is a world-making project that starts from the question of the social forms imaginable absent the commodity form and property as such."<sup>‡</sup> Rather than focusing on political parties or Cold War-era conflicts, Reed encourages us to think of communism in terms of collective practices of imagining a world without property—a world that isn't structured around enclosure, the right to exclude, and the structures of subordination that these produce.

I read *Kissing Other People or the House of Fame* as giving us something like dreaming as communism, or the communism of dreams. In dreams, the world is remade, and the dream vision offers a form in which to present this difference—"these details of curious biography are disclosed by the appearance of an illuminated manuscript page visually available to everyone" (74). While these dreams are Gabriel's, they are not the property of her singular consciousness; they are a tissue of connections furling outward. In reviving the dream vision for the twenty-first century, Gabriel reminds us that each night as we sleep, we undertake the work of transformation, rewriting the experiences of waking life. The special task of poetry is to make these visions "available to everyone," to produce something we can continue to share and hold in common, even while awake.

Sarah Dowling

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<sup>†</sup>/ Anthony Reed, *Soundworks: Race, Sound, and Poetry in Production* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 68.

<sup>‡</sup>/ Reed, *Soundworks*, 71.

Andrew Zawacki, *Unsun: f/11*. Coach House Books, 2019.

Since *Petals of Zero Petals of One* (Talisman House, 2009) and *Videotape* (Counterpath Press, 2013), Andrew Zawacki's poetry has become progressively more occupied with the bleeding of visual and digital media into immediate experience. The substance of his project has been not so much the sur- or hyperreality of the finished images that we make of ourselves but their deep grain: less what the pictures depict and more the silver halide crystals and, increasingly, pixels that compose them. Seen *as* instead of *through* elements like these, the world appears both incredibly dense and fragmentary. Every surface suggests its own massively faceted structure, and any facet can be magnified to fill the foreground. Zawacki's poems zoom accordingly: up and down scales of perception, between conceptual realms, and in on words themselves, breaking them around hairpin enjambments and ringing the changes on their exposed components. The opening of "Snowflak" (along with its title) demonstrates this poetics of abruption and transposition at work in his latest book, *Unsun: f/11*:

Climbing in the fall line, an avalan

-che on the verge of the tongue, a  
splurge might trigger a surge of  
further spending, pending  
funding :

          S1-S2, with a neutral  
filter – lanceleaf yellow,

          alyssum white

(100)

The lines compact and fracture lexica, doubling what sounds like pop consumer psychology back on itself and forward into a natural world seen, with clinical precision and almost literally, through the lens of its visual manipulation. Nature appears as though it were already part of an image feed, a database, a reconnaissance report. Land becomes landscape in the satellite's eye, or "through a / Summilux, darkly" ("Music for Attack Helicopter," 102), or in the photograph bought from a stock archive ("Strewnfield," 50).

Zawacki's book tumbles and sprawls like this, bewitchingly and breathlessly. Lyric after lyric decompresses like a corrupted .zip file against a desktop background of hinterland flora run through a dozen filters. Details are constantly enlarged into ominous abstractions, like the photographs of seemingly ruined chicken coops that accompany the sequence "Waterfall

plot” (all of them shot at the aperture of the book’s title). The reading’s progress (or progress bar?) alternately rockets and stalls; words truncate or mash into one another like filenames. Glitches and video artifacts proliferate as anagrams, hybrids arrived at by eye and ear at once. Opening poem “Optic Audio” inaugurates Zawacki’s brand of synesthesia as “ununique / and sequesque,” and the single-consonant distance glimpsed between “Daughter and laughter” sets off a sequence of jagged sonnets on the phonemic and grammatical spillage of children’s language (11, 14). Walter Benjamin’s son’s mispronunciation of *Fotografie* inspires the scene in “Gratophoph” of a wintry beach filigreed with babble: “is there much enough snow?” it asks, “is that supposed to be lakes”? This poem’s “Shudderhorror. / Souldoll. / Shiverbeard” are not Hopkinsian sound patterning bent on unity and integrity, but another set of visual-aural permutations from a speaker caught in a vertigo of argots: photographic, of course, but also technological, chemical, geological, textile. “My mouth keeps spr- / inging open,” it says, “I have got a lot / more songs in my mouth” (27). But the words seem not to come from the speaker. They may not be “much enough” its own. Many are highly technical, lush, and apparently anticolloquial, despite the purchase their referents have on everyday life. Water’s the color of “zaffre,” impure cobalt oxide used to tint glass (“Waterfall plot”); the plain road to an airport runs through the “sodic soil” of an “ablation zone” (22). Others are a kind of private property: magnified, thin clouds resemble the weave of “1050 denier double weave,” the (trademarked) stuff of suitcases and tactical clothing (“Ballistic Nylon Sonnet,” 17).

But it is the moments when *Unsun: f/11* doesn’t send us to the dictionary or the wiki that are most uncanny, when the defamiliarizations are less wrenching. Then the sense coalesces of a speaker shoring fragments against his interpellation by Big Tech and market forces:

The afternoon twitching in Afib with  
 fog at the far end of town, slinking  
  
 like a tectonic crack  
 shellacked in iPhone glass, my data  
 shadow flickers along the paywall and  
 casts me  
  
 out : a whisper  
  
 through the darknet. A pearl.  
  
 Fox field at evenfall.

(“Outside a Ruined Casino,” 56)



The final coinage showcases the complex tension available in this style. It suggests how archaic resistance can sound in an age of corporate kennings. “iPhone,” “paywall,” and “darknet” sonically preempt the attempted retreat of “evenfall” into nonvirtual darkness—although this may just be another manufactured landscape, like the mountain built inside a Dubai shopping complex and “covered / With real snow all year round” (“Majid Al Futtaim Holding Sonnet,” 20). By the same token, a trace of the idyllic remains after all the qualification. The shepherds are long departed, but to see the countryside in terms of screens and data is to cast it in a lurid light that answers, slantly, to the heightened terms in which their songs simulated it. The sunset is still a little idealized. Earlier in “Outside a Ruined Casino,” daylight looks like “an algorithm of / textured demos and Perlin noise, // on a dome,” that is (I think), an effect from a program meant purely to demonstrate a programmer’s visual-algorithmic chops (these largely abstract motion-graphics are called “demos”). This one features a particular kind of visual “noise” or interference pattern—think of a snowy TV—programmed by Ken Perlin in the 1980s. The seeming randomness of the pattern simulates natural textures—stone, water, sky, flesh—when seen at the right resolution. Once a new modality of the visible, Perlin noise has grown increasingly ineluctable: now it’s present in virtually every frame of computer-generated imagery that aspires to realism. Yet it still pleases this speaker, even if only as part of “A prettiness / to break my face against” (55).

So do the strata of things—mineral, digital, financial—keep rushing to the surface in *Unsun: f/11*. Sometimes the sense of density is overwhelming, as when our individual lives are contrasted with “lossless” audio files (“Codec Sonnet,” 112). The construction works brilliantly on its face, as clearly no life is without loss, but it would take a long paragraph to unpack what is compressed (so to speak) in this metaphor, whose vehicle is a different kind of noise. And sometimes the wordplay runs recursively away with itself: “Pell-mell all hell and ill will will unfurl” slurs to a stutter like that simulacrum Sally, selling her shells on the seashore, told ten times fast (“Dixie Pixie Sonnet,” 24). But these lyrics deftly sustain their throughput almost all of the time. Eccentric, they deploy tight prosody and a delight in sonic continuity (all of those anagrams) as centripetal forces amidst the profusion. Thus the controlled plunge in “Swim Lesson Sonnet” through photographic darkness to finance’s flyover country to Stevens’s “Man on the Dump”:

Is this reciprocity  
Failure, is it lens falloff, or maximum black  
Or the dark open spaces of capital

In Stevens's poem, dead tropes and images piled up like bouquets in rotting newsprint—old poetic news—and the truth they approximated was itself an illusion generated by grammar. “The the” suggests that definite things exist to be grasped without distortion, when the means of grasping will always constitute them in part. Zawacki's poem enjoys too many such means. Its site is like a frame where new exposures pile up, continually overwriting one another. The resultant shade of black is overdetermined: either a defect in the film stock left exposed too long (reciprocity failure), a deliberate effect meant to simulate the cameras of yore (lens falloff, more commonly known as vignetting), or a blank in a ledger or landscape awaiting its accounting. A too-capable vision tries to get a hold on a phenomenon in too many overlapping ways, none of which it can readily discard. The result is a profusion which threatens, almost successfully, to overtake the poem but is also its means of movement. As so often in *Unsun: f/11*, the poem accelerates two ways at once: downward into the infrastructural densities of ordinary experience, the welter of explanations underneath even a stretch of seeming emptiness; and onward to the next shot, the next approximation. The motion is always ahead, “And cannot be undone,” as the book's last poem concludes, only revised with another forward swerve (“Study for Analemma 1,” 125). Or: these poems pitch deeper and deeper through our contemporary, largely tacit, and technologized commitments, like Frost thought poems should, although on a terrain he could not have imagined. The images alter every instant, and there's no CTRL+Z-ing allowed.

Michael Rutherglen

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Yevgenia Belorusets, translated by Bela Shayevich, *Modern Animal. isolarii*, 2021.

“When was the last time you touched an animal—not a domestic one, your cat or dog, not one with a name? When was the last time you were surprised by an animal?” These questions, posed by a classmate in a seminar some months ago, paralyzed the class, jolted us out of whatever theoretical discussion was taking place. At these questions, we had stumbled upon a conclusion reached by many contemporary thinkers of animals and animality: our human lives in

the present are defined in part by an absence of animal life. Climate change, the growth of cities combined with the destruction of natural habitats, overexploitation and depletion of resources—all of these factors contribute to this unsettling verdict. As John Berger once succinctly put it: “Everywhere animals disappear.”<sup>†</sup>

Yevgenia Belorusets’s *Modern Animal*, published by isolarii, is a meditation on this disappearance. *Modern Animal* announces itself as “a cycle of lectures on the modern lives of animals” (5). Belorusets opens with a series of five documents which show several lecturers and their audiences wrestling with two questions fundamental to philosophical thinking: What is the human? What is the animal? These questions have plagued philosophy for millennia, and *Modern Animal* provides no final answers. The first lecturer tells us an animal “cannot conclusively decide what a human is and what distinguishes it from an animal” (8). The next lecturer, who might be an animal, posits the opposite: no animals “have representational thought, abstract ideas, or irony! They’ve got no metaphors, no scientific method, goddammit!” (12–13). The classic dichotomy between rational humans and nonrational animals disintegrates, however, when the second lecturer makes two admissions: first, that the previous lecturer, the proponent of indistinction, “was nothing but a common rabbit... a little bunny”; second, that they themselves are a human, but the possibility that they are a Vienna Blue rabbit “cannot be ruled out completely” (21). With this self-reflexive announcement, the distinction between human and animal loses its stability. The border has been torn down, and the categories become muddled. As for the humans, the ones attending the lectures and the book’s readers, they and we are left unmoored, unable to get any bearings.

As the human-animal distinction breaks down, so too does the lecture conceit, and the book transforms into a polyphonic collection of odd narratives gleaned by Belorusets, evincing her training as a photojournalist. The tales presented in the latter portion read differently from the preceding lectures. Rather than the vertical dissemination of knowledge from teacher to student, the bulk of *Modern Animal* feels like flitting between conversations at a party full of people you don’t know. The move from the lecture format to recounted narratives underscores *Modern Animal*’s challenge to traditional representations of animals in Western philosophy and aesthetics whereby animals, in all their polymorphous diversity, are violently subsumed into the conceptual category of “the animal.” Belorusets is not interested in discussing “the animal” as a zoological or philosophical problem to be answered. Instead, *Modern Animal* gathers without merging its many stories, shifting the focus from the animal in the singular to animals, plural.

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<sup>†</sup>/ John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 26.

The later vignettes, composed in a style reminiscent of W. G. Sebald or Olga Tokarczuk, differ dramatically in their formats and contents. Some are given specific determinations—there’s an interview transcript, a fairy tale, and a recounted dream—but the overwhelming majority are simply presented, their only ornamentation a title. Disembodied, anonymous narrators from all walks of life—“bourgeois, urban, rural, Roma, working class”—share their encounters with animals. One narrator recalls bringing a street cat home for the first time, and this is directly followed by another talking about their chaotic living situation in a one-bedroom apartment with some fifteen dogs and several cats. Then yet another narrator recalls the death of their beloved dog, while someone else recounts an odd story about a pigeon in a prison. The dizzying multiplicity of speakers and genres seems to prevent the possibility of finding commonality. The stories, consequently, never quite congeal into a coherent collection united by an overarching narrative. *Modern Animal*’s cacophony, however, is not a defect or distraction but its aim. And though they seem to have little to do with one another, all the stories share a common feature: they are all ostensibly “about” animals. This through line, though, feels tenuous. What does a folk tale about a chicken’s soul inhabiting a dead woman’s body have to do with childhood stories about beloved cats or with a terrifyingly vague imagination of a cow’s final moments in an abattoir? The text asks this question of itself in a short story at its center: “How is everything interrelated?” (138).

But even in this labyrinth, Ariadne has left her thread. A logic slowly reveals itself. Unlike the first several lectures that probe the divide between *the* human and *the* animal, the following stories expose the moments of connection between humans and animals, the constructed bridges that cross this divide. In this sense, the stories are not about animals at all, but rather human encounters with them. *Modern Animal* reminds us that wherever we look, animals are already there. At stake, then, is not the difference between the human and the animal, or even humans and animals, but the conditions of animals in the modern world—how they appear in our lives and how we engage with them.

And yet, the text cannot be read as some paean to animals in the Anthropocene; it does not urge us to reconnect with our nonhuman-but-earthly kin. The moments of interspecies encounters are just that: momentary, fleeting. The animals in most of the stories do not—perhaps cannot—stay for long: they run away, disappear, or die. In “Arranging Our Life Together,” a narrator recalls their childhood home, always filled with “a bouquet of dogs” (165), fifteen of them in a one-bedroom apartment, along with five cats. The dogs and cats constantly escape, bursting forth from a window and dashing into the world. “There was a lot of turnover” (116). The narrator doesn’t remember the dogs’ names, not because they don’t love them (as they

undoubtedly do), but because the dogs are bound to escape. This episode acts as an allegory for *Modern Animal* as a whole. Stories, like the animals that jump in and out of the text, begin as soon as they end, their appearances always shadowed by the faint knowledge that they soon will be gone. This connection is made explicit in an early document, a thesis in development, when its narrator asserts, “books are animals!” (68).

Even when we think we have them contained, animals maintain an interiority far from any human grasp. “On Going to the Café,” one of the early documents, describes a café in which a tiger is kept captive for visitors to ogle at while they sip their coffee and talk about politics, though they always end up turning to the “tiger question” (25). But from behind the iron bars of his cage, the tiger—and one cannot help but think of Rilke’s panther here—does not pay “much attention to [the guests], or at least [pretends] not to notice [them]” (33). The interactions with the tiger, indeed with all the animals in the collection, are asymmetrical: humans take more interest in animals than the other way around. Animals always remain some distance away, even when dangerously (as in the case of the tiger) or lovingly (in the case of the dogs) close.

*Modern Animal* enacts this distance on the level of narration by refraining from dwelling for too long on any animal. Almost every story repeats the same structure: a narrator, as if answering a question posed by Belorusets, remembers some experience with an animal, gives details, and then abruptly changes subjects, sometimes talking about themselves or beginning a new story with new animals. The collection of stories is less a menagerie than a safari; it is as if we are always seeing the animals from far away. As a collection, *Modern Animal* points to a paradoxical tension in the condition of animals in modernity: they are distant in their nearness and near in their distance. More than just living around humans, animals haunt us, looming at the edges of modern society. In everyday routines and chance encounters, we are reminded of their existences, and so we think we know them, what they are, how they live.

But animals are not objects of knowledge; we cannot know them like we know  $2 + 2 = 4$  or that the sky is blue. If they are not facts to be understood, what are they? Belorusets poses this question in a story of a child who attempts to figure out what it is like to be a cat. She “[examines cats] from all angles”—their physiologies, their “personal characteristics, behaviors, and habits” (73–79). But it’s not enough. She recognizes her own humanity and concludes that the task of becoming a cat is impossible because fully understanding a cat is too. A cat’s life “cannot be fully elucidated” to a human (82). So she takes up the next best thing: looking at them. To answer the question: animals are objects of experience, things to be seen and heard, smelled, felt, even tasted. *Modern Animal* makes us aware of the

gap between experience and knowledge, how the former approaches the latter asymptotically. Distance, sometimes incredible and at other times infinitesimal, always cleaves the two.

If *Modern Animal* is not a paean, it is not an elegy either. Belorusetz does not call for us to mourn the disappearance of animals in modern life (in the West), to return to a prelapsarian time when humans and animals lived harmoniously. Though written with a journalistic remove, the book provides a glimmer of something a little stronger than hope—perhaps a knowing anticipation—based precisely on the simultaneous presence and absence of animals. One of the last stories, “Killer Horse/Inconsistencies,” which is also one of the longest, illustrates this. In it, a horse trainer recounts some of her equine encounters. She’s very good at her job because, as she says, she can speak with them. Not directly, of course, but she can “understand any horse and explain [her]self and [her] desires to them” (253). Except not every horse: “But there’s this stallion that doesn’t understand me, who I don’t understand” (253). This killer horse “refuses” to be trained, to be known as the other horses are. Like the caged tiger, this horse spurns human control. So, the trainer says, they “never will understand one another. We look at one another, and he respects me, he might even fear me, but he does not understand me” (254). Without comprehending him, she still tends to his needs, comes to him, *sees* him. The relationship comes down to mutual recognition, not understanding. Animals are indisputably different from humans, but the exact nature of this difference is irrelevant. You don’t have to know what an animal is to have an experience with it. A “common language” is just a dream. All that we can do is notice them, let ourselves be surprised by their ever-fleeting appearances, and recognize that they are never as close as they appear—but neither are they as far away.

Rainer Maria Rilke, in a letter to Emanuel von Bodman, asserted that “between the *closest* people infinite distances continue to exist.”<sup>†</sup> He directed von Bodman not to lament this fact; on the contrary, Rilke urged him to learn to “lov[e] the distance” because it allows one to see the other, to appreciate them as a whole. *Modern Animal*’s final story, a dialogue between an assistant priest and a fish, functions as the book’s epimythium (the final lines of a fable that deliver the moral) and takes a stance similar to Rilke’s. In the relationship between humans and animals, the assistant priest observes, “there is no sense...there is no connection” (266). There is only “concern,” which “leav[es] just love, for some reason” (266). We might

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<sup>†</sup>/ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke 1892–1910*, trans. Jane Bannard Greene and M. D. Herter Norton (New York: Norton, 1945), 57–58.

ask: how are we to perform this love? The assistant priest has no definitive answer; his response is cut short, ending with empty parentheses. Belorusetz, however, has not left us hanging. In its turn from objectifying knowledge to memorializing stories, *Modern Animal* enacts this love, which is premised not on the closeness between a human and an animal, but on the avowal of distance and an openness to the experiences that may bloom in the gap.

Britt Edelen

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John Giorno, *Great Demon Kings: A Memoir of Poetry, Sex, Art, Death, and Enlightenment*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020.

In *Great Demon Kings*—John Giorno’s memoir twenty-five years in the making, completed a week before the poet’s death in October 2019—we see the poet relishing the past with exuberant, gossipy delight, gleefully filling us in on every detail of his acid trips, romantic escapades, and sexual exploits. Fresh out of Columbia University in 1958, a young (and, as he repeatedly reminds us, exquisitely handsome) Giorno dashed in and out of galleries, museums, parties, bathhouses, sinking his teeth in the emergent and lively downtown art scene in New York City and collecting a string of famous lovers along the way. From Andy Warhol’s oral fixation and touch aversion, to Robert Rauschenberg’s “big dick, thick with a silky foreskin, nine inches hard,” to William S. Burroughs’s unexpected submissiveness and love for getting fucked, Giorno bares all, remembering his past loves with tenderness and lust in equal measure (147).

For Giorno, sex is “fabulous,” “totally great,” “ecstatic,” “spiritual,” often spiced with mind-altering chemicals and always “motivated by genuine love.” He sniffs poppers when Warhol sucks him off, drinks vodka and smokes joints with Burroughs before they stumble into the bedroom, takes “acid every three or four days for five months” with Brion Gysin while “fuck[ing] endlessly,” and each time, he happily gives himself to these moments of transcendental erotic bliss. No matter how comfortable—or uncomfortable, for that matter—you are with sex, Giorno *will* make you blush in surprise and tremble with excitement. Much like his poetry, Giorno’s prose is unadorned, syntactically straightforward, and filthy—there is no subterfuge, no euphemism, only cocks, cum, and pleasure.

In many ways, *Great Demon Kings* could be read as an ode to the post-Stonewall, pre-AIDS “golden age of promiscuity,” when liberation through sexual love felt not only possible but palpably within reach. Or it could be

read as a love letter to the vortex of avant-gardism that took downtown Manhattan by storm in the 1960s and '70s. It is also a bildungsroman that traces the journey of how a starry-eyed “young poet” (Warhol’s affectionate moniker for Giorno) gradually finds his own voice—by saying yes, always, to art, sex, experimentation, and change. In his own words, “Too much was not enough” (127). Following his smutty trip down memory lane, it becomes obvious that Giorno’s tendency to say an ebullient “yes” to everything is characteristic of his unique genre of poetics. In his own words, Giorno “had the freedom of being the sum of, but not *of* any particular tradition” (235). His poetry finds inspiration in found text—often from pulp, popular, or pornographic material—and rearranges it in ways not unlike Warhol’s silkscreens, Rauschenberg’s combines, or Burroughs’s and Gysin’s cut-up collages, but it is always animated by a carnal sensitivity that is distinctly Giorno’s own. Take, for instance, his 1965 “Pornographic Poem,” which has lines such as,

I lost count  
of the times  
I was fucked  
by them  
in every conceivable  
position

and,

The positions  
we were in  
were crazy  
but with two  
big fat  
Cuban cocks  
up my ass  
at one time  
I was  
in paradise.

(173–75)

Upcycling “a mimeographed erotic story” that Giorno discovered lying about one day, the poem takes the “pornographic image as a readymade” and finds irreverent pleasure in the sound, rhythm, and physical shape of erotic love.



The pull of Giorno's poetry lies in his rapturous embrace of queer desire as well as, more significantly, his capacious understanding of the form. Giorno's work embodies the corporeal dimension of poetry, how it should not only be read on a page but seen in a gallery, heard at a show, deeply felt in the body. As Marcus Boon observes, it is sometimes difficult to parse the difference between poet, artist, and rock 'n' roller when considering Giorno's oeuvre because of his continual interest in multimedia experiments.<sup>†</sup> In 1966, Giorno was introduced to Bob Moog—inventor of the modern synthesizer—through Rauschenberg, and the two began a series of collaborations that brought his poetry to the stage, with the poet's voice distorted, overdubbed, and the volume turned all the way up, transforming spoken-word performance into the trippiest rave. Giorno also founded his own production company, Giorno Poetry Systems, which released over forty titles of spoken-word albums by the likes of Laurie Anderson, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, and Kathy Acker. Giorno is perhaps best-known for organizing the Dial-a-Poem series, where one would call a phone number to receive the recording of a short poem, making possible the instant accessibility and mass circulation of poetry before the Internet. Later in his career, Giorno experimented with visual forms, inkjet printing aphoristic quotes, often from his own poetry—such as “WE GAVE A PARTY FOR THE GODS AND THE GODS ALL CAME” and, my personal favorite, “I WANT TO CUM IN YOUR HEART”—over bright, rainbow backgrounds, rendering immediate the vivacious *joie de vivre* that is so central to his work. For Giorno, poetry bends minds and brings pleasure—not unlike a tab of LSD or an orgasm.

It might feel slightly disappointing, then, that in contrast to the abundance of graphic details he happily supplies when talking about past dalliances, Giorno seems uncharacteristically reticent about his own artistic output in his memoir, often glossing over the significance and weight of his innovative practices. “Pornographic Poem” is the only poem of his that Giorno reproduces in full. The only other that he cites at length is his 1973 poem “Suicide Sutra,” a sprawling and thoroughgoing commentary on the horrors of the Vietnam War, the hippie movement, and American consumerism, yet only three stanzas are included. The Dial-a-Poem project takes up just a meager eight pages against the book's total 345. His fabulous inkjet prints barely get a mention. Indeed, it is easy to get lost in Giorno's psychedelic labyrinth of desire and forget that this memoir is—or at least purports to be—first and foremost about poetry. In the opening pages, Giorno tells us confidently, even a tad smugly: “I was young and beautiful

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<sup>†</sup>/ Marcus Boon, “Introduction,” in John Giorno, edited by Marcus Boon, *Subduing Demons in America: Selected Poems 1962–2007* (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2008), ix.

and that got me what I wanted and all I wanted was sex” (13). Yet the foil to Giorno’s total self-assurance in his good looks and sexual charm is the nagging insecurity that he would forever remain in the shadows of his more accomplished, more prominent boyfriends, that he was just “a beautiful piece of meat” (214). “This was shaping up to be a lifelong syndrome,” Giorno confesses, “an invitation to perform, followed by the not-so-subtle attempt to rope in my famous lovers or friends, too” (189).

Giorno’s “lifelong syndrome” becomes an ongoing source of tension in the book. We catch him in moments of self-doubt as he second-guesses whether he “deserved” to have a front-row seat witnessing the creative eruptions of the greatest minds of his generation, or whether he was writing “enough” poetry to establish himself as an artist in his own right. But the frequency of these moments tapers off as the poet grows older, as he begins to see poetry not simply as a craft to tinker with and perfect but as a fact of life, just as transient as the rest of the material world—a realization that he attributes to his Buddhist training. As he explains in a 2005 interview, the “point of it all was that these images [used in Giorno’s poetry] are just as empty as anything, or everything, miraculously appearing, their empty nature is the empty nature of all phenomena.”<sup>†</sup> Perhaps this is why Giorno—intentionally or not—sidesteps his own poetic achievements in his memoir. A committed student of the Nyingma lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, Giorno does not see the “empty nature of all phenomena” as a void, but rather the portal through which we open our hearts to life’s most vital energies—love, lust, compassion, and joy—and cast off our attachments to fame and glory.

In the epilogue to the book, Giorno says, “I believe and feel in a soft way that I have lived a failed life because all my accomplishments were based on the force of my ego,” tying together and letting go of his insecurities in one breath with the quiet benevolence of a bodhisattva (345). When paired in contrast with the exuberant, glorious, and enviably decadent life that Giorno has lived, however, this benevolence might come across as abrupt, even underwhelming. But Giorno’s movement between lust and enlightenment was never meant to be merely sequential (that is to say, one does not replace the other); rather, it is accumulative, appetitive. Spirituality and carnal desire are two sides of the same coin, both submerged in euphoric pleasure. Giorno might argue that the path to nirvana is promiscuity: open your legs *and* your heart. Poetry, sex, art, death, and enlightenment, in this sense, are mutually entangled, at times indistinguishable from each other, like an ocean of flesh caught in the midst of an orgy. All are made up of the stuff of life, channeled through the sensations of the body and brimming with joy.

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<sup>†</sup>/ Giorno, cited in Boon, “Introduction,” xxi.

It is true that, for those who are not already familiar with Giorno, *Great Demon Kings* never offers a full enough portrait of the scope or the depth of his poetic practice. But it is also true that, no matter who is reading it, it is a book that seduces us at every turn and teases out our own appetite for more—of everything. In 2006, on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, Giorno writes:

May every drug I ever took  
come back and get you high,  
may every glass of vodka and wine I ever drank  
come back and make you feel really good.<sup>†</sup>

And that is exactly what this memoir does: it welcomes us into Giorno's world of delightful excess with a cocked eyebrow, asking us if we want a drag of whatever it is smoking. Giorno tells us:

Just  
do it,  
just do it  
just don't  
not do it,  
do it.<sup>‡</sup>

With *Great Demon Kings*, he makes a pretty convincing case.

Cecily Chen

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<sup>†</sup>/ Giorno, "Thanx 4 Nothing," *Subduing Demons in America*, 382.

<sup>‡</sup>/ Giorno, "Just Say No to Family Values," *Subduing Demons in America*, 349.

## CONTRIBUTORS

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