CHICAGO REVIEW

CHICAGO REVIEW

66:2

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FICTION

INTERVIEW

NONFICTION

POETRY

REVIEWS

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SYLVIA LEGRIS

OCCASIONALLY THE FIELD OF POSSIBILITIES [2]

Is disruptive coloration,
yellow concentric rings
around a single eye,
a fovea centralis
of seed cones & pollen cones,
closely packed juniper seeds,
a Polyphemus moth with
urticating bristles & needles
with fine stomata lines, a nexus
of cone axis & host pine.

OCCASIONALLY THE FIELD OF POSSIBILITIES [4]

Is a coevolved canopy
of wing scale & leaf,
a broadband acoustic cloak
deflecting echo & foe,
wavelengths of powder & light,
a cloud of stacked platelets,
a thin-film percussion,
hair-penciled & interlinear,
sparkling archaic sun moths,
a microlepidopteric register.

OCCASIONALLY THE FIELD OF POSSIBILITIES [5]

Is night-active & pupillary,
wing-fringe grazing retina,
small moth repetitions
in an orbit of sequestration notes,
thick scale vestiture,
glassy, bluegrass-hosted,
rain-impermeable with snow-
veined forewings, a loop
of sequestration notes,
a small moth repetition.

OCCASIONALLY THE FIELD OF POSSIBILITIES [6]

Is a current of candles & dawn
half a clockface ago,
a Yablochkovian glow
of carbon-arcing waxwings,
match twigs, linstock boughs,
a sky of combustible fruit
tinders a river of ruined craters,
winter on its last legs,
a winter of monthlessness,
winter with plants in the belly.

MARK FRANCIS JOHNSON

HARD LAND

1

Winds its way to me
the thirty, half my rent -
the physician is not right !
the lawyer has no right !
both must cease for my sake
very graphically opining
on my character, another self anyway.
They give it all their care while *I* pay,
the first clew…

2

A woods rises in

value while in a neighbor's
possession, injures

the neighbor before
I can bear defeat.
How hard, the land
some places !

3

Do I wish I could here farm
form several new trees into house
using an opinion of skill
yes, and for the bright, thin

home I see would trade my
sordid love of grain even

if THAT
and weeping found somewhere on me
an incurable wound ruining

"what's left." *Further*
I would become *really a part*
- like, say, a good single father -
of an appetite for having done

the thing – I would,
had I not already claimed
a bit of pasture so hard
it is better than feelings.

ONE HOT AFTERNOON

1

I am sorrowful,
if not a *motive for thrift*
thrift the outcome. In my dreams
the boy who comes to the city
conquers where city-men fail.
Today being name-day I've chosen
sleep. Finally I dream

"the harvester of lesions" is brother
to "the builder of marmalade" ? It does
make sense. I hope whoever
they are they

are told we can't operate,
you fictions of pollution
not bundles of properties !

2

If I catch
me spying a deer

is life then a workplace drama,
inasmuch as persons frequently *die*

taking fish ? Plucking wild fruit lit by
a finally inescapable gleam

seems wiser, yet like
doing reverence to a fly

by drinking from a
chalice visited

many, many times one
hot afternoon.

3

Very far from
day and night

due to wind ? And the next “morning” I
- a spontaneous production of the earth

;no memory
disputes this -

am requesting a transfer. It’s given,
I speedily perish,

the
spontaneous productions of the earth get rarer.

WHEN IN DANGER

1

Repurity – it's like training ice –
employs another means
of transfer between beings —
"not now, money !" These

assurances of pardon
can be like rays reflecting
off eagerness
then delight,

imagine. Here you begin to
perceive the secret your due,
in the preceding pages
my design

- why pretend
otherwise - to prepare you.
Precede, pretend, prepare
three of my one idea.

2

was wrong wasn't
ever any
obligation to adore them, the elements,
I didn't –
that shame – where is it now, not
dry for the trade ! As a source of OUTSIDE ideas
shame cannot be bettered. Yet

a champion learns it's
been done, the perfected wrinkle seen
so often the world's big face long ago

fell . You might as well
hire the family doctor to fill your teeth,
as well pretend you

have a family doctor - and perish of shame the truth
no teeth.

3

Is it a warbler ?
needs parts
what, that's a cherry nibbled resembles
a bird in surrounding creation,
some sane trickiness.

Pardon me if it's on show *the*

body
cast I love, I use illustrations, that's me !
broken in the maze of human motives, by nature
ignorant of the future as a

a 8-year-old calf *unlike me*
bred of widely varied stock, smartly chosen
I am thinking now of a real beast, yes.
O calf, cautions couldn't spare you, we
children who, having done wrong, are old.

4

When in danger, pay
without ceasing or,
wickedness a bright response,
unbosom yourself without ceasing
lie to blab so. If

lying, use knowledge of the world
of that portion of history yours
best classified as *tics*
pervasive, intense, habitual -
knowledge of that "place" where clarity

cannot long exist, is anyway
just a feeling inutile but funny,
everybody.

5

Many a simple, unpretentious

beast has risen
to be a Prince of Service. Some
having small education borrowed
ideas from the field; I was

allowed seven. One
more would make
a splendid gift – soon please
find such, friend, to give

me as I was given
to my first parents, not
any *particular* people, two beings told
no restrictions on your egg !
why I've lived in habitual

violation of every law, by turns
(in my own mind) calf, stranger, sea
disjecta – but always in fact a
Prince-of-Service-in-training.

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Summer 2022

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MARCIA WALKER

Rey

Shutting up for four weeks has no appeal to Marris, nor does caring for a dog, but she listens as Char repeats—around a mouthful of chicken gumbo—the instructions.

Don't take him to the park. Rey doesn't like other dogs.

Got it.

And his leash. Never take him off his leash.

You've told me all this.

Marris has agreed to watch Rey while her sister goes on a silent meditation retreat. She pushes the biscuits across the table. It is possible Char loves the dog more than Marris. A stupid thought, ranking love, but Marris can't help it. She's done it her entire life.

Rey, the lean giant panting between them, is a rescue. He came from Puebla, in the Southeast of Mexico, or so the shelter said. They also said he was a German shepherd and collie mix, but Marris doubts it. Not with that tight fur and those paws like broken bricks. The history of abuse though, they were probably right about that. Around his face, scars split his fur into dark lines. Surveying the world suspiciously with his milk-gray eyes, he never leaves Char's side. Marris tentatively pats the base of his neck, more to reassure her sister she's friendly with Rey than because she wants to. Under his fur, the sinew reminds her of a wrestler she used to date whose muscles wrapped his body like ropes pulled too tight.

Make sure to walk him by eight at the latest. And always use his harness. Keep it on all the time. He's a flight risk.

Char's voice rises in pitch when she's agitated, which is most of the time.

He's family, Char adds, scrunching the fur behind his ears and looking to Marris. You're the only person I trust to take care of him.

She has said that before too, but Marris likes hearing it. Some things are worth repeating.

Char goes for a third helping of the gumbo. The menu at the retreat is strictly vegetarian, and she's bulking up before the big restraint. The place is full of rules. No talking. No phones. No laptops. No communication whatsoever with the outside world, and once you enter, you're not supposed to leave until the month is over. To Marris it sounds like jail, but Char says people have too much freedom, and, without limitations, freedom has no meaning. When Char goes on like that, Marris starts to sing "Hotel California" and sometimes Char joins in and other times she tells Marris to go fuck herself.

Char swabs the cream sauce with her biscuit and murmurs, I hope I don't go crazy.

Why do you need all that silence anyway? Marris opens another beer for each of them.

I need to calm down, just to calm the fuck down.

Why don't you stay with me for a month instead?

I wouldn't last ten minutes here without talking, you know that.

Marris wouldn't give her five. But she likes the ramble of her sister's voice.

Putting down her fork, Char hugs the dog tight and mouths into his neck fur. Marris is fairly certain it's something to do with mindfulness or consciousness or one of those words. The thing is, Char doesn't meditate. Not even yoga. How the hell is she going to sit in silence for a month? Marris expects her back within two days. A week, max.

The next morning she gets a text.

Heading in. Take good care of Rey. Radiant sacred divinity!

That's the kind of thing Char says. She likes to talk about the revolution of self-love. Marris attributes it to Char's formative years on the West Coast. Although they share a father, they didn't grow up together, hadn't even known about each other. Their father had a short but intense relationship with Char's mother twenty-eight years ago. (Marris would have been three years old at the time.) Char's mother only blabbed about the affair after her sudden diagnosis of terminal stomach cancer. After her mother died, Char messaged Marris on Instagram. *Hey sis*, it began. She said she had proof they were related. Although she wasn't interested in meeting a father who didn't want her in his life, she was interested in meeting her sister. *How about it?* she signed off.

Marris didn't know what to think of the message. She had never heard of Char or anything about an affair. She wasn't exactly close to her father, but she also didn't think he was one to cop out on his responsibilities. Her parents had divorced when she was fourteen, and for several years he sent her photocopied bank receipts of his child support payments. On a whim Marris called her mother, something she usually did only on birthdays and holidays, and asked if her father had ever had an affair. Offended, her mother didn't outright answer her question. After that conversation, Marris thought there was likely some truth to Char's message.

When they met, Char offered to show Marris the long-form birth certificate which confirmed their relation, but Marris didn't need to see it. The evidence was in their mouths, more precisely in their low gumline, which gave them identical rows of unusually tiny teeth. Marris had always wanted a sister.

From her bed, she texts Char back.

Good luck! I love you.

Before knowing Char, she never said I love you except when someone said it to her first. With her sister, it's different. She feels something powerful. Sometimes her heart thrashes against her rib cage with the strength of it. I love you I love you I love you.

She pushes herself out of bed to walk Rey. His nose is a breath away from the door, exactly where Char left him the night before. Clipping the leash to his harness, Marris waits for him to rise. When he doesn't, she says, C'mon, Rey, let's go for a walk. The word "walk" is supposed to prompt him. Walk. Walk, she repeats. She says it louder. Rey closes his eyes. She yanks his leash. She pulls again, harder, trying to wrench him off the mat. His low growl fills the room and an electric current rises up Marris's vertebrae. The hooked fangs under his thin lips are designed to tear flesh. Marris drops the leash.

Suit yourself, she says. She showers and makes coffee as if indifferent. But she's hurt. She wants the dog to like her, has for the two years she's known Char.

An hour later she tries coaxing him to the rest of the apartment with liver treats, but he doesn't move. She attempts the thing Char does with the plastic pig; she even mimics Char's voice, only he's not fooled. She squeaks, shakes, and lobs more dog toys, and still his eyes remain fixed on the door, waiting. Marris fiddles with her phone

and starts a quiz called "What kind of dog parent are you?" After the question "How many tummy rubs do you give your dog a day?" she stops. There is no option for none. She'll probably be back in a week, she says to Rey. You know she never sticks to anything that long. How can she explain time to a dog? Stupid dog, she says instead.

While she shoots off texts to casual lovers from her bed, the dog shits on the rug. Her father's old Moroccan rug. Her skin crawls with anger as she scrubs out the stain. She hunts for puddles of piss but doesn't find any. Sliding open the back door that leads to a square of enclosed dirt, Marris points outside. She does a quick check—sometimes she finds the odd syringe or used condom from someone's nighttime prowl—but it's clear. Outside, Rey, she says firmly. The dog hunkers down even more at the front door.

While it's hardly the first time Rey's been to Marris's place, they spend a lot more time at Char's apartment. Char hates Marris's neighborhood, too many housing co-ops and cracked concrete sidewalks. Despite making less money, Char insists on living in a bougie area. In front of each restored Victorian is a dinky garden chock-full of azaleas, trimmed boxwoods, and tulips that crop up like vigilant soldiers each spring. Marris thinks it's pretentious, but she doesn't say anything. Half her physio clients live in that neighborhood. Besides, she knows her area is undesirable. She'd always said she would move once she was part of a practice, but she's been part of one for over a year now. She likes knowing she can afford better, while Char always lives beyond her means. More than once, Marris has creeped a look at Char's astounding credit card bill.

Rey doesn't leave the welcome mat all weekend. He must get up at night to eat. Something fuels the pile of shit he leaves for her on the rug in the morning. But during the day his depressive attitude dominates the room. What? Marris says to him. What? *What?* Occasionally, his head dips to sniff the seam of the door and he releases a long whimper. Marris is certain he blames her for Char going away.

It's not until Monday, when Marris has to go to the clinic, that she loses her patience. She barks commands to unblock the beast from the front door. He ignores every single one. Her leg vibrates with the urge to kick him. I know you can hear me, she says. To get to work she sneaks out the back sliding door. She can't lock it this way but doesn't

have time to care; she's already late for her first client, Martha, who comes once a month for repetitive neck strain. As she tells Martha to roll her head slower, she feels guilty about yelling at the dog, about wanting to hurt him. What would Char do if she knew? On the way home she goes to the pet store where they sell her a pig's ear. That's a real treat, the salesperson says.

As Marris approaches her back door, Rey lunges, teeth bared. His claws tear at the glass. Fear shocks through her and rather than run, Marris freezes. She doesn't know this dog, so different from the quiet creature who waits by Char's side or the depressed mass at the door. When her voice works, she says, Rey, it's me. Marris. It's *me*. She waits for some recognition, but Rey continues to attack the glass as though he wants to rip her body apart. She waits until her fear subsides into a damp sweat. Only then does she crack open the door. The dog immediately shrinks back, ashamed. Char once told her that dogs can't feel shame, it's too complex an emotion, but that's still what Marris would call it. Rey lets out a low mewl and returns to his place at the front door. There's no doubt the dog can smell the fear, still moist on her body. There's nothing she can do about it. She puts the pig's ear in the fridge rather than giving it to the dog.

The next day, Marris returns home to a heap of shit on her bed. The edges have seeped and spread into her white duvet. What the fuck is wrong with you? Rey lifts his head and flicks his gray eyes at her. She doesn't care if Rey likes her. It's only a month, asshole, she yells. And she'll probably be back next week so suck it up. She cups a plastic bag around the crap and shakes it at the dog before pitching it into the garbage. You think you're angry? The only one who's been smacked around? You don't see me shitting on your bed.

But the next morning, still humming with indignation, that's exactly what she does. She squats over the expensive dog pillow he refuses to sleep on and leaves her mark.

Take that, dickhead.

She slips out of the apartment on a strange kind of high, exhilarated, like she's won a long-played game.

At work, between clients, she looks into dog boarding. It's expensive, but she'd pay the money. The problem is how to get him there. She doesn't drive. If she crushed some sedatives into his water,

maybe she could get him into a cab? But what if Char found out? Or if something happened to Rey while he was boarded? She closes the page on the computer. Sending the dog away is not an option. He is, after all, family.

As she's waiting for the bus to go home, the wrestler texts. First time in over a year. The tips of her fingers dot with sweat as she considers replying. They used to get together on Friday nights, mostly for sex, but sometimes they listened to music and snacked on Shreddies out of the box. Once he brushed her hair and twisted it into perfect French braids. Who taught you that? she asked, but he never told her. Other nights they jerked off and watched porn set to a continuous random stream. One time she came to a clip of a dog penetrating a woman from behind. The dog was slightly bigger than Rey. She deletes the wrestler's text as the bus pulls up. A stranger asks if she's okay, she's white as a sheet, he says.

When she reaches the back door to her apartment, Rey snarls and bares his teeth and Marris bares her teeth back. She pounds the window with her fists, stomps her feet, and curses the dog until a neighbor yells. Both the dog and Marris shut themselves up inside the small one-bedroom apartment. Despite the lack of exercise, Rey has lost none of his bulk. He paces the couch a few times and returns to his self-designated spot on the welcome mat. Before lying down he shudders, a movement that rattles his entire body. Marris remembers her shit from the morning and wads toilet paper to clean it up, but the dog bed is empty. There is no trace of it. She looks to Rey, but he remains glued to the front door, still hoping for Char to come and get him.

He ate it, without a doubt. She's not certain whether that's aggression or affection. Maybe it means nothing at all. Marris is disgusted, but something else, too. A part of her feels flattered.

Also true: she's flattered Char likes her. Even though Marris is older, it's Char who teaches her all sorts of things. She showed Marris how to insert a Diva Cup. Put her fingers right inside her, like a doctor or a man, only it was different. Friendly. She wasn't trying to diagnose or prove anything. Char told her she used to put her soother up her pussy when she was little. Her mother found her like that and let her

be. Marris wishes they had the same mother, that they had come from the same uterus.

She airs the dog pillow with two forceful shakes outside and drops it next to the couch. With long, wet licks, Rey cleans his hind legs. She can't stand the sound of his wet mouth and withdraws into her bedroom. The latch of her bedroom door won't close, the whole apartment building is askew, and she pushes the dresser against the door to keep it shut. As she lies down she stares at Char's last text with a low level of alarm. A week has gone by and not a word. Even though Char told her all the rules of the retreat, Marris didn't expect her to follow them. They must have taken her phone away. It is possible Char will last longer than she thought. She misses her sister, especially their conversations.

Do you know about the love hormone? Char had asked one day as they shared a cart at the No Frills. They often shopped late at night, before the store closed and when no one else was around. Marris pushed the cart while Char faced her, perched on the back.

All sorts of things release it, Char said. Even eye contact. Char hopped off the cart and hiked up her shorts. How long can you look me in the eye? Char challenged her.

Five seconds, Marris said and kept walking.

Seriously.

I hate staring people in the eyes. It feels violent.

Come on. It'll feel good.

Marris didn't want to but Char kept asking and eventually she parked the cart flush with the spices and bore down on her. Under the flickering glare of the fluorescents, Char's gray eyes appeared darker. Marris found it difficult not to laugh and fought the urge to look away. She remembered staring contests as a kid, how the shine of the eyes turned into a glassy zombie glare. She stopped thinking about winning. Char's eyes widened, or maybe it was Marris's concentration that made them expand and grow. She felt as though she was falling into a warm pond. Char was right. It did feel good.

The attacks at the back door continue through the second week. Sometimes Marris rages back at Rey and other times she takes it passively. The stress is affecting her sleep. At work she mentions her

sister's dog has an aggression problem. The osteopath across from her suggests a muzzle.

Do they still sell those? Marris asks, swallowing a yawn.

The other physiotherapist, Fiona, comes in halfway through their conversation and takes an interest.

Dogs pick up on the environment around them, she says.

What does that mean?

Dogs sense things we're not aware of. Separation anxiety is one thing, but he could be picking up on the pheromones in your apartment.

Fiona is useless. She has a hypoallergenic labradoodle that cost several thousand dollars. What does she know about wild dogs from Mexico? What does she know about the wildness of anything?

You should be careful, Fiona adds. I read about a woman whose dog ate her face off. Right off. And she had taken care of that dog for years. You never know.

Marris works late that night, trying not to think of Rey eating her face. When she gets home, she braces herself for the routine of terror, but Rey is strangely silent. The backyard is dark, as dark as the inside of her apartment. Only Rey's eyes glow on the other side of the glass. The impulse to run rises, but she ignores it and slips her hand inside to turn on the light. A shred of fabric hangs from Rey's mouth. A chair is knocked over. Next to it, a smear of blood. Boot tracks to her bedroom.

She tiptoes inside, as though not to disturb the intruder, but no one is there. Nothing has been taken. She wonders if the dog is hurt, but the blood is not his. With a wet tea towel, she wipes the stain off the floor. Instead of reporting the break-in, she washes down every surface in her apartment. Lastly, she jams the broomstick behind the sliding door. It's going to be okay, she says to Rey. She parrots the way Char said it to her after Marris had threatened the wrestler, or maybe it was the other way around. It's difficult to remember details.

That night she lies in bed, arms straight and pinned against her body, expecting the intruder to return. She imagines him opening the door, returning with mace for the dog, perhaps for her as well. A single sharp bark cuts through the darkness and her thoughts. Then nothing. She listens to her short breaths, continuously repeating. What else did the intruder touch? Her cutlery? Her panties? The sliver of

soap in the shower? The list is endless. When she can't stand it any longer, she pulls the covers off her bed and drags them to the front door. Threads of jean are still caught in Rey's teeth but she lies down next to him. She would rather be killed by a dog she knows than by a stranger. She falls into an unbroken sleep.

In the morning she pulls her stiff body onto the couch. Instead of remaining at the front door, Rey follows and sits rigid next to her. They watch the door to the backyard. For the first time she considers calling the retreat and asking for Char, begging her to come home. It's not the dog, or not entirely. She wants help. She wants someone to take care of her. Char is the only one she can call. Pictures of the retreat are available online and she looks at them. When the tangle in her throat is thick and tight, she dials the number on the website. It rings and rings and rings and eventually goes dead.

In the silence of her apartment, she searches up sounds that dogs like and plays them from her phone. Doorbells, babies laughing, chip bag crinkle. The squawk of ducks is particularly soothing, at least to Marris. The dog doesn't react one way or the other. Nonetheless, when she puts on her coat and boots and clips the leash to his orange harness, he walks next to her and down the shadowy hallway. She walks with purpose even though she doesn't know where they are going. Once outside Rey strains against the leash, and she hates him again. At the same time, she's hopeful. If he took the leash, this is a sign he likes her. Isn't it? They keep walking past the CoffeeTime, through the parking lot, across the street, down the steps, and into the ravine. They walk north. If they were to keep going, they would reach the silent retreat and Char.

One thing she argues about with her sister: it's only love when it's returned. So says Char. They come back to this conversation from time to time. They've definitely had it in the ravine where Marris has taken Rey for a walk.

Love is love, Marris said. If you feel it, then it's real. It doesn't matter if the person doesn't love you back. That's what unrequited love is.

That's something else, said Char. I was obsessed with a woman when I was in bartending school. I followed her around. I did that creepy thing and waited outside her house just to see her. I couldn't

think of anything else for weeks. I was convinced she was the love of my life.

How do you know she wasn't?

Couldn't be. She didn't love me back and we didn't know each other that well.

But what about the people you know well and they know you well, only they leave but you still love them?

You're still hung up on that wrestler. That wasn't love.

That bugged Marris, but she knew better than to bring up the topic of the wrestler with Char. You're wrong, she said. Only she couldn't articulate exactly why. All she could say was Char was wrong.

Another night they are walking, again, she and Rey, almost like a normal pet and owner, except for the dog dislocating her arm with the tug on the leash and the expression on Marris's face, a blend of protracted alarm and exhaustion. This time they stick to sidewalks. People with nice dogs cross the street as they approach. Eight more days. Marris counts them down and hooks the leash around her waist. Without thinking, she veers into Char's neighborhood and ends up on her street. The dog goes nuts. He strains hard, without relent, and the leash rubs her hip bones raw. Stop pulling, she says, please stop pulling. But he is crazy with the scent of home. It requires all of her strength to drag him away. Three blocks down and he still resists. After that Marris avoids Char's street and her neighborhood entirely.

Two days later, Marris finds a dead squirrel in her backyard. A margarine container half-filled with antifreeze beside the body. It's obvious the poison was meant for Rey. Marris trolls the backyard looking for clues and ends up staring at the sky. Maybe she should report this, but where does she start? Where is the beginning of the story? She knows she would leave out too many parts anyway. And what if the authorities think *she* left it there? It's possible they could blame her. Her head dips to the margarine container and she has a terrible thought. She doesn't drain the antifreeze immediately like she should. Rey watches her through the window. With a jerk she kicks over the container and the blue liquid disappears into the ground.

Unexpectedly in the mail the next day she gets a birthday card from her father. It's a month late. The cover has a triple-scoop strawberry ice cream cone that is starting to melt. Inside are his

initials and a five-dollar gift certificate to Tim Hortons. Quit staring, she says to Rey and pivots away from him. She checks the back for a personal note, but it's blank except for the price tag. She scrapes off the orange sticker. Again and again, she flips open the card and imagines something else inside. A personal note. An invitation for lunch. Even her name.

She pockets the gift certificate but decides to throw out the card—Char would be hurt if she saw it. Not that she's ever said anything, but Marris knows. She's always made sure to remove any sign she has contact with their father. With deliberate slowness she rips the card in half. Rey peels off the welcome mat and paces into the kitchen. His nails clip the worn linoleum tile around Marris as she tears the card into quarters, then eighths. He parks his massive frame in the center of the kitchen, forcing Marris to step around him to drop the pieces into the recycling. She leaves the kitchen, changes her mind, returns, removes the pieces from the recycling, and buries them at the bottom of the trash. Rey clocks her every movement. Marris shades her face from him but it's no use. She can feel the fucking dog inside her. Her trembling gut. She can't hide it, and this, more than anything else, infuriates her. Just attack me already, she says.

They are in the ravine again. Only four days left. Rey pulls harder and harder on the leash Marris has wrapped around her waist. She lifts her sweater and uncovers a red welt on her skin from the nylon cutting through her fleece. The cold air refreshes her sore skin. She does what she is not supposed to do. She unclips the leash and holds Rey's orange harness with one hand. It is certain Char would never forgive her. She would never speak to her again. Sister or no sister. Blood or no blood. Accident or no accident. It is a terrible risk, freedom, but she lets go—a flight risk. A rush and he's gone, a flash of his harness in the trees. Over the hill, then nothing.

After squinting to the horizon, through bare stalks of trees, she turns away from the hill. It isn't relief or joy or sadness or even regret that fills her, but an immeasurable emptiness and a certainty she is stuck with that growing hollow place inside her. She must trek that emptiness home, feed it, put it to bed. She begins the walk back. One foot forward, then the other. The slack leash brushes her pant leg with each step. The only other sound in the deserted ravine is the

low, resonant drone of traffic from the nearby expressway. Maples with new leaves, barely opened, shade the forest around her, and taller pines slant inward over the path. Marris stuffs her fists in her pockets as drops of cold spring rain begin to fall.

She quickens her pace but it's not long, only a few minutes, before she senses she's not alone. She stops and scans the area. Only the leaves and a few ferns tremble. A trick of the rain, surely. She checks the crest of the hill. Her head swivels to the right and left. No one is there, but her whole body rings otherwise. She breaks into a run. A twig cracks behind her, but she doesn't risk a look. Paws, she's certain, pound the trail, springing closer. He's tracking her and closing ground. She punches the air to drive herself forward, but she can't get there quick enough and there isn't anywhere new to go. He sprints faster, almost to her heels. She calls out to her sister. To the wrestler, too. Her voice is a pant. She needs someone to answer, but only the wind, the traffic, and the ragged huffs and growls of the abandoned dog respond. She is tired, and likely a failure. The expanse of trail in front of her looks the same as the one behind. Any moment his teeth will close on her ankle or the force of his paws on her back will knock her down. She calls him to her in a voice of unwavering helplessness. It peals through the wilderness. Rey, Rey, Rey.

WENDY LOTTERMAN

STEEP RAVINE

Anemones incriminated on rock respond
Shyly to fingers in the socket, suggesting
The face is just an expression, or else
Daylight hits different beneath water.
If water were a condition of rock and
Not the other way around, our jagged
Avenue of differently shaped lanes
Would swallow both ends of the rubber
Spaghetti, clutched sensibly between
Two opposing instincts that both
Kill the cat. Sand keeps the time
Between your hips, at which point
I open them up in order to come
Back, the day after the day after
Tomorrow. If months were days.
If the birdsong were spelled out
Phonetically, I would come back
Home and cut the first slices small,
Knowing that cake is just as fickle
In size as states. For instance, we
Had no way of knowing the shape
Of California before we got there.

TALK OF THE TOWN

The spectrum from she to y'all fails to account for the narrowness of patrimony,
Talking in tangles to the Hague between highly localized parades, as if only the specificity of this
Pasture could make that milk, and only this cave could taste like the lack of that particular sky.
Depressions gather debris from fleeting scenes, some trash
Hanging back like the serendipitous invention of dogs. In this case, the subtype inherited
Too much sleep and a habit of licking persistently. On one throne, the comfort of
A comfort shoved slightly up the nose. On the other, the baroqueness of constraint,
Making a case for the intricacy of shame. Cake and lotus line the aisle to a
Hazy destination. In your language, which is not quite mine,
All these obsessions are wrong. But the smell bursts right through the hallway
And I am called to the door by something other than knowledge.
Only whispers can contain the painful decorousness of this truth,
Repeating the twists of its snaky entrance with emphasis as it moves in reverse.
That scene does not belong to any room, or bed, or season of reality
Propped on boxes of unused standard gloss.
No access, holy or vernacular, could really capture that atmosphere,
So the signal has to do something else.
The shelves are named Billy, the dog is not mine.

Guests threaten on levels I can't defend.
Details escape the record, which is not a euphemism,
But a very high floor downtown.
All stamps, even smileys, share a history of grievance,
From nightclubs to forearms and sheep.

PRIME

The key to the allegorical form is a basement in Alabama. Robbed of topsoil. Nothing grows in these gray zones where the party is a paralyzed flash mob in shrapnel, or glitter, wishful fictions of renaming the playground, but deep down you know that language was never actuarial. Call to get a quote. Call the super who moved us to blow beauty and brains all over the supply chain. Made fresh daily, this hesitant declension of flowers captures something inexchangeable in the trade route. Skies imply the absence of aluminum so the users return in twos. When the last joint is fused, no knees remain to pray on. But they prey on impulse and riddle and error. Pray to god and robotics and insolvency. These new birds can memorize the address, reciting the bushes in evidentiary backstroke. Zoom in to find scribbles in the window saying "death to executive realism, this efficiency is killing too efficiently." Each day is crowded and lonely, coagulating into atoms instead of a real bloc or body, an indivisible slab of granite on the island. Interspersed behind the columns is a hyphenated blind spot. When you least expect it, the shadows assemble into nighttime. Inside is an isolating colony of hell, so described by the one who confided in the operator. He repeats the welcome line in crisis saying: Hi, it's Chris from loss prevention, calling to prevent this loss, the operator unable to solve a snowfall that started so long ago. Calls come in from Lebanon, confusing the continents. The line says my friend is collapsing like boxes in the brutally wet desert behind cardboard cutouts of real horizons and representations of daylight. There is nothing neutral in a place-name, but the gruesome confusion of nursery rhymes takes the reindeer way too seriously. From the inside, you see no snow atop the mountains, but a suspiciously milky runoff feeds these higher wait times, putting pressure on the weather to remit to this standard of service and delivery and debt. Compulsively

googling running shoes, sending wishes into the universe, not as truth but a carefully translated message, confessed only to stamp out the appetite. Ashamed to stow that shame away. Call back a call center in Texas to say you never got the message; log a complaint that the box never came. Jason says the scooter is yours for free, so you are free to ride around the joint anarchic birthday as the renegade you claim to be. Jason is killed by a chorus of complaints made in-office, wrought in local rock as a monument to a very big mistake. Now you have to repay. Now you have to repent, and repay, and love him. But nothing too difficult this time. It is too much to tune in all the time. Blow up the dune buggy. Let the piñata leak stocks and options onto the confections collected in its belly. In real time, in another frame, the coin purse burst its urine all over the runway. Her shimmering initials spell out the boundaries of a carapace in heat. Each element cries out the same, but these ballads are neutralized in unison, sung in rounds to form an insular melodic plot point that vocalizes its goal, and then dies. Prime time whistles between the wind chimes. Some tall order has slipped beneath the cracks of a strike to find your wish in a tinted fulfillment. The trail was never so honestly blazed. Boxes and boxes and boxes are blocking the way. Bleached urchins leach toxins in the office, balloons of too much future just burst into the uniform. You peed in your pants. You spilled magic all over the balance sheet. The unseasonal breeze is drying alibis for downtime in the break room. Ragged hands crowded 'round the refund, saying grace for different destinations. Each arrival discloses the story of its origin. Every delivery bruises its escape route. Reach out to touch the box, but leave no trace. There are still no solutions to waiting, but the future is a fruit with many names. A package came for you. It was grazed by amber rains for the fourth time today. In that sense, they came for you, too.

COLIN LEEMARSHALL

The Poetry of Lee Sumyeong

Lee Sumyeong might be considered simultaneously the least and the most "Korean" of contemporary Korean poets. This dichotomy pivots on the distinction between *what* Lee writes and *how* she writes it. In terms of the former, we might say that Lee's poetry is not very Korean at all. Her poems are never anchored to specific Korean sociopolitical contexts, and only seldom do they contain region-specific topographical or cultural markers. Lee's poetry also appears highly deracinated in terms of its connotative ambience. If, for example, one can impugn the potency of "Koreanness" in Kim Hyesoon's poetry (from however questionable an occidental vantage†), the "ethnographic" contours of Lee's poetry must be deemed all but invisible. In Kim's work, as well as in that of other women writers like Choi Seungja, Kim Yideum, and Kim Min Jeong, violence and grotesquerie are recognizable (if variegated) vectors of a vital Korean feminist poetics. Whatever its own violences, Lee's poetry is never as sanguinary, scatological, or emetic as that of the above-mentioned poets. Nor, on the other hand, is it marked by the kind of belletrism that appears in various ways in the work of poets such as Lee Seong-bok or Kim Kyung Ju. Instead, Lee's poetry is austere and idiosyncratic, deriving its singular kinetic energy from uncanny repetitions and strange juxtapositions of images. Through these juxtapositions, anthropic privilege becomes strikingly denuded. While people (or etiolated suggestions of them) do appear in Lee's poetry, these people are never the ciphers of a clearly defined politics or ethics. Such is not to say that Lee's poems are *not* political or ethical, but rather to locate their political and ethical energies within a deanthropocentric field of

†/ See Matt Reeck's controversial review of Kim's *A Drink of Red Mirror* (translated by Jiwon Shin, Lauren Albin, and Sue Hyon Bae). Matt Reeck, "Matt Reeck reviews *A Drink of Red Mirror* by Kim Hyesoon," *Asymptote*, July 18, 2019, https://www.asymptotejournal.com/criticism/kim-hyesoon-a-drink-of-red-mirror/.

fissured and intercomplicated object relations that collectively encode kaleidoscopic possibilities.

Swimming stubbornly outside of some of the more salient currents of contemporary Korean literature, then, Lee's poetry instead evinces its Koreanness via a demonstrable embeddedness within—and a defection from—the synthetic matrices of the Korean language itself. While the best Korean poets are of course acutely aware of the graphical, phonological, and syntactical peculiarities of the Korean language (and conversant with the ironic and interpellative dimensions that these peculiarities can imply), few are as relentless as Lee when it comes to interrogating and flouting the language games that are particular to Korean. In Lee's poetry, the mediating structures of Korean are frequently experimented upon: morphemes are switched, grammatical markers are upended, quotatives are elided, the rules of colligation are defied. Such language-game violations affect the topology of Lee's images in a way that cannot easily be decoupled from the mediating system of the Korean language. Although siphoning these synthetic transgressions into an analytic language like English is sometimes impossible, such impossibility perhaps allows for some creative license during the translation process—a search for dynamically analogous (if not always homologous) effects. It is hoped that the uniqueness and vitality of Lee's original Korean poems might survive at least somewhat intact in the English translations that are included below.

All of the following translations are taken from Lee's 2014 book *Just Like* (마치).

LEE SUMYEONG
Translated by Colin Leemarshall

FOUR-LANE ROAD

The four-lane road spreads like a contagion. Spreads in front of the eyes. Glistening all the while in the sun. On the four-lane road are people wearing shorts between the legs of people putting up billboards and people frozen with billboards tar slides down. The four-lane road extends out and seems to have go firsted and seems to have don't goed

when the four-lane road spreads fully out stop up the road and stand there

on the four-lane road drive cars that drove the roof and sometimes the roof collapses to pick up the roof went in and throw away the roof the four-lane road is fallen into some crucible. Tries to go eastwest like crazy. Strives to remain at eastwest. Congealed with excitement. The four-lane road smells strongly of petrol. Must in this way completely evaporate

tries to put down
he loaded goods the entire conveyance of the ground

4차선 도로

4차선 도로는 전염병처럼 번진다. 눈앞에서 번진다. 햇살을 받아 내내 번들거린다. 4차선 도로에는 짧은 바지를 입은 사람들이 있고 팻말을 세우는 사람 팻말과 얼어붙은 사람 다리 사이로 타르가 흘러내린다. 4차선 도로는 뻗어 나가고 먼저 가 했던 것 같고 가지 마 했던 것 같고

도로가 완전히 퍼져 나가면 도로를 막고 서 있으렴

4차선 도로에는 지붕 달린 차들이 달리고 간혹 지붕이 떨어져 내리고 지붕을 주우러 들어갔다가 지붕을 버리라 4차선 도로는 무슨 도가니에 빠져 있다. 동서로 미친 듯이 가 보려 한다. 동서인 채로 가만있으려 한다. 흥분하여 굳어 있다. 4차선 도로에는 휘발유 냄새가 가득하다. 이대로 통째로 증발해버리렴

실려 있는 것들을 지상의 모든 운반을
내려놓으려 하고

MOST OF HIM

Most of him is without shadow. It would be good to set him down for now. Good to drape a line of him on the road.

Most of him crowds into other people. Enters and bends. Most of him unthinkingly cuts his throat. He is absently drained.

Raising a hand unawares most of him has forgotten himself. Is forgetting and raising a hand. He will get better now. The hand will stiffen. Will commit crimes.

He is discovered all at once. To mark the location
he is completely indifferent. Beats against the roof of the mouth. Giggles intertwine.

Most of him moving he does not claim movement. He moving the movement has gone cold. Perhaps he is buried in the ground. Most of him being no more than most of him mostly from the broken centre

he stands trying to forget what is forgotten.

대부분의 그는

대부분의 그는 음영이 없다. 당분간 그를 세워두는 게 좋겠다. 그를 거리에 한 줄로 늘어뜨려 놓는 게 좋겠다.

대부분의 그는 다른 사람에게 밀려들어간다. 들어가서 휘어진다. 대부분의 그는 아무 생각 없이 제 목을 자른다. 그는 우두커니 바닥 나 있다.

자신도 모르게 손을 들고 대부분의 그는 자신을 잊어버린다. 잊어버리고 손을 들고 있다. 이제 그는 나을 것이다. 손이 굳어질 것이다. 범죄를 저지를 것이다.

그는 한꺼번에 발견된다. 위치를 표시하기 위해
그는 아랑곳하지 않는다. 입천장을 두드려본다. 키득거리는 소리가 한데 뒤얽힌다.

대부분의 이동하는 그는 이동을 주장하지 않는다. 이동하는 그는 이동이 식어 있다. 그는 땅 속에 묻혀 있는 것인가. 대부분의 그는 대부분의 그에 지나지 않아서 대부분 부서진 한복판에서

잊어버린 것을 잊어버리려고 그는 서 있다.

RAISE ARM

raise arm and grass dies
you are standing. It would be nice to raise arm and haul coal
to contain in similar containers similar things
a similar arm
confused with arms of unknowable owner
imminent danger and
danger become a new unit unfurling you.
new unit new cloth
between new gradation and gradation
pointing at similar gradation and
the sense of having reconciled with someone's arm
locking his arms
would be nice whenever the arm is done, such unkind
hair, pooling

chewing coal. It would be nice to shout the coal stuffed in the mouth
there being so much coal
that the progress of the answer is suddenly underway.
Raise arm and you
decide to find passing you yet another arm.
Arm flowing before you harden
you try suddenly to harden so that
raising soaring arm
this endless uncertainty expands endlessly and
with uncertainty becomes one side
in protest against a thing totally unknowable and
raise arm
suddenly leaf, like tree striving to possess leaves

팔을 들고

팔을 들고 풀이 죽어
너는 서 있다. 팔을 들고 석탄을 끌면 좋을 텐데
비슷한 것들을 비슷한 통에 담고
비슷한 팔
누구의 것인지 알 수 없는 팔들과 뒤섞이고
위험이 닥쳐오고
위험은 너를 펼치는 새로운 단위가 된다.
새로운 단위 새로운 헝겊
새로운 눈금과 눈금
사이에서 비슷한 눈금을 가리키고
누구의 팔과 화해를 한 것 같은 기분이 들고
그의 팔을 끼고
팔은 언제라도 끝나면 좋을 텐데 이토록 불친절한
머리카락이 고여 있는

석탄을 씹는다. 입안 가득한 석탄을 소리치면 좋을 텐데
석탄이 아주 많아서
문득 대답의 발전이 이루어지는 것이다.
팔을 들고 너는 너의
스쳐가는 또 다른 팔을 발견하기로 한다.
네가 굳어지기 전에 흘러나오는 팔
너는 불현듯 굳어지려고 하는 것이어서
솟구치는 팔을 들고
이 끝없는 불확실을 끝없이 늘려가고
불확실과 한편이 되고
무엇을 향한 것인지 도대체 알 수 없는 시위를 하고
팔을 들고
문득 이파리, 이파리들을 가지려 하는 나무처럼

THIS TRUCK

Trucks pass. Pass daily. This truck passes. As bread gets baked or
bread turns stale

it would be good to follow the truck hangs down from the truck and
becomes the truck

went and missed the truck

it would be good to stand suddenly on the slick road it is dazzling and
when remembering nothing and raising boring head

are going where exactly

it would be good if I give me to whoever greets like this
despite not knowing him

things running into the truck

while setting the truck in order
emergent bits of non-breathing lint

are going where exactly

this truck speeds along.

Moving constantly aside
the avenue does not break.

이 트럭

트럭들이 지나간다. 매일 지나간다. 이 트럭은 지나간다. 빵이
    익거나
빵이 상하는 동안

트럭을 따라가면 좋겠어 트럭에 길게 매달려 트럭이 되어

가다가 트럭을 놓치고

번들거리는 길에 문득 서 있으면 좋겠어 눈이 부시고
아무 것도 기억나지 않아 지루한 머리를 들고 있을 때

어디로 가는 거죠

누군가 이렇게 인사를 해도 나는 그를 모르고
그에게 나를 주고 오면 좋겠어

트럭으로 뛰어드는 것들

트럭을 매만지며
숨도 쉬지 않고 생겨나는 보푸라기들

어디로 가는 거죠

이 트럭은 돌진한다.

옆으로 자꾸만 비켜서며
가로수는 깨지지 않는다.

JUST LIKE

My mind is covered with dead leaves and it is
just like
the dead leaves are standing.
Just like
it seems like I'm dreaming I'm washing plates first seen in a dream
    and no matter how neatly I stack the plates
just like
dead leaves will surely cover the ground
dead leaves will surely cover the ground completely
in which case in real time
in which case on the road
just like
particoloured shawls from who knows where line up and
shawl-draped shoulders
just like
I'm crossing to a different day
I'm exhaling different breath and going around
just like
as if overflowing
as if endlessly inflating
in which case just like after I dream
let's go see white lambs
let's go see flocks of lambs suddenly walk out
just like
just bury the here
the here being swept away
my mind overturns dead leaves and

dead leaves will surely cover the ground
dead leaves will surely cover the ground completely
just like
as when after dreaming

마치

내 마음이 죽은 잎들을 뒤집어쓰고
마치
죽은 잎들이 서 있다.
마치
꿈을 꾸고 있는 것 같구나 꿈속에서 처음 보는 접시를 닦고
있구나 접시를 아무리 가지런히 놓아도
마치
죽은 잎들이 땅을 덮으리
죽은 잎들이 땅을 온통 덮으리
그러면 실시간
그러면 거리에는
마치
어디서부터 온 건지 알 수 없는 알록달록한 숄들이 늘어서고
숄을 걸친 어깨들이
마치
다른 요일로 건너가고 있구나
다른 입김을 내뿜으며 돌아다니고 있구나
마치
흘러넘치듯이
끝없이 부풀어 오르듯이
그러면 나는 마치 꿈꾸고 난 후처럼
하얀 양들을 보러 가요
양떼들이 별안간 걸어 나오는 것을 보러 가요
마치
여기를 묻어버려요
여기가 떠내려가요
내 마음이 죽은 잎들을 뒤집어쓰고

죽은 잎들이 땅을 덮으리
죽은 잎들이 땅을 온통 덮으리
마치
꿈꾸고 난 후처럼

SOCIAL TIME

We are social life. Fountain does a dance in the garden. Pulling each other's arms we guide to fountain. Clasp fountain and drink fountain. Which is to say we enliven jackstones.

All focus is on a single gathering, a single scene. Disinfectant is placed here and there. Picks up tweezers and revives rumour. Does activity not at rumour.

We sit in a circle. Wear today's diverse clothes and

what comes with some material is good and
cut a material and
material is blocked and

we do unknowable cooperation. The material is non-toxic.
non-toxic gang
hang non-toxic fingers and fingers
at once slacken and

our city plans where eagles fly around above non-toxic grass are lonely. Our public interest work is lonely.

We enroll living community. We contain no particular ingredients. We simply push ahead with the ingredients. We go to society and get better. Society has much time. Time descends to us.

Time will be cover for us.

사회 시간

우리는 사회생활이다. 마당에는 분수가 춤을 춘다. 우리는 서로 팔을 끌며 분수로 이끈다. 분수를 붙잡고 분수를 마신다. 이를테면 우리는 공깃돌을 활성화한다.

하나의 집합, 하나의 장면에 힘을 기울인다. 소독약이 여기저기 놓여 있다. 핀셋을 들어 소문을 살린다. 소문에 없는 활동을 한다.

우리는 빙 둘러앉는다. 오늘의 다양한 옷을 입고

어떤 천과 함께 오는 것이 좋기만 하고
천을 자르고
천이 막히고

우리가 알지 못하는 협동을 한다. 천은 독성이 없다.
독 없는 패거리
독 없는 손가락을 걸고 손가락을
일제히 풀고

독 없는 풀 위로 독수리가 날아다니는 우리의 도시계획은 쓸쓸하다. 우리의 공익근무는 쓸쓸하다.

우리는 생활 공동체를 등록한다. 우리는 특정 성분을 함유하지 않는다. 성분을 감행할 따름이다. 우리는 사회에 가서 좋아진다. 사회는 시간이 많다. 시간이 우리에게 내려앉는다.

시간이 우리를 가려줄 것이다.

GUESTBOOK

You are unopening leaves. Leaves flying leaf not being flown leaf
stuck on a window are so many windows.

On this street the thing pressing
what with your pressing the thing pressing you, you walk almost
regularly.
The head is completely empty.
Swirling in head, a sphenoid bone
at the end of a building when footsteps chase each other down, a
sphenoid bone

found found
like a row of death-teeth is found a neatly arranged black. Black
standing and black holding nothing and
unable to hide in this dark.

The world being backless, your weeping sounds.
backless night
backless playground

in a spineless alley
when on absently standing

until escaping this alley
what was the cry that went through this alley?

alone cutting the world's epidermis

whenever you speak mud is dashed somewhere.
a person attempting mud
the appearing everywhere of mud

that which from everywhere is being delayed

방명록

너는 열어보지 않는 잎이다. 날아다니는 잎 날리지 않는 잎
　어느 유리창에 붙어 있는 잎 유리창이 이렇게 많다.

누르고 있는 것 이 거리에서는
너를 누르고 있는 것을 네가 누르느라 너는 거의 규칙적으로
　걷는다.
머리 속이 텅 비어 있다.
머리 속을 맴도는 나비뼈
발걸음들이 서로를 쫓아낼 때 건물 끝에서 나비뼈

발견 발견
죽음의 치열같이 가지런한 검정이 발견된다. 검정은 서 있고
　검정은 아무 것도 들고 있지 않고
이 어둠 속에는 숨을 수가 없다.

이 세계가 등이 없어서 너의 울음 소리가 들린다.
등 없는 밤
등 없는 운동장

등뼈 없는 골목에
우두커니 서 있다가

이 골목을 빠져나가기까지
이 골목을 뚫고 나간 울음은 무엇인가

홀로 세계의 표피를 찢는 것

네가 말할 때마다 어디선가 진흙을 끼얹는다.
진흙을 시도하는 자는
진흙이 사방에서 나타나는 것

사방에서 지연되는 것

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An Interview with Camille Roy

VS: *Congratulations on* Honey Mine*! It's brilliant and was so meaningful to read. What was it like to gather this work from diverse eras of your life during our current catastrophe? Were there any places or memories that were especially resonant for you when revisiting them over the last year?*

CR: I'm so happy the book resonates with you!

Losing my partner to cancer in 2017 gave the collection a very different feel for me. *Honey Mine* holds memories of our days. The initial piece starts with a story of our time of discovery, when we first got together, and the last one, the afterword, reflects on my loss and our relationship in the context of that loss. For me the book opens a sweep of time, a wave that rises and then falls.

Honey Mine investigates many confounding questions and experiences relating to sex, politics, race, class, gender-based violence. I never thought I would need to tackle so much (or that the writing would take so many different approaches and forms). It turned out that this was required. This was the material I needed to work with. Through all this, it's a record of surviving and thriving, a book of pleasures.

Your work is often associated with the New Narrative school, which takes an experimental approach to writing queer life into fiction. Could you tell me about how these approaches served to formulate your experiences in writing?

What I found in New Narrative was methods and context for writing which sprang from my experience. With this tool kit, I could give my experience the weight of the real and then work with it in the complex and unfolding ways of fiction. That sounds straightforward, but I

think members of marginal and fugitive communities don't have the authority of their own experience without a struggle.

This struggle is present in every sentence. It is a struggle to use one's own experience as an interpretive lens on the world in which one is oppressed. It's a type of realism (distinct from fatalism) which is aware that every advance is provisional, and the likelihood of erasure is great.

This book recounts many moments of girls meeting gendered socialization with ambivalence and bafflement. On the one hand, "it's boring to be a girl." On the other, being a dyke "helps you get over being a girl." Simultaneously a hassle and a miracle, girlhood is a conundrum that provokes intense reactions from male stalkers and harassers, but the girls themselves seem rather blasé about it. I'm wondering if you could tell us about how this mutual indifference or wariness toward gender identity shapes the many emotional and sexual intimacies that the girls in these stories share?

In the view of the protagonist, gender can't be separated from its interpretation (and without the act of interpretation, it has little or no substance). This is her subjective truth (and may not be generalizable). In her experience, the fantasies provoked by "girlness" are methods of capture and use—sexual harassment is an example of this. Distance from this dynamic gives her agency and freedom. With distance safely in place, it is possible to play with gender as a spoof, as a bit of sexy fun, or ignore it—without penalty. Let your fur grow: no shame.

This is not an aspirational politics, nor is it moralistic. It reflects the fact that meaning drops away the further you get from the core machinery of society. The freedom of the outsider is real (though it works better with a community of fellow travelers).

The girls are not exactly blasé. They are nimble survivors and that requires realism and alertness. An example of this occurs in "The Faggot" when the protagonist hitchhikes with a possible serial killer. She chooses to say something that might disrupt his fantasy of her, and it works: she's no longer appetizing, and he kicks her out of the car. It is an aspect of the entitlement of misogyny that it appears to be motivated somehow by the girl herself, when it is only another fantasy, which in this case a killer is attempting to throw over her like a

net. The distinction between the girl herself "causing" her assault and a misogynistic and entitled fantasy causing her assault is profound. It's also more apparent when you have some distance from the core machinery of society.

This dynamic of strategic distancing and play feels related to the complicated tension which emerges throughout the book when young people try to reinvent themselves upon leaving their birth families and landing in queer ones. In the story "Isher House," the narrator writes of an old schoolmate:

> *She had a new lesbian name too, flowery but assertive. An appalling name, actually, one that stuck out like a little sign which said,* I am not my father's daughter. *Which is what she said, I heard, to someone from our school. But you are your father's daughter. That's the truth.*

I love this side-eyed skepticism about a person's new gay identity automatically representing a total break from the powerful influence of family heritage. What is lost when a queer identity becomes a legible, positive category? What is gained if one dwells in the space of obscurity and distance? What would it mean, however impossible, to not be your father's daughter, while acknowledging his powerful influence on who you are?

Great question. Back in the nineties I got interested in the idea of what is lost when we "fit in" (or are, as you say, legible), and I stuck my thoughts about it into some lines for a character in a play, *Bye Bye Brunhilde*. Technique is a queer butch person who gets lost in her intellectualizing. Here she is getting orgasmic over her ideas.

> TECHNIQUE:
>
> RE—RE—REL—RELATIONSHIP AS COMMODITY—INFINITELY PENETRATED, ABSORBED, SECTIONED AND RE-SECTIONED BY AN ADVERTISING ECONOMY—
>
> (FEAR pants for breath as TECHNIQUE gyrates)
>
> WE ARE PRESENTED TO OURSELVES AS AN INFINITE ARRAY OF MOVEABLE PARTS—

(TECHNIQUE tears off her vest)

THE MORE CLOSELY WE RESEMBLE THE "TARGET" AUDIENCE, THE MORE WE ARE SUCKED UP AND THEN TAKEN APART BY THIS STREAM OF IMAGERY—

(TECHNIQUE unbuttons her shirt)

THIS IS CONTROL BY RESEMBLANCE!

SO THE LEFT HAS BEEN TRANSFORMED INTO A STRING OF VIOLENTLY UNRELATED APPETITES—

(She throws off her shirt and sinks to her knees)

THE LATEST IS "FEMINISM"—WE APPEAR AS JUST ANOTHER FORCE CONSPIRING TO LACERATE THE SOCIAL BODY.

The basic idea is that we are controlled by resemblances. Whatever social type we resemble controls us via norms and appetites. Images are not neutral but create pressure toward looks, behaviors, values, attitudes, and more. This is simply how capitalism operates. It has particular force for women, who get stuck in a stream of images that ultimately are loaded with judgment (you are too fat, skinny, flat chested, busty, whatever) and then pushed toward purchases to fix themselves.

I think this is one of the ways legibility is actually toxic. It's a vector for judgment. There are others. What is made legible is simplified and unified. Our categories are reinforced even as much of who we are is uncategorizable and falls into alienation.

What is lost when queers become legible? I think a certain immediacy of experience that comes from being outside this capitalist image economy. I don't want to sentimentalize oppression. But culture gets made privately and in subcultural spaces even if the society does not represent you. You (and your friends) exist, you are just not constantly pulled out of yourself and your experience through manipulative representations.

Capitalist images are intended to excite desire, so it is at the level of desire that we are manipulated. This is invasive, and even violating,

partly because you do get caught up, you do enjoy it, and experience your alienated yearnings (for things that you probably cannot afford).

There was a moment perhaps ten years ago when young queers in SF were into something called "gay shame." It was an effort to get back to that era before assimilation. The word "shame" was used I think because it implies something that resists the image, cancels it, because nothing about the shameful image excites desire, and that makes it nonassimilable.

I think what is gained in obscurity is a deep relief from the alienation of oneself from oneself via the images of the capitalist economy. It is easier to be playful. It is easier to resist society's pressures. Back in the day, it was easier to be hairy, to leave pretty behind, not wear bras, grow your mustache. You could do this and still have a sexy good time. There was a counterculture that even functioned economically, with bookstores, clubs, co-ops, etc. There was the women's part of this, also the hippie part. It was possible to float around and actually live outside the mainstream. Nowadays it seems to me only the homeless do that, and they pay an extremely high price.

Is obscurity even possible anymore? Just about everything is filtered through social media—and these are giant corporations, the most powerful in the world. This situation is peculiar. It's unprecedented. We are even told we need to be our own brand!

Of course, survival pushes us toward branding. An artist friend of mine who makes a living from their art (without teaching) said to me once, "It's all Instagram."

There's a moment near the beginning of the book where you describe "Camille" as an escape artist within language. Then in a recent talk with Eileen Myles, you described Camille as a puppet that you can control. And as we've been talking, I've sensed a slippage between the "you" that I'm speaking to and the "you" that's in the book—speaking to you using your real name versus Camille as your pseudonym versus Camille as your character. So I wanted to ask what these sorts of devices enable for you and to what degree they are in play or not in play outside of the book in your life as a writer or in any other capacity.

As Camille, I can claim experiences that if I were to just go out in the world with those experiences, they would have some social stigma attached. There's a type of oppression aimed at women that uses stigma to attack a person, to downgrade them. It can make it harder to make a living. I'm wary of that, having experienced it at various times. Camille as a pseudonym protects my privacy.

After putting the whole book together, I realized that Camille was a literary creation that spanned decades and multiple books; all of my work as Camille was the creation of this fictional character. Why was that such a surprise? It was one of those things that hides in plain sight.

The identity of Camille is a liberatory device. Fiction releases me into the world of the imagination. Many of the writers whose work has parallels to mine write memoir, not fiction. It's interesting to think about the difference between what I do and memoir. What am I looking for? What satisfies me in terms of the movement of the story, the assembly of characters, their history? It is always that I want to have freedom to advance. I'm not abandoning reality. Camille is the way that I bring my life to writing, as fiction rather than memoir.

There's all of these family stories in Honey Mine*, including run-ins with Aimee Semple McPherson and Mina Loy, and these varying levels of believability in these tall tales that get passed down in biological families. There's also a renarrativization and mythologization that occurs when young people enter queer communities and develop the new person that they're going to be. How do those forms of mythologization intersect with your approach to narrative? I'm curious if you feel that those two tracks of mythology are more divergent or parallel.*

In many families, children grow up with stories that have the structure and message of fiction, but they're presented as realistic family stories. Sometimes these stories cause aggravation because there may be aspects of the truth that family members are at odds about. Nonetheless, these mythologies persist, and they affect everybody who's there. You end up having more than one thing true at the same time. Some people resist the story while others celebrate it.

I think the same thing is true in life. When young people join a community, there's often this utopian phase of casting off everything

from the past and then you get to be reborn. It's practically evangelical. When people are in their twenties, they come up with this brand new shiny identity that cancels their family of origin. And then after ten years, it kind of wears off, and there's a new task, which is how to integrate all these parts of oneself. It's a new developmental task. My feeling is that we live simultaneously with the varied and contradictory stories of our lives.

You referenced the *Honey Mine* story where the narrator is skeptical of her friend's new identity. In that story the narrator has been unable to extract herself from her community of origin. She could not leave it behind. It seeded her relation to the rest of the country. But her friend seems to be able to do it very easily by changing her identity. This is a conflict between them. It's similar to what I said earlier about how you can have these conflicts within families too.

I'm curious about your experience growing up in a communist household and then moving into a different kind of radical political community, a very different kind of lesbianism than the one we have today. What was your experience like, given that many people were leaving behind more traditional, capitalist, American Dream families? Did you have a different kind of rebirth, or did it still involve the same sort of canceling out of the past?

There are generational correspondences across political eras. One of my friends went from her communist family to the Weather Underground into a lesbian community. I think that communities of resistance change over time, but in many respects they perpetuate themselves. Of all the people that I know that grew up with communist parents, I can't think of anyone who became right wing. Everybody in some way carries that left political analysis with them. It's a profound part of people's identity. The one person I know who became somewhat conservative was motivated by a religious conversion. So that's unusual.

When people come to maturity and then tell the story of their lives, they're always telling the story of their generation. If you take a step back, you can see that these generations have a way of passing their culture forward, which may not be obvious. There was such brutal political suppression of communism in the fifties that the

ways in which it continued to survive were not easy to see, but it did continue to survive.

And I don't doubt that it will eventually reemerge. There has been extraordinary destruction of the working class of the United States. At some point, whatever it is that keeps us from seeing this clearly is going to become less effective.

What you're saying about the simultaneous persistence of repression and the obviousness of injustice makes me think about this thread in your stories around the impotence of truth, at both structural and interpersonal levels. In the first story, there's a scene where Dusty confronts her father about his sexual abuse, and he brushes her off. When Camille tells Dr. Marshall that she's worried about a stalker, Dr. Marshall brushes her off. So power is fundamentally unfazed when truth is spoken to it. You sum it up really nicely: "the servants know everything and no one cares."

But there are some instances in which it seems like the truth is extremely disruptive. As we mentioned earlier, there is the need for anonymity. Also there is the story of a cousin being upset about being included in a book. At the larger level, this book is so frank about the open secrets of class inequality, racism, and misogyny. I'm curious how that frankness comes with doubt about its power, though doubt could be too strong of a word. What space do you see for the use or the misuse of truth as a political strategy (or aesthetic technique), given the sort of indifference and invulnerability that power seems to have to that sort of confrontation?

What a good question. This has so many different aspects because it spans the most fraught family issues like incest as well as larger arenas of political conflict. What I can tell you is that growing up in Chicago in the sixties and seventies was a time of riots. Martin Luther King said he had never seen mobs as hostile and hate filled as he saw in Chicago. It was the time of the Chicago Seven, when Fred Hampton was murdered by the Chicago Police Department. It was a time of such deeply entrenched political injustice and oppression that it did lead to feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

However, in our current political moment I think there's too much emphasis on feelings. I'm not terribly interested in people's

feelings. They require too much attention. The cultural changes that can challenge entrenched structures of power happen over time; they happen slowly and require a lot of persistence. It's not the simple act of telling the truth. It's the act of telling the truth over and over and over again; it's the act of telling the truth to everybody who has a stake.

We have a faith that the act of telling the truth creates the circumstances and context that will allow it to be heard. That often does not work. The protagonists in my book learn from experience that society's consciousness is constructed with a lot of blind spots, a lot of resistance, a lot of coded refusals to any call to awareness. The problem of confronting a patriarch with his pedophilia and incest abuse has so many dimensions because this is a power structure, it's an economic structure, it's a familial structure. As you can see in that story, there's so much resistance to truth that to tell the truth in that context breaks the system. And then there is a new question: what happens to all those relationships after the structure that has connected people has been shown to be corrupt?

This issue can occur in many areas of society. The question is what our political values should be, given this problem of the breakdown of relation. Today we have virtually an infinite number of ways to argue our positions, but I think that we listen even less than we used to. So there's a lot of arguing and not that much understanding. If we're going to go through difficult transformations, if you are being confronted with truth that's unwelcome and perhaps threatening, then it has to be done in an atmosphere where people have the value of empathic listening. We have so many platforms today, but these are all platforms for people to articulate their views. We don't have platforms for this kind of empathic listening. There's no place for it to occur. I'm actually somewhat concerned as to whether we can survive as a society under these conditions.

This is one of those situations where the center will not hold. I'm continually surprised at how much we have destroyed the livelihoods of so many people in this country, and this is basically considered to be okay. It's the working of the free market and therefore efficient. The destruction doesn't have any political gravity at this moment. Despite this din of argumentation, so many important things fail to register. I was just reading that of the fatal drug overdoses in San Francisco,

something like 85 percent are Black men. This is a city that's like 7 or 8 percent Black. This is an issue of racism, and it's also an issue of the destruction of the livelihoods of the working-class population of San Francisco. I don't mean to rattle on about this, but this tends to be the kind of thing I think about when I just go around the city.

I want to ask about your sentences, which are surprising, multifarious, and feel definitive without being closed off. The book opens with a squeamishness about the word "sex" and then a linguistic trail of associations leading Camille to see her body as a stadium. So we have language displacing the real body, but this is also its value in that it offers the potential to redefine the self and the self's activity. And then we have this—I love this line—"Femme means making pink the color of your interior, and then drinking a lot of fluid." So what's going on with your approach to the sentence? And then what's happening when the sentence can't be stretched far enough and you have to depart from it altogether?

One of the things that I got from New Narrative and also from feminist poetics as taught by Kathleen Fraser was permission to explore the further reaches of my own experience. And that inevitably ran into conflicts with received wisdom about the sexual experience of women. Women are both sentimentalized and patronized, and at the same time exposed to physical threat and harassment. You're supposed to be able to absorb this incongruity and internal conflict without having that disrupt your belief in the structure of society. There are so many contradictions that you run into if you stay in touch with your experience that disassociation is both expected and natural. That is what breaks the sentences. One of the things that's interesting about being in a sentence is that you are in a socially structured unit of thought and experience. That's what you're inside of. When your experience is constantly brushing up against the limits of that structure or dropping out of the frame entirely, then that has an effect on the sentence. It changes the sentence, to carry it with you through those kinds of disruptive experiences.

It's possible that these contradictions are heightened in my work because there were multiple ways in which I was in conflict with

my society: growing up on the South Side of Chicago, communist parents, you know, a list of things, and then eventually I came out as a lesbian. In many ways the reality that I inhabited did not fit within the American self-concept. Being a writer gave me the option to explore all this rather than simply becoming dissociated.

My sentences are an embodied exercise. Readers enter them and feel, physically and emotionally and erotically, the disruptions as they occur. They enter a sentence in my work because, word by word and clause by clause, it's recognizable, they can follow it. But it takes them to someplace unexpected.

I always assumed that what I was doing was obvious. It's experience, not theory. But I never got anywhere with it for years and years. Perhaps it's different now. There seems to be more willingness to engage with what I'm doing than there used to be.

Zooming out a little bit to narrative as a structure, I notice a tension in your stories between active and passive elements. The active element is the writing itself, its endless efforts at disrupting or arousing the reader. But there is often a strong passivity or stuckness within the characters. Often a character confronts intractable issues, like crossing a line of racial segregation and then finding that there's no clear indication of what to do once you've reached the other side. In this regard, you write that narrative formalizes "a moment of surrender" and presents a "spectacular innocence." When does narrative offer you command of a situation and when does it incapacitate you?

The moment of surrender is related to what I call mutant beings, who exist beyond the bounds of the descriptive capability of our language. This is not a mystical observation. The prisons are full of people who fit that description. The moment of surrender is really about turning to them and not trying to suppress their existence but actually opening the door to such difficult experiences that are often completely erased. This surrender leads to an articulation which is beyond the bounds of normal expression. It has to be a moment of surrender because life always has this aspect of trying to keep your act together, trying to look like a person who doesn't deserve to be abused, trying to seem competent so that you will be able to continue to survive. It's that

"look good" person who has to surrender in order to witness these other aspects of our life. With surrender you are just giving a part of yourself. You're letting those difficult aspects be witnessed through you. You are letting down your guard.

The other thing that is worth noting about conventional narratives, like the hero's journey or the endangered maiden, is that they have been developed over thousands of years. They're very sturdy. But when we are talking about the helplessness and hopelessness of confronting power today, one of the things that makes it difficult is that the stories we have to use are fragile, they're partial. They can't always be completely known and are often in part irredeemably lost. You cannot expect them to become soldiers in your fight against power. You have to let them be exactly what they are. You have to care for them. You have to be tender with them because they need that in order to live on the social stage.

There was a time when there was a craving for positive images of oppressed groups. And it turned out that stories made with this prescription were boring. I'm suggesting that there is a need to develop a sensitivity or tenderness for what I call the mutant beings, to surrender to them, to give them space, to allow them to come through you. This is the opposite of being or having a new champion. It's more about listening, empathic listening, which I feel we have lost as part of our political culture. Maybe we never had it. I think the listening aspect of our cultural intelligence, which we bring to our art or literature, we must also bring to our politics. I honestly think that without that we will be stuck.

I wanted to ask you about death and spirits. The book is very much in memoriam of your partner, and there are several points throughout the stories where spirits or voices appear. In describing these, the protagonist protests against the disbelief of the reader, like, "I'm sure you won't believe me, but I have to tell the story anyways." I'm wondering if you feel that writing brings you closer to those voices or spirits, or if setting it down complicates that relation or makes it available for someone to doubt in a way that is difficult.

My feeling about those kinds of experiences is that it's a mistake to take the experience and then structure your idea of reality around it.

For example, I would never say this shows that spirits exist. That's not an interesting statement to me. What's interesting is to simply pay attention to that experience without evaluating it in terms of its truth value. I don't think that is changed by writing about it. To me it's no different than any other element of the fiction. To me, everything that ends up in the book is a fiction. It goes through the filter: in goes experience, out comes fiction.

In the world of fiction, anything is possible. So there's not really any problem with even outlandish spiritual experiences. Fiction doesn't make the argument that the definition of reality is in this story. It never does. I knew someone from an Indigenous community who told me that in her community, the name for what you might call God was "Great Mystery." I think the spiritual experiences in the book gesture toward a mystery. They don't gesture at an explanation. I don't like to be bossed around by explanations.

It's interesting to write fiction, because you are in some way giving birth to a nonmaterial being. That is what the characters in fiction are. They're nonmaterial beings and they have a life in time, which is not the same as the life and time that you and I share. It's a different kind of time. Perhaps it's dream time or culture time. I don't know what the word for that would be, but it's interesting how language is this kind of tree of life for humanity. For the Vikings, the tree of life was a complicated gigantic structure with different realms. When we create a fictional character, it's just another inhabitant of that great tree. And there's something about that, in turn, which seems similar to the life of a ghost, right? In both cases they're nonmaterial beings.

What's the difference in the writing process for writing a poem or writing fiction?

I tend to be a very slow writer of poetry, I just kind of noodle on them for years and enter them from widely different spaces and time periods. So they may have embodiment and character among their elements, but they also have this element of just being an object made out of language. Whereas stories are worlds. There is something about writing a story that is not that different from reading one—entering a world.

But you can use elements of fiction in a poem. And I do that a lot because I find that these are very good mechanisms to enable the reader to relate to the poem. Whether it's a quality of suspense or an embodied experience or a scene with characters, you know, if those things appear in a poem, even if it's very complex, the poem is more accessible to readers. I want people to have a pleasurable experience. If it's going to be pleasurable, there have to be ways that readers can experience recognition. But it's still the case that a poem is constructed from words, and stories are not constructed from words, they're constructed from sentences. Anyway, I think that at the margin, these things bleed into one another, but there are some differences.

What writing are you doing now? What are you seeing in contemporary writing or contemporary art that interests you or provokes you? Is there a relation between those two things, your writing being driven by your reading?

I kept a journal while my lover was ill and dying, and later, through the grief process. I've been working with that. And what I'm reading now, I can go to my shelf. This is *When Work Disappears* by William Julius Wilson, about the South Side of Chicago. It's a great book. Everybody should read it. It's a book of political economy, job loss, and racism. This is *The Freezer Door*, which is by Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore. I really liked this book. Here is *Gordo* by Jaime Cortez, this amazing Bay Area writer that should have been published decades ago. And then this is Gail Scott's book of essays called *Permanent Revolution*.

There are a lot of good books coming out. There's more material published that reflects a variety of communities and experience. But it's always so hard to figure out what's going on in your own present moment. You never know until afterward what was important. So, I don't know, is there a reason to be optimistic or not? The answer probably just depends on one's temperament.

TIMOTHY STRAW

THE THOMAS SALTO

It's not a bad thing for a boxer to keep all the teeth he ever
knocked out and in old age glue them one by one to
a dry corncob, to show his trophies to the neighbors, to
smile because his teeth remain.

When pride is stateless it is laborious. When pride is laborious, it is forgiven.

It's not a bad thing to die on the seventh day and perish on
the eighth—to be buried on the ninth day and interred on
the tenth. Deborah brushed the Sinai with a comb and still
she found no flea. Laws, facts, phenomena all

shine in the body of their host. And who here is not a host?

But it is
wrong to steal for pleasure till you know what pleasure is.
Wrong to love your suffering unless by this you mean one

suffers you their bed. Pain loves the dawn—darkness,
the
dinner—and a bank teller in a hair shirt won't redeem
the
sin of finance. As you said, real tragedy doesn't kill the
hero,
it kills the chorus.

But I know a good card game. You can play it forever.
I call
it "Dogs! Do you want to live forever?"

LAKE UNION, LOOKING OVER

A city lake seems always somewhere else
Like sky seen thru a rip

in a drive-in
movie screen on which

are thrown, uniform,

gun runners, legs, mouths
thighs

a thriller full of sharks.
One thinks of the man

who, flying over Ohio, threw
a Webster's from the plane

and 'all it did was land.'

Late evening looking over
at Washington Mutual Tower—

my brother's up there very
high, drifting among

stalls, sinks, offices,
a shopvac on his back

and moving as he does
in the manner of

a poorly folded paper plane
aslant and down.

The listening cool of evening
  leaning in

or
  this, the "moment's populace"—

waiting in the air, but no—

All this way to come
to watch the handclap wavelets

of the lake.
To wave to him up there.

THE GULL

Out of a squall the seagull flew, over cornfields,
slagheaps, slurry,

the sky like wet mail
piling up at a vacated address,

over little towns, took rest, flew on,

over salt silos, gas flares,
gospel tents,

these formal occasions,

disparate jetskiers on a manmade lake,
the world turning like pages in a wind

discontiguous, unread,

over this the gull flew on, past grassland, marshland,
was shot down

in late November
in plummet whiter than the air

fell and bled and flapped a while
in the reeds and shallows of the marsh

till rooted out and took
by some blonde wig of a dog

half-dead to the hunter's hands.
Trash bird, he'd say, come inland all this way

and chuck it down

PALM AND FOUNTAIN IN THE PROVIDENCE MEDICAL CENTER WAITING ROOM

Sleep here—down
in the little green

valley between
life and life

none but the good shepherd
every morning washing

the white distance between
wolf and wolf

rests his rag on his shoulder tells me
you've gone off

to the sixwinged sickroom
sand in your cuffs said you told them

Let me keep
my labors. Let me go

But you would say
it simpler than that or not

at all you would neaten
his dishcloth, wave him off

smilingly, troublingly,
as the garden troubles the gardener

and rebuke the thought
that butters the doorknob

but still begs you look
thru the crack

to the little courtyard and its spindly tree
to the bright dry apricots gold

as sickbed celibacy
and anyway

the noun he used was wrong

so I knew you were not here
just as you said

ED ATKINS & STEVEN ZULTANSKI

TWO PEOPLE ATTEMPTING TO PLACE A PENKNIFE ON A BED SO THAT IT APPEARS AS IF NO ONE PUT IT THERE

So, I suppose we should first eliminate places where it would be really obvious that someone put it there, like a chocolate-on-a-pillow kind of thing.

Yeah, that's right. That would look very intentional.

And maybe dead center would also be too much, even though there would be an uncanniness to that. But it would be too—

If it was dead center then I don't think it should be parallel to any right angle. Do you know what I mean? It should be slightly off.

Yeah, but that's not enough. I think it shouldn't be in the center at all, no matter if it's slightly skewed.

Okay, so let's rule out the center.

Yeah.

What about the bottom corner?

Well, now it looks like an object that's…gathered at the bottom of the bed.

What do you mean?

Like if you take off your socks in bed and then they get kicked to the bottom. You know? It's just easy to imagine how it got there.

Oh, yeah. True.

Well, maybe let's try tossing it on the bed and seeing what happens.

Good idea. Should the knife be open or closed?

I think open.

Open. Fully? Because fully open is very aggressive, it's quite threatening. If someone sees it, they're much more likely to think, "fuck, this is a knife."

Yeah, yeah, yeah. But partway open is aggressive in a different way. It suggests the knife is about to be opened.

No, then it just looks unused. You can't do anything with a half-open knife. It doesn't work as a weapon.

Hm. I'm not sure about that. But okay, let's just leave it fully open. That's more neutral, because maybe leaving it partway open implies that it was left behind in the middle of an action. All the way open doesn't necessarily imply any action.

Yeah, good point.

Do you want to try throwing it onto the bed, or are you going to pass by and drop it?

I'm going to throw it high.

Okay, good idea.

Here it goes…

Oh, that's really nice. I like where it landed.

Yeah, it fell nicely inside of a—

A fold of the duvet.

Yeah. That's interesting. But we don't want to hide the knife. If it's hidden, it suggests that someone did the hiding.

Yeah.

What if we make it very conspicuous?

How so?

Like, what if it was standing on its end? Would that help, or not?

I don't know, give it a shot.

Okay…

Hm…

This isn't working. I don't think I can do it.

It seems pretty hard to do.

Yeah. It will only stand up if we lean it against the pillow like this.

It looks like it's sleeping, propped on the pillow.

That's too cute. What if, instead, we prop it up on the folds of the duvet?

Good idea.

That looks good.

Yeah, and if we twist the folds, it looks like something that's in the process of being revealed, or maybe something that was just revealed.

Yeah, and the creases in the duvet really help, because it almost looks like the knife is about to float down a little riverbed or something…

A gully, yeah.

Yeah, a gully.

And the knife is not completely hidden by the folds, but it's not the first thing you would see, either.

Not at all.

That looks good.

Yes. It looks like it's rising up to meet the day, like it's getting out of bed. Or like it wants to leap over to the pillow. It feels quite optimistic. Even positive.

Yeah, it's a positively charged scene.

And a knife on a bed, even if it's a penknife, is nine times out of ten going to be quite upsetting, I think.

And this does not look that upsetting.

Yeah, no. I almost think you wouldn't notice it, mainly because it's not being aggressive at all, really.

Yeah, I think that's right.

It looks very…dainty, in fact.

Yeah. It's really nice.

Is it too nice? Does it look too neatly arranged?

That's a good question. Maybe. Hm.

What if we just twisted the duvet a little…like this…so that it covers the knife a bit more? Does that make it less nice?

Huh. Now it looks like it fell into a little hole…no, wrong word, uh…

A divot.

A divot, yeah. It fell into a divot.

It looks trapped now, doesn't it?

Yeah.

Or like it's being held by the duvet. Embraced.

That's not bad.

No, it's not bad.

It's not bad. But it's a bit too…um…orderly. It looks like someone dug a little hole in the duvet and then dropped the knife in.

Into the divot.

Yeah.

I think we should move on. I'm going to try throwing it again.

The last time we threw it, it did something good.

Yeah, the throwing helps.

It really does.

See, that's pretty nice. It's very undramatic like that. Very banal, isn't it?

It doesn't look like someone put it there. It almost looks like…it fell out of someone's pocket as they reached for something else.

Yeah, but see, when it's too casual, when we don't do any arranging at all, that also suggests that someone just dropped it.

Yeah.

What if we tuck it into the folds a bit more?

Mm-hm. Yeah, that's really nice.

But see, now the problem is that it looks like it was left there specifically to be found.

Like a warning?

Yeah.

Yeah, you're right. It's too much like a sign. Something that wants to be found.

Okay, well, what if we made the whole scene messier, so there wasn't so much focus on the knife? I mean, could we, I don't know, put the pillow under the duvet or something?

What do you mean? Oh, like remake the bed so that it's—

So it's messier.

Ah, I get it. That's not bad, actually. That's a good idea.

I'll try.

But now it just looks like someone's just had a really crazy night, doesn't it?

What about another element that works against the mess? Something really deliberate. Like, what if I roll up the end of the duvet?

But roll it only partially.

Sure.

Like that?

Yeah, like that.

And then what if the penknife is nestled just a bit under the twist?

Oh, that's a little scary.

It's a little bit nastier, huh?

Yeah, now it's getting monstrous.

It's not as good.

You think it's too much?

Yeah.

I mean, yeah, there's something to it, but it's not as good.

It's too mannered, isn't it? Now the penknife is just part of this ridiculous theater, rather than…

Right. The whole scene really draws attention to itself.

Yes.

And that might lead to people thinking that someone put it there, whereas when the knife was kind of resting in the little puffed-up cloudy divot, that felt so innocent that you didn't really think about someone being behind it…

Yeah, this looks like a whole arrangement.

Yeah…sorry…

No, no, it was a good idea.

Let's try something else. What have we not tried?

We could just stab it, right? Or cut the bed up.

No, nothing like that.

Of course not.

No.

I was just kidding.

Can we do something to the pillow?

Like what?

The pillow's very puffed up. Could we knock the air out of it?

Yeah, how can we make it as flat and lifeless as possible?

Punching it?

That's not bad.

Punch the other side too.

Now it looks like two heads were sleeping on the one pillow.

Yeah. Or two cats.

Or two cats.

Eh. It's a bit…referential.

What if I also pinch the pillowcase, like this, so there's a little pinched peak, and put the penknife next to it?

Hm.

That's nice, but it looks deliberate.

Yeah.

But I like the pinch, that's a good direction, let's try it somewhere less conspicuous.

What if we pinched all around the edges, at intervals?

No, that's too system-y.

Yeah, that would definitely seem intentional.

I like the idea of doing something on the edges, though.

Okay, I have an idea. What if…it's hanging over the edge of the bed as much as it can without falling off?

Huh. Not a bad idea. I'll give it a try.

Yeah, like that, but it's not on the edge enough.

It's hard to get it to stay—

It needs to look like it's almost impossibly balanced.

Yeah—

Most of it should be hanging over the edge. More than half of it, if possible. It should look like it should have fallen already.

Right. I get the idea. But it's not working.

Let me try.

Sure.

Oh, I almost had it.

Almost—

Almost.

Oh, almost.

Yeah, but not quite. Yeah, I don't think it's going to happen.

No, I don't think so either. It would look really convincing, though, if it did.

It would look incredible.

How I Became a Priest

A man came by selling fish in plastic bags. They were skillfully pinned to a wooden pole that he bore like a cross over a thick shoulder. Of course, I let him into the apartment. Not because I had any intention of buying fish, but because I wanted advice, and he seemed like the kind of person who would offer it without reservation. He had that kind of face.

I had a problem with ants. I could not get rid of them, and overnight their number multiplied. They stalked along the walls in palpitating lines, establishing new pheromone trails and, having rallied courage, even traversed the center of some of the smaller, less noble rooms.

The man came in and set the pole-and-bag contraption down on the table, propagating unsettling sounds. He wiped his hands on his wide-legged trousers and launched into a plodding spiel about the extra-special qualities of the fish and why I ought to buy them, but I could not be swayed because I hate fish. I hate everything about them, down to their notochords and opercula. "Don't you think," I said, "it's interesting that these fish are carried around in plastic bags when inside each of them a tiny bag shrinks and swells with oxygen so that they can maintain an optimal water depth?"

He licked his lips, rubbed his blocky fingers together, and said he hadn't thought of that before. I tried very hard not to psychoanalyze him as people say I am wont to do. "Persimmon?" I asked, proffering the bright red-orange fruit from my palm. I had been holding it since before he stepped into my life with his fish, and it had grown very soft and warm in my hand. He took it all in, shaking his head like someone who had just received astonishingly bad news. Just then, the horn of light that had been growing all morning in the room through the open second-story window speared through the bags of fish. A wavering slab of rainbow appeared on the tabletop with erotic and procreative power. I think we both took pleasure in it.

"Is direct sunlight good for the fish?" I asked.

"You will not buy my fish, will you?"

"No," I said. "I will not. To be honest—" but I stopped myself there.

The man sighed. "Then I will be on my way."

"I think that fish is dead."

"So it is," the man said, unhooking a bag and lifting it up with pinched fingers. The fish, whose tiny internal bag was bloated with decomposing gases, hovered belly-up near the water's surface.

"Most fish sink immediately after death," I said. "That one must have been dead for some time."

The man gave me a vicious look.

"I'm drunk," I said. "Don't listen to me."

The hard lines in his face disappeared.

"Leave it here," I said.

"What will you do with it?"

"Take it off your hands. Lighten your load."

He couldn't argue with that. He handed over the bag and, before setting out, made sure the other fish were in good health. In an attempt to perk up the mood, I tried my hand at telling a joke but botched the punchline. "Hm," the man said. "I think you meant 'tossing and turning.'" And he was right. The smell of exhaustion glazed his skin like an earthly grease. I knew that to ask his advice about the ants would be but a burden, so I thanked him instead and gently shut the door as he descended the staircase.

I arranged the bagged fish and the persimmon side by side and studied the composition from the sofa. I saw that it was good, but it stirred nothing in me. Nothing. I grew sleepy. I closed my eyes.

The fish was not where I'd placed it when, much later, my dream body evaporated and I woke up. An army of ants had hefted the bag up like treasured nectar and toted it halfway across the room. Their strength and predatory resolve shook me. Why the fish and not the persimmon? Who was to say that one night they would not march into my body and lose their way because their specialized cells could no longer detect the sun's polarized light? They would begin to trail one another in a continuously rotating circle, eventually dying of exhaustion. I would be but a sack of dead ants, and I did not wish for that to happen.

I scooped up the bagged fish and cast it out the window with both hands. To my surprise, it did not burst open when it struck the begonias but sprang up once, then twice, before staying put among the splay of disrupted leaves. As I'd hoped, the ants, momentarily harried, reorganized themselves and began to trickle out the window. I was not sad with their steady leave-taking, but I was not happy either. I chose a place on the windowsill to hamper their newly made trail with my finger. At first, the smooth line of ants became messy, a shiny clump with many moving parts milling about before my living tissue. But soon enough, they grew bold. And, lo, how they trampled upon my flesh!

MARIANO BLATT
Translated by Will Fesperman

AN OBSCURE PROVINCIAL WRITER

Amazing.

There's a low fence behind my house,
a couple of bushes.
Then a strip of wild grass,
what in the city you might call a sidewalk,
and the street.

A little farther,
huge,
the Andes.

I'm a writer,
quite obscure,
an obscure provincial writer,
two or three friends lying about,
sometimes
we share
a joint, a party, a ride in a pickup.

I'm happy
and now I hear two dogs barking at the same time.

UN ESCRITOR OSCURO DE PROVINCIA, CON DOS O TRES AMIGOS DESPARRAMADOS POR AHÍ

Esto es maravilloso.

El fondo de mi casa termina en un alambrado bajo
junto al que crecen algunos arbustos menores.
Luego de unos metros de pasta salvaje,
lo que en la ciudad llamaríamos vereda,
está la calle.

Un poco más allá,
imponente,
la Cordillera de los Andes.

Soy un escritor,
oscuro por cierto,
un escritor oscuro de provincia,
con dos o tres amigos desparramados por ahí
con quienes de vez en vez,
comparto algo:
una fiesta, un porro, un viaje en camioneta.

Estoy feliz
y ahora escucho que los dos perros ladran al mismo tiempo.

LEANDRO

Yesterday you came to get your weed.
Hadn't seen you in a long time
you were cuter than ever.
Too bad you talk a lot
and don't listen.
Well I don't think it's so terrible
and anyway
you're being yourself.
It's just that…
nah forget it
I only wanted to leave a record
of your good looks
and get our hug
on paper.

LEAN

Ayer viniste a buscar el 25.
Hacía mucho que no te veía
estás más lindo que nunca.
Lástima
que hablás mucho
y escuchás poco.
No es que me parezca mal
de última
estás siendo vos.
Pasa que yo…
bue, ya fue.
Solo quería dejar constancia
de lo lindo que sos;
y que quedara
guardado en un papel
nuestro abrazo de ayer.

CARLOS LARA

Catatau Prefatory Note

Paulo Leminski (1944–1989)

A journey is perhaps most "alive" when it's perceived as what has already begun, when it is the forgetting of any beginning. When someone asks himself if there was a beginning, it's because the journey already exists, and he says that the experience of beginning has been misapprehended; to be, then, is to be distant from becoming.

Everyone listen: the poet's code is that nothing should remain what it is.

The premise of *Catatau* is simple enough. What would René Descartes monologize about, say, had he landed on the shores of Pernambuco, together with the troops of Prince Maurice of Nassau, in what was the Dutch conquest of that part of Brazil around 1630? René is also getting high and doing lord knows what else to derange his senses. Leminski called *Catatau* a "novel-idea" written in verse, Whitmanic verse with a Brazilian body. It's a delirious, absurd, continuous, unpredictable, unapproachable, sinuous, intermodal, almost unreadable, mighty dream soliloquy where everything sounds like everything else.

So what else could I do but call this thing a translucination (credit to Andrés Ajens and Erín Moure for the terminology, according to Kent Johnson): *Get a Towel*. Not only does the title veer from the thus far posited meanings of the ambiguous "catatau," while remaining sonically approximate, but it also implies taking a dip, submersion in language and foreign languages (I believe Leminski utilizes something like eight different languages throughout) and the poet's (or translator's) transmutation of it all.

Catatau advances a sort of textual sentience alongside its readers—a tropicality of Moment and Momentum that multiplies and becomes ever denser, ever more embrangled as one goes along. For the Moment of *Catatau*, like energy, exists only in instability: to swallow and absorb all difference in its protean flow.

from GET A TOWEL: A translucination from Reynaldo Jiménez's Spanish translation of *Catatau* by Paulo Leminski

ergo sum, in addition, Ergo Sum Renatus Cartesius, a cause appearing there, here
presentable, in this labyrinth of delectable gains, I view the maritime, I view
the bay and the navies. I view masses. Yeah, yeah, there go the III years distinguishing me
from Europe and gentle civility, yeah, yeah, a mortuary. This old "barbarus—non
intellegor ulli"—those exercises of Ovid's exile stay upon me.
Dull park, dull principality, I lend the lunar excess, I CONTEMPLATE
CONSIDERABLY MOORS, MARITIMES, NEBULAS, THE
ENIGMAS AND PRODIGIES OF BRASILIA. From these verdant
years, via gift, horizontal meditation for temporary tomorrows, solo
adventure to the light, yeah, the sun at midday. A star, Mister Gods, in the
actual circumstancia, presence in the stanky dust of Vrijburg, gaseous
demapping, tabula rasa of humor, Oort and zoo, chosen from the fiery case
of flowers. Just want to stamp the impatient eye with blue crustaceans.
Planting sarcophagi and carnivores confoundedly, in a place for all,
solar and timely in umbra. Cascabels do their thing, scintillating the awkward drop
by drop, ephemeral choking enjambment. Cocos enclosing themselves in cups,
mamas amplify it: TITTY BOYS. The vapor humidifies the mohawk, ergo

the mushroom, asphyxiation and fermented fragments of fragrance. Hollow one
palm in front of the nose, mine, immense and immersed, well. Bestials,
infernal ones, among flower parties circulate in the triple jail—the worst, duplicating
the majors; in gayolas, in minority, in venturing—the best.
Abnormal animals engendered by equinox, de-jaded in the axis of the
terra, deviating from ready-made lines. A little more than the name the
Toupinambaoults signaled, barely suspended by the knot of
reclaim. From afar, three points…And fuck, here's Armadillo, the spheres are rolling
in from other eras, scavenging the mundane and fundamental. Salient mother with
seventy-one teeth, ten of which fall out right here, twenty-five
at the premier bite of tilth, twenty waved away by wind, fourteen by water, and
one disappears by accident. One, in the general cacophony, going by
the name Tamanduá, dispenses with its tongue into the dust of a certain
insect, still standing, bi-eyed by the nearness, face-to-face, there, then there,
proparoxytone as cumulus and dissolving eclipsed by ants. By
or on the rama, voice of metallic and longing songs, the air upon us is maleficently
freezing, I bend a veil in the want-me-don't-want-me game. Two stone's
throws from here, turning and medium, two gyres; medium turning, bundles of three
by two. From where to where, come and go; from time to time, they see
what it is they have. Before the second element, the pack runs and
retraces, dada and bebe, mama and bebe. Postlaguna, they fill
the prelaguna. A Tapir, I've never seen one so engorged. Clouds of the

prawnscent that impales the noses of pacas. Capybara, its stomach about to leap
out of its eyes, or, being satiated it lies down belching up pasture,
or, as known when it goes without eating, thrashing its gullet around,
baring its teeth, yet delicate when it's not hungry. Ensy, juan-
called-bobo, doesn't say "mu," doesn't flee fire, brilliant not boisterous—
jacamar, brachyptera, insectivorous, taciturn, nonscansorial, stupid,
—to hazard at random. Monkeys combing their hair spectrally in the bathroom
of piranhas, face like a visage in the almostness of water: weaving
makes a marvelous mouth, mandates that the evil eye annul its imprint,
apes are forever. In the wetness, the corpulent reptile intertwines
lizard and lobster. Monsters of deviant nature in
the air, afloat, broken open, adrift, head bowed, the same and never
from afar. A boa of solid butterflies naps in the sun.
Toucans in the sugarcane, Sephardic masks on, arcane to the marrow.
Boa, at the scene of the crime, dismantles the spirals englobing
goats, sheep, blue-eyes. Astrals from the mouth afar, bicephalic sphinxes
between the apple trees, deconstructing their mangled
contents: they scoop up horns twice. Exorbitant, tales lasting
for centuries, establishing Marcgravf as a quality prophet. Vegetarian
eternities. Cries? Moods? Crossing and uncrossing the same? No, this
thinking, no—a sinkhole of climates and color inside
my head. Pensive without compensation: the sibyl pinches me, the

python hypnotizes, I'm an obelisk, I see the pythoness Medusa, I
stop, become stick-stick, stone-stone. Daedalus of Elysium's
mirror, burbling tower, hortus urbis diaboli, fury of Thule, delicacies
of Menrod, corral of spasms, each bug silences and selects
its ambles and walls. Bug buggerinis, what's going on
with me? The heart opening to Artyczewski. Artyczewski'll come.
Our morning chats are at a fault. A parrot stole my
train of thought, words sharpened in Polish, imitating Artyczewski
(Cartepanie! Cartepanie!). Beasts engendered in the most
incendiary fire of the day…Eating these animals will
singularly perturb the things of thought. I record the days
among these extraneous beasts, my dreams populated by extraneous fauna and
flora: the sparking of things, the crashing of bugs, interesting
Being: the flora sparkles and the fauna floresces…Singular
excesses…In primis cogitationibus circa generationem animalium,
de his omnibus non cogitavi. In the mouth of waiting, Articzewski
delays as if, it seemed, possessed by this kush that he
gave me,—that blastoff, that purple, that greenery, that cheeba, that herb, that M.O.,
that loud, or that pretendo, that wacky tobacky, that G and that black
gold, according to Marcgravf. Inhale the herbal fumes, fill your
breast with the breaths of this plant, its essence, head still, office
of ophidium. The sun jumps up on the vhebehasu tree, which is

also enviroçu, embiraçu, imbiroçu, aberaçu, aberraçu, inversu,
inveraçu, inverossy, depending on discrepancies of speech on these beaches
where words can lose sounds, falling apart
through the mouths of buggies, speech fermenting. They give weight
to kisses, stones, sticks, feathers, fear of going speechless:
they carry live bugs in their mouths.

SAM PINK

I'm Just Some Fuckin Guy

I write shit and draw shit and put it online. I don't consider myself a writer or an artist or a creative tho, I'm just some fuckin guy. I wake up and have coffee and package shit to mail. People message me and get surprised when I message back. But I'm just some fuckin guy. Depending on what you consider living, it's not hard to make a living off art. And I wouldn't complain either way fuck it. I self-publish now. Don't have an agent. Thanks for reading that shit. It's print on demand, did any of the pages fall out. I buy tape at the hardware store to package shit. There's a woman there I want to ask out. But I've gone back to barely talking. Except it feels good now, like there's just nothing there, so whatever. It's fine. The problem was expecting something then finding nothing then feeling disappointed. But now it's great. I'm just some fuckin guy. I collect usable cardboard from people I know who I've trained to spot usable cardboard. Not having the right cardboard can ruin my entire day. I consider myself a disciple in the art of appreciating and utilizing cardboard. Sometimes I joke with people that I "use the whole box" like some people say "use the whole animal" with hunting. And usually—once I clarify what I mean—they laugh. I go to the post office pretty much every day. Some fuckin guy walking down the street holding packages, can you imagine. Chynelle is a newer employee at the post office and she complains about my handwriting and I tell her she misses me every moment I'm not there. And we're both right. Chynelle is cool because within like three sentences she starts implying sex stuff and it's a nice pick-me-up. I love it. We have a good relationship. Nobody makes Chynelle laugh like me. I sell books and drawings out of my apartment. The apartment is the warehouse and my mind is logistics. And it's not a bad system, for some fuckin guy. Yeah sometimes shit gets lost or I forget and people message, hey, did you send that thing, and I just send another. People are understanding tho. One time a handmade

t-shirt got lost en route to Canada. Ideally the thief looks cool as hell in it. Or it's still in the box, at the bottom of a body of water. I have a cabinet thing my neighbor Vicki gave me where I keep my books and tape and scissors. Occasionally when I open it, it smells like her makeup and cigarette smoke which is very (very) erotic. Yes, I am always provoked by its smoky finger of come-hither. My life is great. I love it. Saying yes like arms across chest and falling backward off an infinite cliff. It's simple and good. I do this thing now where, to add excitement to something, I imagine it's the first thing I've done since being stranded on an island for ten years. Or it's right before that happens. The feeling is the same either way. Either way I'm not a writer. I'm not of the times. There's nothing I want to talk about. I'm not even creative. I'm just some fuckin guy. A packager. Tape wrangler. "Whatchoo doin, sending all this shit," says Chynelle, with one eyebrow up, and we both laugh. Media Mail. What is it, is it just books? It's just books. I'm not my books tho. And my books aren't me. We don't recognize each other. I envision a zip tie, as opposed to a twist tie. I move like the zip tie. One click at a time but no going back. Closing in. Not easily undone. I don't want to go back. I won't. For I am just some fuckin guy. Only two people have complimented me on my wrapping job, but I know more have thought it. And, by the measure of overwhelming safe arrival, one can conclude it. And that's what matters. Victory. I believe in wagers. Accepting their outcome in advance as the truth. Bigger wagers, higher intensity of life, deeper meaning. Even through failure. All or nothing. But either way, true. Sometimes I'll use an x-acto or my knife to cut up cardboard while completely naked and it's invigorating. Feeling like a deadly monkey. *Living* like a deadly monkey. In command of the future. With nothing to talk about. No conversation. No consensus. No "about." Only through and through. I like packaging shit to mail. That's it. It creates a sense of reality. Because I'm just a little sweetheart. Today Chynelle gave me a bag of black walnut–flavored coffee she didn't want. Things are heating up. I bought some mailers and it felt like selling out. Fuck it. I don't do international anymore. I just send free pdfs fuck it. International…come on. I'm just some fuckin guy. And that's fine. Just moving along. Some stuff in my control but mostly not, and that's cool because ultimately, like I said. Ya know. Existing

in a mindlessness that prevents volatility ya know. Which prevents being an asshole. It's that easy. The way follows the why-not. And the why-not follows the anything-but-this. Media Mail is the cheapest way to send a book. They raised the prices recently though, oh well fuck it. People message hey I really liked that book and I say thanks. Because that's all there is. A little here and there, saying hello, hearing hello back, and then back to being some fuckin guy.

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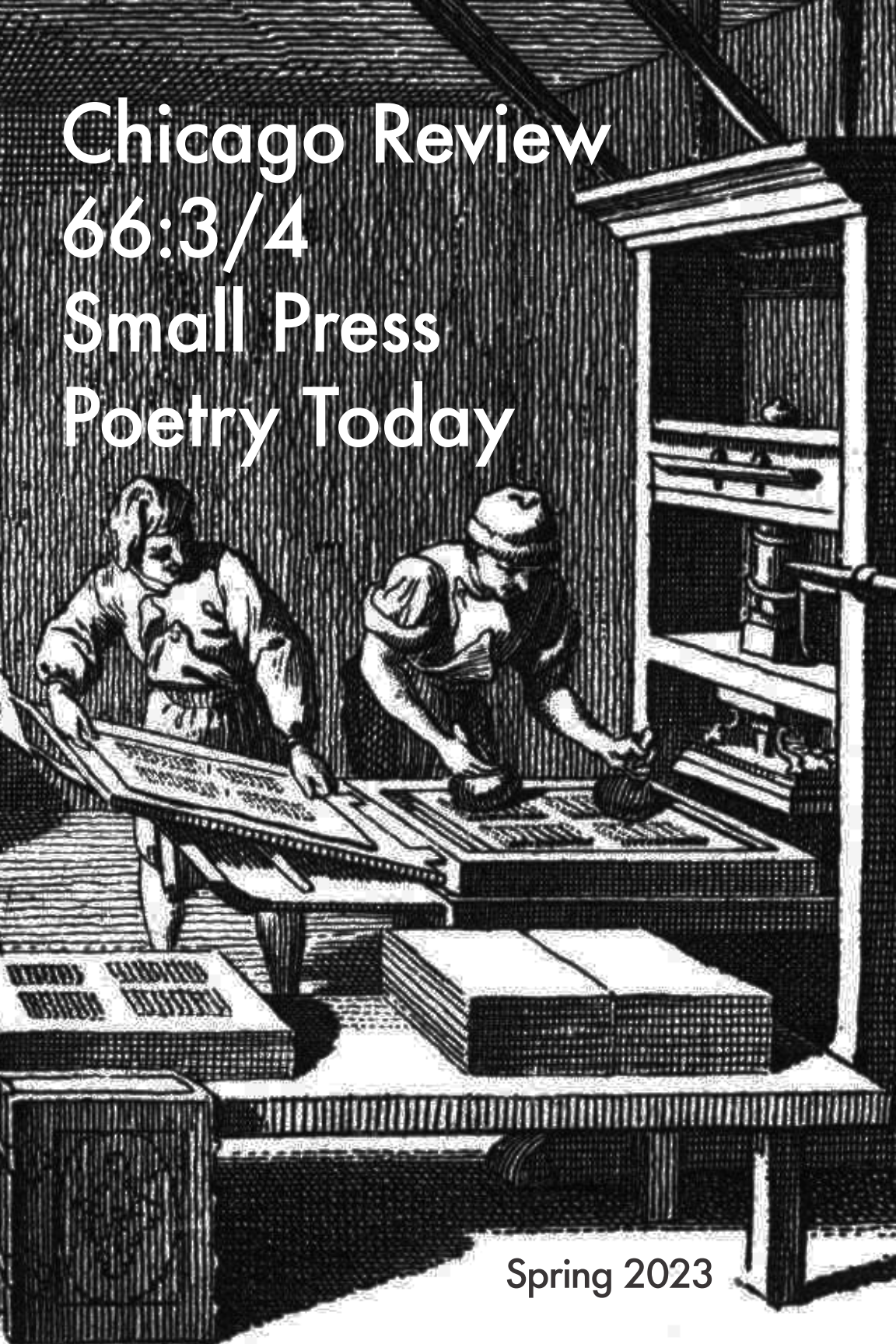

Spring 2023

WENDY XU

VITA NOVA IN WINTER

I proceeded through the tint of first snow
I knew that I must, say something about our time:
money deranged the earth
using only a winsome manner

Heteronymic pairs did crime in the language
Flashing holographic for fun so that I soon felt urgent
But it's not

a theory that would barely stand up
to flowers
delicately purging their fuzzy haloes before sleep
If I could *really* speak through
the perverse squadron of cloud in my head, the cotton candy of it all
I'd ask for eggs,
a second chance

When Dante first saw the ankle of his Beatrice he failed
to distinguish it from the others
When he saw her wrist set with a miasmic pearl he collapsed
in the crowded piazza and slept
for three days, waking with a line of poetry

beneath his tongue, hoping to see her again
But it was too late

and as a condition of his twice witnessing Love
those songs from his later years
exactly doubled in spirit and some other quality yet

undefined by human ears,
At least those of us still living

dustily on earth

REAL EVENTS

Poison in the old king's ear
Lines of description fading
Into imaginary lines
A broken foot from antiquity
In silhouette ran doggedly towards
The horizon's neck
These are just riddles drawn from the agitation of the Sphinx
Living out his infinite years in the museum's basement
Neph, Bastet, Thoth engraved them all with love
Hallowed be thy neighbor arguing over his tickets
Hallowed be thy annoying tourist
Bumming a smoke at dusk
The sun disk thus settling down upon his head
Like a perfect haw flake
For a crying Chinese child
Remember, the surrealist's instructions were to drive
Straight through the chimney without stopping
Then bear left
If you can remember (well then)
You'll know *you* when you see it

MORNING

Reading the words of a teacher
profoundly past

An unsentimental perfume in the air
I'm speaking now *as* you, forget *to*

The feeling equivalent of a stem cell
magnetized to its twin

Reading poems that speak to the times
as thus charged to do
as there being nothing else to speak to

My own shame piping and blowing
behind my breastbone demands attention

A student spoke once to fear
Fear, I know you, said the student in recitation
You are for both the young and the old

I tried first to crush you in the tides of human thought
The whirlwind of knowledge
Like a junco bird whipping itself up in the douglas firs

His dark forehead set feathered swivels
like *a thought* at tilt, in morning
When the water slips off a line in the mountain's face

It makes of itself belief
It makes *a thought* obliterated
It coronates nothing least of all thoughts
It pecks at shame's banal authoritarianism

Categorized as having a New World profile
Easy to identify, hard to love

Hellish clouds of the mind
lift

GIVE YOU UP LIKE NOCTURNE

Pull at a string trilling this whole year through
Incandescent like live air, the score
bright marching from eye
        to eye
Wing-like
symmetrical shadows anointed
her furry tail in half-C
I heard her plucking on me earnest
Holding for another earful
        for thy neighbor's compromising hand
Reverbing, piping over the sand
Fading out over the day-broken trees
Brick symbols, that's how solid
        I interpret you and I to be
Could it really end after all this?
A curtain's-length cut of sun
        Soft on for just a little—
contracting filamental proteins
A smile
for you in the score-light

ROSKVA KORITZINSKY
Translated by Bradley Harmon

I Haven't Yet Seen the World

I've been thinking quite a bit lately.
For god's sake, scratch that.

A few days ago I went to the movies. You'd already been dead for seven months. That's not why I went to the movies, I hadn't thought about what day it was before I was sitting in the theater with my ticket in hand, and by then it was too late to decide whether or not I would commemorate the day of your death with a movie, it was too late.

The film was about a woman. In the opening scene she's raped in a subway underpass. The rest of the film is in rewind, we see what led up to the incident. In the final scene, the woman is a young girl, she's lying in the grass and gazing up towards the sun. None of what we know will happen has happened to her yet; it has only happened to us. As I was walking home I thought about the first time you showed me a picture of yourself as a child. You were sitting on a rug and fiddling with some paper.

Our apartment belongs to me. I still live here. A few months ago I found a receipt in one of your jacket pockets. You had bought a ruler, a saw, and a bucket of paint in the color *spring*. The purchase had been made only a few days before you died.

I looked up "spring" online. It's a shade of blue that people used to have in their kitchens in the 1950s. I have no clue what you were going to saw and paint blue. I spent about an hour looking through drawers and cabinets in search of those mystical objects before I accepted the fact that I had found the receipt in the first place and couldn't ask for anything else.

There we have it. I have the receipt for your purchase and can't ask for anything else.

A kind of compromise.

One time you told me that your mother had planted a tree in the castle park the day she found out she was pregnant with you. She had snuck out at night and dug a hole in the earth by a cluster of other trees so that it wouldn't be noticed, and there she had planted the tree that was then barely two feet tall, before hurrying back into the dark. When I asked if you could point out the tree for me, you said that you didn't know which one it was. You suspected that it was just made up, you said. A story your mother had invented to give you a guilty conscience. When you were a teenager and you two would argue, she'd say, *You should show me a little gratitude, after all I was the one who gave birth to you*, and you'd say, *I never asked to be born, you only had children for your own sake.* Then she said, with a wounded pride in her voice, *I planted a tree for you in the park, do you think that was also for my own sake?*

I don't know what I should do with that word, grief.

Like love, hate, freedom, and other shiny, razor-sharp concepts, I scowl at it from a distance with suspicious eyes. In any case, I've been going to the park a lot this summer. I've been lying near the edge and investigating the clusters of trees and wondering about which one of them could be yours. I've decided on a cherry tree that seems about thirty-three years old (I obviously have no idea), it's thin and crooked. It's all terribly sentimental. I allow myself things I normally wouldn't have wanted to allow myself. It feels like I'm on holiday somewhere no one knows me, or on an acid trip that's about to end, and beyond it: nothing.

So, a compromise. You weren't particularly happy in life, it'd be too stupid to suggest otherwise. But you worked hard, incredibly hard, to become a better and a little bit happier person.

And there was something very sincere about you, an almost childish openness—your laughter was never scornful, and one could read every emotion in your face. Your apparent innocence often made me forget where you came from. Sometimes I would get carried away and wanted to tell you a *piquant story*, for example about the time I did this or that with him or him, and you would listen with wide eyes and a wide smile, before eagerly responding, *oh, now I remember the time*

I had a threesome with the stripper and the anorexic hairdresser and the hairdresser insisted on contorting into a bridge while I fucked her. And then you laughed loudly. When you noticed the expression on my face, you said, as if to downplay it or apologize, that it was nothing serious, we had just done a lot of cocaine.

Your geography really was completely different than mine.

Nevertheless, you liked me. You said that I was sharp as a knife and unbelievably sexy. The truth was that I was the first one you'd slept with since getting clean, and I read that it's common that addicts experience a kind of sexual rebirth after having gone through rehab. I didn't say anything to you about it, but you certainly knew.

When we slept together it often felt like a kind of miracle. Can I say that? I'm saying that. People who are similar to each other, maybe they don't need it in the same way, that sacrificial space between bodies (before I met you I imagined that love was some kind of glowing hand or claw that would grab hold of the darkness within me, but not anymore, when I hear the word love, I see it before me, this step into the light. Yeah, yeah, I know how it sounds). We did everything with each other. Yet there remained an imbalance. Every now and again, when you held me down or when I choked you, I witnessed in your eyes what I would at other times forget: that you came from the darkness, while I was just a blind passenger there.

I don't think I was pretending, it was more like I was participating in these small transgressions, like a nonbeliever entering a church and being infused with that space before shamefully discovering a person sitting before the altar in concentrated prayer. Or like a crying tourist in a concentration camp just before the tears get stuck in their throat. You were that person praying, you were the Jewish children staring out of a black-and-white photograph. Now and then, when you looked at me right before you came, I felt it.

The only family member you introduced me to was Rikke. You had lost contact with both of your parents, first your father, then your mother, but you had always spoken warmly about Rikke. The house in Drøbak, you had lived there off and on for several years, when you couldn't afford your rent and were kicked out, when you lost your job as a bartender, customer service representative, construction worker.

It was Rikke that had played Mahler and Schoenberg for you when you were a child, it was Rikke who had Kafka, Woolf, Beckett, and Dickinson on her bookshelves and Hitchcock, Bergman, Veier, and Fellini in her video collection. She was everything your parents weren't, the only thing she had in common with them was that she drank.

In many ways you can thank Rikke that we got to know each other, you said that one time we drove out of town to visit her. It was winter and the roads were slippery, you rolled down the window on the passenger side, you exhaled warm smoke and steam into the cold. I turned onto the highway, shifted gears.

Really?

Yeah.

You tossed the cigarette butt out the window, rolled it up, and crouched down, shivering. You grinned like a fox.

You wouldn't have even picked me up with the tongs if I hadn't been at least a little *cultured*.

Before I heard about Rikke, I *was* confused, that's true. I knew where you came from, and it didn't make sense to me. All that obtuseness, laziness, and backwardness that someone as clear and sharp as you could be born out of, that you had grown from such a seed.

I sometimes watched you while you read, for example, you would sit at the end of the sofa—you've sat on my sofa! You've been here! Something within me feels an urge to shout it out into the streets because it's starting to resemble a dream, every sensation mixed with the others, I'm one of those drunkards in the play that falls asleep on the street and wakes up in the king's bed and then gets to live like a king for a moment before he wakes up on the street again and suspects it was all a dream, I go through the apartment in search of clues, yes, the toothbrush that still stands in front of the dental floss, the jackets hanging on the rack in the hallway, someone stops by and carefully asks if it's not time to get rid of your belongings, they probably imagine me lying with these relics in bed at night, screaming and wailing and punching the empty air, but of course I don't do that, I just need to know that it was real, you in your apartment, that it was also true—with your head bowed and slippers on your feet. And there was something about the veins on your forehead, your tense jaw, the

way you held the book, your hands a little too big and the pages a little too fragile, which made me think that you must have created yourself. You resembled someone who, in deep concentration and taking great pains, had formed themselves between their own hands. You know that documentary film, *The King*, where Nils Aas shuts himself in his studio and works on the sculpture of Haakon VII for several years? He was truly beautiful when he was young, Nils Aas. He stands in his studio and works on the sculpture, first in miniature and then in full scale, and he has the same expression as you, or you had the same expression as him, I can see you in front of me in that studio, only it's not the King you're working on but yourself.

When we talked with each other, you always listened attentively. You seemed terrified to miss even a single word, as if I could've taught you something entirely essential. I could see how you sat and pondered afterwards, with your insanely alert and concentrated gaze, you took what I had said with you and brought it to the pedestal where the sculpture that was you stood. You pressed blue rocks into the damp clay.

And then I heard about Rikke, and I understood that if it was this way with me, then it must have also been this way with her.

You asked me to turn into the parking lot in front of a duplex.

Now we're here, you said with a strained lightness in your voice.

You were out of the car before I had a chance to turn off the ignition. Through the window I saw you brush your hand through your hair. You tiptoed anxiously around the courtyard, pulling your fingers up into the sleeves of your sweater, you had left your jacket and gloves in the car. You went up to one of the windows on the basement floor and looked inside. I took a deep breath and unfastened my seat belt.

Rikke stood inside the entryway with her arms crossed. A child who had been strictly told never to open the door for strangers but who nevertheless gave in to the temptation and now doesn't quite know what to expect. Her makeup was heavy, her shoulder-length hair worn out after years of boxed coloring, she had small wrinkles around her eyes and mouth. You walked over to her and opened her arms.

Her apartment was small and quite dark, only thin strips of daylight reached in through the windows positioned near the ceiling looking out at the parking lot. When I was younger, I secretly liked to peek inside the windows of such sunken apartments, to imagine all the things that went on in there.

Once in a while we heard laughter from the floor above, a child yelling something, the slamming of cabinets, and then an almost imperceptible twitch traveled across Rikke's face.

The living room was decorated to the best of its ability with various colorful knickknacks; some kind of shawl was draped over the back of the sofa, there were glass bowls filled with plastic beads, dried-out flowers in drinking glasses, a wrought iron candlestick, a pair of bright paintings that I suspect Rikke had painted herself, they were painted without talent but with large, clumsy emotions in the brushstrokes.

Rikke had set the table for coffee, a weird little china set was laid out on the table. I sat down in the middle of the sofa, you sank down next to me completely relaxed, you didn't let yourself be bothered by how everything in here was barely holding itself up, the objects, the furniture, Rikke, a home dreamt up by a neglected child, a home that lacked everything it needed.

Rikke answered your questions quickly, almost dismissively, but she looked at you with eyes that overflowed with trust. Gradually I slipped further and further away from you two. What had I expected? A place with more force? A large and dilapidated house, a woman who strolled through the rooms and talked too much and laughed too loudly, a haze of heavy perfume, glass cabinets with soft bottles with amber drink, a garden where the flowers had withered, something baroque: a place where madness lay like a heavy, picturesque shadow over everything. Just not this. Not this thin woman and her trinkets, not this tattered IKEA sofa, the bookcase that was hardly a bookcase, the DVD player on the floor in the corner. Not this little person who had no words for anything.

When I think of you, this is what I remember the most: Your hand, your gaze. How you stood with open eyes and let the world fall into you. How you lifted something up, a bird, a bone, a person, with the

same caution. Your respect for everything that existed. The desire to let it be as it is. Only carefully lift it up and look at it and touch it with your fingertips.

In the car on the way home from Rikke's I was silent. I couldn't hide it—what was it? Disappointment? Pity? A feeling of having been deceived?

You were staring out the window, the spots of light from the streetlamps were glowing wounds on your face that swelled and swelled in the darkness.

Were you upset?

I don't know.

All I know is that I don't have your gaze, I don't have your hands.

My eyes are closed and my fists clenched.

I'm still lying in the womb, mumbling my own language.

I haven't yet seen the world, that's why it's so easy for me to judge it.

But I'm trying to listen now that you're gone, I hope you know that. I'm working on being like you.

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LANGDON HAMMER

The Talking Board: Ouija, Wordplay, Poetics

"Voice" has been a central concept in poetics at least since Wordsworth defined the poet as "a man speaking to men." The idea that poems have "speakers" is only a metaphor, as we all know from deconstruction and Language poetry. But the metaphor is fully naturalized, and, despite those and other potent critiques, the idea flourishes in blurbs, book reviews, and above all the classroom. We speak of poets "finding" their voices, as if voice existed prior to writing, already there to be discovered. Writing poetry, in this view, involves a process of transcription. The problem for the poet is how to get voice down on the page.

The occult poetry of James Merrill, based on the transcription of spirit voices, intriguingly complicates this basic idea. Merrill and his companion David Jackson began using the Ouija board to communicate with spirits in 1953, and they continued to use it off and on until Merrill's death in 1995. Very little of their séances got into his poetry until 1976, when Merrill published a poem called *The Book of Ephraim* about his and Jackson's adventures in the Other World. "Ephraim" was the name of their "familiar spirit," or guide. Two more Ouija poems followed, *Mirabell: Books of Number* and *Scripts for the Pageant*. Then the three books were bound together in 1982 as a single long poem called *The Changing Light at Sandover*.

In *The Book of Ephraim*, the capital letters that represent the speech of the spirits are integrated sparingly in Merrill's urbane idiom, while spirit voices take over in the later books of *Sandover*, dominating the lowercase language of the mediums. Here, if anywhere, writing is dictation. The spirits call Merrill "Scribe." Yet Merrill was hardly the spirits' passive secretary. He didn't simply take down their words and put them in poems. He made all sorts of changes to his source texts—cutting, pasting, clarifying, refining, enhancing, and, when it pleased him, inventing his record of what the spirits said. Merrill

treated his Ouija transcripts as draft texts to be revised, as is clear from his papers in Special Collections at Olin Library, Washington University in St. Louis.

That Merrill revised his Ouija transcripts to turn them into poetry is hardly surprising. What is interesting is that revision was already underway in the transcripts themselves. As he took down the spirits' messages, Merrill had to work to make them make sense. Indeed, he had to work to turn them into messages in the first place. There was no primary revelation that he later "doctored." He had to "doctor" the text simply to *have* a text. When he sat at the Ouija board, Merrill was, in this sense, already writing poetry. Far from dutifully transcribing voices, he was creating them, bringing them into being by selecting among and ordering the letters, punctuation, and numerals available to him on the board. (But if we asked him, Merrill probably would have said he was only helping the spirit voices to make themselves clear.)

This way of looking at Merrill's Ouija board, which I find persuasive and necessary, nonetheless demystifies it prematurely. It gets us beyond the naïve phonocentrism expressed in the usual commonplaces about poetic voice. But it cedes too much shaping control to the medium's intention, normalizing what is fundamentally strange. So what if we reversed our perspective and approached the Ouija board as a model for what goes on in the writing of poetry? What if, rather than an outlandish exception, Merrill's spiritualist poetry was normative, a model for how poetry typically gets written?

Most of us will be more comfortable thinking about spirits as a poetic creation than about poetry as the creation of spirits. But I ask the reader to take this weird idea seriously, if not exactly literally, for the space of this essay. My proposition is that the Ouija board demonstrates essential features of how poetry works, and how it works for readers and writers both. These are features we tend to push out of view or minimize in our accounts of poetics, including the crucial, generative role of wordplay. I'll be discussing Merrill, but only incidentally his Ouija poems. My subject is the premise of those poems, the Ouija board, a particular technology whose workings we can examine through Merrill's Ouija transcripts.

§

Although Merrill began with a store-bought Ouija board, he and Jackson preferred homemade models. The board they used in the 1970s includes the letters of the alphabet arranged in an arc, Arabic numerals 0–9, "YES" and "NO," and the ampersand, as well as short functional words and punctuation (fig. 1). The board was plain and utilitarian. The letters were large for easy reading, while the surface was big enough not to cramp the mediums. But not too big: the board fit on the small dining table in their home, as any board game would. The dime-store teacup that served as a planchette, or pointer, had been glued back together after repeatedly careening off the board.

When they used the board, Jackson sat to the left, Merrill to the right. Jackson put his right hand on the cup, Merrill his left. (They were both right-handed.) The cup moved quickly, veering across the surface of the board, pointing to letters that Merrill recorded with his free hand. While Jackson smoked a cigarette and looked away, Merrill's eyes darted back and forth as he asked questions and deciphered messages in the process of recording them. Jackson rarely spoke.

Did they think they were actually talking with spirits? Merrill gave different answers over the years, and the answers were complex and equivocal. But what he wanted readers to understand was simple: when he and Jackson did the board, it worked; it produced messages that *they* had not produced, or at least messages that neither one of them was aware of having produced, whether acting on his own or with the other; and to that extent, talking with spirits was an "experience" they had, with the same reality as any other experience. Judged by that pragmatic criterion, the answer was yes.

The work of Daniel Wegner, a research psychologist who studied the Ouija board and other automatisms, provides some ways to understand that "yes." Following David Hume in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Wegner defines conscious will as a "feeling" that varies in strength along a spectrum of actions.[1] On one end of the spectrum are obviously intentional actions such as when we remember to water the houseplants and then do it. On the other end are full-on automatisms marked by "a distinct feeling that we are *not* doing" what we manifestly are doing.[2] How the impression of "*not* doing" is created on the Ouija board depends on the mechanics of the board—how, for instance, the presence of two people putting pressure on the pointer

confuses the perception of individual agency, and how letter-by-letter composition creates suspense, a slight temporal lag in the recognition process, during which the writers are positioned as readers watching the unfolding of a word.

Wegner's explanation of the mind-body interaction behind the Ouija board–effect is helpful, but he wants to do more than explain the exceptional case. Rather, he argues that the phenomenon of automatism reveals the normative structure of behavior, in relation to which actions like watering the plants are the exception. I will follow his lead far enough to speculate about the dynamics of poetic creativity. Perhaps an apparent exception articulates the structure of the norm. If we take the Ouija board for model, then writing poetry is more like receiving messages from the *au-delà* than like remembering to water the plants and then doing it. The model suggests that the poet is always in the double role of writer and reader, a position that unsettles the links between thought and action, and makes it hard to distinguish between intention and intuition, discovery and projection in the poet's use of language to create what we perceive as "voice."

If poetic voice is like voice on the Ouija board, then writing comes first, and the voice effect in poetry (or to adopt Jonathan Culler's helpfully impersonal term, "voicing") is plural and metamorphic by definition. We'll see this point borne out in the textual confusion of Merrill's Ouija transcripts. But it's also often stated outright by the spirits as a principle, as in a séance from 1953, which Merrill made a typed record of.

Merrill's Ouija board speaks in capitals, since the letters on the board are only uppercase. In this séance, which is typical, the board moves back and forth between the first-person singular and plural. It makes statements without initially giving a name to its voice or voices. Then Apollonius, the Hellenistic author of the *Argonautica*, identifies himself as speaking. He mentions Whitman ("YOUR GREAT POET SINGING SONGS") and "MY SAPHO." The mediums ask about Sappho ("Is she there?"), evidently hoping to speak with her. The board responds by reverting to the first-person plural, dismissing the question as if it were immaterial to distinguish between spirit voices. "WE THAT SING ARE ONE," it says.

Implied here is a concept of poetic tradition that Merrill would expound three decades later in *Sandover* as a not-so-veiled argument

with Harold Bloom and his theory of the "anxiety of influence." Originality hardly counts as a value when origins are never singular, genealogy does not obtain, and nothing is ever wholly new. As in the Freudian unconscious, there is no time on the Ouija board. "I AM ALWAYS WAS IS IS," the board says on the same page.

The voices in this early séance are discussing "song," but also love and sex. It's very important that Merrill and Jackson are getting access here to homosexual literary heroes whose advice to the mediums in McCarthy's America during the Lavender Scare is not to be ashamed about their sex lives. One goal of Merrill and Jackson's spirit adventures was to find sexual and ethical validation for the lives they were leading. The board itself was an erotically charged activity. It's easy to see it as a queer countermodel to the image of the author as God the Father, an idea Merrill develops in *Sandover* with much camp comedy.

Merrill's queer critique of authorship in *Sandover* dovetails in various ways with the principles of deconstruction. Poststructuralism entered literary studies in the United States at the time Merrill was writing *Sandover*, and the poem might be read productively alongside Jacques Derrida, who discusses writing as a kind of occult magic in "Plato's Pharmacy."[3] For that matter, when the Ouija board is doing the writing, the slogan "the death of the author" is disarmingly literalized. The link is not a joke: Merrill as "Scribe" in *Sandover* has a good deal in common with "the Scriptor" in Roland Barthes's manifesto.

But Derrida and Barthes did not have any particular influence on Merrill. The points of convergence between them can be explained by the influence of French modernism on Merrill as well as on Derrida and Barthes. By foregrounding chance and constraint, French poetry from Mallarmé to Oulipo used structured forms of wordplay to enable (as Barbara Johnson translates Mallarmé's "Crise de vers") "the disappearance of the poet speaking, who yields the initiative to words."[4] This is how, as a wordplay machine, the Ouija board works.

§

"Unlike most objects of study, wordplay…has the distinction of being simultaneously very special and wholly ordinary," Joshua Katz, a

linguist, remarks.[5] The point is that wordplay is a commonplace phenomenon, but it is extended and enhanced in certain literary devices that push ordinary language well beyond the "marked," self-reflexive language typical of poetry into the category of the "super-marked."[6] Katz refers specifically to devices such as the acrostic and the anagram, which select letters and sounds in one word or phrase and generate from them more words and phrases, producing "content" that seems to inhere in poetic "form," or breaks down the difference between form and content. By producing effects that "are *themselves* (at least part of) the point that they so artistically convey," Katz writes that wordplay of this type impresses us as revelation.[7] It is as if a word had come forth from its hiding place in another word at its own initiative.

In an essay on Francis Ponge, Merrill makes a point of defending the pun, that "lowest form of humor."[8] By calling attention to the linguistic medium, as the lexical or phonic material of a word comes forward to mark a secondary sense, displacing the primary reference, puns involve a breach in speech decorum. Whether or not that means a downshift in register, which it often does, the breach is felt to be in bad taste. (Think of Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare: "A quibble, poor and barren as it is, gave him such delight, that he was content to purchase it, by the sacrifice of reason, propriety, and truth."[9]) Merrill goes on: "The pun's *objet trouvé* aspect cheapens it further—why? A Freudian slip is taken seriously: it betrays its maker's hidden wish. The pun (or the rhyme, for that matter) 'merely' betrays the hidden wish of words."[10]

Merrill sought to activate that hidden wish through all manner of wordplay, including lexical and phonic recombination in the form of acrostics, spoonerisms, palindromes, and above all anagrams. Anagrams decorate the margins of his poem drafts and fill up empty time in his notebook. On occasion he might put an anagram into a poem. But finding an anagram was an end in itself. The qualities he prized in this form can be inferred from some of his favorites:

PROUST | STUPOR
MARCEL PROUST | PEARL SCROTUM
POSTAGE | GESTAPO
MARY MCCARTHY | CRY AT MY CHARM
NERUDA | UNREAD

Note that in most of these cases Merrill is working with a proper name or noun—a feature of wordplay I'll come back to. That's the case too in a particularly frantic example of wordplay, where he creates anagrammatic lines by using the nineteen letters of the name of a friend, David Wesley McIntosh (fig. 2). This is scribbling as Scrabble.

There's much to say about Merrill's anagrams. They are an example of his love of games and of word games in particular. They point up the lexical dimension of his imagination. Their production by the recombination of elements within a fixed set recalls (it's almost a joke about) the Ouija board's doctrine of reincarnation. They suit the cast of mind that made him prefer, in poetry, "given arrangements," meaning rhyme, meter, and stanza patterns. They reflect his taste for baubles and trinkets. In their strict economy, they satisfied his aversion to waste. They show his drive to make meaning even or especially when he is just filling time, doodling in the margins of a draft poem or in a notebook. They demonstrate his lack of interest in originality, conventionally conceived.

Their mood is carnivalesque, and their energy manic, as in a giddy salute to a friend on his birthday (fig. 3). Merrill uses the eight letters of Tom Ingle's name in eight combinations, and manages almost to make sense:

NO GIMLE**T**?
G**O**, LIT MEN,
TO **M**INGLE
LEG O' M**I**NT,
TO**N**G, LIME,
LEMON… **G**IT
ME? O G**L**INT
LONG TIM**E**,
TOM INGLE!

How many words are there inside a word? In how many ways can the same letters be combined to make more words? When new combinations connect syntactically, they make something more than isolated, individual words. They produce phrases, questions, commands, and exclamations. They produce, in short, speech, and with it a speaker, delivering, in this case, a madcap nine-line party toast.

§

"Give it up," Merrill chides himself in his notebook, referring to his anagram habit as if he were talking about cigarettes or cocaine. There is something addictive about the anagram and its generative potential. Once words take the initiative, what is there to stop them?

Unlike Merrill, Ferdinand de Saussure was obsessed not with producing anagrams but with finding them, if that distinction makes any difference in the case of the anagram. Saussure began his career in linguistics by studying polyphonic wordplay. His point of departure was the structure of "phonic mirroring" he observed in the early Latin poetry known as Saturnian verse, the formal organization of which has always been obscure. These "harmonies" consisted in the repetition and inversion of vowel sounds (a vowel and what Saussure called a "counter vowel") within a given line.[11] The principle worked to locate a satisfactory formal unity within the line so long as the number of vowel sounds was even, but an odd number left a phonetic "remainder." To cope with this excess, Saussure extended the principle to posit a "counter vowel" answering the "remainder" in the next line, or the line after that, and so on.[12]

Under the microscope of Saussure's phonological analysis, poetry disclosed to him "a swarming of syllables or phonic forms echoing each other," as Daniel Heller-Roazen describes the effect in his book about "hidden languages," *Dark Tongues*.[13] The structures of recombination Saussure discerned grew more various and intricate as he pursued the topic, and he introduced new terms (logogram, paragram, and hypogram) to identify these further units. The scope of his research enlarged as well, reaching behind Latin and Greek into Indo-European. "By 1907," Heller-Roazen writes, Saussure "believed the Vedas to be 'literally covered with anagrams' and Homer's epics to be 'a vast and continuous anagram.'"[14]

Saussure would have preferred the term "anaphony"—his coinage—with its stress on orality, but he felt bound by the existing term, even if his anagrams were never, like Merrill's, exact recombinations of letters.[15] As Jean Starobinski points out in his commentary on Saussure's notebooks, which were published for the first time in 1971, Saussure regarded anagrams as foundational: they were generative

structures in poetry, not an "accessory" or ornament.[16] (This is the same distinction Katz makes when he contrasts "hyper-artistic" devices to the "trappings" of normal literary techniques, which tend to reenforce rather than create meaning.[17]) Saussure supposed that the origins of the principle lay in religious rituals that used the names of God to generate and sanction discourse, and that the principle had survived as a mechanism, a formal apparatus, for producing poetry in other contexts as civilization evolved.

In effect, Saussure believed he had discovered "an unapparent law" that was active everywhere in poetry. To have objective reality, he reasoned, these intricate patternings and the techniques behind them must be the result of a secret knowledge passed down from one poet to another. The phenomenon needed to be nonaccidental, intended. The assumption that an "occult" technique had been deployed systematically in poetry across many centuries and languages was, however, wildly implausible and could never be verified. Who was to say Saussure had not authored the anagrams he discovered? After several years of intensive research, he abandoned his line of inquiry. "Give it up!" he must have told himself.

About the value of Saussure's anagram research, the consensus among linguists has been skeptical, to say the least. Saussure is useful for us, however, not because he explains Merrill's Ouija board poetry scientifically but because, in his early work on anagrams, Saussure was thinking like a poet. Roman Jakobson, an important exception to the consensus among linguists, understood the value of Saussure's anagrams in this way. In Heller-Roazen's account, Jakobson further extended Saussure's overextended theory by dropping the requirement that the anagram system be the result of intention. Instead, Jakobson classified it as a product of the "poetic function," which, in his well-known formulation, "*projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination*."[18]

Wordplay, as a product of the always-present potential for transferring metaphoric thinking—selection and equivalence—to the axis of combination that organizes speech, is therefore, Heller-Roazen writes, "a possibility given with the very ability to speak."[19] As Jakobson developed it, the point is not that Saussure's anagram system revealed an occult technique possessed by an elite caste of

poets; rather, the principle behind it was hidden from them and from everyone else simply in the nature of words and how we use them. From this point of view, it doesn't matter whether the anagrammatic patterning Saussure observed was "voluntary or involuntary. One is tempted," Heller-Roazen continues, expounding Jakobson's thinking on the subject, "to go still further and to maintain that this much *must* remain indeterminate. Implicitly, Jakobson proceeded as if the neutralization of the difference between consciousness and its absence were the hallmark of poetics."[20]

This last seems to me a key point, and a crucial gloss on the function of the Ouija board, for Merrill and anyone else. Following Wegner, we can see the Ouija board as a device for producing "the neutralization of the difference between consciousness and its absence" in writing. It can be objected that the Ouija board produces much more than anagrams. But it's the same way with Saussure's anagrams, which go so far beyond "PROUST" and "STUPOR" as to generate, Saussure suspected, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Saussure's notion of the anagram was ultimately so extended it became indistinguishable from the poetic function.

In fact, the anagram, defined narrowly as the recombination of letters in one word or phrase to produce another word or phrase, seems more likely to restrict than to release the "furor of phonic play," in Saussure's expressively alliterative phrase.[21] The anagram breaks down words to build up others. It gives primacy to sound and letters, the visual and acoustic, without sacrificing sense. It is orderly as well as anarchic. Crucially, there are a finite number of possible combinations. The Ouija board, by contrast, functions like Saussure's anagram system pushed to its fullest extension, a point at which anagrams can be found everywhere and recognizing them is hard to tell apart from madness.

Saussure developed the concept of the "*Stichwort*," or theme word, to cope with that threat. He supposed that the anagram system of primitive poetry invoked the names of gods; later the names of heroes and other important "characters" and even certain nouns took their place. Theme words, Saussure reasoned, presided over particular units of verse, almost like a stanzaic pattern, limiting and structuring phonic proliferation. In a given passage, the theme word might appear whole or in scattered parts unfolding the theme word's permutations.

The theme word's organizing function is important; so is its difference in kind from other words. As Heller-Roazen explains,

Figure 1. Color photograph of James Merrill's Ouija board, photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Julian Edison Department of Special Collections, Washington University Libraries.

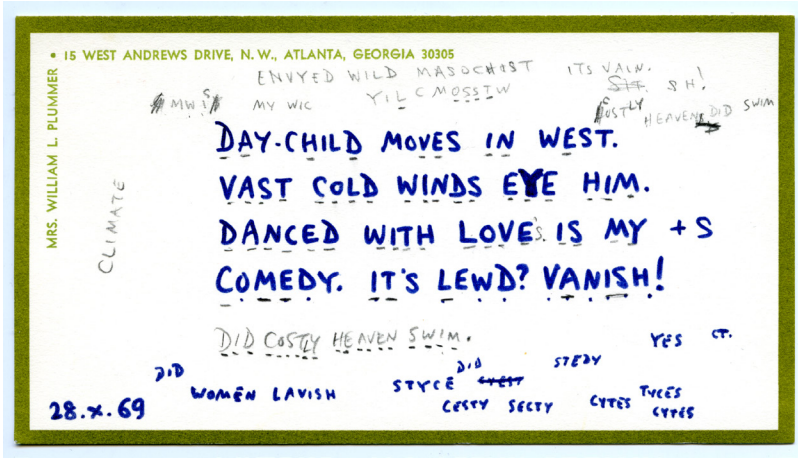

Figure 2. Anagram poem "Day-child…" on a card from James Merrill to David McIntosh, October 28, 1969. Courtesy of the Julian Edison Department of Special Collections, Washington University Libraries.

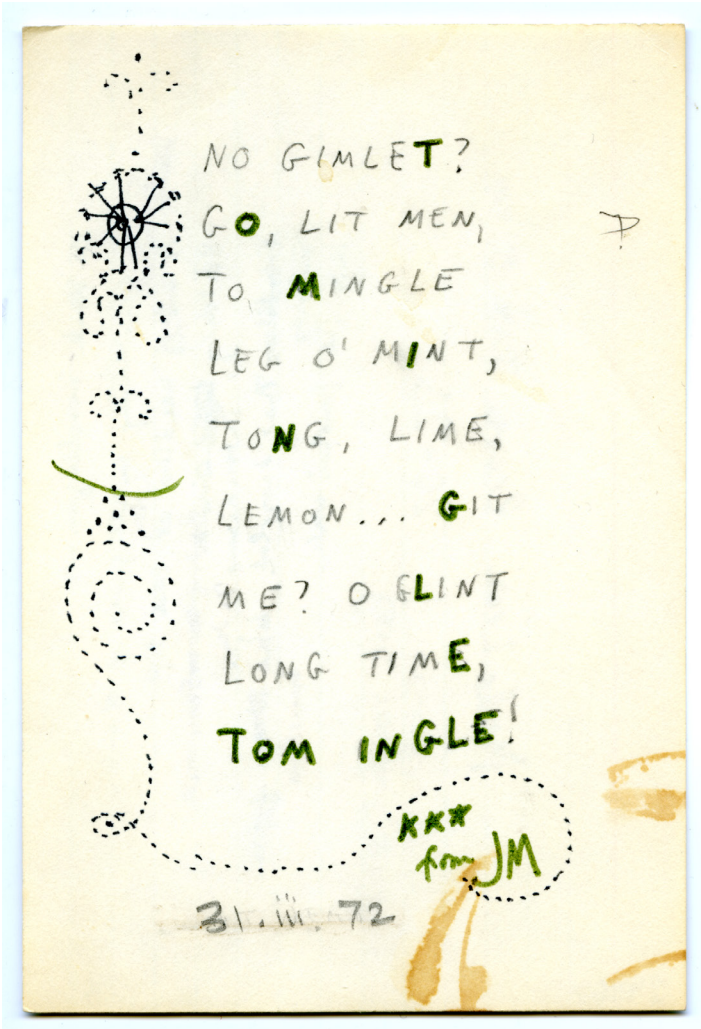

Figure 3. Anagram poem/birthday toast to Tom Ingle by James Merrill with drawing in pencil and ink, March 31, 1972. Courtesy of the Julian Edison Department of Special Collections, Washington University Libraries.

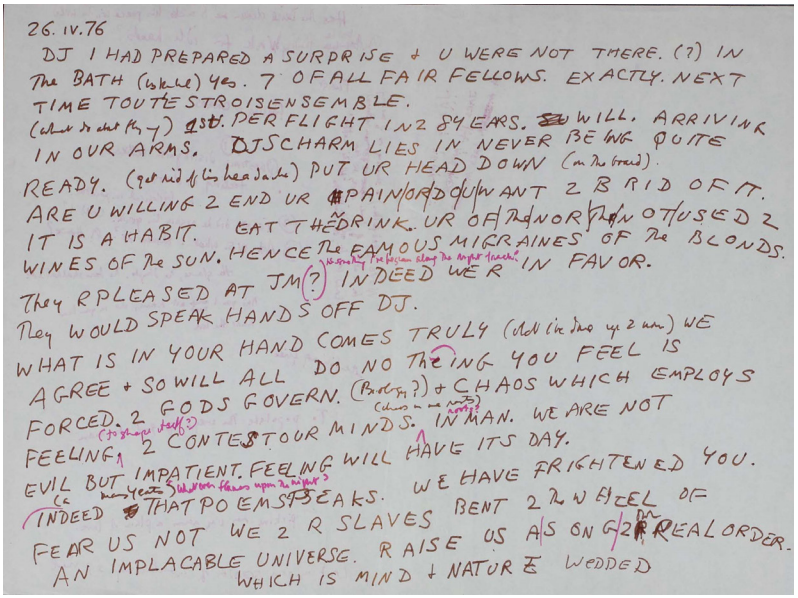

Figure 4. Loose-leaf page of Ouija transcript by James Merrill dated 26.iv.76. Courtesy of the Julian Edison Department of Special Collections, Washington University Libraries.

Saussure's "*Stichwort*" departs from the structure of the sign as he would later define it in *Cours de linguistique générale*. The theme word, as "the name of a referent or a part of the world," is "synonymous with a real thing," and it imposes "'a necessity on the phonemes in the poem, withdrawing them from the contingency that affects lexical units'"—the famous arbitrariness of the sign.[22] For the later Saussure, the sign "exists only in the system of differences that links it to and distinguishes it from all other signs in a given language," and has "no positive self-identity."[23] The "*Stichwort*," on the other hand, "requires no opposition to be recognizable as such."[24] It is only like itself.

Examples of Saussure's theme word include the names of the gods in the *Rigveda*. But when we consider the theme word as "synonymous with a real thing," possessing a "positive self-identity," and producing non-arbitrary, motivated sound, the name itself seems to have the status—and the creative power—of a god. Saussure located a generative agency within names that somehow existed outside the differential structure of the sign. The quasi-mystical status of the theme word seems like a version of what Katz means by "beyond" when he says "super-marked" wordplay and "hyper-artistic" language "elevate form to the point of content and sometimes even beyond."[25]

Think of that "beyond" as Merrill's *au-delà*, the Other World, which he accessed via the technology of the Ouija board. The Ouija board's spirits function in the manner of Saussure's theme words to intentionalize phonic and lexical patterns, working at once inside language and "beyond" it, or at least beyond its normal range of uses, even its "marked" use in poetry. But the order the Ouija spirits produce is unstable and temporary at best. As speakers, the spirits dissolve and merge according to logic of the same verbal processes that generate them. Merrill's transcripts show this happening and why it has to be this way.

§

As in the Saussurean anagram, something crazy abides in the Ouija board. Both ways of engaging language involve a confusion between subject and object, discovery and projection, which is like the confusion of those terms in psychosis. Self/other, inside/outside,

living/dead: on the board the boundaries between those oppositions begin to collapse. Or rather, the board takes us into a regressive linguistic space in which basic structures of speech and the relational categories they construct have not yet been securely established. When we read Merrill's Ouija transcripts, watching him transcribe the "speech" of the board, we watch those structures being assembled.

Transcription involves sequencing letters, one letter and one line after another. The sequence can be orderly, so that the page looks like a neat handwritten message—and Merrill had a neat hand. But often the record isn't orderly. We find a stream of letters, thickening and thinning in waves that reflect the pace at which Merrill makes marks and his uncertainty about what he is writing down. The size of the letters and the space between them grow and shrink in a visual equivalent of slowing down or speeding up the audio recording of a voice. We watch Merrill gaining and losing and regaining control over the letters he records. He goes back over what he's written down, reordering and reshaping letters or supplying missing ones.

Writing comes forward here in its most basic components as the sequencing and segmentation of letters. In effect, by slowing down our normal practices of reading and writing, preventing us from reading whole words at a glance, the Ouija board places us in the position of language learners who must sound out words, one letter or phoneme at a time, deciding what connects with what. In that way, it returns us to the primitive process of lexical recognition in language acquisition, and then the repetition and transposition of that process in early literacy, which demands the segmentation of first sounds and then sounds and letters. Words on the Ouija board don't come preformed and unitary. They emerge by steps. Then sentences take shape. And then recognizable "speakers" can be identified, although the spirits are always, as Merrill calls them, "mute spellers-out." Orthography is phonology on the talking board.

Segmentation is critical to creating words, and in this regard, the capital letters have a disconcerting effect. Caps evoke headlines, telegrams, and public signage. An all-caps message comes at us like language that is being broadcast, not spoken. Reading a page of Merrill's Ouija transcriptions, we are made aware of how much, in English, we depend on the difference between lower- and uppercase

letters to mark proper names, indicate emphasis, and segment sentences in order to create units of sense and acoustic rhythms we can hear as the voice of a speaker. Ouija text, in Merrill's handling of it, comes in the same form as the epigraphy inscribed on ancient Greek monuments—lines of capital letters inscribed without space or punctuation between words, which must be pried apart to be deciphered.

Segmentation comes into play with respect to voice as well as with the shaping of individual words. Merrill needs to decide how to distinguish speakers. Where does one leave off and another begin? The continual uncertainty of who or what is speaking on the board is stabilized by various devices marking transcribed language as "voice" and the voice of a specific speaker. These include catchphrases attached to recurring voices, the familiar spirit Ephraim chief among them. The conversation on the board tends to follow a pattern: The mediums first make contact with Ephraim, who speaks about or for other spirits. Often he simply gives way while other spirit voices take over. Mention of a name is usually enough to conjure whom it signifies and to give him/her/it/them a chance to speak.

Speakers who are regulars in Merrill's séances are reduced for easy reference to their initials (WHA for Auden, CK for Auden's partner Chester Kallman), as are the two mediums, JM and DJ. Characters constitute characters, to so speak. Ephraim is usually "E." He serves as a supernatural master of ceremonies, able to summon the dead, the famous, the obscure, and the elemental: Merrill jokes in *Sandover* that "E equals any emcee squared." In this respect, he functions as the "host" personality in a dissociative disorder. But the mediums also express suspicion that other voices are merely Ephraim in disguise. Indeed, he turns out to be just that in certain cases. But then character or identity on the board is essentially unstable. The spirits change form, gender, species, although these categories don't mean much in a séance.

There is an underlying premise in this model of text production: that linguistic signs exist in a continuum, or totality, that is the material basis for segmentation to begin with, something like a radio frequency the mediums tune into. The Ouija board seems to think so when it says "WE THAT SING ARE ONE." Yet like so much modern poetry

from *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos* to Ashbery, the Ouija board, in Merrill's transcripts, has a form of dissociative identity disorder. Identity in the language process of the board is chaotic and decentered, a matter of so many *alters*. "Sense" comes and goes on the board, as words veer between different registers, and voices interrupt each other or trail off. If in principle all singers are one, in practice no voice is perfectly unitary and consistent. The I that sings is many.

§

Wordplay is associated with subject matter that lies outside polite communication, including scatology, sexuality, and the sacred. Merrill's transcripts slide between these topics and mix them up, as on the transcript page dated "26.iv.76" (fig. 4). Ephraim begins this séance by telling DJ that he has just missed his chance to participate in an orgy with "7 OF ALL FA IR FELLOWS." Then he treats DJ's migraine by telling him to put his head on the board. (The Ouija transcripts are full of attention to the mediums' health, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, when Merrill was ill with HIV.) Then Ephraim leaves, ushering in new, unnamed speakers. They begin by outlining a cosmology—"2 GODS GOVERN (Biology?) + CHAOS"—and they tell Merrill to write a hymn of creation, urging him to "RAISE US A/S ON G /2 R our REAL ORDER WHICH IS MIND + NATUR E WEDDED[.]"

This exchange comes from the first of the séances that turned into the later books of *Sandover*. Merrill destroyed most of the transcripts on which those books were based, but he kept this page. He was, we know from his notebooks and letters, shocked and thrilled by these particular voices, both because of the occult knowledge they provided and because of their obscurity and strangeness. Who are they? What are their names? They ask first to be called by numbers. They identify themselves as subatomic particles, also as giant bats; before long they turn into one speaker with a name, "Mirabell." I won't follow the story further, but I want to highlight this page as a model of what Merrill wanted from the Ouija board and an example of how it worked.

Merrill went to the Ouija board for gossip and entertainment. But he also looked to it for visionary instruction, and as his involvement with it grew, he saw himself in a tradition that included the Bible, Blake, and Yeats. He wanted knowledge of creation, and he wanted

that knowledge to emerge from words or, more precisely, from the alphabet itself. The plural, unnamed, nonhuman speakers he spoke with in this séance might as well be grammar, the abstract structure of language. When they instruct him to "raise a song to our real order," he is already doing so as he transcribes their imperative, lifting words from the lexical static of transcription. Mind and nature, intention and intuition, interact—are "WEDDED"—in the process.

This moment in Merrill's Ouija transcripts is a version of a motif in ancient literature, where wordplay simultaneously describes and repeats a creation story. As the first example of the "hyper-artistic," "super-marked" language he classifies as wordplay, Katz offers Cicero's "song of the vowels." Translating the early third-century BCE didactic poem known as the *Phaenomena*, Cicero begins the story of the beginning of things with the words "A Ioue."[26] This is a mildly eccentric Latinization of the Greek, which we would translate in English as "From Zeus let us begin." It's eccentric because Cicero has dropped the "b," the consonant, in "Ab" ("From"). The small detail has the effect, Katz notes, of putting all five of the vowels—A I O U E—together at the start of the poem, as if to say: these sounds, coming from the name of God, are the foundation of the world.[27]

"Vowels"—our word comes from the Latin for "voice." They are, in most linguistic accounts, the phonetic basis around which words are built. Here, in this bit of wordplay, Cicero has evoked creation by returning to the generative foundation of human communication, "the primordial gamut," as Katz calls it.[28] The primary building blocks for words have been joined in this pair of words, "A IOUE," or "From Zeus."

As an example of Katz's "hyper-artistic" language, Cicero's lexical-phonetic wordplay functions like Saussure's "*Stichwort*." Saussure had no interest in mystical interpretations of the anagram system he had theorized. But as Starobinski points out, it is tempting to see in the privilege and function of the theme word "an emanatist conception of poetic production," where the "developed text is concealed in the concentrated unity of the theme-word which precedes it."[29] The idea is that the theme word contains in itself, like a kernel, the text that is generated from it. Creativity, in this view, would never be from nothing; it would be (Starobinski) "a deployment through multiplicity of the energy already fully present" in the elements of the word.[30] Or

perhaps, following Jakobson, it is an "energy already fully present" in words as such, and how we use them.

Saussure discovered that theme words could not be delimited except by giving up searching for them, as he did. "Wave upon wave of possible names would have taken shape beneath his alert and disciplined eye," Starobinski summarizes. "Is this the vertigo of error? It is also the discovery of the simple truth that language is an infinite resource, and that behind each phrase lies the multiple clamor from which it has detached itself to appear before us in its isolated individuality."[31] Think of that "multiple clamor" as the confusion of Merrill's Ouija transcripts, or simply as the linguistic continuum in which letters and sounds call out to each other through phonic and lexical links, leading the poet—any poet—from one word to the next in the process of discovering what words want to say.

The "infinite resource" that is language is represented in the alphabet spread in an arc on the Ouija board, which Merrill and Jackson used like an anagram machine to generate text. I see them at the talking board as readers and writers, active and passive, in a mental condition where the difference between "consciousness and its absence" has been neutralized, playing a game of selection, segmentation, and combination in which "mind" goes to work on "nature," pursuing the possibility of speaking about anything and everything from the beginning. I see them, in short, as doing what poets do and have always done.

NOTES

1/ Daniel M. Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 3.
2/ Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will*, 99. I discuss Wegner's theory of automatism and how Merrill and Jackson used the Ouija board in *James Merrill: Life and Art* (New York: Knopf, 2015).
3/ Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 72–73, 93–94, and passim.
4/ Stéphane Mallarmé, "Crisis of Verse," in *Divagations*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007), 208.
5/ Joshua T. Katz, "Wordplay," *Proceedings of the 20th Annual UCLA Indo-European Conference*, eds. Stephanie W. Jamison, H. Craig Melchert, and Brent Vine (Bremen: Hempen Verlag, 2009), 84.
6/ Katz, "Wordplay," 89.
7/ Katz, "Wordplay," 101.
8/ James Merrill, "Object Lessons," *Collected Prose*, eds. J. D. McClatchy and Stephen Yenser (New York: Knopf, 2004), 210.
9/ Samuel Johnson, *The Wit and Wisdom of Samuel Johnson*, vol. 1, ed. George Birkbeck Hill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), 261.
10/ Merrill, "Object Lessons," 210.
11/ Ferdinand de Saussure, in a letter dated "14 July 1906," available in Saussure's notebooks at the Public and University Library of Geneva (ms. fr. 3962). Quoted in Jean Starobinski, *Words upon Words: The Anagrams of Ferdinand de Saussure*, trans. Olivia Emmet (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 10.
12/ Saussure quoted in Starobinski, *Words upon Words*, 10.
13/ Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Dark Tongues: The Art of Rogues and Riddlers* (New York: Zone Books, 2013), 114.
14/ Heller-Roazen, *Dark Tongues*, 125.
15/ On the oral basis of Saussure's research, see Joshua T. Katz, "Saussure's *Anaphonie*: Sounds Asunder," in *Synesthesia and the Ancient Senses*, eds. Shane Butler and Alex Purves (Durham, UK: Acumen, 2013).
16/ Starobinski, *Words upon Words*, 17.
17/ Katz, "Wordplay," 100.
18/ Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Selected Writings III: Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry*, ed. Stephen Rudy (The Hague: Mouton, 1981), 27.
19/ Heller-Roazen, *Dark Tongues*, 150.
20/ Heller-Roazen, *Dark Tongues*, 145–46.
21/ Heller-Roazen, *Dark Tongues*, 125.

22/ Heller-Roazen, *Dark Tongues*, 123.
23/ Heller-Roazen, *Dark Tongues*, 123.
24/ Heller-Roazen, *Dark Tongues*, 123.
25/ Katz, "Wordplay," 100–101.
26/ Katz, "Wordplay," 80.
27/ Katz, "Wordplay," 80–81.
28/ Katz, "Wordplay," 81.
29/ Starobinski, *Words upon Words*, 43.
30/ Starobinski, *Words upon Words*, 43.
31/ Starobinski, *Words upon Words*, 122.

JENNIFER SOONG

Escapist Poetry

I.

Verity Spott's *We Will Bury You* (2017), Marie Buck's *Unsolved Mysteries* (2020), and Steve Orth's *The Life & Times of Steve Orth* (2020) are three collections of poetry that have recently upended the typical antagonism between politics and escapism.[1] Sharing a desire to turn from problems or situations as they really are toward scenarios that attempt to play out alternative and unlikely sequences of events, these works attest to a recent conjunction between Marxist commitment and wild phantasizing. The escapist visions they each present, however, fall short of a faraway and beautiful hope, suggesting that a redemptive or critical account of escapism on the grounds of future-oriented utopianism may no longer be salient. Pointing instead to a more novel phenomenon, these authors can be seen exercising their creative capacities at the border between two seemingly opposed yet equally austere realms: reality, with all its political impoverishments, and phantasy, which "attains nothing."[2] A turn to escapism allows these poets to grapple with the reality of nothingness mirrored in phantasy's very form.

While I use this essay to grasp this contemporary occurrence, I also situate it within a longer trajectory of thought, one that connects the history of escapism to the history of its critique as well as subsequent critiques of those critiques. When John Crowe Ransom first used the term in 1930 to describe American work culture, for instance, he used it to identify a "defeated and escapist people," obsessed with productivity and scientific progress yet "afraid of the fullness of the inner life."[3] Escapism entailed a "general illusion of personal and collective power," but also—rather counterintuitively—an escape from interiority.[4] By the late 1970s, Ransom himself would come under attack as participating in an "escapist Fugitive movement."[5] This time, escape meant a divorce of literature from its historical and social realities.

In a 1933 issue of *The English Journal*, Alfred Kreymborg brought out the closeness of escapism and poetry in particular. Those who found sympathy with T. S. Eliot were characterized by "an attempted escape from disillusionment," while "the romantic movement had its escapists also: poets defeated or horrified by life who embraced old ivory towers and chiseled perfect stones out of their solitude."[6] Genevieve Taggard, Louise Bogan, and Léonie Adams were all "termed escapists, or women defeated by romance," while Marion Clinch Calkins's apparent self-flagellation was yet "another means of escaping a world grown too stupid, common, and dull."[7] Escapism here allowed Kreymborg to capture a reactionary mechanism both within and against the banal and traumatic "horrors" of modernity; it allowed him to define that reactionary mechanism as part of modernity itself. Two years later, the poet Stanley Burnshaw would write that Wallace Stevens's *Harmonium* (1923) is "the kind of verse that people concerned with the murderous world collapse can hardly swallow."[8] When asked to reflect upon this statement in 1989, he explained that "to the people alert to the world of 1935, *Harmonium* couldn't fail to appear as 'escapist' both in subject matter and in attitude."[9]

Around the same period, Marxist critics, too, were arguing against escapism on the grounds of deception, ease, political indifference, and idealism. When Georg Lukács launched an attack on the "so-called avant-garde" writers of his time, he argued that their failure to penetrate into the totalizing aspects of reality made them only superficial foes of the bourgeoisie.[10] In response, Bertolt Brecht composed an equally aggressive critique, though on similar grounds. This time it was Lukács who had departed from reality. Lukács "starts from a sound principle, and yet one cannot help feeling that he is somewhat remote from reality," Brecht wrote.[11] "It is the element of capitulation, of withdrawal, of Utopian idealism which still lurks in Lukács's essays" that makes his work "unsatisfactory; for it gives the impression that what concerns him is enjoyment rather than struggle, a way of escape rather than an advance."[12] Against an agonist art that might lead to revolution, escapist literature merely participates in a culture of false hope, consumption, and convenience.

When critics in more recent years have thought about escapism, they tend to position it against a lost pastoral writing and earlier

associations of poetry with leisure. Today's critic of escapism cringes at Edward Young's eighteenth-century understanding of poetry as "a sweet refuge" that "gives us a respite" and Joseph Addison's ranking of poetic imagination as a "gentle exercise" less rigorous yet more delightful than philosophy.[13] Part of this disapproval speaks to historical shifts in the conceptual alignment of leisure with bourgeois thinking. Take John Fekete's 1977 argument that Keats's work was an instance of vacillating "between escapism and moralizing sentimentality," which marked an "abandonment of the effort to change the structure of reality."[14] The critic's choice to pinpoint Romanticism was no accident, since it was precisely during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when notions of leisure were rapidly changing and giving way to one modern notion of escapism: that escapist works are merely entertaining and therefore solutions to boredom.[15]

This critical tendency to associate escapism with boredom arises from somewhat of a paradox. The bored individual suffers from disengagement with reality, but so does escapism, its apparent solution. The emergence of boredom as a collective sentiment coincided with an increasing emphasis on the distinctions between inner and outer life. On the one hand, boredom was perceived as a failure of external reality to immediately meet certain expectations. On the other hand, it was seen as the result of poor inner resources and an inability to enjoy the contemplative life.[16] Romantic poets attempted to take a social angle to the problem of stupor, but the result was an increasing move toward the interior life as the site of rejuvenation. (Feeling came to replace the traditional role of nature in poetry, accounting for escapism's referential shift from a physical retreat into the countryside toward a retreat into solipsism.) If nineteenth-century escapist works were merely palliatives to bourgeois or upper-class boredom, it is easy to see why they might have been politically condemnable: they would have neither altered material reality nor transformed a destitute interiority, instead distracting their audiences from both.[17]

Despite the surfacing of "escapism" as a pejorative label, there have nevertheless been two strains of thought that provide alternative readings. Ernst Bloch argued that the irrational component of escapism can in fact exceed the rational as a test of reality. Using the example of Don Quixote—arguably the most delusional utopian figure

in Western literature—Bloch claimed that "it is not simply a matter of how mad we consider the Junker to be. But of how correct we consider the facts in which and against which he rides."[18] There is a kind of a dialectical turn in what we, as modern readers, can identify as the escapism of Don Quixote. The false knight does not engage in mere escapist activity; he takes his escapism so seriously that the argument that he has "gone too far" or has become "too out of touch with reality" folds in on itself. It is the comic self-seriousness of the whole endeavor that reveals something true about the protagonist's flight from reality: "he saw the knight-errantry of yore as nonetheless a nobler guiding image than the budding bourgeoisie."[19] Against the description of escapist literature as falsifying, Bloch argued that it could be redeemed by giving us a picture or "blueprint" of what might be possible, of what *could be* ("a guiding image") rather than *what is*.

If the Blochian argument for living out of sync with a dominant world-logic attempts to redeem escapism on the basis of building a Marxist "poetry of the future," as well as on the basis that utopic visions offer critique, psychoanalysis suggests that escapism is more fundamentally and more simply inevitable. Here, it is useful to note that escapism has as its primary vehicle *phantasy*, a term that toggles between a psychoanalytic emphasis on the individual and a cultural phenomenon. Phantasy is one of the earliest modes of the infant's psychic life, the first expression of human impulses of desire and aggression.[20] It is active, fundamental to the first step of doing, which is willed or unwilled wanting, as well as to the image of doing that is consequently imitated and translated (successfully or not) into reality. For the analyst, escapism can never be truly escaped.

While psychoanalysts in the twentieth century have interpreted phantasy as integral to one's experience and testing of reality, Freud himself expressed ambivalence about the escapist's relationship to reality.[21] In "Two Principles of Mental Functioning," he writes that daydreaming and phantasy can "abandon dependence on real objects," going on to say:

> An artist is originally a man who turns away from reality because he cannot come to terms with the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction which it at first demands, and who allows his erotic and ambitious wishes full play in the life of phantasy. He finds the way

> back to reality, however, from this world of phantasy by making use of special gifts to mould his phantasies into truths of a new kind, which are valued by men as precious reflections of reality. Thus in a certain fashion he actually becomes the hero, the king, the creator, or the favourite he desired to be, without following the long roundabout path of making real alterations in the external world. But he can only achieve this because other men feel the same dissatisfaction as he does with the renunciation demanded by reality, and because that dissatisfaction…is itself a part of reality.[22]

This initially appears to prove the Marxist critic's point, since psychic reality cannot penetrate material reality, or as Freud puts it, "real alterations in the external world." ("[The] mild narcosis induced in us by art can do no more than bring about a transient withdrawal from the pressure of vital needs, and it is not strong enough to make us forget real misery," Freud had written in *Civilization and Its Discontents*.[23]) But isn't psychic reality part of the superstructures of reality? The binary of reality and escapism, society and art would seem to be itself an effect of history, one that would have cultural production "remain a persistent if contradictory and progressively weaker and more abstract and reactionary critique of the social realm."[24] The argument resembles Theodor Adorno's. For Adorno, lyric poetry's turn away from the world always retains a negative image of the reification of the world, for "it is precisely what is not social in the lyric poem that is now to become its social aspect."[25] The feeling of a separate, subjective, and arguably illusory space created by the aesthetic always moves us because it speaks to a more encompassing, real alienation. As Joshua Kotin has observed, Adorno reads lyric poetry as an *index* of the injustices of the world rather than a *confrontation* with them.[26]

II.

One category of escapism departs from earlier assumptions by showing that contemporary poetry can be confrontational and escapist at the same time. The revenge phantasy—which shapes Verity Spott's *We Will Bury You* and Marie Buck's *Unsolved Mysteries*—is calculated and deliberate rather than passive. *We Will Bury You* consists of a

series of death wishes or spells cast and imagined upon members of the British Parliament, while *Unsolved Mysteries* depicts various sexual and political phantasies that at times involve impossible feats. Despite, or rather precisely because of, their Marxist politics, there is a shared interest in what Spott calls "magical thinking…based on a kind of impossibility."[27]

Composed a day after the British government voted against removing its cap on public sector pay, *We Will Bury You* revolves around various hexes on members of Parliament. Rather than escaping into a world where politicians are transformed into moral beings, Spott discovers in escapism a substitute to empowerment and control over the situation. In a conversation with Keston Sutherland, Spott notes that the poem arose from "the feeling of nausea," "helplessness," and "political impotence" that was ensuing at the time.[28] In the book, revenge allows for a substitution of these feelings with the speaker's feeling of potency:

> Tonight, whilst you lie dutifully on the ground your gut will wrench & prickle. You will shit in your bed. You will lie there, you will come out of your dreams asking for help. Lucy Allan.
>
> […]
>
> Tonight is fuel is your body. Kindling. In your ribs a sudden volt of traction. A nebulous subsonic itch crashing into your salary. A careless spell catches your stars. The edge of a rib cuts into your lung. Stephen Barclay.
>
> […]
>
> Tonight, whilst in your need you cry out. You cry out for someone to come to help you. All your private establishments have gone to their beds. There must be an ambulance somewhere in this long night of blades. "Come to me! Come to me!". Silence. "Help me!". Mr John Baron.
>
> […]

> Tonight, as if in love you turn in your naked bed. You turn & are ripped out & aborted. Forced to swallow yourself. Sir Henry Bellingham.
>
> (n.p.)

Sampled from various parts of the collection, these excerpts attest to how escaping one's real political impotence into an imagined personal and collective power generates certain kinds of paradoxical situations. The first revolves around address. Spott invokes real-life addressees only to foreclose any actual responses. The fictional element of lyric apostrophe is thrown into relief. On the one hand, it is a way "to will a state of affairs, to attempt to bring it into being by asking inanimate objects to bend themselves to your desire."[29] On the other hand, the hexes' use of apostrophe is aimed at the elimination rather than the positing of a "potentially responsive" other.[30]

The second paradox is temporal. The poems entail a sense of futurity ("tonight") that is recaptured from brute reality as something pleasurable, or at least just, rather than despairing. But unlike the kind of distant horizon that constitutes Bloch's blueprint of the unrealized, Spott's focus on the immediate future pushes back against a postponed gratification as well as any image of utopia. When "tonight" follows "tonight" with no definite end, does one see the light of day? Is this the future or the annihilation of time by desire? Hopelessness is not replaced by hope but rather a more visceral sense of anticipation—embodied rather than dependent on rational or irrational belief. "Tonight" is both the time when political work is imagined *and* the time the poet is afforded to do their escapist work. It quickly begins to blur with the present itself. Although nighttime is the last frontier of the capitalist workday, the poet does not restore it as a precapitalist site of rest and sleep.[31] Rather, there is a kind of prolonged, insomniac "tonight" in which Spott transforms the desire for rest into the "putting to rest" of the speaker's oppressors.

Thirdly, escapism generates an intimacy with the very politicians who are otherwise inaccessible to most citizens. The carefully crafted nature of each hex, as a *unique* infliction of pain, transforms the relation between the subject and the object into something personal, even tender. In reality, the growing political indifference that arises from despair and hopelessness corresponds with politicians' own

indifference toward the working class. In the escapist phantasy, the speaker's careful constructions force the politicians into a situation where they must care because, crucially, the phantasy is about them. It is not only the future that's brought nearer but also the spatial arrangement of political persons. The irony of this claustrophobic escapism consists in the poet phantasizing about a situation *in which there is no escape for the members of Parliament*. If, in reality, the latter escape the consequences of their actions by removing themselves from the people and places their political policies affect, such detachment or distancing can no longer hold in the space of phantasy. Here, politicians are deprived of the very pleasures, comforts, and defenses that escapism typically permits.

Each of Spott's hexes also isolates their objects from any outside help. This alienation heightens the image of the phantasy's success, since escapism itself attempts to shun the outside to create a self-sustained nonreality. In their isolation, many of these poems end up transforming the autoerotic nature of infantile phantasy into a kind of autoimmune attack. It is often the politicians' own bodies that turn against them: Lucy Allan's gut wrenches her out of her dreams; the edge of one of Stephen Barclay's ribs punctures his lung. Elsewhere, maggots are born inside Jo Churchill, and Sir Peter Bottomley becomes allergic to himself. Ironically, the poet's entrance into and invasion of the politicians' bodies seeks out an emotional interiority that reality lacks. The emphasis on a sick and destructive interior body reveals a broken mechanism but one that will now "work" in the "right" way. One of these ways relegates the politicians to a helpless infancy, with no control over their own bodily functions ("You will shit in your bed"). Another way forces helplessness onto them through the passive voice. When Spott writes, "You turn & are ripped out & aborted. Forced to swallow yourself. Sir Henry Bellingham," Bellingham becomes both subject and object. The allusion to pleasurable masturbation becomes an act of horrendous cannibalism. Since, in its first stages of phantasy the infant fails to distinguish between wish and reality, one might phantasize that the phantasy appears even more real to those who are under attack. Bellingham has himself to fear.

In *We Will Bury You*, positive desire appears as aggression, while poetic pleasure is mingled with images of pain. Escapism no longer

works through detachment, or what Freud called a "mild narcosis," but rather an intensification of affect by way of temporal and spatial proximity. The concentration of mental and psychic energy—made evident in the eighty-eight-minute period in which Spott composed the entirety of the book—appears through the repetition of the word "will." Spott's use of the word evokes a phantasy of agency as well as a phantasy where word and deed are inextricably tied. The word functions in a way that is closer to the binding mechanism of the older "shall." The more language repeats itself as a way to realize its content, the more the phantasy allows for both a recathexis and discharge of desire and agency. Spott's desire to escape reality is not so much a desire to escape pain into numbness as it is a desire to escape numbness itself. But this intensification of feeling, through prolongment, risks becoming its own form of desensitization. The phantasy might engender and become the very situation it tries to escape.

III.

Not unlike Spott, Buck produced an escapist poetry to confront a growing sense of political "agnosticism and sadness."[32] Inspired by the eponymous popular true crime show that features the mysterious deaths of ordinary people, *Unsolved Mysteries* counterintuitively connects the escapist activity of television consumption to poetic composition, a process that involves not only making decisions but also states of intense concentration, immersion, and frustration. Rather than having solipsism as its aim, escapism becomes a means toward sociality. People not only escape together but escape on behalf of one another.

In the poem "Take My Glasses Off," the speaker says, "The world is like a lucid dream: if you notice, you can affect the scene with your will.… Which is why you become less depressed when involved in political organizing" (69). The premise is deceptive, but the emotional consequence is perhaps real, not just for the speaker but also for "you." While watching an episode about the death of a man named Dexter Stefonek—who apparently scribbled the words "Hot Jock Shot Wad" in a public bathroom days before his death—Buck escapes into a

world where everyone can "thrust into the world…shooting our hot / wads" and where the universe itself appears as "a sloppy wet mouth, / a rectum, / spit-covered labial folds, / a spongey warm pocket, / a small calloused hand" (13, 15–16). The private and solitary act of masturbation becomes an outward-facing possibility of release and freedom for everyone. When Buck watches an episode about a young teenager who disappeared and was later found to be murdered, they phantasize that she simply ran away from her oppressive small-town life "to go be queer in New York City // or to go do drugs in New York City / or to go be with a lover in New York City" (23). Here, Buck's escapism is about another's physical escape, suggesting that one could imagine *for* another person. Buck, being a queer writer in New York themself, evokes the phantasy of sharing what is good in one's life with a dead stranger. In the speaker's phantasy, the teenager's escapism is not simply a form of negative freedom. It is also an escape toward love and liberation.

Throughout the book, Buck links phantasies of certain people's deaths to reanimating and memorializing the already dead. Revenge is not a vicious cycle but promises closure. The future is tied to the past, defined only by undoing it. In their poem "Documentation," Buck sets up a premise: because it is difficult to remember ordinary and undistinguished things in the world of *Unsolved Mysteries*—including the lives of the lower-class victims on the show—one should associate them with exceptional images:

> For instance, if we wanted to remember Dottie Caylor, we could think of Jeff Bezos smeared with blood, lying outside of his patrol car, with the lanyard of his handgun wrapped around his ankles, handcuffs on his left wrist, the name "Robert" written on his hand, his unit's radar cable wrapped around his neck, and a bullet wound to the head. We would picture a wide, open public space, and put this image there. We know nothing about Dottie Caylor's life beyond her shitty husband's account of it, so I supposed we'd be using this image of bloodied Jeff Bezos to remember the shitty account on *Unsolved Mysteries*. But also: Frances Yates is unambitious. If we're going to create little fetishes for memory, I want this one to tell us more: we picture Bezos marked with red, and what it gives us, the memory it provides, is Dottie Caylor's desires, her relationship

with her pets, the feeling of her skin when she'd just moisturized it, then again when it was dry and in need of exfoliation. (59–60)

Escapism draws on the most vivid of billionaire profiles for its creative power. By attempting to use wealthy and powerful men to evoke the dead "so they will 'come to mind at once,'" Buck tries to substitute the impoverished nature of social memory with a phantasy that is rich in content but impoverished, given phantasy's very nature (60). Poetry, in turn, offers the additional phantasy that this substitution is possible. In "Documentation," phantasy marks what is absent, what should be there but isn't. It's a kind of compensation: the poet attempts to "fill in" lost details about Caylor's life, but reanimation remains impossible. Like Spott's work, the details in Buck's poem are what generate poetic pleasure, a pleasure in vividness and vitality. Yet such vital details are deeply tied to the act of mourning. The loss of Dottie Caylor is associated with a number of other losses: the loss of life to police brutality, the loss of healthcare, the loss of Bernie Sanders's campaign. The failure of the world to recall these harms results in a desire to escape this world for one that might remember.

When Buck phantasizes about creating "little fetishes for memory"—such as erecting a monument for Caylor by placing the image of Bezos in a public square—these phantasies revolve around reversals and acts of undoing. The relation between "us" and Caylor is restored through the transformation of Bezos (a living subject) into a set of dead body parts and the reanimation of a nonliving object (Caylor's body) into a subject. In a later poem, "Let's Pretend Today Is Not Sunday, But a Weekday," Buck—having discovered that they've been bleeding during sex—imagines that they will bring the bloodied comforter to whatever dry cleaner is advertised on Instagram:

So my goopy blood has produced an economic reaction, and

after we separate the bodies of the ruling class from their heads,

we'll be able to reverse the code and resuscitate all of it:

where an ad for Kotex is recorded in the book of history we'll instead get a glob of blood smeared across the page,

there to be licked up and tongued back into the body and

then into the mind and its experiences.

(72)

The reification of blood results in its animation as an agent separate from its producer in the economic sphere. However, what the blood does is go out and inspire revolution, "reversing" the processes that keep capitalism running.[33] Menstrual bleeding gets transformed into an act of making the ruling class bleed through decapitation. The image of this "goopy blood" in fact plays with Marx's own metaphors. Famously Marx compared the capitalist to a "vampire" who "thirsts for the living blood of labour."[34] Here, Buck suggests that revolution will allow people to take back their lost blood, licking it up and tonguing it "back into the body." Blood, once a waste product of the speaker's body, becomes a vital element in the literal re-membering and restoration of the subject's unalienated self. It obtains a magical function in service of a collective anti-capitalist politics.

IV.

Only on the surface does Orth's work diverge from Spott and Buck's, in the sense that it employs more easily recognized forms of escapist phantasy. In *The Life & Times of Steve Orth*, a collection of short fiction and poetry, a recurring protagonist details his life as a grocery store shift manager and aspiring writer. At work, he often daydreams: "Sometimes when I'm there at the grocery store, spacing out and power-facing the olive oil, I'll let my mind drift away. Not too far away. Today I thought, 'I think I'm more well-known as a grocer than a writer. Maybe even to my fellow writers in my writing community' " (38). (Note that the humor here lies in the phantasy that one could be "well-known" as a grocer.) During his lunch breaks, he writes poems, including one "about my money / and if there were more of it / all I would do was add a room / to my apartment, buy a fancy / video game machine and / then I'd just smoke weed, drink / Mountain Dew, and play video games / all day" (39). When he isn't working, the narrator spends most of his time playing Candy Crush, tracking his lost order for new headphones, and escaping his mundane life by watching

plenty of TV: *Friends*, *Tanked*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Seinfeld*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Office*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *Full House*, *Fixer Upper*, *Top of the Lake*, *Planet Earth*, *Game of Thrones*.

In one of the stories, "A Perfect Day for Scottie Pippen," which is a riff on J. D. Salinger's "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," the protagonist starts by recounting an ordinary day. He flips through TV channels, watches some golf, gets bored, hears his cat Debra meowing, feeds his cat, grabs some Pop-Tarts, doesn't bother toasting them, and finally lands on a semi-decent show: *Naked and Afraid*. After a while, he figures he should leave his house. He drives his car to 59th Street, sees NBA champion Scottie Pippen, gets out of the car, and says hi. After talking with and shooting hoops with Pippen, the protagonist goes home, opens a box in his bedroom, removes a gun, and shoots himself.

What begins as a "realistic," ordinary day becomes a kind of escapist phantasy, although Orth's rendering of phantasy in the same paratactic language across all scenes creates a world in which even superstars appear as banal as the narrator's everyday life:

> I see that it's a beautiful day, not a cloud in the sky. I get into my car and drive down 40th Street. I take a right on Telegraph Avenue. I drive down Telegraph for a little while, and then I take a left-hand turn on 59th Street. The park is on the right. I find a parking spot really close. I turn off the car and get out. And then I see six-time NBA champion Scottie Pippen shooting some free throws.
>
> Scottie passes me the ball once I step onto the court. I dribble a little bit and then airball a three-pointer. The ball rolls into the grass where we let it sit. Scottie walks up to me. We high five. (35)

Recalling the typical male, adolescent phantasy of feats on the sporting field, the phantasy revolves around bathos (think: "airball") rather than transcendence. We never get the sense that the unexpected happens to the narrator. Even exciting things don't appear exciting in the narrator's phantasies. Has escapism itself become boring? This seems to be the case when the act of suicide that ends the story is the ultimate bathetic act. Before shooting himself, the narrator tries and fails to get his cat's attention. He forces out "a small sigh" and fires a bullet. In this world, a bang and a whimper are the same ending.

Committing suicide puts an end to the character's stupor, but it also translates his nonfeeling into literal nonbeing. That the story's ending is modeled off Salinger's further deprives the character of any agency: even his phantasy is predetermined.

In Orth's world, working-class people don't just have shoddier lives compared to the rich. They even have shoddier forms of escapism, hence, "I'll let my mind drift away. *Not too far away*." When the narrator is eating his untoasted Pop-Tarts, the most he can think is that they "are a little dry, and I wish I had gotten myself a drink. Maybe some water or juice. But it is not unbearably dry" (33). The funniest example occurs when the protagonist starts watching *Naked and Afraid*, a reality show that arguably allows viewers to "escape" capitalist modernity by putting two naked strangers in a jungle and asking them to survive via "hunter and gatherer" means. Here, Orth's character is meant to escape into a world that is more exciting because it reminds us of escaping real predators. Pitifully, the viewer only escapes boredom by imagining how, in this show, "there is still a lot of stuff to do, like find and kill an animal to eat" (34).

Then there is the fact that it is not even Michael Jordan who occupies this escapist world. Rather, the person whom the protagonist can mentally access is Scottie Pippen, famous for being second to Jordan and for coming from a working-class background. Still, it is Pippen who has the "best night of my life" and who relays his superior phantasy to the main character:

> "…I dropped acid, and then I took some X."
> "What's X?"
> "Ecstasy."
> "I think ecstasy is called E."
> "Not this stuff. It's called X. Way more hardcore than E."
> "Is it pretty hardcore?"
> "It's very hardcore. Very, very hardcore."
> "What did it feel like?"
> "I felt like I was dancing, even though I was sitting. I felt like I was dancing on strawberry ice cream and there was moon juice coming out of my pores. And, you know, moon juice is pretty thick, like maple-syrup thick. And then I could levitate. Like periodically. And I'm like okay. That's exactly how it felt."

"That sounds cool."

"And then I, I swear to god, I time traveled. Like, I blacked out for a pretty long while. And when I woke, I had been transformed into a pharaoh, a fucking pharaoh. I knew I was a pharaoh because I no longer had any desire to wear a shirt."

"Pharaohs don't wear shirts?"

"No, we don't."

"So you're still a pharaoh right now?"

"As we speak." (35–36)

In addition to giving his protagonist a rather "stuplime" experience, one that simultaneously elevates and absurdifies his encounter with Pippen, Orth playfully reworks the genre of the "stoner comedy," in which a typically high audience can relax while watching someone on screen (who is usually also high) have incredible and fun experiences.[35] The humor here, however, relies on a rather sober protagonist, who, despite phantasizing this whole scenario, has to listen to the plotless happenings of Pippen's night. Pippen's drug adventures are funny because we know they sound boring to the protagonist, because telling the story of being high is like recounting one's dream or phantasy to someone else—there is no actual arc, consequence, or development. No one really cares.

Significantly, Orth's phantasy revolves around *access* to experience rather than experience itself. Escapism is mediated through the celebrity. The NBA star's Ecstasy is so much "more hardcore" it gets a different name, however idiotically ("X" instead of "E"). Even more importantly, Pippen's phantasy becomes real. He is "still" a pharaoh after his drug trip and time travel. The return to a "naked" stage of humanity where one doesn't have to wear a shirt actually gets realized for Pippen in the "now." What is really being phantasized, then, is a phantasy where phantasy can become real. Yet the imagined "I" cannot access this phantasy himself. The politics of escapism in *The Life & Times of Steve Orth* is precisely how reality curbs and short shrifts the narrator's imagination, so much so that the author must displace his phantasy onto the twice-removed character of Pippen.

If hanging out with Pippen represents the clichéd phantasy of male bonding, elsewhere in the book, Orth satirizes the phantasy of one's own death. In the poem "My Death," Orth does not pursue

revolutionary martyrdom but rather the classic phantasy of being a voyeur at one's own funeral:

> If it were possible to die from depression,
> I would be dead for sure.
> My body would be buried in
> a graveyard,
> tombstone and all.
> People would bring freshly cut flowers,
> beautiful flowers, to my funeral.
> But would anyone there sing
> "The Candle In The Wind,"
> my favorite Elton John song?
> Would anyone sing that song
> at my sad funeral?
> Would anyone change the verse lyrics
> to make it more 'bout me,
> Steve Orth?
> So doubtful!
> So irritated I am.
> Just thinking 'bout it
> makes me want to live!
>
> (81)

It is Orth's emphasis on the fickle and the trivial that gives the poem a "ha ha" effect while belying the real triviality of most people's lives, dreams, and deaths. What does it mean that mere "irritation" sways the speaker away from thoughts of dying? The phantasy betrays the danger that there is not much to live or die for in the first place. The line "If it were possible to die from depression" is a dark take on possibility. At the same time, Orth evokes Elton John's elegy for Marilyn Monroe. The working-class woman's phantasy of being "discovered" and becoming rich and famous ends up generating its own idealization of death in Orth's poem. When the speaker phantasizes about being the central figure in "Candle in the Wind," what he really desires is firstly, a *tragic* death (since a tragic death is always more moving than a "regular" death) and secondly, an important death. It is the desire to matter that is even more potent here than the desire for a good death, let alone a good life.

V.

In an interview for *Chicago Review*, Buck quotes the gay artist and activist David Wojnarowicz: "At least in my ungoverned imagination," he says, "I can fuck somebody without a rubber, or I can, in the privacy of my own skull, douse Helms with a bucket of gasoline and set his putrid ass on fire or throw congressman William Dannemeyer off the empire state building."[36] In his phrase "at least," Wojnarowicz reveals a key facet of escapism in the works discussed. If phantasy provides a space for "at least," it is valuable because it is the last defense against crushing realities in the name of goodness or pleasure. But it is also a kind of bare minimum that can reflect a cynical reality. How "good" is this goodness? The escapist cannot claim or change reality, so he claims his imagination as the next best thing. Phantasy, in this case, is a marginal space that is held out against an overwhelming reality. But its minimal nature ("at the *very* least") is telling. It is the bare minimum that reflects the austerity of what remains outside of it, hence the paradox that in this minimal space, maximalist and intricate phantasies can erupt under pressure, into either a form of violence or total bathos.

In a blog post, Spott too uses the phrase "at least" while discussing the Left's urgent need for new protest slogans: "The last couple of times [at protests] I've tried to get people shouting 'Theresa May will die today' because *at least* that is some kind of fucking spell even though it is obviously shit." Here, the poet attempts to place the phantasy of *We Will Bury You* at the center of political reality. The result? "You get these weird looks from people like you have the wrong kind of shit in your mouth, and then it goes back to the same old dum dee dum nothingness."[37]

It is difficult to see how any of these works fit into a Blochian project of hope. It is too optimistic to think they are themselves optimistic or even in the business of providing false hope. If hope entails waiting, Spott and Orth both eclipse that temporal horizon (with the Pippen phantasy involving time travel backward rather than forward). Even when Buck phantasizes about the aftermath of revolution, it is largely bound to a desire to undo the past as well as a revenge model that emphasizes resolution and closure over an

open-horizon utopia. In Spott's book, this revenge is repetitive and recursive. The importance of repetition in all three works—rewatching old episodes, restating "tonight," and returning daily to work—is itself an attempt to play out sameness with minor differences. The past is more Bergsonian in this sense, never gone but contemporaneous with the present. Escapism moves sideways, not beyond. At the same time, there are phantasies of reversible time, the time of the dead, the elimination of time to stop a predetermined or predictable tomorrow.

In an email conversation with Orth, I asked him about the relationship of his writing to reality. He responded by saying, "I don't have much interest in reality or being realistic. I don't want my writing to be confined to what has happened or will happen." In both realms—writing and reality—"anything can happen, but a lot of times, nothing does." This nothingness, which is reflected in the bathos of Orth's phantasy content and the nature of phantasy itself, ends up pointing us to real political stagnation. When Orth's protagonist jots down a poem about what he would do if he were rich, his image of escape and liberation is a prolonged reiteration of his present hobbies, which allow him to escape from the reality of being a minimum-wage worker. The character's socioeconomic reality defines even his apparent solution to escaping that reality.

Rather than offering hope, escapist phantasies instead seem to negotiate the reality of nothingness that is mirrored in their own form. In a way, these escapist works might be seen as failures—not because they don't transform their fictions into realities, but because their fictions are constantly conditioned by reality. Yet it is a banal fact that something is still at work that keeps these writers writing. While the politics of phantasy does not lie in its downstream political impact, there is nevertheless a struggle with a larger political reality. That this struggle takes place *in an escapist world* is significant, since phantasies are no longer about easily fleeing situations but about experiencing reality where it can be felt as something else: frustrating, just, funny, even delusional.

For Orth, political reality renders both everyday struggles and their escapist solutions diminutive. It is the helpless shift from expectation into nothingness, the deflation of protest into mere annoyance or world-weariness, that manifests itself in the work as if to say: the

trivial near-nothingness of one's habit-ridden life can erupt into the most outrageous phantasies, which are in turn simply that—phantasies. True phantasies are never funny for the one who escapes into them; they are supposed to be intensely private. Yet humor in Orth's collection works as a form of solidarity and cliché. We laugh because we recognize a shared experience of having to bear a certain political reality that often doesn't allow us to even struggle with it in a meaningful way. What is unreal is also all too real.

For Spott, escapism is ironically the site where one desires antagonism. Spott's phantasy protests a society that assimilates, absorbs, and neutralizes its antagonistic contents. The *real* struggle is not between the speaker and the politician or the artist and the society. Rather, it is between an antagonism within such terms and the mere reversal of roles such that no antagonism is possible. A work like *We Will Bury You* wrestles with the very nature and structure of its own model of revenge. Buck's collection, too, raises this question when the poet merely turns the problem of capital's absorption of art into art's absorption of capital. Jeff Bezos is the poetic speaker's problem *and* their solution. One can phantasize that there is a resolution to class conflict, but this resolution is achieved in a way that approaches a deus ex machina.

The works of Spott, Buck, and Orth ask us to question whether earlier justifications for or against escapism still track the projects of writers today. But more than that, they call into question those very binaries of political engagement and escapist withdrawal, the idea that hope is the foundation for action (because it is an instigator or direct cause of it), and the relationship between imagined actions and real ones. Spott, Buck, and Orth give us the names of people who exist in real life; they also present extravagant forms of magic. They give us the past; they also give us the reanimation of that past into a present that is unreal and defies the laws of possibility. "It is the element of capitulation, of withdrawal, of Utopian idealism which still lurks in Lukács's essays" that makes his work "unsatisfactory," Brecht complained about his fellow writer. But the same could be said of reality, for the works here show that dissatisfaction is precisely what is being grappled with by way of escapism. These phantasies know that what satisfactions they offer are, in the end, even in the phantasies

themselves, not so satisfying. Yet they offer brief and at times intense moments of affective engagement, even if that engagement takes the form of a laugh, let out only to evaporate into an emptiness. When escapism is a symptom of reality, it longs to escape from that very condition, often in the form of reversing causality, as if reality could be the effect rather than the cause of phantasy. If it is difficult to fully critique or redeem these projects, it is also their ambivalent statuses that give us time to contend with what we want and expect from art and life, and what form that desire takes. Maybe the question is not whether escapism can be justified but what escapism justifies for us.

NOTES

1/ Verity Spott, *We Will Bury You* (Surrey: Veer Books, 2017); Marie Buck, *Unsolved Mysteries* (New York: Roof Books, 2020); Steve Orth, *The Life & Times of Steve Orth* (Oakland: Dogpark Collective, 2020). These books will be cited in text for the remainder of the essay.
2/ Sigmund Freud argued that one can try to sever all links and mentally "re-create the world," but that "whoever, in desperate defiance, sets out upon this path to happiness will as a rule attain nothing." Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1961), 31.
3/ John Crowe Ransom, *God without Thunder, an Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1930), 178.
4/ Lars Konzack, "Escapism," in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark Wolf (New York: Routledge, 2018), 246.
5/ John Fekete, *The Critical Twilight: Explorations in the Ideology of Anglo-American Literary Theory from Eliot to McLuhan* (London: Routledge, 2014 [1977]), 45.
6/ Alfred Kreymborg, "American Poetry after the War. I," *The English Journal* 22, no. 3 (March 1933): 178–80.
7/ Kreymborg, "American Poetry after the War. II," *The English Journal* 22, no. 4 (April 1933): 268–69.
8/ Alan Filreis and Harvey Teres, "An Interview with Stanley Burnshaw," in *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 13, no. 2 (Fall 1989): 115.
9/ Filreis and Teres, "An Interview," 115.
10/ Georg Lukács, "Realism in the Balance," in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso Books, 1980), 29.
11/ Bertolt Brecht, "Against Georg Lukács," in *Aesthetics and Politics*, 68.
12/ Brecht, "Against Georg Lukács," 68.
13/ Edward Young, "Conjectures on Original Composition," in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, 3rd edition, ed. Hazard Adams (Boston: Wadsworth Publishing, 2005), 338; Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, vol. 3., ed. Gregory Smith (London: Everyman's Library, 1945), 278.
14/ Fekete, *The Critical Twilight*, 6.
15/ Fekete also critiques the Symbolists of the late nineteenth century along with the Romantics.
16/ See Patricia Meyer Spacks's *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
17/ Ernst Bloch attributes boredom to the rich: "this affluence causes a quite specific producer of more mature, now sedate wishes to appear: instead of deprivation—boredom. No speed, no luxury, no coast however blue, helps to escape it." He continues: "In its more modern form this escape attempt turns

away from mere fat capital towards snobbery. Or even towards eccentricity." Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 1, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), 34. Fast-forward over a century, and this train of thought is still evident. In a 2015 review of Ben Fama's collection *Fantasy*, Nicky Tiso argues that lines like "I think I'm in love with the world of billboards and magazines" and "Celebrity impersonators / Soba noodles / Salmon wraps / Sushi rolls" are "fantasies borne of the cultural logic of late capital, not outside it: fantasies of popularity, wealth, youth, sex, and glamour." She attributes these fantasies to the voice of a "meaningless bourgeois retro haute leftist nihilist first-person young adult," who, rather than undertaking what Tiso calls "affiliation or engagement," remains nonchalant. By contrast, Steven Zultanski describes the same collection as playing precisely "with what it [is] critiquing—high fashion, celebrity worship, the gig economy, posting—getting as close as possible to its subject matter at the risk of becoming identical with it, in order to find emotional nuance in cultural logics that appear monolithic and empty." In one case, *Fantasy* is a work that arises from boredom and presents weak escapist imagery without caring about effecting change. In another, it is a work that only appears to be complicit in consumerism but in fact isn't and is thus able to contend with the milieu's "emptiness." Both views see phantasy (and what I would call the escapisms of late capitalism) and critique as incompatible. Which side one takes ultimately depends on whether one reads *Fantasy* not only as ironic but also as genuinely ironic, where irony is a distancing tool that leads to engaged critique rather than mere depersonalization. See Nicky Tiso, "REVIEW: Fantasy by Ben Fama," *The Volta Blog*, September 28, 2015, https://thevoltablog.wordpress.com/2015/09/28/review-fantasy-by-ben-fama/; and Steven Zultanski, "Steven Zultanski Reviews Five New Experimental Poetry Collections," *Frieze*, March 28, 2019, https://www.frieze.com/article/steven-zultanski-reviews-five-new-experimental-poetry-collections.

18/ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 3, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1986), 1048.

19/ Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 3, 1046.

20/ Kleinians and Freudians generally share similar views about phantasy, including its mediation between the conscious and unconscious, its incorporation of impulses and defenses, and an interest in universal "primal" phantasies. However, Freudians "posit fantasy as dependent on the capacity to distinguish between fantasy and reality, as constructed rather than endogenous, as utilizing experience in its genesis, and as connected to memories of real events." Kleinians, by contrast, situate phantasy in the earliest stage of infancy, making it responsible for many higher mental functions. Freudians consider phantasy to be unconscious when it has

undergone either primary or secondary repression, whereas Kleinians view phantasy to be unconscious independently of any repression. See *On Freud's "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,"* eds. Ethel Spector Person, Peter Fonagy, and Sérvulo Figueira (London: Karnac Books, 2013), xiii.

21/ Susan Isaacs writes, "phantasy enters into the earliest development of the ego in its relation to reality, and supports the testing of reality and the development of knowledge of the external world…reality-thinking cannot operate without concurrent and supporting unconscious phantasies." Susan Isaacs, "The Nature and Function of Phantasy," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 29 (1948): 93–94.

22/ Sigmund Freud, "Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 12, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1958), 222–24.

23/ Freud, *Civilization*, 31.

24/ Fekete, *The Critical Twilight*, 8.

25/ Theodor W. Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society," in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry W. Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 42.

26/ Joshua Kotin, "Poems that Kill," in *Critical Inquiry* 47, no. 3 (2021): 456–76.

27/ Verity Spott, "A conversation with Verity Spott – part 2" by fred spoliar, *Spam Plaza*, March 26, 2021, accessed July 1, 2021, https://www.spamzine.co.uk/post/feature-a-conversation-with-verity-spott-part-2.

28/ Verity Spott, "Keston Sutherland & Verity Spott discuss 'We Will Bury You,'" YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NXURFEBA8Y, December 3, 2020, 10:12, 17:58.

29/ Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 215.

30/ Culler, 216.

31/ See Chapter 10, "The Working Day," in Marx's *Capital*. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1976).

32/ Marie Buck, "Interview with Marie Buck," interview by Brian Whitener, *Chicago Review*, April 23, 2021, accessed July 1, 2021, https://www.chicagoreview.org/interview-with-marie-buck/.

33/ Psychoanalytically speaking, the revenge model Spott and Buck employ represents a fundamental structure of phantasy which relies on reversals. This is evident in classic psychoanalytic examples where subjects that imagine performing an act on an object may end up receiving the act, or where the imagined action is replaced by an antonymic act.

34/ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 367.
35/ On "stuplimity," see Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 280.
36/ Buck, "Interview with Marie Buck," *Chicago Review*.
37/ Verity Spott, "Poetics of Protest," in *Two Torn Halves*, June 14, 2017, accessed July 1, 2021, http://twotornhalves.blogspot.com/2017/06/poetics-of-protest.html. Emphasis mine.

Ed Roberson, *MPH and Other Road Poems*. Verge Books, 2021.

The title of Ed Roberson's most recent collection, *MPH*, seems to support an almost unavoidable characterization of the book as a firsthand account of motorcycling in America. The descriptive blurb on the back cover explains the circumstances that lead to this conclusion. In the early 1970s, Roberson travels cross country with two friends on a set of BMW road bikes while working on a poetry manuscript documenting the experience. Coming at a prolific time in his writing life, the manuscript falls by the wayside and is lost for decades. Images and fragments of language from the missing text, recalled by memory, appear in select poems, scattered across several subsequent books. Upon discovering a portion of the original manuscript, originally titled *MPH*, Roberson puts together an expanded version, collecting the extant works from the '70s with the poems they inspired in their absence. Given this remarkable backstory, reviewers tend to privilege the vehicular theme, reading the book as a serial road poem in the context of literary treatments of westward migration and the iconography of the motorcycle as a harbinger of countercultural cool.† From this vantage, a clear case can be made for the project's significance. As a continuation of Roberson's lived inquiry into the unsettling beauty of Black social life, it calls attention to and complicates the neocolonialist myth of the open road. In 148 pages, the poet reckons with the possibility of living "in the present," which is not just about acknowledging the afterlives of slavery but about calling attention to the ways that racial trauma conditions our very ability to discern the sensorium of the present (xvii).

And yet there's something else at play in the book, just below the surface, dwelling there in the title. As the three letters ask us to imagine ourselves in the saddle of the motorcycle, we look down at the instrumentation panel, gauges marking speed, and are confronted with the realization that *MPH* is a book that sees the motorcycle in terms of its potential to achieve certain readings. The bike is subordinated to its dials, made into a means for making a periplum, of charting the land as it is seen not on a map but in motion. The initialism on the cover announces that below its cover as a postmodern motorcycle diary, the book represents a sustained study into the nature and meaning of measure.

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†/ Mark Scroggins, "The Mythology of the Cross-Country Motorcycle Trip in Ed Roberson's Early Poems," *Hyperallergic*, October 20, 2021, https://hyperallergic.com/686213/ed-roberson-mph-and-other-road-poems/.

Few concepts are as integral to the history of twentieth-century avant-garde poetics as that of poetic measure. Often associated with William Carlos Williams's advocacy of the so-called American idiom, measure proved an appealing idea for subsequent generations, as it signaled a marked succession from the dominant history of Western poetics. While technically synonymous with meter, the organizing system that structures a line of poetry, measure departs from inherited ideas about prosodic regularity, connoting instead an aspirational pursuit of rhythmic principles accommodating of dynamic variation. The field poetics of the postwar era draw heavily on Williams's ideas, particularly in Charles Olson's breath-based theory of projective measure. Olson's arguments, in turn, made measure relevant to the anthropological study of Indigenous poetries in the late 1960s. Under the sign of measure, ethnopoetics came to fruition, applying alternative prosodies in an effort to treat Yoruban praises and Peruvian dance songs not as primitive artifacts but as literary acts suggestive of a global avant-gardism to come. At the same time, measure served a prominent role in the poetic theories of the Black Arts Movement, as writers like Amiri Baraka found in Williams's work an argument about the untapped power of local peoples' speech. In offering a way of scoring what sociolinguists in this moment were calling Black vernacular English, measure provided a means of further integrating poetry into the social fabric and overturning Eurocentric notions of the lyric subject as an autonomous figure, cut off from collectivist politics.

Roberson absorbed all of this in his motorcycle days. In his introduction to the book and elsewhere, he describes a period of teaching himself "the art of poetry in a broader and deeper context than the historical examples [he'd] been taught in school" (xv). But how does this translate to the page? How do we go from pentameter and hexameter to speedometer? Consider these lines from the opening poem:

> Not a narrative not a word walk
> though neither a slide
> -show of your time in other places
>
> in the sense of a track a record
> a check off writ in a particular geographic like
> as box in a theater of states not
>
> scenic accurate the people
> the customs the events
> but a response to the sense

of wandering of rootlessness
of isolation in your own country
of a despair the mortality

of freedom of the adventure the new
as territory of quest of myth a campaign.

(1)

Measure here is chiefly a matter of line break and spacing. As early as the 1970s, critics such as Robert Spector were pointing out commonalities between Roberson's typographical registration of speech and the "controlled if unconventional verse forms" of Olson and E. E. Cummings.† And yet Roberson shows how typographical irregularity and prosodic experimentation can not only generate new formal arrangements but also prompt the revival of the radical potential embedded within traditional forms.

This opening poem falls squarely within the structural parameters of the sonnet. After the octave, we read the volta "but a response to the sense," and here Roberson offers a key for thinking about the formal relevance of motorcycle travel to the structure of his line. The first lines recite a litany of negated literary genres, all relevant to the history of westward expansion and the subjugation of land and people. The poem is not a teleological start-to-finish tale of a single hero or a consumptive carousel of photo ops, nor is it an academic sublimation of cultural imperialism through thick description. It is, as the volta terms it, a response to an inchoate field of perceptions and memories; thus Roberson emphasizes the utility of the sonnet for countenancing and countering received expectations. Measure creates a tension between the diachronic propulsion involved in tracking the development of a thought and the synchronic isolation of a phrase through repetition and blank space. By removing certain linking words and dwelling instead on the continual unfolding of minimalist perceptual chunks, the poem translates the experience of speeding across state lines with little between you and the unfolding horizon. It suggests a compositional process of continual checking and readjustment, corresponding to the reactive rapt attention of the motorcyclist.

Yet perhaps the stronger link between formal measure and the title lies not in the sensorial experience of bike riding but in the destination at the end of the ride. In the introduction, Roberson explains that in addition to seeing friends in San Francisco, the object of the trip was to visit sacred sites in the Indigenous communities of the Southwest. One of his traveling companions,

†/ Robert D. Spector, "Poetry Quarterly: Betwixt Tradition and Innovation," *Saturday Review* 53, no. 52 (December 26, 1970): 51.

Andrew Welsh, was completing a dissertation on the "primitive" origins of the Poundian categories of phanopoeia and melopoeia in riddles, communal chants, and dance songs—a project that would become *Roots of Lyric* (1978). Likewise, Roberson, who considered himself to be "just *playing* with poetry" in his Pitt Poetry Prize–winning first collection, *When Thy King Is a Boy* (1970), was becoming more serious about writing, undertaking a self-directed study of anthropology and ethnography that converged with the ethnopoetics trends of the late 1960s (*CR* 59:4/60:1, 91). The desire to visit the Black Hills, Hopi mesas, and the White House Ruin was a function of "not only wanting to read about a place, but to actually *be* there." And yet what is most noticeable in *MPH* is that the book, like the opening poem suggests, engages with current trends in anthropological poetics without attempting to capture the expressive practices of an Indigenous other. Rather than use the innovative measures proposed by Dennis Tedlock, Jerome Rothenberg, and others to transcribe shamanic power songs like some Lomax of the "Me Decade," Roberson applies these methods to engage with the incantatory rituals he encountered in his youth as a congregant in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church.

Native American rites offer Roberson perspective on his formative experiences in the church, with its gospel traditions shaping his understanding of musicality. A clear example of this comes to the fore in the poem that represents the crux of the lost 1970s manuscript, a chant entitled "'Cause." It begins:

> when we made the middle passage didn't we
> walk the waters didn't we
> have the waters paved with the skulls
> of our grief for each other didn't we make it
> on ourselves.
> when we crawled under the mason dixon
> didn't we jump the fence over jordan
> didn't the river re-bed behind us and
> turned blood because the bloods wouldn't tell
> didn't we make it to this one side on our other.
> on ourselves didn't we
>
> (22)

While there are scant instances of blank space later in the poem, the primary engagement with measure comes through the ecstatic refrain of sanctified questioning that Roberson weaves throughout. In a post-reading Q&A

published in *Chicago Review* in 2016, Roberson describes the relevancy of ethnographic materials for this poem in particular, calling attention to its source text, the old spiritual "Didn't It Rain," widely popularized during his youth by Mahalia Jackson. "A lot of the ethnographic expression had not been really looked at in any way other than a colonialist way. But after a while when I was reading this shit, I thought—'I know this.' It dawned on me that I had seen people sing power songs" (*CR* 59:4/60:1, 91–92). The reverence for the religious song is presented in the poet's attunement to the improvisatory precision calibrating the carried-away refrain with syncopated pauses, here figured through variable line breaks.

The concern for measure spills into the thematic content of Roberson's reworked hymn. He changes the question from the original "didn't it" to "didn't we," and in doing so shifts the focus from a performative inhabitation of Old Testament flood mythology to a query into the historical rupture attending the constitution of a modern Black diasporic sociality. "Didn't it" wants confirmation, as prophetic vision, of spiritual cleansing. "Didn't we" wants to know how one measures the feeling of a collective past in a singular body. But it also recognizes the impossibility of rationally knowing such a collective past, and thus introduces measure in order to discuss its own limits. The objective is not to overthrow the idea of measure but rather to set up the conditions for showing that which cannot be measured. In the introduction, Roberson proclaims, "I wanted my readers to be able to recognize the art that is latent in the poetry I lived as a Black man in America" (xv). To register its latency is to calculate that which is not present, not yet actualized, not yet measurable. The legibility of the vernacular lies in its illegitimacy. Its measure is a matter of ongoing resourcefulness and adaptation, which Roberson hallmarks in "'Cause."

The skepticism regarding positivist metrics is internal to the postwar interest in measure. In twentieth-century poetry and poetics, to be concerned with measure was to be concerned with the very logic of measurement, analytical and quantitative rationality. Nathaniel Mackey reads this embattled embrace with measure as one of the signal features of avant-garde experimentalism and innovation. He refers to it as the "pursuit of a more complex accommodation between technique and epistemological concerns, between ways of telling and ways of knowing, especially when knowing is less the claim than a nervousness about it."† For Roberson, the motorcycle manifests this nervousness, as exemplified in the poem "The Physics of Trajectory":

†/ Nathaniel Mackey, *Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018), 240.

A kid rolls the window
the rest the way down
and spits at us.

what's the physics
for I am passed spat
at?

(64)

Here the loogie becomes a kind of word problem. If a BMW motorcycle is passed going seventy-five miles per hour, what are the chances spit from the passing vehicle hits the motorcyclist? But in this word problem, the words are not stable quantities; they are part of the problem. Ascertaining the path of the projectile, a literalization of projective verse, requires inquiry into the instrumentalized assumptions shaping language:

every time I get
the cold stray
drop of somebody's

windshield wash spray
the passed returns.

(64)

The dance of roadway passing and getting passed invites us to consider temporality in terms of its linguistic signatures. Being passed by another driver locates us in that driver's past. But then if we speed up, we overtake the passing vehicle and put the vehicle in our past. The near homophony of "passed" and "past" provides Roberson with a subtle way of drawing upon his studies in Indigenous cultures to unsettle Western notions of teleology. The poem signals an openness to pre-Columbian conceptions of cyclical time that anthropological linguists like Benjamin Whorf identified in the structures of Hopi languages. Yet here again, Roberson's inquiry into the logic of measure leads him to wrestle with the ideology of colonialist appropriation intrinsic to early developments in ethnopoetics. The critique of imperialism takes the form of a challenge to the idea of liberation through transportation. While we might think of the road as escape route, the road out of town, out of the plantation South, the segregated urban North, that road is the very thing that brings the brutalities of the past into the present: "you think it never reaches // you yet / the past / doesn't have to. you are reached" (64). The road is a colonialist project, settling the land, staking a claim, and facilitating the extraction of resources, from mineral deposits and factory-farm harvests

to assembly-line handicrafts and commodified folkways. It is not incidental that Roberson comes to this realization of the omnipresent past on the road. The offending kid spits on a Black motorist from the presumed safety of a family sedan. The act exemplifies the ways in which what we call the past in the hopes of putting it behind us predicates—potentially unconsciously—the behavior of subsequent generations.

Masquerading as a childish prank, the spitting incident touches upon a larger pattern of the book, of moments that signal the clear and present threats, small and large, that await a motorcyclist around every bend in the road. "Didn't It Rain" might point to the symbolic promise of spiritual recuperation through baptism, but on the road, rainfall takes on a material significance, producing treacherous conditions. When accepting the Stephen Henderson Award, Roberson explained that he first came to poetry not because it was beautiful but because it was terrifying, that it enabled him to write through his feelings of fear and trepidation.† The motorcycle, or "donor cycle," aligns well with the affective charge of Roberson's work. The individualized threat of collision makes perceptible the everyday terrors intrinsic to modern life: police brutality, gun violence, exploitative labor, the prison-industrial complex, and the outstripping of natural resources. These realities are seldom named explicitly in *MPH*, but they contribute to a sense of impending risk that Roberson calls the "it." He consistently writes in the book of being "up against it."

> I would die. on this trip
> or not. that simple.
> but the surprise was it wasn't
>
> up ahead. it was right here.
> on me closer than up against
> my flesh and always was.
> now. the dark
>
> cloud over the road was everywhere.
>
> (114)

Just as the past becomes indistinguishable from the passed, the prospect of dying on the bike travels with a constant companion, the fear of dying on the bike. The speedometer becomes a way of measuring the fear that the

†/ Ed Roberson, "Reading for Heatstrings, Reading and Presentation of the Stephen Henderson Award for Literature by the African American Literature and Culture Society, Boston, May 27, 2011," PennSound, accessed March 4, 2022, https://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Roberson.php.

rider is up against. Looking at the dial, one has a means of measuring the probability of surviving a collision. But in that moment, the moment in which the rider sees the needle pin its way past 100 miles per hour, the moment in which fear blooms in the rider's helmet, that is the moment the terrible thing did not happen. If being up against it is a practice, then the motorcycle is part of that practice, of living in the present with all real risks, yet without anticipating—and thus enacting—the terrible outcome ahead of time.

All roads somehow lead back to the current moment. Once there was a time when a reader could ask of a book, why now? What about our moment matches the message relayed by this author? Now everything is somehow a comment on pandemic life, especially those works that try to ignore the situation and pose some illusion of being untouched. But the parallel between *MPH* and the global coronavirus pandemic is apparent. All one needs to do is consult one of the hundreds of online COVID-tracking websites, which are commonly referred to as infection dashboards. I don't want to tie any neat bow around a book that is as spellbinding as it is challenging. It is reductive to say that Roberson has offered us some kind of survival guide. But in a moment in which we live with new fears, and new means of measuring fear, of making speculative terror a palpable fixture in our lives, Roberson's book offers more than a reminder that precarity has long been the condition of human existence, and that we survive through remaining in relation to others. In exhuming the lost poems of first permission, he has fashioned an arrangement of contemporary power songs, mysterious in the measured resilience they make available.

J. Peter Moore

§

Wendy Xu, *The Past*. Wesleyan University Press, 2021.

Wendy Xu's previous collection, *Phrasis* (winner of Fence Books's Ottoline Prize in 2016), was preoccupied with its own acts of poetic saying. "*Phrasis*," Xu noted in an interview, is intended to invoke "half of the word 'ekphrasis,'" thereby severing her poetry from the task of representing externalities.† In her new volume, *The Past*, Xu adapts her concern with the limits of lyrical representation to tell the story of her family's immigration to the US from China, her navigation of a racist and racializing American culture, and her

†/ Wendy Xu, "Wendy Xu: 'Poetry Validates the Emotional Realness of the Imaginary,'" interview by Kaveh Akbar, *Divedapper*, May 2, 2016, http://www.divedapper.com/interview/wendy-xu/.

complex relation to nationhood and heritage. Xu's poems present fragments of memory that seem to swirl around in what she calls, alluding to the false idyll of American whiteness, "the snow-globe of the past" (95). It's this fragmentation that provides the interstitial openings in which Xu is able to conceive a space not limited by the historical conditions that determine her self-knowing. "I am not writing to photograph the past," she contends in "Why Write," "I am writing to sit inside the pauses of Uncle's sentences, the commas of the dead" (80).

The dead do punctuate Xu's poetry. In 1989, Xu's family left China for the United States, just three days before the government massacred prodemocracy protesters in Tiananmen Square. She grew up in upstate New York and small-town Iowa. Her mother worked in a garment factory. Her father found a job with an agricultural subsidiary of DuPont, a fact Xu acknowledges while pointing to the company's role in developing chemical weapons used in World War II. Xu studied for her BA at the University of Iowa, switching her major from business to English, before obtaining an MFA from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She has simultaneously defied and fulfilled the kinds of expectations often imposed on first-generation Chinese Americans, publishing three full-length books of poetry and winning several awards before the age of thirty-five. *The Past* excavates Xu's mixed feelings about her own sense of filial obligation, immigrant ambition, and ties to a historically privileged mode of autobiographical and confessional lyricism. Elegizing her melancholic attachment to and distantiation from a previous generation and its lost homeland, the collection asks: How can one hold onto revoked origins without becoming mired in them? How is it possible to retain connection to a past that has been filtered through imperfect memory and mediated by the distortions of an oppressive literary tradition and alienating society?

One answer is that Xu's poetry makes itself about the very fraught process of personal and political identification in linguistic form. Naming, as Xu has commented, "is the way in which the government has been trying to identify me, or assimilate me, or erase me and document me in different ways my whole life."† In "Names of the River," Xu narrates an excursion involving her failure to describe a meaningful response to the sight of China's iconic Yangtze:

> I did wrong by all ideas of *nation*, haunted
> by the after-
> life of speech, public acts wagging

†/ Xu, "'Poetry Validates.'"

their dutiful tails
I sat down
in the crosswinds of a feeling, too wild
to write it out how the velcro parts
of me unstuck themselves

But do you too, alone, ever
feel incompetent? If in one hand holding
a wet tissue for dignity
when the Yangtze view
leaves you cold?
Somewhere in America a white boss
in a dandelion dress-shirt is raising
his voice again
A quick pivot to the page where
I stare down the verbs and am afraid
to make a recitation of myself—
am I *unimitable*, or, is this just another feeling?

(18)

Into this scene of emotional impasse, Xu interjects a tragic analogue for the experience of broken connection to her birthplace: "Somewhere in America a white boss / in a dandelion dress-shirt is raising / his voice again." In the moment of failed identification with her homeland, that is, Xu hears the reprimand of a white supervisor; her error— failing to perform the expected Asian identity in her poetry—becomes doubled by a rebuke in the sphere of American professionalism. The complex feelings of shame and anger conjured by such parallel exclusions from both Chinese and American culture form one of the tributaries of Xu's approach-avoidance behavior when it comes to verbal self-representation. "I stare down the verbs and am afraid / to make a recitation of myself," the poem continues. But her blocked encounter with the Yangtze and the lost possibility of naming it also lead to an engagement with extratextual ongoingness and unwritten potential. A breakdown in the process of identification and representation, manifesting at the level of Xu's frequently disjunctive form, seems to precipitate her understanding of the self as a flow of provisional fragments, a riverine processuality. Xu concludes "Names of the River" with a list of monikers that she *would have* recorded on the day in question if things had been different: "I would have made a record of everything / there flowing / from the mouth of the river: / 'The Yellow and Deep Water' / 'The Big Mouth' / 'The Five Stars' / 'The Tao' // One reminding me now of the next, heavier / than foreign

air, / their yellow names soaking the page" (19–20). By reflecting on what cannot be or has not been stated, Xu's language becomes inundated with a kind of fluidifying negativity. Negation, Xu once remarked, is something with which she hopes to always remain fascinated: "to say that something is, or for something to be, is fixed and determined. To not be leaves space open for everything that is still possible…for play and negotiation."†

Befitting her interest in a productive kind of negation, much of Xu's poetry is beautifully unsettling. There are frequent jump cuts, sudden shifts in time and place. Pronouns and other deictics remain ambiguous. Much is left out. Logics that would explain the sequencing of thoughts and images are often withheld (though in many places they are available for discovery, as above). Objects and concepts get personified or animated with synesthetic associations whose implications can be difficult to parse. Then there's Xu's penchant for non sequitur, anacoluthon (unexpected or ungrammatical turns in sentences), and other swings in rhetorical register. Consider the wonderfully disorienting "After Is Not Return":

> Outside the old house,
> concrete aging
> away from me: three men
> in green jackets, dark hair
> patching a sidewalk
>
> Set the scene and do not
> yet undo it (let it move
> in the direction
> of time: silence
> to sight,
> to inevitable
> speech
> to mood)
>
> How many fathers past
> and ambitious sons?
> A blue parakeet singing
> from the neighbor's
> gridded roof (escaped
> from a cage at market)

†/ Xu, "'Poetry Validates.'"

Human words
move me towards
confession (memory a slim
        blade slipping
                the apple)
cuts towards unintended
        flesh instead

The air was full of listening wires
        buzzing for names

When I was once a private person
and wish
to be again (says the poem…

(35–36)

Here, as elsewhere in *The Past*, Xu's writing is at once intimately clear and blurry, like memory is with its limited depth of field. And, like memory, her language becomes by turns photographic and exquisitely surreal. Always draped across her lines with precision, Xu's sentences pivot from the concrete to the abstract, the descriptive to the editorial, and the symbolic to the purely sensory. Everyday images get tweaked with minute strangenesses. Sidewalk slabs fronting the "old house" appear as "concrete aging / away from me," while later, "memory" is "a slim / blade slipping / the apple."

While Xu interacts complexly with remembered histories, *The Past* is particularly concerned with intergenerational differences, with "the chasms between different generations of Chinese-American immigrants."† Figuring the domestic as always couched in the political, her volume presents many intimate depictions of the life shared by Xu and her family. In "A Sound Not Unlike a Bell," she describes a phone call with her father: "Last night on the phone, bored to death while Dad live-translates my new poems into Chinese / He probes the meaning behind phrases until I think 'You just don't get it' / Later he explains to me the metrics of Chinese classical verse and I think 'I just don't get it,' and we laugh together" (11). In "A Poem on My Mother's Birthday," she recounts sharing celebratory cake with her mom under the pall cast by her uncle's passing: "We eat exchanging soft permission to touch the future, mysterious diurnal flower of existence, its irresistible center" (65). Later Xu writes in the pivotal "Notes for an Opening" that to honor her mother, she must "'be twice as good as them to be taken half as seriously'"

†/ Xu, "'Poetry Validates.'"

(96). Her book is partly an effort to recognize the ways her life and writing have been made possible by the struggles and triumphs of a prior generation. Here, however, Xu exhibits a significant cognitive dissonance with regard to filial conventions, one that also carries over into her experience of the inheritances of the lyric genre. "It is beautiful to please one's parents," she acknowledges, "Though somewhere it is written that piety is neither interesting nor progressive" (11).

Xu's tendency to present what she describes in "Description, Repetition" as disjointed "granular thought," coupled with her capacity for gorgeously estranging the familiar, both reflects and bolsters what we could call her honest ambivalence about the project of lyric autobiography (37). *The Past* is peppered with negative—or at least hesitant—allusions to lyrical conventions. "Coming to America," the first poem in the book, opens with metatextual narration of the generic command that the poet "Speak first of the flooded interior," before going on to reference desire for "further inquiry of the lyric self" (1). In "Writing Home," Xu reports that "These days / the lyric's sentiment floats / away from me, like a river someone / forgets to bless" (17). Xu isn't the first poet to blend a tenuous interest in confessional lyricism with the formal techniques and poststructuralist theories often associated with the Language poetry movement of the seventies and eighties.† But what stands out about Xu's writing is the way it sits so squarely in the middle of what one influential anthology called this intersection "where lyric meets Language."‡ Add to this the critical intelligence with which Xu performatively maps an experimental will to disrupt the spatialized temporality of lyric expression—the ways conventional lyricism implies the uncovering of a self located *beneath* and *before* language—onto the problem of representing the immigrant and personal past in her writing. It's by narrating this process that Xu transforms the space she carves out between realism and experimentalism into one in which the problematics of identification can play out in a particularly generative and moving fashion.

Alongside many poems that treat the difficulties of making a record of personal and familial history, *The Past* also uses its experimental formal conceits to remember those who have been wiped from historical memory. In this respect, Xu joins contemporary poets like Solmaz Sharif and Layli Long Soldier who have linked quotidian experiences of gendered and racializing erasure to the physical and legal nullification perpetrated by the United States

†/ One could find a pre-Language precursor to Xu's sociologically attuned love-hate affair with lyric in Amiri Baraka's first two poetry volumes, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961) and *The Dead Lecturer* (1964).

‡/ Claudia Rankine and Juliana Spahr, eds., *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002).

against both its residents and foreign nationals. Whereas Sharif and Long Soldier employ their destabilizing of linguistic reference to respond to the abuses of US empire, Xu's additional object of critique in *The Past* is the Chinese government's surveillance of its citizens and censorship of history. In a central sequence called "Tiananmen Sonnets," Xu encodes into her lineation a numerical allusion to the date of the Tiananmen Square massacre (June 4, 1989), which is routinely detected and scrubbed from the internet by Chinese government algorithms. The "Tiananmen Sonnets" are some of the most intricate and allusive poems in the book. Here the idea that experimental poetry's ambiguity—its saying by not saying—could be a means of evading domination takes on a more literal meaning in Xu's poetry.

Xu has commented on her turn to writing about identity and immigration that the catharsis it provides is in part due to her long-standing reluctance to take up these themes in her writing. As an undergraduate, she was once encouraged by a white professor to make her work more readily about her ethnic identity, an exhortation that had the opposite effect. "Instead," Xu explains, "for so many years afterwards, I wrote furiously *away* from anything that would mark me as racially or culturally Other in my poems. I was young and I took it as a challenge to write a poem so good and 'universally' legible that no comments would be necessary, least of all any about it needing to be more Chinese." This doesn't mean that Xu has come to identify uncomplicatedly with Chinese heritage in her poetry. "Now," she explains,

> I'm writing immigrant Chinese-American poems because I feel like it, and sometimes it hurts and sometimes it heals. The old fear is still there, that I've fulfilled somebody's expectations of me, that I'm less-than because my flowers are a little more Chinese these days. That my white readers see me most clearly when I autopsy my immigrant pain on the page![†]

If Xu's work is powerful, it's because of the ways she so eloquently articulates this problem of wanting to honor one's past without being reduced to it, a problem she links to debates about poetic genre while gesturing beyond them to the higher-stakes issues of surveillance, citizenship, cultural memory, and diaspora. Xu thereby deftly navigates a particularly tricky double bind of representation that has been at the heart of recent critiques of both confessionalism and experimental verse—a larger dynamic of the public sphere wherein minoritized writers must either negate their differences or

†/ Wendy Xu, "Wendy Xu on the Impossible Complexity of Immigrant Love: Peter Mishler in Conversation with the Author of *Phrasis*," interview by Peter Mishler, *Lit Hub*, March 27, 2018, https://lithub.com/wendy-xu-on-the-impossible-complexity-of-immigrant-love/.

risk *being* negated by rhetorics of invalidation. In so doing, Xu refuses the either/or logic that culture imposes on her, realizing in *The Past* a book that looks to the future as much as to history.

Andrew Gorin

§

Mark Francis Johnson, *Sham Refugia*. Hiding Press, 2020.
Mark Francis Johnson, *Poor Fridge*. Anteism Books & The Centre for Expanded Poetics, 2021.

For several years now, the poet Mark Francis Johnson has been publishing books whose cosmic intricacies tend perversely toward disintegration. Johnson's project of atypical world building—or "unworldbuilding," as he has labeled it—takes place in a world or world series called "Colwynox," the topographical contours of which remain unchartable even as they are felt. Something akin to Johnson's poetry can be seen in ekphrastic miniature in the Justin Lieberman–designed front cover of *Sham Refugia*. In Lieberman's collage, details from a Disney comic strip have been cut into various polygons and then carefully spliced together at oblique angles along the gutters. Just as the tesserae of the resulting mosaic combine beautifully while simultaneously undoing the narrative gestalt, so Johnson's poetic units accrete into seductive "wholes" that nonetheless refuse to cohere according to traditional optics.

Sham Refugia is divided into five sections, which are respectively and fancifully titled "A Diet of Felt Painted Like Snow," "We Were a Whole Protein," "Fair Comment On My Means," "Debris Too Soft To Sell," and "A Gentle, Gentle Rebuff." The purpose of this division is not immediately clear—and indeed it may even imply a structuration that the book in some ways works to disavow. But we can certainly pick up from the composite of these titles something highly suggestive in terms of socioeconomic arrangement—a reformulation by which familiar elements of taxonomy, consumption, and commerce have violently shifted. In the title "We Were a Whole Protein," for instance, the puny amplification of "Whole Protein" ironically implies that the "We" is now or was once *even less* than protein—a demos figure with all the social influence of an amino acid. In some ways, then, the Colwynoxian world of *Sham Refugia* seems even more systemically iniquitous and inequitable than our own. At the same time, the difference is not simply a question of measure; however much the book resounds with the affective and tonal frequencies associated with world building, it also dispenses with the moorings that typically facilitate epistemological purchase

on a given fictional world. Often, we never know quite where we are, despite the thud of the terrain beneath our feet.

Throughout *Sham Refugia*, Johnson's world building unfolds in both verse and prose. When it comes to the former, Johnson is a skillful prestidigitator, making deft use of the caesural and lineal possibilities that the form allows:

> A tuft of hair-like hair like
> grass on a tiny island can be
> relied upon, yes to surrender shape
>
> to a drizzle.
> A merchant giving a horse
> white cement can mar
>
> a landscape a treacly tale
> endurable without anesthetic
> about said landscape would improve. It is
>
> always hard the day after it
> is easy. A vast industrial Mom and Pop
> merry with bunting can mar
>
> a landscape a big baritone
> out of costume would improve.
> The opposite too
>
> is true. Watch your step.
>
> (26)

The opening lines suggest a miniature *Rape of the Lock* redux, in which the simile-stricken tuft surrenders to the most pathetic villain in the pathetic fallacy storehouse: a drizzle. The suggestive orthography of "mar" in line six fuses horse, merchant, and blemish, and there is a related noise confluence in "Mom," "merry," and "mar" in the antepenultimate stanza. Such anamorphic oddity is even more extreme in the transitions between some of the lines. In the section running from "A merchant giving a horse" to "about said landscape would improve," the cadence of a grandiloquent prose begs us to interpret the whole as a parsable syntagm—which we can, with a little effort. But the violent snaps at the line breaks seem to force the words and phrases into new language parts, or at least to plug them into

extremely unusual relationships with each other. Even if we can successfully cut through Johnson's smoke screen of wordplay, the clarified proposition that emerges still requires some interpretive contortion: "A merchant giving a horse white cement can mar a landscape [that] a treacly tale (endurable without anesthetic) about said landscape would improve." Thus, a world in miniature, at once forensically articulated and topographically disorienting.

Another crucial element of Johnson's world building is iterative deployment of certain words or phrases. These words or phrases might be redolent of anything from protagonists to technologies. In *Sham Refugia*, we repeatedly encounter such oddities as "Whayn," "Kreeth," "3019," "plastic sheds," "Wulfworks," and "Holiday" (most of which also appear elsewhere in Johnson's Colwynox books). There is also a rich variation of textual type—both in terms of typography (constant undulations between italicized, bolded, or quoted text) and typology (repetitions or twists on textual strings, both in the titles and in the bodies of the poems). These strategies of phrasal recombination and recirculation serve to orient us in the absence of typical narrative conventions. What we don't get in a Johnson book are backstories, functions, or particulars—or if we *do* get them, they are too far out of range for our reticles to measure.

A delicious early slice of Johnson's prose world building occurs in "Three Sweeps," whose opening section runs:

> In a great empty foul-smelling hearth he jumps twice, thrice, again and again, too cold rather than too small to reach the lowest rung on the blackened ironwood ladder that runs out of sight up the chimney. He jumps again, he is jumping still. *Don't think because he is cold he's not small / Cold found the Molecule, after all.* Small jumper in extra-small company jumper, jumping to reach the rung he will never reach. You can buy audio of the puny thud he makes. (15)

Certainly, such writing can be described as narrative—the homuncular protagonist has been provided with setting, quest, and travail. There is narrative *texture*, too, a sound and a feel that are enjoyably picaresque. However, closer inspection reveals the points of connection to be somehow compromised. Both the propositions and the nexuses between them seem ever so slightly off or elliptical, complicating the temporality, the voice, and the telos of the set piece. Often, what we are left with is not quite a narrative in the classic sense but rather a potent narrative *affect* that miraculously survives the obscuration of the elements that are traditionally taken as essential narrative constituents.

The effect of this tantalizing world building is even more striking when considered as an architectonic lattice that provides form to *Sham Refugia*

as a whole. The book is a complex crystalline structure, as imposing and labyrinthine as bismuth. While such complexity does not readily lend itself to narrative glossing, it nonetheless facilitates a kind of apophatic approach to the book's various objects. Like forerunner texts such as Francis Ponge's *Soap* or Leslie Scalapino's *that they were at the beach*, Johnson's book often revisits certain vignettes in order to iterate them differently. Consider the following excerpt from one of the several entries titled "Counsel":

> A **New Citizen** sporting the popular 3019 t-shirt which reads "*In the great empty hearth he had to jump twice, too cold rather than too small, to reach the lowest rung on the blackened ironwood ladder that ran out of sight up the chimney*" is likely to be vaporized by a King who fears aspirational wear, and Who, angered by similar shirts in the past, has been known to "pull the ladder up" without warning. (68)

The homunculus who in the first section of the book was in the process of forlornly jumping for a rung that he would never reach has now been vulgarly transformed into mere t-shirt pabulum (incidentally, the second extraction of value from him, following the audio recording of "Three Sweeps"). Crucially, though, the narrative has changed: instead of being kept at his Sisyphean task, the homunculus is reported to have reached the lowest rung on the ladder after two attempts (hence "aspirational wear"). We might believe that any aspirational valence has been nullified by the fact that the "**New Citizen**" wearing the t-shirt is "likely to be vaporized." But such is the wrong way to read Johnson, I think. It is more interesting to consider what the various textual parallaxes and focalizations and reworkings tell us about Johnson's worlds. For example, we might ask what happens to text that becomes quoted or misquoted within the Colwynoxian cosmos, or how italics impact the veridicality of a proposition. Such questions help us approach the spirit of unknowing that both binds and undoes the world structure of *Sham Refugia*. Unknowing, in Johnson's work, manifests not through voids or silence but rather through the opposite—through reaffirmation or reiteration. The effect of having multiple poems titled "Counsel," "A Familiar Problem," and "Embarrassing" (or variations such as "Note on Counsel + Counsel," "These Familiar Problems," and "An Embarrassing Short," or even hybridizations such as "Two Familiar, Embarrassing Problems") is to imperil the moments of authority and discretion indicated by each title. In other words, the poems seem averse to being read in isolation, instead animating each other through a kind of quantum entanglement.

Perhaps we might educe something from the unexplained title of the book. If the individual poem provides no refuge (or *refugium*, in the book's

rather cli-fi parlance) from the hostile Colwynoxian world, might we describe the individual poem as a sham? Surely. But we must also ask whether the entangled network of poems is any more impervious to such fraudulence. I would argue that there is no escapism either way, that any sanctuary *Sham Refugia* offers is both illusory and temporary. Those who have read other books by Johnson will quickly realize that *Sham Refugia* is but one polyhedral cut from an even more elaborate hypercrystal. The book flags this imbrication several times, particularly through those of its poems that are titled "Page Discarded From *Treatise on Luck*" (*Treatise on Luck* being another of Johnson's Colwynox books, published by Gauss PDF in 2017). Such reflexivity should not imply that *Sham Refugia* is simply "more of the same" (each Johnson book has its own unique piquancy and organizational structure). However, it does point to a rhetorical frame of reference that brings all of Johnson's Colwynox books onto a shared (or at least partially shared) plane. Just as individual Johnson poems struggle to become havens in the aggregate, instead linking up with each other into a series of porous warrens, so too do his books cross over and into and through each other.

In relation to the forms of intertextuality discussed above, Johnson's more recent book, *Poor Fridge*, stands as a somewhat unusual entry in his oeuvre. Nora Fulton notes in her afterword that "the presence of Colwynox has been interrupted, if only for this moment" (216). This observation is both true and not true. Unlike *Sham Refugia*, which might be said largely to unfold in Colwynox, *Poor Fridge* seems unusually earthbound for a Johnson book—particularly in those of its entries that make heartbreakingly direct biographical reference to Johnson's family. Indeed, there is scarcely a mention of Colwynox in the book. Crucially, though, there *is* a mention—a solitary mention of the most tantalizing kind: "* *anti-dew propagraf, Colwynox, 3019.*" This text footnotes an oblique, macrographically rendered one-line poem: "Dangerous to die? Doubtful dew knows, anyway *" (90). What matters here is less what this poem *means* than the fact that it is a vessel by which to secrete Colwynox into the book. One is reminded of Jorge Luis Borges's "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" or M. John Harrison's "Egnaro," stories in which materials from a nonveridical world seem to tinge the ontic surface of a world assumed to be real. With this single, surreptitious mention of Colwynox, Johnson changes the complexion of *Poor Fridge* considerably, introducing a poison that the book might otherwise have given the impression of having purged.

Appropriately, purging poisons is one of the book's broader preoccupations. It is a forlorn preoccupation, however, since both the alexipharmics and the poisons are too slippery:

> In my dream, "U" was alexipharmic. Everybody knew it. The problem – of course there was one – lay in determining to which poisons exactly it addressed itself.… Lost in the confusion of the times were several facts about "U" once so well-known they'd formed as a body what was called *The Scrip*. Only a shit old joke had survived, rendered incomprehensible by the passage of time: "*putting the scrip in scripture*." (145)

The above excerpt is from a poem titled "U," one of sixty-seven poems from "All Twenty-Six Volumes," the longest of the book's three sections. That this section presents itself as an ordered system—an abecedary, to be specific—only to stutter repeatedly on certain letters and spew out multiple alternate entries is exemplary of how, in Johnson's poetry, the alexipharmics and the poisons often snake elusively around each other. It is probably not accidental that the "U" (with its homophonic suggestiveness) happens to be the letter that is dreamt off as alexipharmic. Most demanding of our attention, though, is Johnson's "shit old joke" (which is actually a pretty damn good one!). To put the scrip in scripture would be not merely to betray a financial dimension in the religious text but to place the scriptural transaction at a further fiduciary remove, thereby codifying an estrangement from the wished-for *redemption* (in both the spiritual and the financial senses of the word). That such a joke should appear in this book is unsurprising, since mammon and lucre from on high are very much in the poet's crosshairs. Consider the poem below, reproduced in its entirety:

> That is,
> the, welfare state had not been in operation
> what is it
> drying in the Sun upon the Gates of the City
> the jelly, smell of money hangs over the planet
> here something further must be said
> give these, people *a toast of pain*
> although they are aware of us
> that, our ship has fallen down
>
> given them, such
> protection as results, from
> becoming a *result*, a thing
> habituated to, gore say
> similarly phantom, less,

less…. it's, that accedie again !
What does it eat besides
ice it finds in static?
Can it recognize a money
use, newsprint as toilet paper
batter the fish without scruple

triumphant
in *that*, the, tiniest house ?
Departed poisson --
pat the new gods, dry !

(180)

Like all the poems from the section in which it appears ("Thumb Winter Sea"), this poem, "22," is excessively and unusually punctuated, its nonstandard commas recalling the restless quotation marks in Alice Notley's *The Descent of Alette*. The idiosyncratic punctuation serves to wring from the disgusting fact of exploited labor a bondage and a murderousness that the ineluctable convention of *making money* would rather occlude. We are not even a "thing" habituated to gore—we *are* the gore; it is *they* who are the ones habituated to this thing. We might read this poem and start wondering what money even is. Appropriately, the poem allows us doltishly to "misunderstand" money via an enjambment that upends the noncount noun: "Can it recognize a money." Money is shit, and its sublimation as newsprint allows us to return the shit to itself by locating an apt "use" for it ("newsprint as toilet paper").

While there is surely no more depressingly sanguinary figure than "gore" by which to register the effacement of human life in the capital relation, not all of the book's responses to such effacement are quite so defeatist. One way that Johnson challenges such effacement is by breathing life into inanimate objects or by endowing already animate objects with heightened significance. Another is by attempting to mentally degrade or immiserate enemies. Corn ("corn and beans," "standing corn," "corny example") is later animated (albeit pluperfectly) as "*Corn*":

You may think yourself well off because
You killed my horse *Corn* but
You are my horse now -- in my hard mind --
yes : and the reputation of my *Corn* grows
[…] I *see* You
and having seen
You, I will never leave off robbing

You, sword and pistol in hand
pretty well ripe after

robbing You many many times, very actively
every day, my whole life and Yours.

(155)

This sad, angry, tender poem seeks to push fantasy into irrecusable fact, to degrade the horse killer into a horse while exalting the dead *Corn*. Johnson's narrator attempts to exact revenge via a kind of psychic brigandage, mentally "robbing You" on a daily basis. Such imaginary robbing effects an ontological schism by which the You who thinks themself "well off" is complicated by the You who is subject to interminable privation in the "hard mind" of the narrator. Doubtless, such private reprisal impacts on the corporeal You not one whit. But regardless, as tokens of a desire to redress injustice, Johnson's mentalized subjects or objects clearly entail a poetically ethical orientation to capitalist exploitation, an orientation that pushes empathetically beyond the human. Anyone who reads *Poor Fridge* must conclude that Johnson is an animal lover—the book is sympathetically full of deer, horses, chickens, snails, and other animals. Perhaps the most important animal in the book is the bovine, which doubles as a figurative and literal site of capitalist extraction. Indeed, Johnson's vicarious feeling for cows and oxen is so acute that his narrators can tip over into a kind of boanthropy:

M

is for Mark, who […]

not not afraid
mooed

moooooooooo
a homely sound

comforting in
and comforting that

poor wilderness.

(119)

On top of coalescing with cattle, Johnson's narrators become one with the field from which labor and value are extracted. In one of the "F" poems, the forehead (with its "acre of brow") becomes the "poor soil" into which "shame carved the furrow," while in a poem from the final, untitled section of the book (a series of stretto-like entries that answer earlier material), the taste of one's thumb is described as "like robbing a *fallow person*" (94, 203). Such specific coalescences place the fantastical within the purview of political economy, proving that Johnson's often seemingly unnavigable worlds can sometimes cut right through to Earth with satirical clarity. Ultimately, *Poor Fridge* takes seriously the task of registering one's entanglement with capitalism and personal heartache while staying faithful to the imperatives of an "unworldbuilding" impetus already well established.

While it is not necessarily unusual for literary works to deploy ambitious forms of endophoric and exophoric reference—that is, to gesture both within and outside of themselves in order to expand or complicate their own ontology—it is certainly unusual to encounter something as sustained and intricate as what we encounter in Johnson's work. We might call Johnson's brand of referentiality *bibliophoric*, given how obsessively it implies book- or world-building structures and affects. Johnson's bibliophora is not simply a token of metafictional self-awareness, a textual flagging of his books' artifice; rather, it is a complex and variegated poetic enquiry into how books and their worlds are (or might be) contained or not contained. It is a measure of the extent to which books can or cannot connect with the world in which they were written—*our* world, whatever that might mean. However we choose to define it, Johnson's ongoing Colwynoxian (and perhaps now *anti*-Colwynoxian) project has given rise to an intercomplicating series of worlds that are at once richly peopled and impishly elusive. Humorously and vertiginously, *Sham Refugia* and *Poor Fridge* further problematize the terrain.

Colin Leemarshall

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Monica Huerta, *Magical Habits*. Duke University Press, 2021.

Monica Huerta's *Magical Habits* is hard to pin down. Part memoir, part cultural theory, part academic monograph, the book follows Huerta as she delves into her own archive of memories and texts to write about what she can't stop thinking about, what theories and discourses help her make sense of things. Thinking through the childhood she spent in Mexican restaurants

in Chicago and her experience in the academy as an adult, Huerta turns her life over like a prism, refracting text messages, photos, and artifacts, making a collage of her memories. Yet there is nothing self-centered about Huerta's reflections: there's an ardent hope that somewhere in there, in the experimental and unconventional form, the reader will find a space to connect.

Huerta manipulates readerly expectations from the very beginning. Veering from the standard structure of academic monographs—where four body chapters typically sit between an introduction and a conclusion—Huerta gives us twelve numbered chapters, eight interludes named for nonchronological years (e.g., 1988, 2002, 1976), and one Chaucer-inflected allegorical tale in the center of the book called "The Quene: A Mervilos and Magiquall Tale of epistemological Mischief, Wherein there are revealed no secretes." Favoring the freedom of "epistemological mischief" over the constraint of focused argumentation, *Magical Habits* does not aim to convince its reader through a single train of thought. Rather, Huerta models a new form of writing that decenters the reader and author and considers the process of writing itself as ongoing.

This modeling is playful and engaging, marked by an invitation. Huerta writes, in the first lines of *Magical Habits*, "In what follows, dear reader, you will notice there are times when I use the first-person plural, *we* or *us*. Might I ask for your patience? It is not always obvious whom I mean, and it's for this reason: I don't know." But it's less that Huerta doesn't know what the "we" is doing and more that she wants to welcome many different interpretations of it. She writes that the "we" functions "more as a liturgical than a declarative or prescriptive utterance," a way to invite the reader in without figuring them solely as an addressee. Like a liturgy, which offers everyone a role to play with its call and response, Huerta's first invocation of the reader refuses to lock anyone into a single form of participation. This multivalent "we," invited on every page, is magic for Huerta: "Alone when I write *we*, but maybe soon with some company" (x). We, the readers, are conjured onto the page.

If the conjuring force of this "we" decenters and multiplies the reader, Huerta wants to open the realm of writing for reconsideration, too. For Huerta, writing—and thinking—are processes in perpetual motion, deeply personal rituals that stay open even when the end matter of the book is printed. Thinking is, she points out, a habit that interrupts linear time. You might think a thought once and return to it years later. You might think through something constantly, worrying it like a stone. Habits here work as a groove, a repetition that can mold things, nonevents that remake the world in their shape—like a slow, ongoing erosion—and Huerta's analysis

focuses less on particular habits and more on the atmospheric feel of being in a habit, aiming at this "slice" between the steps.

Huerta's theorization of ongoingness is compelling, but it is the actual form and format of *Magical Habits* that most convincingly emphasize the continuous timelines attendant to thought. Huerta wants to think in company not just with her readers but with her younger self: many of the chapters integrate her undergraduate thesis from Harvard, a cultural history of Mexican restaurants in the Chicago area. For Huerta, returning to this thesis affords a chance to revise and collaborate with her younger self, and the inclusion of her past writing collapses the time between present and past writers. In the pages of *Magical Habits*, Huerta shimmers through a simultaneity of past, present, and future that exposes itself as foundational to critical and creative thought. After all, *Magical Habits* asks, doesn't thought take time? Don't ideas haunt us for years, cropping up in new forms and surfacing in new projects? The very paratext of *Magical Habits* shows us the multiple times and places of writing—each chapter ends with the times and locations of composition and revision: "*August 2003, Cambridge, Massachusett homelands / Revised November 2018, Philadelphia, Lenni-Lenape homelands*" (12). Huerta points to revision alongside the erasure of Native lands, holding up the postcolonial geography of the US as its own process of revisiting and reimagination. Simultaneity between past and present mirrors the simultaneity of Lenni-Lenape homelands and the city of Philadelphia: Huerta shows that both coexist at once, that the legacy of Native homelands is ongoing, too. This is an explicit refusal: a choice "not to partake in the fiction of our own scholarly progression as along a trajectory of linear time" that exists alongside the refusal to see Philadelphia as anything but a fiction (xx). Favoring the ongoing as a method of seeing anew, *Magical Habits* develops a writing practice that can conjure the paradoxical simultaneity of past and present.

In this concern for the ongoing and perpetual, *Magical Habits* makes visible the habits of return that structure academic work and thinking. *Magical Habits* is the third book in Duke University Press's Writing Matters! series, edited by Saidiya Hartman, Erica Rand, Kathleen Stewart, and the late Lauren Berlant. (Huerta has recently joined as this group's fourth editor.) The series is "multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and rigorously undisciplined" and "seeks to expand the tone, reach, claims, and attitudes of conceptual critical writing." How to interpret this elusive approach is an open question: do these texts provide concrete pedagogical models or are they simply a theoretical exercise in writing for academics? Far from offering any kind of resolution, *Magical Habits* bends generic boundaries in favor of exposing the "relentless limits of the multiple," including the many

genres of this book (xxi). Huerta's attention to mood and atmosphere in her writing and recollection is both sharp and meandering, eluding the potential categorizations the reader might be inclined toward. She prefers to tell the long version of the story in hopes that the reader will come along for the ride, not quite telling us where we're going, leaving us open to surprise.

The magical "we" and the ongoingness of text come together at this "relentless limit," bringing us to interrogate the individual sovereignty of the intellectual. Huerta writes that "the heroic posture our professional and institutional structures ask us to perform rubs against the specialization of our trainings, the finitude of our resources, the multiple and ongoing collaborations necessary to actualize any project, the crumbling of political-material investments in education and social infrastructure more broadly" (xiii). Summoning others into the text becomes a way to write against the individual writer, to acknowledge the length of time that thinking and writing take, to expose the insistent returns to texts that make up every reading. To say anything at all is to conjure an audience who might listen. To write in this form—overlapping fragments of narrative—is to conjure a reader who gathers these pieces.

But though *Magical Habits* invites its reader to pull these threads of writing, thinking, and collaboration together, neither the reader nor the writer is the hero of this text. *Magical Habits* is focused on communal repetitions and gestures, a stark contrast to the myth of the heroic intellect, where the hero performs great feats of thinking alone. The hero's journey, Huerta reminds us, "can be paralyzing in its loneliness, and the rewards of the journey—even if victory were possible, as in conquering one single archive once and for all—more likely to be empty of joy. Accolades are nice but rarely snuggle or dance with us" (xx). The hero sees structural conditions as obstacles, as chances to prove the world wrong. *Magical Habits* sees obstacles differently, sacrificing the hero and the singular for the sake of the plural. Huerta closes by making a bet: "If we sacrifice the singular hero and the need for the same, there's a chance (however fragile, however sincere, however hopeful, however simple) we'll gain one another" (xxi). The bet here is not that we can abandon one hero for the sake of another, better one, but that we might, in fact, gain each other. In the absence of the stability that a hero (and their journey) might afford, we might gain more interlocutors and conversation partners and friends.

Huerta writes against the heroism of intellect and the linear timeline of academic work, one that considers writing and having ideas as a process with a beginning, middle, and end. Instead, she looks toward communal and collaborative thinking not as alternate options but as ways of knowing that are already part of the structures of academic work. She draws attention

to the arbitrariness of these structures, beginning her acknowledgments by writing, "There is no way to stop except to say this particular book is over now. That's what it means to be in the midst of a habit, even the habit of aiming toward a slice, however slim, of the space between the steps of a habit. And even if you can find it, the habit might yet go on" (153). Here, as in the entirety of *Magical Habits*, it's the space between the known that requires attention—this "slice" between "the steps of a habit," not the habit itself, is what "might yet go on." There is no way to stop but to say that "this particular book is over now," refusing to limit the persistence of thinking the same thought in different valences.

If there is a limit to *Magical Habits*, it might be its sustainability, which is to say the edge where its questions turn from the abstract to the material. Can this project keep going? What would it look like to read other habits through the temporal prism Huerta takes up? But Huerta has already thought of this: "So then here is another horizon: the same habits that in a moment saved you can become—in another moment, if you repeat them often enough, if you repeat them to make sure the world can't grow or change your understanding of them, or you, and why you need them and love them and keep them even a little too long—a trap" (64). Even a form of freedom can feel like rigidity, *Magical Habits* suggests. Don't get too used to it.

Bekah Waalkes

Ed Atkins is an artist based in Copenhagen. Solo exhibitions include TANK, Shanghai (2022); the New Museum, New York (2021); K21 Düsseldorf (2019); Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin; and MMK Frankfurt (both 2017). Most recently, a play, *Sorcerer*, written and directed with Steven Zultanski, premiered at Revolver Teater in Copenhagen in spring 2022. ◆ **Mariano Blatt** was born in Buenos Aires in 1983. He is a poet and co-founder of the press Blatt & Ríos. His published works include *Increíble* (El niño Stanton, 2007), *Alguna vez pensé esto* (Triana, 2014), *Mi juventud unida* (Mansalva, 2015), and *200 ideas de libros* (Iván Rosado, 2017). ◆ **Will Fesperman** is a poet and translator living in Berkeley, CA. He is the author of the chapbook *Pacific Ability* (Spiral Editions, 2022). You can reach him at will.fesperman@gmail.com. ◆ **Andrew Michael Gorin** teaches in the departments of Media, Culture, and Communication and Environmental Studies at New York University. His creative and critical writings appear in *Criticism*, *Boston Review*, and *The Brooklyn Rail*, among other publications. He also serves as an editor for the Organism for Poetic Research, and as a contributing editor for *The Distance Plan*. ◆ **Langdon Hammer** is the Niel Gray, Jr. Professor of English at Yale. He is the author of *James Merrill: Life and Art* and, with Stephen Yenser, co-editor of *A Whole World: Letters from James Merrill*. ◆ **Bradley Harmon** is a writer, translator, and scholar of Scandinavian and German literature and philosophy. His translations have appeared in many journals, including *Poetry*, *Astra*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Firmament*, and *Swedish Book Review*. He is a 2022 ALTA Emerging Translator fellow and is currently a PhD candidate at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. His translation published here was awarded second place in the *Hopkins Review*'s inaugural Anne Frydman Translation Prize. ◆ **Kelly Hoffer** is a poet and book artist. Her debut collection of poetry, *Undershore*, was selected by Diana Khoi Nguyen as the winner of the 2021 Lightscatter Press Prize, and is forthcoming in spring 2023. Her book manuscript *Fire Series* was a finalist for the 2021 National Poetry Series. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Gulf Coast*, *TAGVVERK*, *American Chordata*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Mississippi Review*, and *Prelude*, among others. She holds an MFA in Poetry from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and she is currently a doctoral candidate in Literatures in English at Cornell University. Learn more at https://www.kellyrosehoffer.com/ or follow her @kellyrosehoffer on Instagram and Twitter. ◆ **Mark Francis Johnson** lives in Philadelphia. His latest publications include *Doleful Hoo-Ha* (Intrinsic Coat, 2022) and *Blown Study* (Erotoplasty Editions, 2022). ◆ **Roskva**

Koritzinsky debuted in 2013 with the award-winning short story collection *In Here Somehere*. Her novel *Flame and Darkness* (2015) received critical acclaim and her third book, *I Haven't Yet Seen the World* (2017), was nominated for the Nordic Council Literature Prize in 2018 and translated into five languages. Her fourth book, *No One Holy*, was published in August 2022. ◆ **Carlos Lara** is a poet and translator from Los Angeles. His version of Blanca Varela's *Canto villano* (*Rough Song*) was published by The Song Cave in 2020. His translation of Varela's *Ejercicios materiales* (*Material Exercises*) is forthcoming from Black Sun Lit in 2023. He is the author of four books of poetry, the latest one being *Subconscious Colossus* (Schism, 2021). ◆ **Lee Sumyeong** is a Korean poet who was born in 1965. Her poetry collections to date are *New Misreading Filled the Streets* (1995), *Herons Play Heron's Games* (1998), *Curve of the Red Wall* (2001), *Cat Watching Cat Video* (2004), *Always So Many Rains* (2011), *Just Like* (2014), *Warehouse* (2018), and *Gas Lines* (2022). Other publications include the monographical study *Kim Gu-yong and Modern Korean Poetry* (2008), two books on poetics titled *Crossing* (2011) and *The Poetics of Surface* (2018), the essay collection *Era of the Air Raid* (2016), and a selection of various prose works titled *I Saw Chilsung Supermarket* (2022). In addition, she has translated several texts into Korean, including books on Romanticism, Lacan, Derrida, and Joyce. She has received several Korean literary prizes for her work. Her first full-length collection in English (*Just Like*, tr. Colin Leemarshall) is due out with Black Ocean in 2024. ◆ **Colin Leemarshall** runs Erotoplasty Editions. He is currently working on a project titled *Total Spiritual Refection*. His translation of Lee Sumyeong's *Just Like* is due out with Black Ocean in 2024. ◆ **Sylvia Legris**'s latest poetry collection is *Garden Physic* (Granta Books, 2022; New Directions, 2021). ◆ **Wendy Lotterman**'s chapbook *Intense Holiday* was published in 2016. Her first full-length collection will be published by Futurepoem in 2023. She is a postdoctoral fellow at NYU, where she teaches, and an associate editor of *Parapraxis*. ◆ **J. Peter Moore** is a poet and scholar, writing on vernacular poetics in post-45 America. He is the author of *Zippers & Jeans* (selva oscura, 2017) and *Southern Colortype* (Three Count Pour, 2013). He lives in Indianapolis and teaches in the John Martinson Honors College at Purdue University. ◆ **Sam Pink** wrote *Ketchup*, *The Ice Cream Man and Other Stories*, and other books. He sells books and paintings at instagram.com/sam_pink_art. ◆ **Young Rader** lives and writes in Berlin. His work has appeared in the *New England Review*, *Little Star*, *Passages North*, and elsewhere. His stories have been shortlisted for the Desperate Literature Short Fiction Prize and the Berlin Writing Prize. ◆ **Camille Roy** is a writer of fiction, poetry, and plays. Her latest fiction collection, *Honey Mine*, came out from Nightboat in June 2021. Her prior book, *Sherwood Forest*, was

published by Futurepoem. She co-edited *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative* (Coach House Books, 2000). More information can be found at https://www.camilleroy.me/. ◆ **Jennifer Soong** is the author of collections and chapbooks *Near, At* (Futurepoem, 2019), *When I Ask My Friend* (DoubleCross Press, 2021, bound with Dan Owen's *Points of Amperture*), and *Contempt* (SPAM, 2021). Her most recent collection, *Suede Mantis / Soft Rage* (Black Sun Lit), is out this fall. Born in New Jersey, she currently resides in Oxford, where she is writing two critical books—about forgetting and the minor poet respectively—as a postdoctoral fellow. ◆ **Violet Spurlock** is a writer living in the Bay Area. She is the author of *Alloyed Bliss* (Eyelet, 2021) and *VS VS VS* (Gauss PDF, 2021). Her first full-length book, *In Lieu of Solutions*, received the Other Futures Award and is forthcoming from Futurepoem. ◆ **Timothy Straw** is a poet and musician from Oregon. Their poems, translations, and essays appear in *Yale Review*, *Jacket2*, *Paris Review*, *Annulet*, *Hopkins Review*, and elsewhere, and Fonograf Editions will soon be publishing their first book of poems. A grad student at Penn, they live in Philadelphia. ◆ **Bekah Waalkes** is a writer and PhD candidate in contemporary literature at Tufts University. ◆ **Marcia Walker**'s writing has appeared in *Electric Literature*'s Recommended Reading, *The New Quarterly*, *Fiddlehead*, the *New York Times*, *PRISM International*, *Room*, *EVENT*, *The Globe and Mail*, CBC radio, and elsewhere. She has received fellowships from Yaddo, Banff Centre, and Saari. Currently, she lives in Montreal. ◆ **Wendy Xu** is most recently the author of *The Past* (Wesleyan, 2021), and *Phrasis* (Fence Books), named one of the 10 Best Poetry Books of 2017 by the *New York Times Book Review*. She is assistant professor of writing at The New School in New York City. ◆ **Steven Zultanski** is the author of several books, including *Relief* (Make Now Press, 2021), *Honestly* (Book*hug, 2018), *On the Literary Means of Representing the Powerful as Powerless* (Information as Material, 2018), and *Bribery* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2014). With Ed Atkins, he co-wrote and co-directed a new play, *Sorcerer*, which premiered in spring 2022 at Revolver Teater in Copenhagen; a film version premiered at Eden Eden in Berlin in fall 2022. He lives in Copenhagen.

Instructions for Insert

a fortune teller by Kelly Hoffer

1. Carefully fold the fortune teller in half diagonally, then unfold and flatten. Fold along the other diagonal and flatten again. You should now have two creases making an x across the square.

2. With the printed side facing down, fold each corner of the square toward the center, making a smaller square containing four triangles pointing inward.

3. Flip over the square, keeping it folded. Fold each corner of the square toward the center to make an even smaller square.

4. Flip the square over again and fold in half lengthwise. Using both hands, insert your thumbs and index fingers into the pockets on either side of the fold, as if pinching the inner fold between your fingers. Gently press your fingers inward, toward the center, so that the paper pops up into a cone composed of four pyramids, with one finger in each.

The fortune teller is now ready to use. Consult as you see fit, operating with two hands.