

CHICAGO REVIEW

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& Volume 67, Issue 1  
Small Press Poetry in the United States

# CHICAGO REVIEW

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SMALL PRESS POETRY  
IN THE UNITED STATES



## Editor's Introduction: On Small Communities

One watchword of this special feature is *community*. Another is *small*. Community and smallness are too often idealized, and the pieces gathered here show how small communities can be messy, inconvenient, intimate, financially unstable, and riven by conflict—but also sources of rare joy and creative possibility. These essays and interviews cover small press poetry publishing from roughly the 1960s to the present, asking how smallness and community have both changed and remained the same. They tell a partial story of literary countercultures in the United States. Over the past few decades, US small presses have published work that larger publishers wouldn't touch, but this commitment to aesthetic innovation was once a more viable business model than it is today. In the 1960s and '70s, a small press such as City Lights or the Jargon Society could sustain itself, however precariously, through publishing. While small presses still publish the most exciting contemporary poetry, the conditions for their existence have changed dramatically. Once upon a time, a small press might have been stable enough to ground an aesthetic movement or found a commercially viable bookstore, but small press publishing in today's literary landscape often requires new and different means to survive. The impetus behind this special feature, however, isn't to rehash the tired debate of whether or not to sell out; it's to foreground the work that these presses still do, despite increasing constraints—and perhaps because of them.

This feature illustrates the wide range of work that drives presses, no matter how small. This issue was partly inspired by Kyle Schlesinger's *A Poetics of the Press* (Cuneiform Press and Ugly Duckling Presse, 2021), a series of interviews with letterpress poetry publishers. In his introduction, Schlesinger points out that “poetry is a material and immaterial thing.”<sup>1</sup> It's not just language but language on a page. In many ways, our feature is a testament to the manifold materialities of

today's poetry—material not just in its printing but also through the people and economic systems that shape that printing. Small presses' insistence on maintaining as much control as possible over their operations (keeping labor, production, promotion, and distribution in-house) is one of the things that makes small press poetry distinct. This is the case even as, under the strain of meager arts funding and a conglomerated publishing world, autonomy and independence are harder than ever to realize. The tenacious effort to maintain these relatively uncompromised material conditions spurs new poetry to flourish—poetry which, without the work of small presses, might exist only in writers' notebooks or saved in Word docs.

In November 2022, *Chicago Review* put out a call for essays, interviews, and other writing on “small press poetry in the United States—its past, present, and probable future, as well as the writers, editors, communities, and institutions that make it run.” The stipulation to focus the issue on the US was intended to offer parameters to a prompt where possible responses were otherwise boundless; however, we also wanted to invite contributors to think about the importance of small presses for today's poetry writ large. We hoped to compile a collective (though not uncontradictory) idea of what one might mean by “small press poetry in the United States”—smaller than large independent presses like Nightboat and Graywolf but bigger than self-published pamphlets or zines; published in major cultural centers like New York and San Francisco but also emerging elsewhere; fitting into major lineages like the New York School, Black Mountain, and Language poetry but also perhaps of entirely different traditions; read by plenty but not enough to turn a profit; featuring established or even legendary names but fostering new weirdos and luminaries-to-come. This in-between space prompts a vague question, the answer to which we attempted to uncover.

Here, however, you will find no comprehensive account of what small press poetry is, was, or will be—and certainly no complete picture of the writers, publishers, and networks that make it run. Instead, we have assembled a Flood of histories, impenetrable and personal Jargons, and Lost Roads that connect only in remote places. As such, the following overview of this special feature remains necessarily incomplete.

Small press poetry offers a chance to think about how communities sediment in a place over time. This is what Darcie Dennigan finds in her essay on the Great Wastepaper Theatre, a poets theatre troupe in Providence, Rhode Island, founded by Rosmarie and Keith Waldrop, Edwin Honig, and James Schevill. As Dennigan “sits in a happy overlap with” the Wastepaper Theatre and its delightfully strange *Anthology*, she unfolds a lineage of poets using theatrical forms to “seriously take oneself not seriously,” expanding the possibilities of verve and verse. The Bay Area is exemplary of experimental literary community, too, as we see in Patricia Keats’s documentation of former *Chicago Review* editor Irving Rosenthal’s Free Press, and in Eliza Browning’s updated history of City Lights as both a bookstore and a publisher. The feature asks by juxtaposition how such earlier moments of Bay Area poetics have and haven’t influenced more recent presses like Krupskaya—paid lyrical tribute by editors Jocelyn Saidenberg and Stephanie Young—and Dogpark Collective, whose origins in house readings and DIY culture are told here by its cofounder Kate Robinson.

The small press fosters community outside major metropolitan areas, too, as Andy Martrich affirms in his interview with F. Whitney Jones, former president of North Carolina’s Jargon Society. Indeed, the influence of this itinerant, forward-thinking press and its founder, Jonathan Williams, reverberates through the feature as an inspiration for newer publishers like Flood Editions. Similarly looking beyond the cultural dominance of large cities, Shannon Tharp revisits besmirl brigham’s *Run Through Rock* and the community of Arkansas poets that made the book’s publication possible. Presses operating outside coastal centers have brought us some of the most unconventional and influential poetry of the twentieth century, and these works would not exist without the labors of small presses. An examination of small press poetry, then, asks us to reimagine the geographies and histories of well-known literary movements. This point is brought home (home for us, anyway) in Nick Sturm’s account of Chicago’s “New York School print culture,” or how writers moving between Chicago and New York both transformed Chicago’s literary scene and infused the Lower East Side with new creative energies. Chicago’s 1970s little magazines and

presses show that even the most geographically specified movements can extend beyond the boundaries of cities, states, and nations.

To that end, this feature is shaped by opposition to received wisdom, to established histories, and to systems of oppression including capitalism, racism, sexism, and homophobia. Small presses are far from immune to prejudice and inequality, but across this feature, contributors discuss how these communities have provided venues for writers whose work has been suppressed by or left out of mainstream publishing. Stephanie Anderson's interviews with Renee Tajima-Peña and Patricia Spears Jones document the difficulties faced by women artists of color in small press publishing and the arts more generally. In the process, they demonstrate how feminists of color have worked both within and without dominant institutions to carve out space for their work, as in the 1978 feminist literary anthology *Ordinary Women*, coedited by Jones, of which she states, "We did not request permission to do this." Jones closes the interview by remarking on how concepts such as intersectionality and allyship shape contemporary literature, driving, among other things, a phenomenon in which "whites are now having to confront their whiteness as whiteness." Today, literary workers fight not just for more inclusivity but also examine the structures that have shaped its past and present. Renee Tajima-Peña's interview takes us furthest afield from literary production as such, mapping out the ways small press innovation spills out into the worlds of visual art and film. Tajima-Peña's work as a filmmaker, activist, and former managing editor of the magazine *Bridge: Asian American Perspectives* exemplifies how core values of small presses (independence from institutions and community-based collaboration) have been directed toward anti-racist ends. Such attempts to challenge systems of oppression rhyme, too, with Katie Marya's essay on the Puerto Rican feminist publisher La Impresora, whose position in a country that has been neocolonially occupied by the United States for over a century challenges the meaning, scope, and even coherence of "US small press poetry" as an organizing conceit. The political ramifications of small presses also animate Catherine Kelly's account of another small publisher from the Bay Area, the Women's Press Collective. Here, as in many of the milieus examined in this feature, artists and writers comingled in a world in which

“crowded living rooms became movement hubs, artist studios, print rooms, bookstores, community centers, and performance spaces.”

Across disparate yet often concordant material and social conditions, small presses center on the form of the book, in which “everything is tactile” (La Impresora), or can be driven by “visionary design” (Flood), or might be shaped by “all kinds of interesting cuts in paper” (Krupskaya). As Kaja Marczewska notes in her study of the evolving and politically motivated relationships between libraries and small presses, part of the potential of small presses resides in how they “challenge familiar notions of what a book or magazine should do and how it should look.” The challenge embedded in small press materiality, then, also impacts their ability to find easy distribution, sufficient sales, or a place in libraries and bookstores. Small press publications’ often idiosyncratic form is both a reflection of and an intervention in the conditions of their production. Steven Maye, in his essay, theorizes the status of the book-form in contemporary poetry, as independent and small presses use the appearance of their books as “their most obvious attempts at branding.” This uniformity of brand promises something characteristic about readerly experience: “The lure of the physical book, conveying the brand identity of the publisher, is thus translated immediately into opening the book and browsing its contents.” It also encapsulates small press poetry’s ambivalent relationship to commodification and the market in which it operates.

Because *community* and *small* mean something else entirely when marketing puts those words in people’s mouths. Many pieces in the feature diagnose the market’s degradation of contemporary poetry. This polemic finds its most forceful articulation in the exchange between Hilary Plum and Matvei Yankelevich. Digging into the economics of small press publishing, this collaborative essay surfaces the material obstacles to small presses’ viability, which range from techno-optimist solutions like Bookshop.org to the warehousing of Small Press Distribution by Ingram Book Company. Plum and Yankelevich also trouble the assumed alliance between small presses and independent bookstores, which is undermined by corporate distribution channels and monopolistic economics. The increasing demand to “shop local,” in their account, raises the question of where exactly the “local” might be found.

While smallness and community may connote geographical boundedness, small presses have long stretched across and joined otherwise disparate locales. Black Ocean, a press with “footprints in Boston, Chicago, and LA,” bridges gaps of language and nation to introduce Slovenian and Korean poetry to the US literary landscape. Transnational exchanges reappear in Marya’s essay on La Impresora, as she Zooms with the press’s editors in Isabella, Puerto Rico, “from a foot of fresh snow in Nebraska.” Such spread-out communities—embodied even by presses like Flood Editions, which operate across state lines—prompt Peter O’Leary to remind us of the “practicalities” undergirding small press operations, “like where to store the books themselves.” Reading through this feature, one may begin to believe that some of today’s most innovative poetry is stored not in research libraries or conglomerate warehouses but in publishers’ garages or under their beds.

Over the past half century or so, the politics of smallness and community have been in flux. Small presses, in turn, have demonstrated the will of communities to defend values of independence and experimentation and publish poetry against a global economy that rewards expansion, exploitation, and commercial success. The history of small press poetry has so much to teach us about what is to be gained by looking for and reaching out to, always, something better.

### §

This issue is my last as editor of *Chicago Review*, and as such, I would like to conclude with gratitude for the small community that has shaped *CR* since I first awkwardly walked into a nonfiction staff meeting in November 2018. *Chicago Review* owes its existence to innumerable editors, interns, and contributors. While putting together this issue, even as it focuses on publishers of books rather than magazines, I have learned so much about the collaboration that drives *Chicago Review*. Magazines and presses alike rely on the labor of editors and authors in order to create an object that circulates literary texts in the world. *CR* has been shaped by generations of such work since 1946. In the introduction to our 75th anniversary anthology issue, we wrote that “rereading past issues for an anthology makes us

thankful that so many past editors and staff members put in so much work” (*CR* 65:1/2/3, 15), and this issue in turn makes me grateful for the work of all the presses, many of which do not receive mention here, who shape the literary community to which *CR* dedicates itself.

*Chicago Review* is yet another small community united by poetry and literature. This does not mean it’s easy. We’ve gone on the record about our funding woes, institutional difficulties, and discontent with the state of contemporary letters. But this feature also makes me appreciate the difficult work that shapes our collaboration. Working together to produce a magazine joins conflict and joy. Our editors’ meetings are filled with jokes, fights, and fits of inspiration, and the production of every issue involves long days poring over the minutiae of grammar and layout. Some of this might sound tedious, pretentious, or aggravating—and it often is—but doing it as part of this small community makes it worth it.

## NOTES

Many thanks to the Chicago Review editors who provided generous feedback and incisive edits on this introduction. I would especially like to thank Jack Chelgren, Cecily Chen, James Garwood-Cole, and Kai Ihns for their feedback.

1/ Kyle Schlesinger, ed., *A Poetics of the Press: Interviews with Poets, Printers, & Publishers* (Brooklyn: Cuneiform Press and Ugly Duckling Presse, 2021), x.



## Small Press Economies: A Dialogue

**HP:** The acclaimed writer Nell Zink's first novel, *The Wallcreeper*, was published in 2014 by Dorothy, a publishing project, a small press with a feminist mission, cofounded and edited by the writer Danielle Dutton. Dorothy supported a promising unknown writer, put her book out well, and killed with it. *The Wallcreeper* was reviewed in the *New York Times*, which is almost impossible for small presses to achieve. Zink was profiled in the *New Yorker*. Dorothy's savvy publication of this debut novel enabled its author's continued success; Zink's novels now come out steadily from Big Five presses.

In 2019, the *New Yorker* summarized Zink's career thus: "She spent the first decades of her career writing for an audience of one at a time, seemingly unconcerned by whether her work reached a broader public.... The novels she wrote took the form of e-mails to friends. The recipient of one such email was Jonathan Franzen, who helped her publish her first novel, with a small feminist press, for a three-hundred-dollar advance. Since then, the novels have become sleeker, and the presses larger."<sup>1</sup>

Here Zink's first publisher sounds not like a site of excellence, vision, and achievement but like something quirky, darling, the opposite of sleek (frumpy?). Jonathan Franzen is credited but not the woman who published the book. Rather than celebrating an impressive underdog, the *New Yorker* (owned by global media corporation Condé Nast) emphasizes the pitiful size of the advance. A small press frequently runs on volunteer part-time labor and quite often on the money of its editors. I coedit a series at Rescue Press, and if I give an advance or hire a publicist for a book, I'm using my own money from my day job or whatever income is around. Zink's later novels are published by Ecco Press, where no one who works on those books pays for them personally. In corporate media, it's a fun backstory that a working woman writer who donates her time and money and expertise to support other women writers is kind of poor.

Insofar as the media pays attention to small presses, they're seen as the JV team to the real presses, the Big Five. The natural goal for a writer is to leave them behind. To get discovered, go big. Most writers don't feel this way, or not simply. They appreciate the editors and scenes who first recognized and supported them. Yet the small presses get left behind anyway, for purely structural reasons. The difference in sales potential is too vast. Why would someone publish at a press that has little access to larger book markets and will likely only move 500–1,000 copies if they could publish at a press that has the resources to move 5,000–10,000 or even 50,000–100,000 copies of that same book? They wouldn't. I wouldn't.

**MY:** But not everyone has that opportunity or wants it. If you're writing against corporate and mainstream literature, and you belong to a community of like-minded writers, you might want to publish with your peers, within your community and for it. Furthermore, you might not have the "platform" to publish with the Big Five—a large enough social media following, for example, or some other insurance to guarantee sales. The more literary imprints of the Big Five don't usually start with a print run of 50,000, and sometimes they sell no more than a small press. (I heard of a first book of literary fiction from FSG selling 500 copies.) Unlike a small press, if they aren't selling through a big print run right out of the gate, they're going to bet on a different horse and put the promotional money behind a book that's doing better (and probably drop the low-selling author).

**HP:** And on the publisher's side, when a small press sells reprint rights for a successful book to a big press—or sees an author's next book go big—that's a beautiful moment. Yet it doesn't help us financially as much as one might think. Our lists are too weird and heterogeneous. Sales pathways that appear for one book don't naturally serve the next book. Our next book probably won't share subject matter or genre labels or algorithmic categories with that hit. We don't have a brand, we're more into restlessness and idiosyncrasy and community, as you might be if you were doing something for free. Because our choices are anticommercial, commercial success can't simply elevate them. The success of a single title benefits us a bit, materially and for sure emotionally, but again, there's a ceiling on how much we can capitalize.

**MY:** That's because an unregulated book trade under capitalism severely punishes producers with high unit costs and low volume sales. It costs a hell of a lot less per unit to produce 50,000 copies of a book than it does 1,000. And even with a tiny profit margin, if you sell a ton of units, then you're winning the game.

So the strategy is simple: a) secure distribution channels by outright ownership or access based on previous sales records; b) buy rights to books that have guaranteed sales; c) put a lot of advertising behind their reception. And there you have it—the next award winner or finalist, the next *New York Times*-reviewed book, the next book on a hundred college syllabi. It's really quite formulaic, if you have the capital and a history of using it to make literature. If you have these things in place, of course you'll print more copies off the bat, which means lower unit costs and higher profit margins.

Small presses don't have capital of that kind, or the history of having exploited it. They're taking chances on authors based on community dialogue, local importance, or an intuitive sense for discovery. Moreover, their access to those distribution channels—and bookstore shelves—is limited by a system that rewards the already visible, saleable, funded, or connected—what's already in demand. In this respect, new poetry from small presses is at a great disadvantage: with few exceptions, it's guaranteed not to sell and not to break even. In terms of economies of scale and profit margins, a small press book isn't like other commodities—a hex screw or a plank of pine, a pencil or a microwave oven. It's got a low ceiling, limited by the audience for more difficult texts and genres as much as by the publicity budgets and distribution channels available to small presses.

Let's take a respectable print run of 1,000 copies for a well-produced poetry paperback at \$3 per unit. Put an accessible price on it, say \$20. A bookstore orders it from Small Press Distribution (SPD) at a standard 40% discount, taking \$8 for the sale and sending \$12 back to SPD, which keeps \$6 and passes the other \$6 to the publisher. Considering the outlay for printing, the publisher's gross is \$3. But what if they had also paid for foreign rights, paid out a royalty (let's say a dollar per book) to the author and/or translator, sent out review copies in bubble mailers, paid a designer, or bought dinner for the proofreader. That \$3 profit dwindles before our eyes. At best, there's half a buck left over. If the run sells through at that rate, we're looking at a \$500

profit, one sixth of their next book's printing costs. Those pennies would add up if they could keep selling steadily, but a small press frequently can't afford the reprints, so it will likely sell that runaway hit to a publisher that doesn't have to store copies under their bed.

**HP:** Even if you did print and sell 50,000 copies, the focus on sales as the primary measure of success can be devastating for writers and writing. Your phrase "writing against" is essential: writing against commercialization. The Big Five publish some incredibly important work. But they also don't publish a lot of incredibly important work. It's clear that the appetite at the Big Five for work that is formally and politically challenging—politically challenging in how it writes against dominant forms of rhetoric and thinking—is small, held to a handful of titles that often have to fight to be understood as the challenges they are.

I think mainstream literary culture relies on a comforting myth that good literature is liberal and will somehow do good politics, without ever articulating that politics or developing any coherent structure in which it might happen. There's a vague, deliberately unexamined idea that the goodness of art and literature will transcend the complicity of the structures art "has to" use to reach people. And sometimes they can transcend; sometimes they can destabilize culture generatively, even using corporate-owned pathways.

But more often, of course, challenging work is not going to make it through those pathways. It's going to be excluded, and readers are not going to encounter it and be changed by it. This is a political problem. Our allies in recognizing that problem as political are fewer than one might expect. Indie leftist media, for example, in the era of Patreon and Substack, pays extraordinarily little attention to leftist art and cultural work. It's much more common to find takedowns of mainstream cultural products—think of how many leftist critiques of *Hillbilly Elegy* there were—than to find discussions of small, DIY, and indie art. Access to those platforms could be transformative for independent writers and publishers on the left, but we aren't usually included there.

There's a failure to understand small press and indie status as a political status and responsibility. For example, look at IndieBound, an organization that represents independent booksellers across the

US. They promote a short list of new books every month, selected by indie bookstore staff—a coveted honor that can help launch a book nationally. Understandably, indie bookstores and sites like IndieBound emphasize the importance of independence: you should buy from the brick-and-mortar, rather than from Amazon, and support local community and economy. You should make a little sacrifice on price to protect something you'd miss if it were gone.

But the vast majority of the books IndieBound promotes and celebrates are published by the Big Five. The same is true at too many indie brick-and-mortars. Their uplift of independent, noncorporate business stops at the door—they ask you to buy indie and pay more, but that's largely not what they do.

**MY:** So how is that store serving its readers? If you're a reader and small press books aren't on the shelf, you're going to buy what's on offer. But let's say you're into locally and responsibly farmed food and your co-op only carries Cal-Organic, wouldn't you be concerned?

**HP:** If you don't support local farmers, they disappear. People understand that and get why they should buy produce at the farmers market. What's keeping readers from supporting small presses, and the diverse communities they serve, in similar terms?

**MY:** It seems to me they can't see it that way because those presses are hidden from view by structural and economic barriers. On either side of the barriers, institutions, corporations, and small presses themselves often pretend these barriers don't exist—they're normalized by the market. Very few literary consumers know that their beloved local indie bookstore is (with very few exceptions) beholden to corporate distributors. Few can imagine what's missing from those shelves and therefore from their potential reading lives. What's missing is countless titles from 400 SPD presses, and who knows how many others that don't have distribution at all.

**HP:** In recent years, “indie” pushback against corporate dominance in literary publishing has relied on tech solutions that I worry are precarious—like Bookshop.org, which replaces a real-world

interaction with an online one, then tries to split the difference through donations—or on the capriciousness of wealthy donors. The recent shuttering of *Astra Magazine* and Catapult’s magazine and classes demonstrate the problems with the latter solution. The wealthy entities behind both those ventures seemed hilariously dismayed by the lack of profit generated by their lit mags and pulled their support.

MY: *New York Times* coverage of *Astra*’s closure claimed this lit mag was “unusual.”<sup>2</sup> In fact, though it was backed by a Chinese publishing conglomerate (Thinkingdom Media Group), its closure was completely predictable. From its sudden proliferation (what *Publishers Weekly* calls “good fortune”) to the industry-tested authors it published, and up to its dramatic failure, *Astra* bore all the markings of a successful PR stunt, even accomplished in record time.<sup>3</sup> The story of the unprofitability of literary magazines, which the *Times* piece plays like a doomsday trumpet, is no story at all. The wealthy have long funded literary magazines to sway opinion, to make taste, and to get attention. The not-so-wealthy have done the same, with staples, stencils, small print runs, and subscriptions; they just haven’t been written up in the *Times*.

The takeaway, for me, is that capital makes literature. By now, everyone knows that publishers pay the box stores to have a book displayed face out on the big table near the entrance or by the register. You can also pay to have your book reviewed in *Kirkus Reviews*. Magazines get a kickback from Amazon for clicks through their book reviews. But more importantly, it is capital that determines which poets appear on NPR, which of them tour dozens of bookstores and get paid for university speaking engagements, which are in the bookstores and get reviewed in major news outlets, library-oriented book reviews, and “indie” culture mags. Usually they’re the ones published by imprints of the Big Five, by Norton or other big indies, or by a handful of large nonprofits like Graywolf, and they have agents. Universities invite the same writers that you see reviewed, advertised, and on the shelves, and speakers’ agents make sure these writers are well paid, increasing the literary wealth gap.

It’s not merit, it’s money. Capitalism has a very simple algorithm. Step One: Try a few things and see what sells. Step Two: Put more

money behind the one that sells, and it sells more. Step Two involves dropping the stuff that doesn't sell, and whether it means to or not, it amounts to capturing attention away from any alternatives. Too often, this strategy serves the elite—the publishers, the nonprofit institutions that give awards and present literary programs and readings (and their figureheads), and the already established writers at the top of the academic and industry hierarchies—even when it raises up voices that have been overlooked or structurally marginalized.

**HP:** Unless writers and editors are independently making decisions about what writing is published and how it's talked about, they are subject to profit/loss models and decisions driven by capital. They're asked to rely on wealth generated by the Koch brothers' decades of exploitation, for example (a Koch family member is cofounder and CEO of Catapult, and presumably provided its initial funding), or by the Big Five's list of right-wing bestsellers. Without a press that can provide a home for your values and community in the long term, success for your politics and aesthetics today can vanish, or be drowned out, tomorrow.

**MY:** By the way, click on the purchase link at IndieBound and it takes you to Bookshop.org, which, according to the *New Yorker*, has “positioned itself as an alternative to Amazon” that supports indie booksellers.<sup>4</sup> *The Guardian* goes so far as to call it “revolutionary.”<sup>5</sup> A few years ago, some small presses wrote to *Hyperallergic* about switching the links on their indie book reviews away from Amazon. The magazine agreed it wasn't a good look, gave up their Amazon kickback, and announced that they would link their book reviews to Bookshop.org, which—though they don't advertise it—has an exclusive agreement to source its independent press books from Ingram Book Company. If you ask Google, “Who is the largest book distributor in the world?” the answer is Ingram. Several sites describe it as “offering immediate access to more than eleven million titles” and “the preferred wholesale provider for more than 71,000 retail and library customers globally.” In other words, your Bookshop.org order doesn't come straight from the local store but from Ingram, which gets a good chunk of the sale. Yes, Ingram, the company that owns Lightning Source (print-on-demand services) and a host of formerly

independent distributors including Consortium and PGW, and the distributor most “independent” bookstores use exclusively to order independent press titles.

In fact, Ingram’s market control is the foundation for the rather traumatic experience authors and translators of small press books have aplenty: You’ve got a book out with a press that’s distributed by SPD. You come to your local indie-and-proud bookstore and say, “I live nearby, I shop here, and I’ve just published a book. Can you order it? Maybe we could do an event?” The clerk looks through a complex database on their computer and says, “Sorry, we can’t order that title.” If you pursue the issue, you learn that the book’s unavailable. Push a little more and the clerk will say that it’s only available on “short discount.” These words mean nothing to you, and most writers, and the clerk won’t explain that they’re looking at Ingram’s system.

Your indie bookstore’s “shop local” plea ends up seeming toothless if local “producers” published by small presses aren’t represented on their shelves. Your book can quite easily be ordered at a standard bookstore discount from SPD, but the clerk isn’t going to tell you this. Ingram invested significant capital in creating an online system that makes it easy for these stores to order books and return what’s unsold. In a way, it’s just like Amazon: consolidate all your purchases to one portal and voilà—a life hack! But for an SPD-distributed book, the discount Ingram offers to your friendly neighborhood bookstore (or your corporate college bookstore) is 20%, about half of the discount it offers on other books—hence the “short discount” warning flashing on the bookstore clerk’s console. Ingram thus effectively blocks SPD-distributed publishers from the shelves, and from the “free” market. (Even though SPD’s plan to let go of their costly Berkeley warehouse space in the coming year will entail storing some of their publishers’ stock in Ingram’s warehouses, there are no foreseeable changes to Ingram’s sales terms for SPD books moving through their system.)

The only way the publisher can get around that—to play ball with the indies and get on those shelves—is to allow SPD to offer Ingram 15%, a hefty cut for a middleman. The total discount of 55% (the bookstore’s 40% and Ingram’s 15%) is equal to the discount Amazon demands for SPD-distributed titles. What’s left of the \$20 retail price is \$9, of which SPD takes half. The publisher’s take has dwindled to



\$4.50 gross. Subtract the printing costs, editorial and design work, publicity, royalties, or rights fees, and the small press has made close to nothing on the sale, or even lost a few cents.

**HP:** And it's important to note that, in contrast, there are vital, inspiring local stores that love and stock indie books and are essential allies to smaller presses—the fantastic Mac's Backs in my neighborhood in Ohio, for example. It's clear from talking to the folks at Mac's Backs, or other beautiful independently minded indie bookstores, that they support small presses because they consider this part of their mission, their values, their work in literature and community. They are making this choice despite the commercial obstacles to it—and then sometimes miraculously creating commercial successes out of small press books.

But many independently owned, noncorporate bookstores aren't willing, for example, to work directly with SPD or individual publishers, which would require more labor but offer better terms than Ingram. They don't value independently published, noncorporate books enough to push back on or find alternatives to the corporation dominating US book distribution (Ingram). So they can't be relied on to help sustain the creation of independent books and literature as an alternative and resistance to corporate dominance. We can't look for solidarity there.

**MY:** Why should a small press publisher support indie bookstores—even in their fight against Amazon—if those stores only stock few (if any) small press publications?

Sure, it's great to have a local bookstore where you can talk to the clerk about literature and get their recommendations. It's a much more pleasant experience than faceless internet shopping, and you feel good supporting “small business” (which isn't quite the same as community). Yet if what they have in stock is basically the Big Five, their imprints, and a few prominent indies, then what they recommend is bound to be much like the “you might also like this” of an algorithm. They're not going to turn you on to small press books you haven't heard of, because they don't have them in the store. In their minds, these books don't really exist.

The lockout of small press literature is in fact much more problematic and violent than the “box out” of independent

bookstores. It leads to a narrow, celebrity-oriented literary culture fueled by capital. It leads to market-based canonization.

**HP:** The word *indie* offers its own value—and a sort of alibi—and corporations have figured out how to use that for their moneymaking self-publishing wings. I’m thinking of the “Independent Press Listing” in the *New York Review of Books*, which features several dozen books, almost all self-published on commercial vanity presses—not independent presses. To a casual reader, it might look like the *NYRB* is giving ad opportunities to indie or small presses, but most of us can’t afford their fee (\$320 per listing if you buy twenty at a time), and even if we could, if we advertised here, our books would look self-published.

**MY:** Similarly, *Kirkus Reviews*, a reputable librarian-oriented book review, has an “Indie” section where you’ll rarely see an SPD-distributed book but instead lots from an imprint that *Kirkus* lists as “Self,” as well as titles from FriesenPress (the self-publishing arm of a Canadian printer), Bowker (the official purveyor of ISBNs in the US, which also offers full-service self-publishing), and smaller print-on-demand and pay-to-play “publishing services.”

**HP:** Of course, the main way that venues like *NYRB* could support small presses would be to review our books, but that’s rare, since we’re largely excluded from the New York publishing publicity circuit. We don’t have a full-time publicity and marketing staff, we don’t have a team of sales reps to reach out to bookstores nationwide, and we can’t afford to fly ourselves and our authors to the trade shows where “buzz” happens around books months before their release.

**MY:** Right, because small press editors are often located outside high-cost-of-living cultural centers, in which case they can’t attend the parties or invite reviewers out for drinks. Small press authors rarely have agents who mingle in those scenes on their behalf.

**HP:** The “indie” label gets used as a marketing tool that diverts income and interest from actual indie presses and writers. “Indie cred” works for ventures like Bookshop.org, which, as we’ve discussed, provides income to indie bookstores (though less than what they’d get if you

were to buy the book directly) and supports Ingram, a corporate rival to Amazon. It isn't really helping small presses and indie writers build the long-term audiences and relationships we need—in fact, furthering Ingram's dominance of the market hurts us. We see similar phenomena elsewhere: "indie" values and praise of the small press appear, but in a structure that doesn't benefit us as much as you might think.

For example, take the recent 2022 holiday "Small Press Gift Guide" that appeared in *BOMB*: a nice feature that included a lot of really good books. But with a couple important exceptions, most of the "small presses" featured in this indie magazine weren't small presses. They're independent but larger companies with multiple paid full-time staff members (that's not a small press thing). One (Catapult) was founded with Koch money. There's an ethos to lists like these—an idea that you're supporting organizations in need. These books and presses are certainly worth supporting, but if you work at a truly small press, you read lists like these and think: Am I too small to be recognized as a small press?

This is the sort of situation that gets perpetuated by literary culture's genial (lack of) politics. The vague idea that "we're all in this together" comes at the expense of the smaller organizations and most marginalized writers, editors, and endeavors. But there's a hesitation to point out these structural suppressions because everyone wants to stay in everyone's good graces, lest you bite the hand that could, in the future, decide to feed you (and in corporate culture, the hand that feeds you is often the hand that kept you from growing your own food).

**MY:** The blurring that's happening in such "small press" lists, in the "indie" review section of major book reviews—as well as in the rhetoric of indie bookstores fighting Amazon—tells of the disappearance of political and aesthetic commitment. It's not only small presses that become invisible—such that readers don't even notice that there's so much missing from the bookstore shelves, curricula, libraries, and radio—but also the very notion that there is in fact something else, something oppositional, an imaginative space for literature and its production beyond the one produced by capital, reinforced by corporate interests and government subsidies. In the Dorothy/Nell

Zink example, the media patronizes (and diminishes the potential of) a small press even when it decides it should support it with a mention.

Small press publishing has surely introduced and buoyed new writers to the surface. It has made possible a lot of the diversity we now see (as much of it as there is) in above-ground publishing. But I don't think that is its primary purpose, in the sense that small presses don't exist to make the larger publishers better, to help them "discover" writers that rise to the top with the help of their capital. (After all, they choose the ones that fit their needs and serve their purposes.) We're not planting a crop of carrots so that someone can come with their expertise, their optics, and their measuring stick to pick out just the perfectly straight and perfectly orange one (or perfectly quirky heirloom) and then plow the field over for another go.

What do you think we're doing? And who created our invisibility? Or rather, whose interests does our invisibility serve?

**HP:** I think we're providing both models and real instances of grassroots culture-making and collective imagination. Small presses are run by writers, and anyone can start one—as long as they can steal a little time from their working lives and get a first publication out to their local readers, which isn't as hard as it sounds. That's not to say small presses are free of racism, classism, sexism—we know they haven't been; they aren't. But their political potential is in their smallness and how they empower people: tomorrow, anyone could found a new press to publish the work that needs publishing, and they could run it collaboratively in relation to community and readers and political values. They could never make a single decision that was about sales (sounds impossible, but I've seen it). They could create a small, real thing that is intimate and imaginative and dynamic and open ended and full of different visions and agents and working against capital, choice by choice. This is the political potential of the small press.

## NOTES

1/ Madeleine Schwartz, “Be the Change: Activism and Cynicism in Nell Zink’s ‘Doxology,’” *The New Yorker*, September 2, 2019, 63.

2/ Kate Dwyer, “Astra Magazine Had Creative Freedom and a Budget. It Wasn’t Enough,” *The New York Times*, December 3, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/03/books/astra-magazine.html>.

3/ Ed Nawotka, “Astra Publishing House Reaches for the Stars,” *Publishers Weekly*, October 29, 2021, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/87770-astra-publishing-house-reaches-for-the-stars.html>.

4/ Casey Cep, “A Kansas Bookshop’s Fight with Amazon Is about More than the Price of Books,” *The New Yorker*, March 12, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/us-journal/a-kansas-bookshops-fight-with-amazon-is-about-more-than-the-price-of-books>.

5/ Alison Flood, “‘This Is Revolutionary’: New Online Bookshop Unites Indies to Rival Amazon,” *The Guardian*, November 1, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/nov/02/this-is-revolutionary-new-online-bookshop-unites-indies-to-rival-amazon>.

STEVEN MAYE

## The Book and the Press in Recent North American Poetry

In a moment when staying aware of any new poetry requires some personal initiative, attending to the work of smaller presses allows readers to engage with new poetry in a way that feels meaningful and which promises to be ongoing and open ended. These presses are shaped by both the taste of their editors and their ideas about what a literary community should be, and their publications represent an evolving engagement with, often an intervention within, contemporary poetry. In some ways, presses have taken on some of the functions once performed by literary anthologies. They bring old and new poets to notice, suggest groupings of poets in the manner of movements or schools, republish and aggregate poems (in “selected” volumes) and do the same with out-of-print collections (in omnibus editions), and thus participate, however reluctantly, in the work of canonization. However, publishing, when seen as an ongoing and open-ended project, is more amenable to the desire for a more provisional, more revisable, more inclusive canon. At the same time, these presses, located in different cities and often staffed by people affiliated with other institutions, index different but overlapping social worlds. In the larger, digital world structured by list culture and algorithmic recommendations, the press runs interference in the distributed construction of collective taste.<sup>1</sup>

Within these literary networks, the medium of the book offers the poet a chance to articulate relative degrees of connection and autonomy. Unlike a journal or anthology, where the poet has little control over a poem’s neighbors and affiliates, the poetry collection offers an occasion to underscore how poems respond to one another, echo one another, build on one another, act as foils to one another. The price of these affordances is that the collection will typically include poems by only one poet, and only poems that have not previously appeared in book form. The book grants a material independence

from the work of other poets and from the poet's earlier work, as demonstrated by innovative poets such as Harryette Mullen or Stacy Doris, who reinvent their style with each new book. Our experience of each book is inflected by the knowledge that it circulates independently from others, that interdependent books may be read in isolation. Each book has to restart the work of building its audience, which is at once a problem and a condition of possibility.

The material form of the book is part of what produces these relations of independence, yet such relations are intimately tied to the book's status as a commodity: a mass-produced form whose attenuated social ties allow it to be bought, sold, and circulated.<sup>2</sup> This fact about the book form complicates all but the most local social ambitions that might adhere in contemporary publishing. To speak of those who buy certain books as a community, as both small and larger publishers do, can seem essentially utopian. In the case of smaller presses, scaling down the market can allow other tangible aspects of a shared life to come into focus, so that the good done by publishing a poetry collection need not be immediately adjudicated in terms of its profitability or the number of copies sold. Conversely, to think that this kind of textured, lived community might come into being at a larger scale through circulation entails a kind of contradiction, since it is through the logic of the commodity that the book circulates. In this context, it takes a kind of alchemy to transform a market into something with the more densely woven connections of a community, or to foment a political movement.

The poet's desire to compel conviction in the book form is one symptom of this ambivalent dependence on the book as a commodity.<sup>3</sup> And when a poet adopts the book as an aesthetic form, with its own tactics of structure, coherence, and closure, that poet can attempt to give the collection a logic that is other than economic.

The Bay Area poet Jack Spicer, who argued for writing book-length works in the second of his 1965 Vancouver lectures, may well be the poster child for this ambivalence. Spicer refused to copyright his books, which he published only with small presses run by friends, in editions of not more than one thousand copies.<sup>4</sup> He also argued explicitly and in detail for taking the book as an aesthetic form. Spicer called this form the "serial poem," a phrase he dismissed as "a joke" and "a lousy

name.”<sup>5</sup> He emphasized above all that such a poem should have “the book as its unit,” and he contrasted such book-length compositions with the poetry collection in its more familiar form: “where you just write a lot of pretty good poems, and then you put ’em into a book, and you call the book something, and people read the poems and see no connections between them whatsoever.”<sup>6</sup> Even the most eccentric tenet of Spicer’s poetics—that each poem should be dictated to the poet by an alien voice—is ultimately a way to affirm the integrity and autonomy of the book form, since each book comprises the transmissions of a single dictating voice. Indeed, when the voice of Spicer’s *Homage to Creeley* returned to him with new poems after that book had been printed and published, Spicer felt compelled to republish all these poems in a single longer work.<sup>7</sup>

When Spicer delivered his thoughts on serial poetry, collections of shorter poems were still the norm and book-length compositions were the exception. But in the decades since Spicer’s lectures, book-length compositions are everywhere, especially within the tradition of experimental writing. The writing of book-length poetry can go by many names: documentary poetics, conceptualism, procedural poetry, the postmodern epic, books that explore a single literary form, and so forth. In recent years, the phrase “project book” has gained currency as a shorthand for many of these.<sup>8</sup> While the general inclination of critics has been to taxonomize these innovations and period styles, doing so can obscure what these ways of writing have in common: each is a way to justify writing poetry at the level of the book. As Stephanie Burt has noted, this tendency had become pervasive enough by 2010 that the poet Dorothea Lasky was moved to publish a manifesto against it.<sup>9</sup> Even a poet like Lisa Robertson—an inheritor, at a remove, of Spicer’s poetic legacy and the author of five book-length poems grounded in literary research—felt compelled by the rise of conceptualism to publish poetry *collections* of the more literal kind, whose components resist being linked to a single archive, compositional strategy, or theme.<sup>10</sup>

That the conceptual poetry of the past few decades, in both its most self-conscious forms and its looser iterations, should be so strongly linked to the book form is itself remarkable. Conceptual art was above all ambivalent about art’s material instantiations,



leading to artworks that represented the same content in multiple forms (as images, objects, and writing), and works like Sol LeWitt's wall drawings, which were designed to be remade anew with each installation. But conceptual poetry, like other publishing cultures, is rooted in mechanical reproduction: the consistency across physical editions is what allows readers to share an experience while separated in space and time. Moreover, works of conceptual poetry often depend on the scale of the book form for their effects, and to distinguish them from the tradition of the "found poem."<sup>11</sup> Instead of an ambivalence about material form, the adoption of a new concept or conceit with each book provides a justification for form. And the form of such works is always the book rather than the collection.

An older and more durable version of this ambivalence can be found in book-length poetic sequences that are unified by the form of individual poems. While such works have been around for centuries, their potential as a tactic for book writing seems to manifest around 1980, in John Ashbery's *Shadow Train* and Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*. Ashbery's book comprises fifty poems with an identical structure: each has four four-line stanzas. Hejinian's, in its original edition, had thirty-seven prose blocks, each with thirty-seven sentences (one for each year of Hejinian's life to that point), and the book thus, in the same moment, imagines a form for the unit and a form for the collection. Both books treated arbitrary formal choices as necessary ones, asserting an equivalence between the form of the poem and the form of the book as two fixed structures at different scales.

These books have a formal ancestor in the sonnet sequence, yet Ashbery's alteration of that form in *Shadow Train* is telling. By replacing the final couplet with another quatrain, he removes the formal differences that promised closure in earlier sonnets: the couplet's eloquent brevity and its single, more sudden rhyme. Instead, with this weakened closure, *Shadow Train* runs on from poem to poem, even as the poems are lent a visual closure through their titles and page breaks. (The *New York Times* review was titled "More Poetry than Poems.") The anticipation that drives *Shadow Train* is not of how each poem will finish its argument, reach an epiphany or resolution, but of how each poem might differ from the last, or how it might contribute to a larger narrative that emerges across the poems. The sense of a larger narrative is partly diaristic, since

Ashbery anchors his poems by referencing months and seasons and because the detritus of American life surfaces intermittently within his meditations. Hejinian's *My Life* likewise invites a diaristic reading through her book's title, although the book reframes the diaristic record as memory work: something more fragmented, more sensory, less composed than recollected. Nonetheless, both books suggest that poetry is a substance that, like a liquid, will fill its container. The structure of the container matters, but choosing the container in advance does not pose an obstacle to poetic composition.

This kind of poetic sequence, in which the poet invents a form or modifies an existing one and then explores it to produce a collection, has continued to be a feature of the contemporary poetry landscape. We can see it most immediately in the many recent books that take up the sonnet sequence as a site for innovation. Yet it also manifests in work with other forms: in Anthony Madrid's book of ghazals and his work with the englyn, a medieval Welsh poetic form; in the rectangular loop poems of Anselm Berrigan; and, most recently, in Sandra Simonds's *Triptychs* and Laynie Browne's list poems.

It may be tempting to read these invented forms through the logic of the gimmick, as devices for saving the labor of inspiration. But the tendency to speak of these forms as "constraints" suggests that this method makes the work of writing poetry harder. In the afterword to his best-selling *Eunoia*, in which each chapter is composed of words that feature only one of the five vowels, Christian Bök writes that his book "makes a Sisyphean spectacle of its labor" as he attempts to incorporate every such word into the distinct prose narrative of its corresponding chapter.<sup>12</sup> Yet even without the rigidity of an Oulipian constraint, the adoption of a serialized form functions to make the poet's labor visible.<sup>13</sup> It models repetition and duration as an inevitable part of its form, and suggests the challenge implied in both repeating a form and innovating within it.

The serialization of a form has a lot going for it as a way to write poetry, not least for how it manifests the breadth and depth of poetry's formal possibilities. Nonetheless, the ubiquity of book-length poetry owes as much to the publishing environment as it does to the needs and desires of individual poets. Matthew Stadler has argued that the contemporary crisis in book publishing is a result of the uneasy relationship between reading and book buying.

Reading is “open-ended, provisional, conversational”—digressive and inconclusive. It resists the closure and commitment entailed in each purchase and delays the interval between one purchase and the next.<sup>14</sup> The serial poems I have been describing mediate the tension between browsing and consumption in the consistency of their form. They make it easier to glean the content of the collection from a sample, and they likewise make it easy for a reader to stray to other publications and then circle back. These forms of relation suggest a weakened version of the conceptualist provocation that someone did not actually have to read a book of conceptual poetry to understand it, that it was enough for the book to exist and to be talked about.<sup>15</sup> The formal choice to serialize an invented or modified form encourages sampling rather than “unreadings”: a reader can engage with the poems as a means of judging the form, and based on those poems they can fathom the book’s potential for future reading. Each book must promise enough to be bought even in a truncated act of reading, while not being so engrossing, so self-sufficient, as to preclude the purchase of its immediate competitors. The various species of project book find different ways to make that promise, but these are the market conditions that unite them.

From a publishing standpoint, the desire for readers to read at the level of the book rather than the poem is thus equally a desire for readers to move between multiple poetry collections. By encouraging people, explicitly or implicitly, to read and to experience poetry at the level of the book, publishers map the unit of aesthetic experience onto the unit of publishing, and individual works are perceived as part of a larger publishing flow. There is even something hopeful about this, to the extent that it imagines that a reader’s attention will constantly open itself to new objects.

But this is also where the book’s status as a commodity is most apparent. The physical formats adopted by different book publishers, their most obvious attempts at branding, are the IRL equivalent of the way publishers constellate their books on their websites. The uniform, squarish dimensions of titles by Futurepoem; the antique laid paper on which Coach House prints its books; the eggshell-hued, unillustrated covers of Wave’s paperbacks—the physical form that repeats across titles promises a certain genre of experience, leading readers to seek out a press’s other titles within physical space. Wave

paperbacks in particular have an immediately recognizable design that foregoes most of the marketing norms that govern other book jackets: they dispense with the blurbs, paraphrases, and images that most presses use to attract potential readers. Instead, the front cover attempts to grab a reader's attention through typography alone, trading on the value that adheres to the press as a brand, while the back cover includes only an author bio, pointing readers to other volumes in the poet's body of work—suggesting that it is the work of the poet, as manifest in the poems, that someone should read for. The lure of the physical book, conveying the brand identity of the publisher, is thus translated immediately into opening the book and browsing its contents.<sup>16</sup>

I end this essay with Wave since they have frequently published writers who resist the project-based poetics that characterize much recent poetry. When Dorothea Lasky, who has to date published five books with Wave, argued that “poetry is not a project,” she instead imagined poetry as an “intuition” where “the outside world of an artist and the internal drives within her blend and blur.”<sup>17</sup> In a similar spirit, Matthew Rohrer has argued that “the writing of all poems is a form of collaboration,” in which the voice of the poet enters a kind of dialogue with the voices, the language of others.<sup>18</sup> As in Spicer, this appeal to voice promises an integrity across the collection. But the innovation of a dialogical or hybrid voice, half of which is specific to the poem, allows the poet to have it both ways. It affirms the autonomy of each poem against the market unit of the collection, even as the through line of the voice also extends outward to the poet's other volumes and to other voices, both on the market and in the world.

Some of Wave's most notable recent publications have taken up this logic as an architectural principle. Sawako Nakayasu's *Some Girls Walk into the Country They Are From* uses its long series of prose poems to hold other kinds of work: poems in verse, poems in other languages, and poems by other people, including the work of seven other poets and translators. And rather than adopting the convention of facing-page translations, various translations and originals are strewn and intermingled across the collection, producing eddies of reading within a larger flow. Tyehimba Jess's *Olio* conjures various “first-generation freed voices” to animate the history of Black American performance and includes several foldout, detachable pages

along with photographs and drawings.<sup>19</sup> Jess's book models the process of sifting through historical documents and of making something out of an absent or incomplete archive: a process of reading beyond the book's physical bounds. (One late section encourages the reader to fold and tape those detachable pages into three-dimensional forms.) In effect, these books trade on the conventions of the book form to model reading as a kind of wider circulation. They make you want to read the book, and they make you want to read beyond it.

Rohrer's remarks above come from the afterword to his collection *The Sky Contains the Plans*, in which the voices he collaborates with are ones heard in the liminal space of waking up and falling asleep. The idea of turning dream voices into poetry and writing an entire book of such poems is about as project-like as a poetry collection can be. But Rohrer's book is, for him, less a project than a practice: a set of skills he exercises over and over, developed from poem to poem until their deployment on the page becomes an art in itself. Poets as otherwise different as Mary Ruefle, CAConrad, Douglas Kearney, and Chelsey Minnis can all find a place on Wave's list because they manifest some aspect of the poem as performance: they exhibit a kind of in-the-moment responsiveness, the exercise of a cultivated linguistic skill, and the regulated momentum of its practice. Yet even when their books are not projects, the focus on the poem as a manifestation of the poet's craft produces a representativeness across the collection akin to other project books. Their poems can be read for an experience of individual style or technique that each poem exemplifies. So while Rohrer's poems may exhibit an ambivalence about the book project they find themselves in, their commitment to improvisation still produces the representativeness that makes the collection more consumable. The very conditions that might inspire a poet to resist the book form can marshal this ambivalence within the market's overarching imperative for readers to browse its wares. Rather than abjuring the book as a form complicit with the market, it may be better to recognize the book as a necessary site for untangling the ambitions of poetry from the conditions of its circulation.

## NOTES

1/ David Wright, "Literary Taste and List Culture in a Time of 'Endless Choice,'" in *From Codex to Hypertext: Reading at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Anouk Lang (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 108–23. On the scale of contemporary American poetry, see Craig Dworkin, "Seja Marginal," in *The Consequences of Innovation: 21st Century Poetics* (New York: Roof Books, 2008), 7–24.

2/ Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986). See also Michel Callon, "The Process of Making Goods Mobile and Alienable," in *Markets in the Making: Rethinking Competition, Goods, and Innovation*, trans. Olivia Custer, ed. Martha Poon (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2021), 63–148.

3/ Compare Nicholas Brown, *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 6. Brown argues that this problem is intrinsic to all artworks produced under capitalism, in which case the belated working through of this problem in contemporary poetry might be ascribed to poetry's economic marginality.

4/ Peter Gizzi and Kevin Killian, "About This Edition," in *My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), xxviii. Lewis Ellingham and Kevin Killian, *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1998), 235–36, 289.

5/ Jack Spicer, "The Serial Poem and *The Holy Grail*," in *The House That Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer*, ed. Peter Gizzi (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 52, 73. Other readers of Spicer have been less inclined to understand "the book" here as a material entity, not least because *The Holy Grail* is itself composed of seven "books," in the sense of chapters.

6/ Spicer, "The Serial Poem and *The Holy Grail*," 52, 56.

7/ Spicer, "The Serial Poem and *The Holy Grail*," 57.

8/ Stephanie Burt, "On Long Poems," *The Yale Review* 108, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 166. Ange Mlinko, "Holding It Together," *The New York Review of Books* 66, no. 5 (January 17, 2019): 62.

9/ Burt, "On Long Poems," 166. Dorothea Lasky, *Poetry Is Not a Project* (Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2010).

10/ Charles Bernstein and Lisa Robertson, "Lisa Robertson on *Close Listening*," October 20, 2016, in *Close Listening*, produced by Charles Bernstein, podcast, MP3 audio, 53:27, <https://jacket2.org/commentary/lisa-robertson-close-listening>. The collections in question are *Lisa*

Robertson's *Magenta Soul Whip* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2009) and *3 Summers* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2016).

11/ See in particular Sianne Ngai, "Stuplimity," in *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 248–97.

12/ Christian Bök, *Eunoia* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2001), 103.

13/ Sianne Ngai argues that judging an artwork as gimmicky suggests that, while its conceit is supposed to save labor, it nonetheless works too hard for not enough payoff. Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020).

14/ Matthew Stadler, "The Ends of the Book: Reading, Economies & Publics," in *Literary Publishing in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Travis Kurowski, Wayne Miller, and Kevin Prufer (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2016), 15.

15/ Kenneth Goldsmith, "Conceptual Writing: A Worldview," *Harriet Books*, the Poetry Foundation, April 30, 2012. See also Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in a Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 100.

16/ Wave's minimalist covers take some of their currency from their resemblance to the products of DIY printing and publishing, thus participating in what Matvei Yankelevich has called the gentrification of small press aesthetics. Yankelevich, "'Power to the people's mimeo machines!' or the Politicization of Small Press Aesthetics," *Harriet Books*, the Poetry Foundation, February 3, 2020, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2020/02/power-to-the-peoples-mimeo-machines-or-the-politicization-of-small-press-aesthetics>.

17/ Lasky, *Poetry Is Not a Project*, unpaginated.

18/ Matthew Rohrer, *The Sky Contains the Plans* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2020), 85.

19/ Tyehimba Jess, *Olio* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2016), 3.

## The Small Press at the Library

*Primavera*, a small Chicago-based feminist magazine, was founded in early 1975 to publish fiction and poetry reflecting the experiences of women. Later that year, the editors submitted the magazine's first issue to the Library of Congress for cataloging, a standard procedure among publishers which continues to this day. But following a nine-month wait, the request was rejected. "The Library of Congress is forced to limit its acquisitions to those publications for which requests are anticipated from the Congress, other government agencies and from other persons authorized to use its collections," the Library's justification of its decision read. "Your publication, *Primavera*, it was thought, did not fall into one of these categories."<sup>1</sup> The consequences of this exclusion were significantly more profound than the letter might have suggested. Since the early twentieth century, the Library of Congress has shared its bibliographic data with libraries across North America. What started as an exercise in bibliographic standardization and a project to create a catalog card exchange among participating institutions has grown to become the National Union Catalog: a compilation of all books cataloged by the Library of Congress, which is an important resource informing library acquisitions across the US. To be cataloged by the Library of Congress—and to be assigned what was then called a Card Catalog Number—meant widespread visibility and inclusion in a complex publishing ecosystem. Omission from the Catalog, on the other hand, was synonymous with an almost complete absence from libraries, and with significantly decreased sales, too.<sup>2</sup>

A year after the original Library of Congress application, Janet Ruth Heller, *Primavera*'s coeditor, wrote to the Library again to explain that "the position of the magazine has changed."<sup>3</sup> Although *Primavera*'s focus remained the same, by 1976 it had been reviewed in a number of regional papers, including the *Chicago Sun-Times* and *Milwaukee Sentinel*. But perhaps most notably, prominent small press



advocate Bill Katz wrote positively about the publication in *Library Journal*, the leading library-sector periodical, which was published at the time by book trade giant R. R. Bowker.<sup>4</sup> In the wake of this heightened publicity, the Library of Congress decision was revised: *Primavera* was added to its collection and indexed accordingly.

This example of *Primavera*'s marginalization, its subsequent change in status, and the value judgements applied to it and similar publications (not interesting or important enough, as the selection committee implied, until venerable institutions suggested otherwise) was by no means exceptional. The case of *Primavera* encapsulates the complex relationship between small presses and the institutions associated with the production and circulation of publications, such as the library—a relationship shaped by distribution challenges, struggles with the increasingly aggressive market logics of mid-twentieth-century America, growing reliance on standardization, and, finally, data-driven economies of scale that transformed the publishing landscape of the 1960s and '70s. (For example, ISBN was introduced in 1970, and the Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication program started in 1971.) On the one hand, the small press publishing scene as it emerged in the midst of 1960s counterculture and social movements in the US was defined by strong anti-capitalist and anti-institutional commitments.<sup>5</sup> The drive to publish content considered unviable by commercial publishers, often on a shoestring and by any means available, led to a proliferation of DIY publications with a distinct look and feel, which challenged familiar notions of what a book or magazine should do and how it should look. On the other hand, the ambition to make these publications visible and accessible to the reading public was an important goal that many small presses and their newly forming institutions—including organizations such as COSMEP (Committee of Small Magazine Editors and Publishers, founded in Berkeley, CA, in 1968)—had worked to address since their emergence. It is this tension between the political and aesthetic commitments of the small press, the desire to reach the reading public on a wide scale, and the economic realities of such expansion that made libraries a crucial junction of small press activism.

The history of the small press is often considered synonymous with the history of accessible print technologies, with mimeo, cheap offset, and later Xerox as defining features of the small press's golden

age.<sup>6</sup> And rightfully so—these innovations enabled small presses to grow at the pace and scale they did. But while these conditions of production made printing relatively easy and accessible, distribution was a major challenge. With a lack of interested review outlets, no reliable distribution infrastructure (no major wholesaler would carry small press publications well into the 1970s), and the difficulty of placing nonstandard publications in bookstores and libraries, the small press's struggle was not to get new work published but to get it widely read. While bookshop sales preoccupied the small press community in its earliest years (and initiatives such as distribution cooperatives, cooperative advertising, and the emergence of specialist small press distributors were an important means by which the small press worked to reach the bookselling community), one of the most intense areas of small presses' organizing during the heyday of the 1970s and 1980s was their library engagement.

SPRIL (Small Press Racks in Libraries) was one such initiative, set up to transform library acquisition policies and inform local cataloging approaches to accommodate independent and nonstandard publications in circulation, often for the very first time.<sup>7</sup> Established by Paul Fericano under the auspices of COSMEP West (one of COSMEP's regional branches), the project placed books and periodicals donated by small publishers on racks in libraries across California. Often displayed prominently, the racks made available an eclectic selection of small press publications for browsing and borrowing, at a scale not previously encountered in public libraries. By 1977, the project distributed 1,200 publications to forty libraries across the state. Supported by a National Endowment for the Arts seed grant, SPRIL also sponsored library subscriptions to participating publications for one year, encouraging libraries to continue purchasing beyond the lifetime of the project. In 1978, SPRIL East followed, with a similar initiative funded by the NEA and targeting five hundred libraries in the Northeast. It successfully reached four hundred libraries within one year and published a short-lived newsletter of its own before its funding was discontinued (marking, perhaps, the public funding crisis to come).

While SPRIL worked with public libraries, GAASP (Getting and Abetting Small Presses), also founded in 1978, engaged college and university libraries across the US.<sup>8</sup> An important element of the initiative included coordination of cataloging and development

of nontraditional acquisition models. To aid these efforts, GAASP offered its five hundred participating libraries a selection of alternative reference resources, including *Alternatives in Print*, first published in 1969 by the American Library Association's Social Responsibilities Round Table. A counter-catalog of sorts, *Alternatives in Print* was a directory of underground and small press materials, designed to address gaps in bibliographic reference works such as the National Union Catalog and *Books In Print*, and to enable more inclusive and better-informed library acquisitions. It was an intervention into existing tools used by the library community—including Library of Congress subject headings promoted through the Cataloging in Publication program, which often mis- or under-represented content on women, global majority communities, incarcerated people, labor, and people with disabilities (in other words, issues at the center of many small press publications). Reproducing systemic biases and exclusions rooted in nineteenth-century epistemologies which shaped all modern library classification systems, these bibliographic standards actively obscured publications that did not fit the existing categories and limited their circulation. *Alternatives in Print*, then, was a politically and ethically motivated intervention, and one of a growing body of alternative directories circulating at the time, which collectively highlighted that “how a book gets cataloged can be just as important to small presses as how it gets reviewed or advertised.”<sup>9</sup> Combining an unprecedented sensitivity to small press publishing practices with a format legible to libraries and bookstores, these “alternatives on alternatives” served as a corrective to established acquisition tools and reshaped library acquisition practices to make small press publications visible.

Beyond its technical impact on library practice, GAASP also fostered the kinds of library–small press networks it embodied. Developed by Jackie Eubanks, a librarian at Brooklyn College, and Elliott Shore, then of Temple University Libraries, GAASP was a product of the library community and is an important example of libraries' activism in the 1970s.<sup>10</sup> Though librarians first, Eubanks and Shore were active in the small press community, and Eubanks acted as the chair of COSMEP for one term in the 1970s. Eubanks's commitment to the small press, as a publishing project with roots in the

free press movement and the tumult of 1968, was intrinsically linked to her commitment to librarianship. Eubanks saw the small press at the library as a progressive institution at the forefront of freedom-of-speech struggles.<sup>11</sup> In this light, GAASP was as much a library project as a small press community initiative, and an important example of the strong current of community activism across both that has been critical to shaping the library and small press publishing practice in equal terms.

Connections between small press and library communities were often maintained thanks to librarians with an interest in small presses and active in networks such as COSMEP. Eubanks, Shore, Celeste West, James P. Danky, Sanford Berman, and Noel Peattie are among the most prominent examples. But library–small press relationships tended to be precarious and contingent undertakings: acquisitions of small press publications were often the result of individual advocates with connections to small press networks—COSMEP in particular—rather than a consistent expansion and transformation of library acquisitions policies to embrace nonstandard publications. The hyperlocal focus of many small publications, especially periodicals with very local coverage or produced by local communities, also meant that some publications were readily acquired by local libraries but of little interest to out-of-state librarians. This resulted in patchy and inconsistent holdings, perhaps more representative of the geographies of small press collecting than of small presses’ rich and diverse outputs. The legacy of this era is clearly reflected today in many US libraries’ holdings of small press materials in special collections, including at Michigan State (where Hugh Fox, prominent in COSMEP networks, was a professor), the Wisconsin Historical Society (where Danky was a librarian), the University of Iowa (home of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and presses such as Toothpaste), UC Davis (where Noel Peattie used to work), the San Francisco Public Library (where West was a librarian), and Temple (former professional home of Elliott Shore), to name a few.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, special collections are the home of the small press in many libraries today. This paradigm of collecting small press publications was already coming to prominence in the 1970s, as a solution to dealing with limited-edition materials that were considered too unusual to be incorporated into circulating libraries. Special collections as a

category of library material emerged in the late nineteenth century and grew rapidly from the 1930s onward as part of the special libraries movement.<sup>13</sup> These collections—although at odds with the small press ethos of accessible, affordable publishing—created an opening for small press publications to be incorporated into libraries.<sup>14</sup> The nonstandard formats, frequent lack of ISBNs or Library of Congress numbers, lack of perfect binding, use of stapling or saddle stitching, and radical or experimental content meant that these publications fit well within the new remit of special collections acquisitions. Small presses' interest in libraries was driven by a desire for wider readership and sales—and inclusion in mainstream circulation, which the small press community imagined might be possible in the expanding library sector. But the very same characteristics of small press publications that proved challenging for mainstream bookselling also relegated small press books and magazines to special collections status. While somewhat undesirable at first—the small presses' fight to be included in library circulation was an attempt to get rid of their “special” status rather than amplify it—the inclusion of small presses in special library collections had a lasting impact on these publications' preservation and long-term retention. Identified as rare, and as a result valuable—a rather unexpected designation for cheap publications produced for accessible circulation—small press materials in special collections escaped discard policies and demand-driven collection strategies which required that lesser-read titles be disposed of, especially in public libraries and in the face of funding cuts and shrinking library resources.

“If the economy affects the bookstore business, imagine what it does to libraries,” Michael Scott Cain wrote in his 1981 *Book Marketing: A Guide to Intelligent Distribution*.<sup>15</sup> The library, Cain contended, found itself in crisis in the 1980s because of major public funding cuts. While the 1956 Library Services Act heralded libraries' golden age, promising their unprecedented countrywide expansion, the economic crisis and political climate of Reagan's America transformed the library sector into a challenged, resource-poor ecology. Shrinking budgets inevitably hampered the momentum of initiatives such as SPRIL and GAASP and commitments to more expansive and consistent small press acquisitions across the sector. But it was also the changing character of the small press that shifted the relationship between small presses and

libraries yet again. Writing in 1984, Loss Glazier noted that “even the term ‘small press’ has been institutionalized by a magazine published by R. R. Bowker (Xerox Corporation) entitled *Small Press*.”<sup>16</sup> Douglas Blazek, the editor of one of the early small press periodicals, *Olé*, described the 1980s small press scene as “stable.” “No groundbreaking or taboo breaking. No need to go underground to avoid censorship. Less spirit, less individuality. Respectability.”<sup>17</sup> This is perhaps the greatest paradox in the history of the small press movement: in its fight for greater readership and institutional visibility, the small press adapted to the publishing landscape a bit too successfully; or rather, by adopting some mainstream tools and tactics, it transformed into an altogether different publishing project.

The 1980s crisis of the small press was followed by a notable decline in the 1990s, with many of its foundational institutions closing down (COSMEP folded in 1996). This is not to say that small presses ceased to publish altogether. Rather, with the institutionalization Glazier and Blazek mourned, and the legitimization and marketization of the “alternatives” or “indies”—as new ventures such as *Fence* and McSweeney’s came to be known—1990s small press publishing was largely predicated on its drive to professionalize and institutionalize, and to abandon in the process its communities’ legacies of autonomy and anti-capitalism. Now more akin to *The Paris Review* than *Small Press Review*, the alternatives of the 1990s grew to be “market ready” in form and content. These new small press magazines and books looked, perhaps for the very first time, just like all the other books and magazines, now explicitly and knowingly designed for mass distribution and for ease of bookstore and library acquisitions. That is, as Matvei Yankelevich puts it, the small press in the 1990s became the outlet for the “de-politicized aesthetics of the new professional literary class,” a playground for the new MFA-graduate author-professional, writing and publishing for their self-selecting, “institutionally qualified readership.”<sup>18</sup>

This remaking of the idea of the small press publication in the 1990s—what Kaplan Harris calls the gentrification of the small press—is key to tracing the histories of the small press, and the small press’s place in the library, too.<sup>19</sup> The modes of production and distribution employed by small presses in the 1960s and 1970s were

an important means of signaling their political commitments vis-à-vis the institutions they worked to challenge. Their “small” operations were a way of turning economic necessity into a complete aesthetics, in which making magazines and books that didn’t fit (the bookshelf, the acquisition policies, the cataloging standards) was as important as writing radical poetry or formally experimental, politically subversive prose. Their attempts to introduce small publications into the library, for example, were a project not of changing the character of their publications to fit institutional standards but of transforming the library’s operations to accommodate the nonstandard material. However, once the small press’s means of production changed, along with its aesthetic qualities, so did the politics of publishing small. The smallness of the small press today—and the broader question of who might be considered small when publishing economies of scale have changed so dramatically since the 1960s—signals a different kind of political, economic, and aesthetic position. In the context of 2023 market logics, the small, indie, or alternative publication is often a status symbol of sorts: a marker of edginess, quality, and intellectual credibility; a little bit on the fringes but close enough to the center to compete for bookshelf space at any library or for major literary awards with the so-called Big Five.<sup>20</sup>

Some of this change in what the small press stands for is perhaps rooted in certain shifts in publishing discourse. With the emergence of the new indies, the term “small press” became more capacious, appropriated to describe many publications that today have little to do with the small press as it emerged in the 1960s. Some small publishers who explicitly position their work as a continuation of the 1960s alternative do exist, but the broader mainstreaming of the small press today has impacted their place in the publishing ecology, too. Predictably, this expanded notion of the small press has affected the relationship of the small press and the library: with commercial success comes greater visibility, and more widespread library acquisitions. Yet the institutional relationship between small presses and libraries remains complex. Ugly Duckling Presse (UDP) is one interesting example of a contemporary small publisher whose work is evocative of its intricacies, which are reflected in the positioning of its publications in library holdings.

UDP emerged in the late 1990s as a collective whose members stemmed from zine and chapbook communities (and this connection between the small press and zines is important, as I show below) and consciously built on the legacies of earlier small presses. One of UDP's early publications was a magazine, *6x6*, which ran for seventeen years and thirty-six issues. *6x6* was designed as a self-conscious intervention into the professionalizing small press publishing world, and its approach to production and distribution evoked 1960s small press practices. Printed on legal paper, reproduced at a printing shop around the corner, the cover printed in letterpress, trimmed by hand to unusual size, featuring one cut corner, and bound with a rubber band, *6x6* also didn't include its title on the cover, mention its editing body, or outwardly display a barcode or ISSN. Its first issue was printed in one thousand copies, marketed for \$2 each. And no one would sell it when it first came out.<sup>21</sup> Nonstandard formatting and conscious flouting of publishing conventions proved as much of a distribution challenge in 2000 as they had been in 1968.

Twenty years later, however, UDP is somewhat of a small press institution, and its own institutionalization means that *6x6* can be found in a number of library collections, available first and foremost in rare, manuscript, and special collections libraries. Like the small presses it worked to evoke, the magazine's aesthetic has shaped its institutional framing as a rare, nonstandard object which is challenging to classify, catalog, and circulate. In contrast, many UDP books, with their perfect binding, ISBNs, and easily identifiable bibliographic information, have found their way to library stacks. But even these "standard" small press publications prove a classification challenge, perhaps because of their association with the early UDP experiments. In some cases, the very same UDP volumes can be found both in circulating collections and in special collections libraries, often within the same institution, signaling perhaps the gray area of trade publishing that presses such as UDP occupy and the ongoing challenge that the small press poses to library acquisition policies.<sup>22</sup>

Reflecting on the end of COSMEP in a 1996 *Small Press* magazine article, Tom Person wrote: "If a new kind of publishers organization is going to come along, it will most likely come from the largest segment of publishers in operation today...the 'zines."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the radical



publishing sentiment of the earlier small press has today found its echoes in zine publishing as it grew in popularity in the 1990s. Perhaps even more complex than small presses in their radical rejection of the institutional status quo and their commitment to DIY publishing ecologies, zines evoke a nostalgia for an “authentic” engagement with writing.<sup>24</sup> Today, zines bring together a lively community of specialist librarians, working on metadata standards specific to these publications but compatible with existing bibliographic data systems. New controlled vocabularies (for example, the Anchor Archive Zine Subject Thesaurus) and initiatives such as the Zine Union Catalog have been enabling sustainable models for nonstandard publications in library collections, often for the very first time, building in this work on the tradition of inclusive and socially engaged librarianship that the small press library community made possible.<sup>25</sup>

## NOTES

1/ Letter from Linda L. Perkins to Janet Ruth Heller, August 16, 1976, *Primavera* Records, Box 1.14, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, the University of Chicago Library.

2/ It is perhaps telling that *Primavera* was initially submitted for cataloging as a book rather than a magazine, although these two categories of publication were approached differently by the Library of Congress. The mis-submission of *Primavera* (which did not impact the Library of Congress's decision on the application) might have been a simple mistake. But it is also, I suggest, illustrative of the rather eclectic character of small press publishing in the period. Although magazine and book publishing faced distinct challenges and relied on separate infrastructures, among small presses these two types of publications were often produced by the same publishers, represented by the same organizations, and handled by the same distributors. As Gordon Weaver of *Mississippi Review* put it, "I do not see a great distinction between small presses and little magazines—often one is coexistent with the other." See Gordon Weaver, "Mississippi Review," in *Green Isle in the Sea: An Informal History of the Alternative Press, 1960–85*, eds. Diane Kruckow and Curt Johnson (Highland Park, IL: December Press, 1986), 95. The characteristic lack of formal specialization evidenced by *Primavera*'s mis-submission was a direct expression of the small press solidarities of the period and the communal knowledge base on which they relied. But this approach to publishing also often resulted in a lack of specialist knowledge among publishers and a limited understanding of the workings of the very institutional practices they were hoping to transform.

3/ Letter from Janet Ruth Heller to Donald Woolery, September 4, 1976, *Primavera* Records, Box 1.14, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, the University of Chicago Library.

4/ R. R. Bowker, today trading as Bowker, has been in operation since 1868 and is a major provider of publishing trade tools and services. These include publications such as *Books In Print* and *The Library and Book Trade Almanac*, as well as supply chain services. Bowker is the sole US agent responsible for issuing ISBNs to publishers. Until 1985, it also published *Publishers Weekly*, the leading trade periodical.

5/ Len Fulton, the founder of *Small Press Review* and perhaps one of the most influential figures in small press publishing history, traces the origins of the small press back to free speech activism in Berkeley (and his own publishing experience goes back to the early 1960s Berkeley newspaper *The Citizen*). "Poetry," wrote Diane Kruckow, poet and editor of *Zahir*, *Stony Hills*,

and *Small Press News*, “was an instrument of peace. Quite a few of us were active participants in Vietnam protests and student rebellions.” Reflecting on her engagement with the small press, Kruchkow stressed the small press publishing community’s commitments “not only to literature but also to social and political movements.” See Len Fulton, “Dust and Dustbooks,” and Diane Kruchkow, “A Green Isle in the Sea,” in Kruchkow and Johnson, *Green Isle in the Sea*, 43–52, vii–viii. As Ellen Ferber suggests, this commitment to dissent, in political and aesthetic terms, came together in the small press publishing movement: “The urge to publish, immediately and cheaply, the manifestoes of change included the move to publish the new literature: the work of young, mostly unknown poets whose radical forms and innovative, often inflammatory content were the aesthetic equivalent of the new politics.” See Ellen Ferber, “Spawning,” in *International Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses*, 15th ed. (Paradise, CA: Dustbooks, 1979), unpaginated.

6/ For the most comprehensive history of what has been described as “the mimeo revolution,” see Steven Clay and Rodney Phillips, *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side: Adventures in Writing, 1960–1980* (New York: The New York Public Library and Granary Books, 1998).

7/ On SPRIL, see, for example, *COSMEP Newsletter* 8, no. 6 (March 1977), *COSMEP Newsletter* 9, no. 11 (August 1978), and *SPRIL Newsletter* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1979).

8/ On GAASP, see *Social Responsibilities Round Table Newsletter* 50 (September 1978): 3; and *COSMEP Newsletter* 9, no. 11 (August 1978).

9/ Other examples of alternative directories included *Alternative Press Index* (first published in 1970) and Len Fulton’s Dustbooks directories (*The Directory of Small Press and Magazine Editors and Publishers* and *Small Press Record of Books in Print*). Quote from Sanford Berman, “CIP, Subjects, and Little Presses,” *COSMEP Newsletter* 7, no. 10 (July 1976): 8; this passage is set in all capital letters in the original article.

10/ The growing interest in collecting alternative publications was grounded in the social activism of the 1960s and early 1970s. It was a period when socially engaged librarianship became a possibility and a significant shift took place in approaches to collection remits to include underrepresented voices. See, for example, Mary Lee Bundy and Frederick J. Stielow, eds., *Activism in American Librarianship, 1962–1973* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987).

11/ Eubanks’s efforts played a significant role in transforming approaches to library collection development. Since 1995, the ALA has granted a memorial award named after her to librarians who collect and champion alternative materials in their institutions.

12/ Many small press publications were incorporated into established poetry collections, too, for instance at SUNY Buffalo, Princeton, Yale, and the

University of Texas at Austin. There, however, they were acquired because of these collections' commitment to collecting poetry publications and not due to an explicit interest in small press publishing as such. These dedicated poetry collections inadvertently became a rich small press resource. For a helpful overview of the rise of poetry collections in American libraries, see Alison Fraser, "Creating the Twentieth-Century Literary Archives: A Short History of the Poetry Collection at the University at Buffalo," *Information & Culture* 55, no. 3 (2020): 252–70.

13/ For an overview of the emergence of special collections as a library category, see, for example, William L. Joyce, "The Evolution of the Concept of Special Collections in American Research Libraries," *RBML* 3, no. 1 (1988): 19–29.

14/ Lyn Hejinian's approach to Tuumba Press is illustrative of this ethos: "The chapbook format appealed to me for obvious practical reasons—a shorter book meant less work (and expense) than a longer one.... I wanted the Tuumba books to come to people in the mode of 'news'.... It is for this reason...that I didn't handsew the books; they are all stapled—a transgression in the world of fine printing but highly practical in the world of pamphleteering." Lyn Hejinian, "Tuumba Press," in Clay and Phillips, *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side*, 257.

15/ Michael Scott Cain, *Book Marketing: A Guide to Intelligent Distribution* (Paradise, CA: Dustbooks, 1981), 105.

16/ Loss Glazier, "Libraries, Small Press, and 1984: A West Coast Perspective," in *Alternative Library Literature, 1984/1985: A Biennial Anthology*, eds. Sanford Berman and James P. Danky (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 1986), 87.

17/ Douglas Blazek, "Olé," in Kruchkow and Johnson, *Green Isle in the Sea*, 116.

18/ Matvei Yankelevich, "'Power to the people's mimeo machines!' or the Politicization of Small Press Aesthetics," *Harriet Books*, the Poetry Foundation, February 3, 2020, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2020/02/power-to-the-peoples-mimeo-machines-or-the-politicization-of-small-press-aesthetics>. On the rise of MFA programs and their impact on publishing, see Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

19/ Kaplan Harris, "The Gentrification of the Small Press: CLMP and the DIY Tradition," in Georgina Colby, Kaja Marczewska, and Leigh Wilson, eds., *The Contemporary Small Press: Making Publishing Visible* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 91–111.

20/ Namely, HarperCollins, Hachette, Macmillan, Penguin Random House, and Simon & Schuster. See Katie Yee, "Small Presses Win Big at This Year's

PEN America Literary Awards,” *Literary Hub*, March 3, 2020, <https://lithub.com/small-presses-win-big-at-this-years-pen-america-literary-awards/>. See also Jim Milliot, “Over the Past 25 Years, the Big Publishers Got Bigger—and Fewer,” *Publishers Weekly*, April 19, 2022, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/89038-over-the-past-25-years-the-big-publishers-got-bigger-and-fewer.html>.

21/ See Yankelevich, “Power to the people’s mimeo machines!,” especially the section “The Resistable Rise of 6x6, or Cutting Corners at a Secret Location in Morningside Heights.”

22/ For example, Jill Magi’s *SLOT*, published by UDP in 2011, is available as a circulating book at Harvard; Yale owns two copies, one circulating, one held at the Beinecke. Catherine Taylor’s *Apart* (2012) circulates at Yale and is held at the Beinecke; similarly, at Harvard, it is both held in the Woodberry Poetry Room collection and available for circulation via the main university library. As a general rule, libraries with specialist poetry collections, typically housed in manuscript, rare, and special collections, will often include these UDP publications in general circulation too. Where no specialist poetry library exists, these tend to circulate, incorporated into standard library holdings.

23/ Tom Person, “Life After COSMEP,” *Laughing Bear Newsletter*, reprinted from *Small Press* magazine, 1996, [http://www.laughingbear.com/lbn.asp?mode=article&subMode=sp\\_cosmep](http://www.laughingbear.com/lbn.asp?mode=article&subMode=sp_cosmep).

24/ Yankelevich, “Power to the people’s mimeo machines!”

25/ For an excellent discussion of the place of zines in American librarianship, see Janice Radway, “Zines in the Library: Underground Communication and the Property Regimes of Book Culture,” in *The Printed Book in Contemporary American Culture: Medium, Object, Metaphor*, eds. Heike Schaefer and Alexander Starre (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 87–113.

## “Chicago comes to be its own source”: Little Magazines and Chicago’s New York School Print Culture

In an attempt to diffuse the veracity of “New York School” as an aesthetic label, John Ashbery once argued that living in New York City—which he, Kenneth Koch, Frank O’Hara, and James Schuyler all did, at least intermittently—really had nothing to do with their poetry. “If you live in New York,” Ashbery claimed, “you are probably not doing so because you like it or you feel it expresses you, but because it’s the most convenient place: there are people, jobs, concerts and so on.”<sup>1</sup> The city offers access to social, economic, and aesthetic experiences, Ashbery suggested, but is not a “geographical definition” that borders his poetry—the admittedly inconsistent criterion Donald Allen used to delineate the groups within his influential anthology *The New American Poetry*.<sup>2</sup> Ashbery then went one step further, describing how New York City “doesn’t add up to a place: one has no feeling of living *somewhere*. That is another reason I dislike the New York School term—because it seems to designate a place, whereas New York is really an anti-place, an abstract climate.”<sup>3</sup> One can read Ashbery’s remarks, made in 1968, as a response to the solidification of various strains of regionalism in American poetry. As Ashbery said, somewhat tongue in cheek, “I am not prepared to take up the cudgels to defend such a place [as New York City], especially when I would much rather be living in San Francisco.”<sup>4</sup> When Ashbery referred to New York School writers Ted Berrigan, Ron Padgett, Joe Brainard, and Dick Gallup as the “*soi-disant* Tulsa School,” a gesture that linked their work to a distant locale where none of them currently lived, he was humorously recreating what he saw as the incongruity of his own situation.<sup>5</sup> Having lived in Paris for nearly ten years, Ashbery returned to New York in the mid-1960s to find himself a *de facto* leader of the “New York School of Poetry.”<sup>6</sup> Moving to the still Beat-tinged Bay Area would have been an interesting way for him to test the affiliation.

Ashbery's comments remind us that participation in a New York School-style poetics signals neither an aesthetic commitment to writing about place nor a singular affiliation with New York City. As Alice Notley, who was born in the Southwest and has lived in New York, the Midwest, the West Coast, England, and now France, confirms, "there were New York School-like poets everywhere."<sup>7</sup> By the early 1970s, Barry Alpert was able to point to what he called New York School "suburbs in Iowa City, Chicago, and Bolinas."<sup>8</sup> What made these "suburbs"—or, to return to Ashbery's emphasis, New York School *somewheres*—visible were the unique print cultures—the little magazines, small presses, and printed materials—that developed in each location. Throughout the seventies, these writing communities sprung up most vividly in places like Iowa City and Chicago where poets were teaching in universities and encouraging their students to edit little magazines, a condition that links the disciplinary expansion of creative writing teaching circuits—through which many writers associated with the New American Poetry made a living, even temporarily—with the expansion of small press print cultures. While Manhattan, and specifically the Lower East Side, might be the privileged geography of the New York School, other places where these poets worked as teachers are equally important for tracing the history of how these writing communities formed and re-formed over time. The city of Chicago, rather than being a Midwestern poetry suburb, was a primary site of extraordinary aesthetic production that is constitutive of—is a source for—the New York School in the 1970s.

The most prominent catalysts for Chicago's New York School print culture were Alice Notley and Ted Berrigan, who lived in Chicago between 1972 and 1975 while Berrigan taught at Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU). By the end of the decade, inspired largely by Notley and Berrigan, more than a dozen young poets from Chicago had moved to New York to join the community around The Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, a dense Midwestern migration lovingly described as "the Chicago Invasion" by Bob Holman, who had himself moved from Chicago to New York in 1973.<sup>9</sup> While Ashbery eschewed the New York School as a label, Berrigan, who was well versed in the term's aesthetic history, including its origins as a "complicated double joke," embraced it.<sup>10</sup> He is famous for jokingly recruiting young poets to New York

School-style poetics, claiming “I used to tell people they could join [the New York School] for five dollars.”<sup>11</sup> While this humorous sense of low-stakes permission accurately describes Berrigan’s model for how to disavow aesthetic gatekeeping in favor of more raucous and inclusive communities, studying his direct interventions in the lives of his students—particularly through the small presses and little magazines he encouraged those poets to edit—offers a more vivid portrait of Berrigan’s perpetuation of the New York School through its corresponding print cultures.

When Notley and Berrigan arrived in Chicago in January 1972, the two poets entered an already active small press scene enmeshed in the aesthetics of the New American Poetry. Paul Carroll had galvanized the city’s literary culture over a decade earlier as editor of the last four issues of *Big Table*, which were published during a notorious legal battle over the censored Winter 1959 issue of *Chicago Review*. Ed Dorn, who taught at NEIU as Poet-in-Residence from 1970 to 1971, brought a direct link with Black Mountain and little magazines to his Midwestern students, a group of whom ran a reading series called The Blue Store in the basement of an antiques store on the North Side and published the magazine *Stone Wind*, which ran from 1971 to 1975. After Carroll began teaching at the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC), his *Big Table* imprint published *The Young American Poets* anthology in 1968, which positioned itself as a generational follow-up to *The New American Poetry*. When Berrigan took over the Poet-in-Residence position from Dorn at NEIU, Carroll’s anthology would become the one required text for Berrigan’s classes.

The city’s avant-garde literary credentials were also propped up by the countercultural zeal following the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Calling on that spirit of revolt, students at UIC formed the Alternate University Poets Collective in early 1970, an informal group that met regularly in coffee shops and after-hours academic offices to share their writing.<sup>12</sup> Entwined with the Alternate University, UIC graduate students Dean Faulwell, James Leonard, and Paul Hoover founded the little magazine *Oink!* in 1971, soon to be edited by Hoover and Maxine Chernoff, and the small press Oink! Books. The Alternate University Poets Collective continued to expand and shift, and soon a cohort developed that included young writers Richard Friedman, Darlene Pearlstein, Rochelle Kraut, Bob Rosenthal, Peter Kostakis,



Barry Schechter, and Donald Nisonoff. In May 1972, these friends published a compilation of their work as *Jukebox Poems: An Anthology from the Alternate University Poets Collective*, which they gave away for free to other students. For those involved, the anthology attuned “our sensibilities to the idea of uncloistering poetical activities by bringing them out in the open. *What did we have to hide?*”<sup>13</sup> As Art Lange summarizes the scene’s energy, “Everyone talked, exchanged poems, and started magazines.”<sup>14</sup>

Berrigan’s teaching at NEIU, which brought together writers from across the city, was the spark for this liberatory publishing ethos. Then taking classes at UIC, Friedman recalls that “when Paul Carroll mentioned, ‘Oh, by the way, Ted Berrigan is coming to teach in Chicago,’ we said ‘Wow!’ and just got ourselves in there.”<sup>15</sup> Friedman notes that Berrigan “was happy to have anyone who was excited about poetry sit in on his class. Never any paperwork or anything, you’d just show up.”<sup>16</sup> Painter and musician Tim Milk remembers a similar open-door policy when he took Berrigan’s classes at NEIU a few years later. “There were a lot of people who would just come sit in on Ted’s classes, dropping in and hanging out and having a laugh,” an environment that echoes the writing workshops at The Poetry Project.<sup>17</sup> Berrigan even made The Poetry Project an explicit part of his pedagogy, assigning his students to subscribe to the Project’s mimeographed literary magazine, *The World*, which became a model for their own magazines. “A lot of the magazine production was inspired by Ted,” says Bob Rosenthal, including teaching his students to use mimeograph machines.<sup>18</sup> This inspiration led to a network of new magazines in proximity to him and Notley, including Notley’s own *CHICAGO* (1972);<sup>19</sup> Richard Friedman, Darlene Pearlstein, Rochelle Kraut, and Bob Rosenthal’s *Milk Quarterly* (1972); Neil Hackman, Rose Lesniak, and Barbara Barg’s *Out There* (1973); Arnold Aprill and Donald Cameron’s *Here It Is!* (1975); Jim Hanson’s *In the Light* (1975); and Art Lange’s *Brilliant Corners: A Magazine of the Arts* (1975).<sup>20</sup>

After their *Jukebox Poems* anthology, the Alternate University Poets Collective transformed into an editorial group that established the Yellow Press and *Milk Quarterly*. The Yellow Press published a series of mimeographed books by young Chicago poets in 1973,

turning to perfect-bound books in 1975. The press continued to publish until 1992, building a catalog that includes Berrigan's *Red Wagon* (1976), Notley's *Alice Ordered Me to Be Made* (1976) and *At Night the States* (1987), as well as Susie Timmons's *Locked From the Outside* (1990). Yellow Press also published the anthology *15 Chicago Poets* in 1976, which features Berrigan and Notley as "Chicago poets" alongside Carroll, Gwendolyn Brooks, Haki Madhubuti, and others. As the editors of *Here It Is!* note about the contributors to their one-shot little magazine, "All these people are Chicago poets with the exceptions of M. B., Alice, and Ted, who are anyway. Chicago comes to be its own source."<sup>21</sup> If "Chicago comes to be its own source," as the editors of *Here It Is!* claim, it is through the empowerment generated by Notley and Berrigan's shared influence, the evidence of which is recorded most prominently in the material medium of the city's little magazines.

Though it might seem odd to categorize Berrigan and Notley as Chicagoans, the three years they lived in the city were the longest they lived together anywhere other than in New York City.<sup>22</sup> The couple's Chicago apartments at 911 West Diversey and 834 West Waveland were salon-like gathering spaces that hosted visiting writers, friends, and students, situating Notley and Berrigan as literary mentors in the heart of the Midwest. "Anytime you wanted to stop by there was something going on," says Friedman, "You got a great education just being there with Ted and Alice."<sup>23</sup> While Berrigan is lauded in many of his students' poems—as Rose Lesniak writes in "Ode to Ted," published in *Out There*, "I set my clock to you"—Notley also carried a vital authority.<sup>24</sup> Her mimeographed magazine *CHICAGO*, which she began editing while she "was in danger—I saw it that way—of not becoming a poet" due to crises related to gender and motherhood, allowed her to arrange and distribute her own iterations of a New York School lineage, which include her powerful early work.<sup>25</sup> Despite not having access to the institutional authority afforded to Berrigan, Notley generated a reputation that countered the sexist assumptions in the city's male-dominated literary scene. Attending a reading by Notley to hear her work for the first time, one young Chicago writer suggested to Lesniak that Notley only had a reading because she was married to Berrigan. "Oh no, don't misunderstand," Lesniak corrected him, "Alice is a great fucking poet."<sup>26</sup> An issue of *Out There* published

in 1974 was dedicated completely to Notley's poetry and prefaced by a series of celebratory introductory notes. As Peter Kostakis writes of Notley, "*She is undoubtedly the most avant-garde.*"<sup>27</sup>

All the new magazines were accompanied by a new reading series at the Body Politic Theatre at 2257 North Lincoln Avenue, which began in July 1972. A flier for an early event reads: "And Now For Something Completely Different." The weekly Body Politic series became exactly that, hosting over fifty writers in its first year alone, including Ron Padgett, Maureen Owen, Bill Berkson, Jim Carroll, Anselm Hollo, Philip Whalen, Gregory Corso, and Jerome Rothenberg, most of whom gave accompanying "official" readings at NEIU, an arrangement that allowed the organizers to indirectly subsidize their independent reading series with institutional funding. As Friedman describes it, "you're going to have one academic reading and there'll be a few people there. Then we'll do the real reading."<sup>28</sup> The first issue of *Milk Quarterly*, which included poems by young Chicagoans as well as Paul Carroll, Berrigan, Notley, Owen, Padgett, and Tom Veitch, was printed by Rosenthal on a mimeograph machine at the Body Politic in 1972. These publishing projects and readings transformed the literary landscape of Chicago, which became centered around NEIU, a surprising status for a small (and newly formed) state institution in a city where private schools dominated the cultural scene. Tim Milk remembers the realignment of Chicago's literary scene with pride:

All of a sudden, the least likely place in the city of Chicago becomes the entire poetry center of the Midwest. I would go to parties where I was hanging out with people from the Art Institute and Columbia, and they'd ask where you're going to school. "I'm going to Northeastern." They'd get these forlorn looks on their faces because we had all the moxie. They had to come to our school for all the readings. They didn't have anything comparable at their schools.<sup>29</sup>

One could also say that no one else in the Midwest had as much of the New York School at their school. Over the next few years, poets like Anne Waldman, Bernadette Mayer, and Lorenzo Thomas continued to visit and read at the Body Politic and NEIU, while work from these

poets filled the pages of the city's little magazines. Conversely, the publication of Chicago-based magazines and small press books was regularly reported on in *The Poetry Project Newsletter*, bringing news about this New York School print culture directly to readers on the Lower East Side.

Though individual descriptions of all the Chicago-based magazines would exceed the scope of this essay, it is important to highlight two in particular: *Out There* and *Brilliant Corners: A Magazine of the Arts*. Edited primarily by Lesniak and Barbara Barg, *Out There* functioned as a Midwestern node in an expanding network of women-led, proto-punk magazines that included the New York-based *Koff*, edited by Elinor Nauen, Maggie Dubris, and Rachel Walling, and *dodgems*, edited by Eileen Myles. The Notley issue of *Out There*, a special 1976 "Women's Issue," and the final issue, published in New York after Lesniak and Barg moved to the Lower East Side, are all key documents for tracing the importance of Chicago's small press scene during the decade. *Brilliant Corners*, edited by Art Lange, is deserving of its own essay entirely. Describing his classes with Berrigan at NEIU, Lange says that "Ted was a revelation. A mesmerizing, fascinating talker, practically non-stop, and the idea of poetry as an art form among other art forms like music and painting immediately interested me."<sup>30</sup> *Brilliant Corners* is unique for recording this dedicated interdisciplinarity, featuring poems alongside a range of cross-genre work, such as an experimental essay by Notley about her practice of writing poems at the Art Institute, interviews with and essays on avant-garde musicians like Anthony Braxton and Joseph Jarman, a review of posthumous books by Frank O'Hara, and a transcribed conversation with experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage from Studs Terkel's Chicago-based WFMT radio show.<sup>31</sup> Wherever one looks in Chicago's literary print culture in the seventies, one finds examples of magazines that carry these renewed and more expansive iterations of New York School-style poetics. Rather than Chicago being a provincial aesthetic outpost that replicated or functioned as secondary to the scene in New York, the medium of the little magazine inscribed Chicago's literary communities into the New York School. As Berrigan writes in his poem "Tambourine Life," "In Chicago, Illinois, you / are really at home / whether you like it or not, baby."<sup>32</sup>

## NOTES

- 1/ John Ashbery, "The New York School of Poets" in *Selected Prose*, ed. Eugene Richie (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 114.
- 2/ In the preface to *The New American Poetry*, Allen identifies John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and Frank O'Hara as the "New York Poets" who "first met at Harvard," then "migrated to New York in the early fifties where they met Edward Field, Barbara Guest, and James Schuyler." Donald M. Allen, ed., *The New American Poetry* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), xiii.
- 3/ Ashbery, "The New York School of Poets," 114, original italics.
- 4/ Ashbery, "The New York School of Poets," 114.
- 5/ Quoted by Ron Padgett and David Shapiro in their preface to *An Anthology of New York Poets* (New York: Random House, 1970), xxx.
- 6/ John Bernard Myers, the owner of Tibor De Nagy Gallery, is the first to use the term in print in an introduction to a portfolio of poems by Ashbery, Koch, O'Hara, Guest, Schuyler, Kenward Elmslie, and Bill Berkson in the little magazine *Nomad/New York*, no. 10/11 (Autumn 1962).
- 7/ "Alice Notley (2)" in *Poetry and Poetics in a New Millennium: Interviews*, ed. Edward Foster (Jersey City, NJ: Talisman House, 2000), 83.
- 8/ Barry Alpert, "So-Called New York School," *Margins*, no. 14 (November–December 1974): 34.
- 9/ Bob Holman, "The Oral History of The Poetry Project," 1978. Unpublished. Courtesy of Kyle Dacuyan, who made a copy for me from The Poetry Project's original, annotated "office copy." Poets who moved from Chicago to New York City during the seventies include Bob Rosenthal, Rochelle Kraut, Rose Lesniak, Barbara Barg, Joel Chassler, Neil Hackman, Tim Milk, Steve Levine, Bob Holman, Simon Schuchat, and others.
- 10/ Anne Waldman, "Paraphrase of Edwin Denby Speaking on the 'New York School,'" *The World*, no. 29 (April 1974): 73. The "joke" that Denby refers to is specifically tied to the intersection of aesthetics and place: "The painters who went to the Cedar [Bar] had more or less coined the phrase 'New York School' in opposition to the School of Paris (which also originated as a joke in opposition to the School of Florence and the School of Venice)... So the poets adopted the expression 'New York School' out of homage to the people who had de-provincialized American painting. It's a complicated double-joke."
- 11/ Ted Berrigan, "Interview with CITY," *Talking in Tranquility: Interviews with Ted Berrigan*, eds. Stephen Ratcliffe and Leslie Scalapino (Bollinas and Oakland, CA: Avenue B and O Books, 1991), 91.
- 12/ Peter Kostakis, "Hogshead Chronicles," *Chicago Review* 25, no. 3 (1973): 126–27.

- 13/ Kostakis, “Hogshead Chronicles,” 130, original italics.
- 14/ Art Lange, email with the author, February 26, 2016.
- 15/ Richard Friedman, interview with the author, June 26, 2019.
- 16/ Friedman, interview with the author, June 26, 2019.
- 17/ Tim Milk, interview with the author, May 24, 2018.
- 18/ Bob Rosenthal describes Berrigan teaching him to mimeograph: “He was going to print Alice Notley’s *CHICAGO*, and he asked, ‘Who has a car?’ So it was me, I had a car, so I got to meet Ted by helping him to print *CHICAGO* magazine. He found a church that let him use the mimeo and I remember he stripped down to his skivvies. It was very hot. He had run the mimeo machine in the army, he was a sergeant, he actually really knew how to mimeo. He taught me how to mimeo.” Interview with the author, November 5, 2015.
- 19/ While Berrigan might have helped to print *CHICAGO*, as described in the previous note, Notley’s magazine was completely her own undertaking. As she says, “I was 26 years old and pregnant. I hadn’t written very much poetry and was in danger—I saw it that way—of not becoming a poet. The magazine was a way of really joining the poetry community, of getting to read a lot of poems.” Stephanie Anderson, “Alice Notley & *CHICAGO* Magazine: Editing &/or Curating Location,” *Mimeo Mimeo* 5 (Fall 2011): 91.
- 20/ I want to thank my former students at the Georgia Institute of Technology, Ani Benge, Jonathan Wu, and Colin Cassell, whose research on some of these Chicago-based little magazines helped me to see the importance of writing about New York School print cultures. These multimodal research projects include interviews with the magazines’ editors, publication timelines, direct access to digital surrogates of the magazines, interactive contributor networks, and contextual information: Benge on the Yellow Press and *Milk Quarterly* (<https://anibenge.wixsite.com/yellowpress>), Jonathan Wu on *Out There* (<https://sites.google.com/view/out-there-mag/home>), and Colin Cassell on *Brilliant Corners: A Magazine of the Arts* (<https://colcassell.wixsite.com/brilliantcorners>).
- 21/ “M. B.” appears in a section of the magazine titled “Workshop Poems” where only the initials of the authors are listed. *Here It Is!* (Chicago: Never Again Press, 1975): unpaginated.
- 22/ Berrigan taught as Poet-in-Residence at NEIU for two stints, first from early 1972 to mid-1973, and again from mid-1974 to the end of 1975. From mid-1973 to mid-1974, Berrigan and Notley lived in Wivenhoe in Essex, England, where Berrigan taught for one year as a visiting poet.
- 23/ Friedman, interview with the author, June 26, 2019.
- 24/ Rose Lesniak, “Ode to Ted,” *Out There*, no. 9 (1976): 68.
- 25/ Anderson, “Alice Notley & *CHICAGO* Magazine,” 91.

- 26/ Milk, interview with the author, May 24, 2018.
- 27/ Peter Kostakis, "Eavesdropping on the Cocoon," *Out There*, no. 4 (1974): viii, original italics.
- 28/ Friedman, interview with the author, June 26, 2019.
- 29/ Milk, interview with the author, May 24, 2018.
- 30/ Lange, email with the author, February 28, 2016.
- 31/ Notley's essay "Modern Americans in Their Place at Chicago Art Institute: An Article" originally appeared in the first issue of *Brilliant Corners* (1975) and was republished online in 2019 by *ASAP/J* with an accompanying essay by Nick Sturm: "Unceasing Museums: Alice Notley's 'Modern Americans in Their Place at Chicago Art Institute,'" *ASAP/J*, March 12, 2019, <https://asapjournal.com/unceasing-museums-alice-notleys-modern-americans-in-their-place-at-chicago-art-institute-nick-sturm/>.
- 32/ Berrigan, "Tambourine Life," *The Young American Poets*, ed. Paul Carroll (Chicago: Big Table Publishing Company, 1968), 97.

PETER O'LEARY

## Flood Editions: An Interview with Devin Johnston and Michael O'Leary

*Flood Editions began in 2001 when Devin Johnston and Michael O'Leary published its first two books, The Shrubberies by Ronald Johnson and Gone to Earth by Pam Rehm. Since then, Flood has typically offered four books a year, mostly poetry, mostly by contemporary poets but also including archival works from past (and sometimes neglected) masters. The books are marked by editorial care, a range of topics and styles, and their sharp design, primarily at the hands of Crisis, the design studio of Jeff Clark. Flood's most recent offerings have been The Year the City Emptied by Daisy Fried, a resetting of Baudelaire's Flowers of Evil in contemporary Philly; Hivado by Andrew E. Colarusso, a collection of lyric sequences; and Believers and Seven Sermons from the Bacchae by John Tipton, an experimental translation converging Euripides and the Gospel of Mark.*

*Devin and I met in 1993 when we both began graduate school at the University of Chicago, he in the English department, I in the Divinity School. A mutual friend suggested we meet because of our shared interest in poetry, specifically Robert Duncan's. Michael is my younger brother. He moved to Chicago in 1993 after he graduated from Kenyon College, where he began a literary magazine, LVNG, with his classmate Jay Sullivan. Upon moving to Chicago, I replaced Sullivan as coeditor of LVNG (Joel Felix would join us a few years later), and Devin's work became a mainstay in the issues we were publishing. When Devin had his tenure as poetry editor of Chicago Review a few years later, I began to write reviews of contemporary poetry. Furthermore, owing to my friendship with Ronald Johnson, I was able to publish a consequential interview with Johnson in the pages of CR (CR 42:01). Before Johnson died in 1998, he asked me to be his literary executor.*

*I mention this last fact to complete the picture of my personal connection to Flood Editions. I am the editor of The Shrubberies. Likewise, I have edited two other books by Ronald Johnson published by Flood: Radi os and ARK. Needless to say, through qualities of friendship*



*and family, my involvement with Flood has been close, though it should be stated that I have no official position with the press.*

*Besides the work they do for Flood, Devin Johnston teaches at Saint Louis University. His most recent book of poetry is *Dragons*, published this year by FSG. After working nearly a decade in the nuclear power industry, Michael O'Leary is now an analyst in the financial services industry. His most recent book of poetry is *Out West*, to be published by the Cultural Society.*

§

POL: *When and how did Flood Editions form? What were you both doing at the time you started the press?*

DJ: The conversations toward Flood Editions began in 1999. I had been working (since 1995) as poetry editor and managing editor of *Chicago Review*. I had learned a good deal about contemporary poetry and editing through those roles, under the guidance of Andrew Rathmann, the editor. But my time at *CR* was coming to an end, as was my graduate work at the University of Chicago. I was applying for jobs without success, mostly publishing jobs, some of them in California. At a barbecue, Michael proposed, why don't we try publishing ourselves, in Chicago? The suggestion was spontaneous, as I recall, but it took root. We were both aware of manuscripts by poets we admired that needed a publisher. Michael had been publishing *LVNG* magazine with Joel Felix and you, Pete, since 1990. Michael had just started school for civil engineering and was working part time as a speechwriter. For both of us, the future felt uncertain, and the casual collaborations and freedom of our twenties may have seemed to be dwindling. Flood offered a way to anchor and organize our shared interests, I think.

MOL: I was recently married, and I had just started to go back to school for a degree in civil engineering. In fact, I was working as a ghostwriter and taking calculus at Harold Washington—I hadn't had a math class since high school—when Devin and I cooked up the idea for Flood.

To add a little more context, Chicago was a pretty good place to land in 1993 if you had vague aspirations to make art of some form. Rent was cheap, the music was good, and there were a lot of artists

around. Is that still true? Probably. It was exciting then, but not too exciting. Sort of like the good enough mother. By the end of the '90s, I had already watched a lot of good friends leave. I didn't want to see Devin go, so I proposed a publishing venture to keep him around. Needless to say, it didn't work, but it has been a great way to maintain a friendship over the twenty years he's been gone.

*Michael, you say, "Needless to say, it didn't work," because shortly after you and Devin formed Flood, Devin got his job at Saint Louis University and moved to Missouri. Nevertheless, Flood's books are all from Chicago. What does it mean for both of you that Flood is a Chicago press? And related: What are the realities of editing your books from two cities? I'm thinking about the practicalities, from communication to things like where to store the books themselves.*

MOL: It once meant a lot to me that Flood was a Chicago press. I was drawn to regionalism and I really liked the low-key, overlooked aspect of Chicago as a place for poetry. I've always had second thoughts about leaving Detroit; perhaps this was an overdetermined attempt to put roots down. But thirty years later, I don't have much perspective on it. I can imagine someone on the outside saying, "Oh yeah, it's a total Chicago press." Or Midwestern. But I'm not sure.

Practically speaking, the work gets done through phone calls, emails, and texts. Devin stores the books at his house.

DJ: I do think that there are Midwestern aspects to us, and geography probably shapes our choices to some degree. But we only publish two poets who currently live in Chicago, William Fuller and John Tipton, so we never made regionalism a priority. At least, we never put much emphasis on our own region; "regionalisms" more generally might be something that appeals to us, writing that's embedded in places, that feels local in ways that might be inconvenient but not sedentary. I'm thinking of Basil Bunting and Tom Pickard in the North of England, Roy Fisher in Birmingham, UK, Merrill Gilfillan in the Western US, Ali Cobby Eckermann on Kauma land in South Australia, and Robert Adamson on the Hawkesbury. Liz Arnold's poetry on Florida. Bill Wylie's photographs of Kansas and Colorado. Maybe even the California sunlight and Maine winters in Jennifer Moxley's writing, and the sense

of New York in Lisa Jarnot's poetry. Even Daisy Fried's *The Year the City Emptied* in part appealed to us for the ambiance of Philadelphia, "that old worker," though she is also translating Baudelaire. Not everything we publish evokes a geography, but it's one thread.

*As you started the process of imagining what Flood would be, what kinds of books you wanted to publish, what were the presses you had in mind as models? Likewise, were there any poets or editors you thought about as models? And similarly, any poets you really wanted to try to publish?*

DJ: Of course, decades later, I'm struck by how little we knew at the outset. Neither of us had worked for a publisher. We had no advisors. The only publishers of poetry at that time in Chicago that come to mind were larger: Third World Press and the University of Chicago Press. Of course, the internet existed in 1999, but it did not seem like a portal to publishing information or community, not to me at least. As I recall, we borrowed a business proposal from someone who had opened a restaurant as our template. We got advice from friends who ran record stores and music labels. I expect people think of "independent publishing" as idiosyncratic by choice, but in our case it was partly sheer ignorance. We relied heavily on Jeff Clark, a brilliant designer and friend, to guide us on design and production. For the rest, we drew on historical models that were mostly quite distant. For example, we were aware that publishers from the 1950s and '60s, such as the Jargon Society, raised money for books through subscription. So we put together a mailing list and sent two hundred or so letters to poets and critics, asking that they preorder our first two books for twenty dollars. We paid for our first publications that way, as we had no other funds to draw on.

Without firsthand exposure to publishing, our models mostly lay in books: those of Jargon, Fulcrum, and Black Sparrow, among others. Books that were (mostly) produced commercially, through offset printing, but that bore evidence of a care that felt artisanal. I still find pleasure in such books.

As for the poetry: we began with two manuscripts that had no other home, Ronald Johnson's *The Shrubberies* and Pam Rehm's *Gone to Earth*. Of course, we had become aware of Johnson through your friendship with him, years before. Pam was part of a remarkable

generation of poets, mostly women, that we admired (including Lisa Jarnot and Jennifer Moxley, poets whose work we would come to publish a few years later). We thought it unlikely that Flood would be sustainable, so we did not think very far into the future. Our list developed organically, or through circumstance. Little by little, we added contemporaries such as Graham Foust, Jarnot, and Moxley; and elders such as Robert Adamson, Fanny Howe, and Jay Wright. The criteria for publication have always been simple: Did we love the work, and could we serve it reasonably well?

MOL: Just to add to Devin's response, the models for me were Jargon, City Lights, and New Directions. In addition to Third World, the University of Chicago Press, and others that I'm not remembering, there was Agate Publishing. I knew the Agate founder, Doug Seibold, from back in the day when I was a fiction editor at *Chicago Review* (1994).<sup>1</sup> Doug was a professional editor and started Agate in 2002, two years after we started Flood. He was intimately familiar with the practical challenges of publishing before and after he started Agate. He has always been really helpful to talk to about the brass tacks of publishing.

*Next, I have two related questions. First, looking at the Flood catalog, some themes emerge. There's a general orientation toward experimental poetry in the modernist and New American lineages—this orientation arguably organizes the bulk of the books you've published. But there are compelling sub-themes and motifs as well, such as reprints of overlooked masterpieces/classics of the modernist and New American period (Ronald Johnson, Robert Duncan, Henry Dumas); with an interest in British poetry of these moments (Basil Bunting, Joseph Gordon MacLeod, Roy Fisher, Rosamund Stanhope); Australian poetry (recently departed Robert Adamson, Ali Cobby Eckermann); prose by poets, essays and fiction (Tom Pickard, Merrill Gilfillan, Jennifer Moxley; Fanny Howe); experimental translation (Thomas Meyer, John Tipton, Daisy Fried); and art books, photography, and painting (William Wylie, Brian Calvin). Devin, you mentioned that loving the work is the main criterion for publishing a book, which seems like the first and best criterion. But do either of you imagine any thematic properties, along the lines I'm observing, to guide what you're doing?*

*And second, two of my favorite small presses claim Jonathan Williams's Jargon Society as a model, Flood and the Song Cave. You've both mentioned Jargon already. Want to share any additional thoughts about this press? Thinking about this question, it occurs to me that a Jargonian thread runs through Flood, tying some of its elements together. (Probably should come up with a water metaphor rather than a weaving one...) Obviously, there's the connection to Ronald Johnson, and also to Tom Meyer. There's also Duncan's Letters, which Flood reprinted from the Jargon book first published in 1956. There's the connection to Tom Pickard, four of whose books you've published (four magnificent books, by my lights), who himself was connected to Bunting by way of Williams. (The story goes that Pickard, who was seventeen at the time, ordered some books from Jargon; Williams recognized the address to be very close to where Bunting was living at the time, in Newcastle, and urged the young poet to get in touch with the elder, who was revived, like in the Grail legend, and subsequently wrote Briggflatts, his greatest work.) Might there even be an oblique Jargon connection to Kenneth Cox, perhaps by way of Lorine Niedecker...? Jargon was never a highly visible operation; even so, I'm surprised to encounter people in the poetry world who have never heard of it. How do you think about the role that Jargon played? Is it similar to the role you imagine Flood playing?*

MOL: Part of the challenge for me is that this interview is forcing me to reflect on twenty-three years of publishing, something I almost never do. Mostly we are just doing the work: editing, writing jacket copy, figuring out what the next books look like and where we are going to get the money to do more expensive projects (the art books). I'm not an academic, and my exposure to the poetry world primarily comes through this work, so it's hard to see anything other than what's in front of me.

A major source of information about how Flood is perceived is through sales numbers: some books do better than others, but it's still not always clear why. If we had more time and resources, we could develop a more coherent sense of how Flood is perceived and what it means to people. But with limited resources—Devin and I both have families and full-time jobs outside of Flood—we have chosen to focus on publishing books we think are interesting. And though this

is much harder to measure, we try to be the best press to support our writers. Or at the very least, good enough.

Aside from the immediate practicalities of supporting a writer when a book is published, the best way to support Flood authors is by publishing new and interesting work. Sometimes that's part of the forgotten classics series and sometimes that's coming from a younger poet like Andrew Colarusso. There is no formula for interesting work. And our taste is certainly idiosyncratic. But in general, it's some ratio of originality, craft, and clarity. Of the three, originality is the most important. The work could be murky and imprecise and still be worth publishing if it's unlike anything I've read and it's teaching me something or pointing to some inchoate part of consciousness I recognize. Sometimes that's what it takes to be original. I place a premium on clarity in poetry, but something clear without craft or originality isn't going to cut it in most cases.

DJ: Connections to the Jargon Society go way back. I grew up in Winston-Salem, and I was aware of Jargon and Jonathan Williams as a teenager—through an interest in folk art, and by running across some of their books—before I knew anything about poetry. Jargon is hard to explain: Southern, rural, gay, avant-garde, sometimes serious high modernist, sometimes whimsical and absurd. It seems to have a unique character, in publishing at least. You sketch out some of the overlaps and connections, in terms of the writers we have published, and Jargon was probably a model for our eclecticism too, in publishing photography, art, and different sorts of prose alongside poetry. We made an homage to Jargon in our edition of Robert Duncan's *Letters: Poems 1953–56*. Their edition was a beautiful letterpress book, with marbled papers, that harkened back to older bookmaking traditions in some ways. Ours was a contemporary rethinking of it, designed by Jeff Clark, who had designed at least one book for Jargon.

*What you're both saying about the kinds of manuscripts that interest you—those with clarity, a sense of place—and the nature of some of the models you've followed as editors and publishers—presses that are a little unusual, not necessarily easy to characterize—provides a compelling sense of your motivations as well as of the work you do. What are some of*

*the changes you've noticed to poetry, perhaps to poetry books specifically, since you started with Flood? For instance—and we've talked about this, Devin—books seem to be getting longer. Are there any features of content, approach, even design (Jeff has certainly been influential in this regard) that you've noticed?*

*And, more philosophically perhaps, do you have a sense of the role that small presses play when it comes to poetry publishing? I'm not necessarily asking whether a sense like this motivates your work with Flood, but rather whether you feel yourselves aligned to a role such presses play.*

DJ: One tendency in books of poetry I'd note: over the past seventy years, they have become more and more focused on thematic coherence. That can be useful, but it's a shame poets don't publish books titled *Poems* or *Observations* anymore. Way back in the 1920s, Marianne Moore was questioning our preference for continuity and completeness as opposed to miscellany. The sense that books need to make arguments frustrates me a bit, as miscellanies let individual poems ring out more clearly. What else? Lately I see more sonnets and pseudo-sonnets than there have been since the 1950s.

But really, since the turn of the century, the diversity and sheer quantity of poetry published in the United States has gone beyond what any person can read or even recognize. I can't imagine why anyone would have the confidence to generalize about "the world of poetry" or poetry of the United States. It was probably a mistake—elite or provincial thinking—to ever believe you could. I'm a teacher, and when I see courses titled things like "Contemporary American Poetry," I feel embarrassed by such a broad claim. No one person has ever heard of most of the poets active now, and for myself, I only see a fraction of the books published each year. So I don't think I could say much useful about the ways in which poetry books have changed.

Michael and I maintain a healthy skepticism about the importance of publishing. I don't think poetry is limited to books, readerships, markets, or even communities. It's an experience, a way of activating language. It can survive in all sorts of conditions of scarcity. Obviously, most poetry does not happen in books: exponentially more poetry blooms in heads, gets muttered, remembered, recited, sung, scratched in notebooks, posted in various ways. But books remain a convenient, portable, sometimes delightful way of encountering it.

I think small presses such as Flood can make space for different, unusual senses of poetry and what it can do. For instance, in Daisy Fried's *The Year the City Emptied*, and in John Tipton's *Believers and Seven Sermons from the Bacchae*, the line between translation and composition gets blurred in ways that are exciting but hard to describe in jacket copy. In Jay Wright's work, there's a ceremonial dimension to the poetry and the ways in which it is enacted. These examples might relate to Michael's emphasis on originality: poetry is being put to uses that the reader might not have anticipated.

MOL: To Devin's response, I'll add, poetry is weird to think about in that there are way more poetry books out there from bigger presses than people want to read. So why should small presses add to the glut? They often have an independence that bigger commercial or university presses can't have. That independence doesn't guarantee quality, but it produces more unusual and diverse books.

*I'd like to finish with a question about the books themselves. Specifically, I'd like you to pick a book that characterizes something to you about Flood, maybe in spirit, in content, in design. I'm not asking you to pick your favorite book, but instead a book that signifies the Flood feel for you. I'm biased here to pick Ronald Johnson's ARK, on which we spent so much time in editing (you'll recall I even made a trip to Lawrence, Kansas, to consult the manuscripts to answer some of the editorial queries we came up with as we combed through the previously published edition) and whose visionary design by Jeff Clark makes for one of the handsomest books in my library. For me, that's an obvious choice, but I'll admit the book I go back to again and again is Music's Mask and Measure by Jay Wright, a book of such exquisite poise, I never tire of looking at it or reading it, something about the magic of an obscure masterpiece in its pages. It doesn't hurt that it takes all of twenty minutes to read the book!*

MOL: *ARK* and *Music's Mask and Measure* are great choices. I'd like to mention many other Flood books, but since you've asked for one, I'll say *The Shrubs* by Ron. Devin, Joel Felix, and I retrieved the manuscript of *The Shrubberies* in the spring of 1998, just two days before he died.<sup>2</sup> When we entered his dad's house in Topeka, Ron was



on his deathbed with a single sheet of paper on his chest. This was his “Last Poem” that concludes *The Shrubberies*:

shambles this way  
antipodean being  
come full circle  
sparks in darkness  
lightning’s eternal return  
flipped the ecliptic<sup>3</sup>

I love that book. I love Jeff’s design, its confidence, elegance, and simplicity. Even now, when I look at it, I do a double take because I think the title is *The Strawberries*. Was that Jeff’s intention? Or is it the fresh lime-green cover? Little green shrubs. It was an auspicious beginning. If there’s a spirit to Flood, that book captures it.

DJ: I’ll add Rosamund Stanhope’s *So I Looked Down to Camelot* to the books you’ve both mentioned. The uncoated cover stock feels good in your hand, and Jeff’s design is minimalist but warm. It’s not something that any other publisher was likely to take on: first published in 1962, the book—and Stanhope’s poetry generally—had been nearly forgotten. The poetry is hard to locate: lyrical, sort of pastoral, delicate, amusing, and quirky:

Seeing December’s ficale,  
Her nervous woods,  
In the red sound of the soil  
I plot my trowel,  
Looking for round green words.<sup>4</sup>

Certain details of phrasing and image keep drawing you back, as well as something more pervasive and mysterious in the tone. Graham Foust first brought Stanhope to my attention, and I kept wanting to loan the book to other people. So why not republish it? That’s been more or less the case with all the books we have reissued, including *ARK* and Henry Dumas’s *Knees of a Natural Man*: it begins with the impulse to pass a book along to friends.

## NOTES

1/ Doug Seibold was fiction editor of *Chicago Review* in the early 1990s.

2/ Johnson died on March 4, 1998, in Topeka. At the end of February, I received a letter from Johnson's sister, Jodi Panula, insisting that I come to Topeka as soon as possible in order to secure his papers because she feared he was in a mood to throw everything out. At the time, I was living in Vienna and did not have the means to return to the US. I sent Michael, Devin, and Joel in my stead, who brought all of Johnson's papers back with them to Chicago, where Michael kept them until my return in July. For the curious, I included the long letter that Michael wrote me shortly after returning from this retrieval mission in the memoir that I wrote about my apprenticeship with Johnson, "Gilding the Buddha," in *Ronald Johnson: Life and Works*, eds. Joel Bettridge and Eric Selinger (Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, 2008).

3/ Ronald Johnson, *The Shrubberies*, ed. Peter O'Leary (Chicago: Flood Editions, 2001), 126.

4/ Rosamund Stanhope, *So I Looked Down to Camelot* (Chicago: Flood Editions, 2020), 1.

DARCIE DENNIGAN

*The Great Wastepaper Theatre Anthology* of  
Providence, Rhode Island

For years I have loved *The Great Wastepaper Theatre Anthology* (1978), the record of a poets theater troupe, because for that same duration I have suspected and been working to accumulate proof that when it comes to poetry it is more than okay, likely preferable, to not take oneself seriously. Or more precisely, to seriously take oneself not seriously. Sure, on the page, go ahead, be serious. There it's generally the absence of the conscious self. At least it had better be. But time spent *not* on a page of poetry and yet in service of poetry's redoubt, which is to say in service of saying no—to productivity and the noise pollution of vaingloriousness and to all rationality on the menu—in service of saying, “oh sorry, I have a professional obligation to apprehend what is more tender than fact and more vulnerable than opinion”?<sup>1</sup> How to spend that time? Alone, of course. But when solitude becomes like a trampoline park with extra low ceilings and your reality and particular brand of awkwardness preclude smoking a cigarette in a clutch of poets outside The Poetry Project? Then what else can there be but to invent, again, poets theater? When I tried to describe its amateurism and clumsiness to some students, one said that it sounded like adults being kids—not intended as the compliment it is, but she is close enough to childhood to be still grasping at, and even honoring, logic, whereas I am desperately trying to escape the straitjacket of logic that so-called maturity keeps cinching tighter. Thus, poets theater—a large percentage of my experience of which has consisted of asking my friend, a serious writer whose poetry is both austere and bafflingly, beautifully paronomastic (the word *pun* utterly fails her work), to don a large pink polyester bouffant wig and walk in ducklike ways. I have mostly been bowed over in laughter at the majestic idiocy of what she is doing, and yet I have felt that these bows were also a genuflection to poetry.

Poets theater, says the Kenning Editions anthology dedicated to the form, “is a social scene, but it is also, crucially, a geographical scene, and the two are complexly interwoven.”<sup>2</sup> About four decades too late for the Wastepaper Theatre social scene, I sit in a happy overlap with its geography: Providence, Rhode Island. The group was “spawned April 25, 1973, by James Schevill, Edwin Honig, Keith and Rosmarie Waldrop—to investigate new possibilities of poetry in the theatre.”<sup>3</sup> Its performances took place at Edwin Honig’s “mansion” on Narragansett Bay, and at a piano teacher’s studio on the east side of Providence, and sometimes at the RISD museum. Performances were free and advertised by posters on the Brown campus and elsewhere, posters suspected by Rosmarie to still exist in the tumult of Keith Waldrop’s home office.

I was born two years into this project, and not into a family that would have been near Brown or poetry. Yet I am cheered in thinking that some tendrils of poetic absurdity were in the air in Rhode Island at that time, and that I must have breathed them in. Rosmarie has a play in the *WTA*, “Remember Gasoline?,” in which a man sweeps “mounting sand”—à la *Woman in the Dunes*—while a woman lies sphinxlike. Every so often a physicist on a bicycle comes to the gas station and the man serves him a drink from the gas pump—tea, hot chocolate, Postum.... There’s the feeling of centuries passing, and much of the dialogue is born from physics talk or from banal exchanges:

WOMAN: I’m not sleeping.

MAN: Then what the hell are you doing?

WOMAN: Thinking.

MAN: Thinking! You make me sick. You make me want to cry.

WOMAN: OK. Keep weeping.

MAN: I’m not weeping. I just want to.

WOMAN: OK. Keep sweeping then.<sup>4</sup>

When I read this play, which is a handful of pages, I like it for its bigness—in addition to Kōbō Abe and temporal physics, it’s Camus’s Sisyphus, it’s—only opaquely!—OPEC, it’s a mood of slowness, nearly eternity, and the woman, despite a lionhearted effort, gets denied sex at the end, and then there’s this stupidly funny inclusion of every word

that rhymes with “sweeping”.... I picture my dad at this gas pump, the very one from Rosmarie’s imagination, with me and my sisters in a heap in the back seat of his Plymouth Fury. He was often aggrieved. But in all weather the back windows of that station wagon were down, and that must have been when the prevailing winds blew some of that transubstantiating air from “Remember Gasoline?” to me in the back seat twelve miles away...turning the gas crisis into an existential one, the petroleum pump into a spigot....

The Wastepaper Theatre got its name because initially Honig and Schevill had the idea to write short plays about current events—plays made from yesterday’s newsprint—but Rosmarie says that she and Keith immediately groaned at that idea and then ignored it. And ultimately they didn’t sweep or sleep or weep away the news but side-eyed it. At the second Wastepaper program, according to the *WTA*, the Waldrops “grossed out the audience with ‘The Tragic End of Mythology’ by K. I. Gałczyński.”<sup>5</sup> Keith played Jove, “a noted sex fiend” who fries the eggs that contain the embryos of his three mythological children with Leda because “we can’t expect anything worthwhile from Castor and Pollux, and as for Helen, everybody knows the consequences.”<sup>6</sup> Polish poet Gałczyński’s one-page plays written for his Little Theatre of the Green Goose have been described as a “meticulous buffoonade,” a phrase that could apply to a good seven-eighths of the *WTA* plays.<sup>7</sup> Like Gałczyński’s, the *WT*’s were not made from the news but still retained the news’s cruelty: “In our present state of degeneration it is through the skin that metaphysics must be made to re-enter our minds.”<sup>8</sup> And Providence itself in the 1970s was a prime site of decline. (Some of us longtime residents feel the need to share the fact that when Bette Midler, of all people, passed through the city in the ’70s, she called it “the pits.”<sup>9</sup>)

Keith and Rosmarie Waldrop are poets, to me the most serious of poets, and when I walked the few Providence blocks between my house and theirs to ask them about the *WTA*, they answered all of my questions, but whatever answers they gave were preceded by them laughing. Honig and Schevill, both now deceased, were poets and traditional playwrights. Why would playwrights attend to a theater of no budget, no real actors, no stage? Why would poets put so much energy in service of language that would (or should—more

on that later) never live beyond a night? These questions are sort of faux-naïf.... It's true that my experience of poetry keeps becoming clotted with institutions, professionalization. But it's also true that an important kernel of my self knows better than to believe in them. (Says the WT manifesto: "If an institution appears on our non-stage, we will poetically abolish it."<sup>10</sup>) So I know why *I* participate in poets theater (or as Schevill's theme song for the WT goes, "When you admire your face / and love your disgrace; / when you polish your ego / for friends in a free show...").<sup>11</sup> And here for *you* is one historical fact regarding each WT founding member that explains their possible seducement by this insubstantial genre:

Edwin Honig, in the early '70s, right before the WT formed, had translated and published Calderón's play *Life Is a Dream*, from which I'll single out these lines in act 3:

Heavenly God, do you wish me  
once again to dream of grandeur  
which time must rip asunder?  
Do you wish me once again  
to glimpse half-lit among the shadows  
that pomp and majesty  
which vanish with the wind?<sup>12</sup>

And so perhaps these lines swept into EH, because what better unreal, ephemeral medium than poets theater to deliberately, happily pursue anything but grandeur? Plus, there's apparently a whiff of amateurism about Calderón, as EH mentions in his foreword to the play: "A French diplomat, reporting a conversation with the old playwright in 1669, concluded that Calderón knew next to nothing generally, and perhaps least of all about the rules of drama, which he mocked."<sup>13</sup>

Keith Waldrop, while in grad school at the University of Michigan, had put up several theatricalish productions, including the "proto-absurdist" play *Comedy, Satire, Irony & Deeper Meaning* by Christian Dietrich Grabbe, and in the stage directions of that play, a character makes a deal with the devil:

*The Devil makes an offer to the Margrave Murdrock, to whose home they have brought him frozen in the month of August. He will procure for him the young Baroness Liddy on two conditions: first, that Murdrock will make his eldest son study philosophy, and second, that he will put thirteen journeyman tailors to death.*<sup>14</sup>

As far as I can tell, the play does not call for actually putting thirteen journeyman tailors to death on the stage, but Keith made a directorial choice to do so, enlisting twelve professors to play the parts of the journeyman tailors, staging each individual death, and then a department chair to play the thirteenth (and apparently most gruesomely killed) journeyman tailor. Whenever I long for a tenure-track job near Providence, I think of Keith killing thirteen tenured professors onstage with such delight.

In a different kind of anti-institutional gesture, James Schevill refused to sign a 1950 loyalty oath to UC Berkeley and thus lost his teaching job there. Assigned to an army unit meant to “re-educate” German prisoners during WWII, he worked with Germans whose rejections of Hitler’s loyalty oaths sent them to concentration camps.... In a letter to the then UC President, he asked, “Can I now in all conscience consent to an oath which was considered a dishonorable act during the war?”<sup>15</sup> Thus Schevill, having so understood the horrors of totalitarianism, was more than primed to undertake absurdity.

Rosmarie Waldrop, as the only one of the four founding members of the WT who is still actively writing and publishing, must remain inscrutable. In her own account, Rosmarie did not particularly want to join the Wastepaper Theatre, but they needed her for balance, to keep the poets theater as much poet as theater. And, she says, in poets theater there was a spatial element: unlike in poems, you could have two things at the same time. And so she did.

## §

Each poet was responsible for staging their own play. They memorized the lines (Rosmarie: “It was a lot of lines”), except in Keith’s plays,

which were pretty much improvised. There would be a framework, the play would start, and the actors, such as they were, often would not know, after their first scene, when to go back on. “I wouldn’t either,” Keith said, and laughed. “That was the point.” In the anthology’s pages you’ll see that a young Gayatri Spivak, now a towering literary theorist, was directed to “triumphantly” deliver the last line in Honig’s “Rehearsing Emily Dickinson’s Puppies”: “YO HE HO OH.”<sup>16</sup> Providence poet Michael Gizzi pops up in many productions as “Husband,” “Thriftshop Owner,” and “Nazi 1.” Hannah Weiner—a Providence native presumably back in town to visit family—makes a showing: in her version of *Romeo and Juliet*, Hannah played Romeo, Keith played Juliet, and Rosmarie played a character named Mike. Each line of dialogue was supposed to be delivered alongside a particular hand signal from the *International Code of Signals for the Use of All Nations*, but RW recalls, “we didn’t learn them, we just waved our hands in whatever way.” I loved the casual way Rosmarie waved her hands as she explained how she would wave away the stage directions. I love the last play in the anthology, written by Keith, in which he starred as “A Man” who waves away words: “Words carry one away from energy, away from meaning, farther and farther. They fold inward. They conceal. They take the truth and make it...mm...I forget what they make it, but anyway. That is very clear in scientific language. The technical, Latin name for the common American robin is, as you may be aware, ‘Turdus migratorius.’ Or, being translated, ‘Shite errant.’”<sup>17</sup>

How did all this lovely shite get set down in book form? It shouldn’t have, right? Antithetical to its spirit to publish! But for Peter Kaplan. Fifteen years old and kicked out of his house, Kaplan started hanging around with Providence poets. At first, they found him somewhat obnoxious, but, and this part of the sentence is conjecture, they made room for him eventually because he tenaciously loved poetry. He killed himself when he was nineteen. In a tribute book that Kaplan’s friends put together, Honig wrote, “Peter was an immense friend of poets, he had a passion for most of them personally and especially for what they wrote.... He knew and read the famous, the most obscure. And he loved poetry books, all sorts, physically and literally, he even published a few.”<sup>18</sup> When Peter was around sixteen years old, he moved to Woods Hole, became either a dishwasher or a



waiter, and started a press—Pourboire—named for the tips he hoped to make. Pourboire Press, in the form of Peter Kaplan (*enfant terrible* of the poetry scene is what then–Grolier Poetry Book Shop proprietor Louisa Solano called him) approached the Wastepaper Theatre about publishing an anthology of their productions. He died before he could see it through, but his friends, poets all, made it happen. They also brought Pourboire back to Providence for its last publication, a tribute book under the Pourboire imprint: *Pourboire 16: Peter Kaplan's Book*.

In going more deeply into the *WTA* for this piece, I have gone down so many rabbit holes! So many poets dead and only very faintly, if at all, etched into today! *Peter Kaplan's Book* is the deepest hole, hard to want to climb out of. In a way, such a slight book, meant only for its contributors—yet here I am reading and reading. It mentions that Kaplan took part in the Wastepaper Theatre on occasion, but I can't find his name in the *WTA*.... On page 47 of the Kaplan book, Robert Francis ends his encomium: "Among the many stories about Peter his encounter with Robert McNamara, president of the World Bank, in the Fishmonger's Cafe is one that should not be lost sight of." And then, after some white space, there's an editor's note: "*This anecdote, certainly one of the most exquisite, appears nowhere in this volume.*"<sup>19</sup> Ha. The poet friends who edited Kaplan's book knew the right balance of setting down facts and letting them disappear.... What I think about the *WTA* is that it shouldn't really exist, it's so odd that it exists. It's so great and yet the best parts of it speak to what isn't here.

*In memory of Keith Waldrop (1932–2023)*

## NOTES

- 1/ Anne Boyer (@anne\_boyer\_thirteen), Instagram post, February 23, 2023. "Last night's sky. Realizing that just like journalists have ethical claims to 'objectivity' poets have equal ethical claims to 'subjectivity.' Which is very funny. Which I dare you to try to explain to a journalist. Which is 'oh sorry, I have a professional obligation to apprehend what is more tender than fact and more vulnerable than opinion.' & then to try to explain the infinity of this vs the daily finitude."
- 2/ Kevin Killian and David Brazil, "Introduction: Why Poets Theater?" in *The Kenning Anthology of Poets Theater: 1945–1985*, eds. Kevin Killian and David Brazil (Chicago: Kenning Editions, 2010), i.
- 3/ Rosmarie Waldrop et al., "Wastepaper Theatre," in *The Great Wastepaper Theatre Anthology: Das einzige Standardwerk* (Providence: Pourboire Press, 1978), 4.
- 4/ Rosmarie Waldrop, "Remember Gasoline?," in Waldrop et al., *The Great Wastepaper Theatre Anthology*, 125.
- 5/ Rosmarie Waldrop et al., *The Great Wastepaper Theatre Anthology*, 27.
- 6/ Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński, "The Little Theatre of the Green Goose Has the Honor of Presenting Its Author Wielding a Terrible Pen 'The Tragic End of Mythology,'" in *The Conspiracy of Feelings and The Little Theatre of the Green Goose*, ed. and trans. Daniel Gerould (London: Routledge, 2002), 96.
- 7/ Tadeusz Stefańczyk, "Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński," Culture.pl, 2006, <https://culture.pl/pl/tworca/konstanty-ildefons-galczynski>. Cited and translated in Mikołaj Gliński, "The Vices and Virtues of Verse-maker Gałczyński," Culture.pl, December 12, 2013, <https://culture.pl/en/article/the-vices-and-virtues-of-verse-maker-galczynski>.
- 8/ Antonin Artaud, "The Theater of Cruelty (First Manifesto)," in *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 99.
- 9/ Tim Whitmire, "Dying City Rises Again in an Act of Providence," *Los Angeles Times*, April 21, 1996, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-04-21-mn-60929-story.html>.
- 10/ Waldrop et al., "Wastepaper Theatre," 4.
- 11/ Waldrop et al., "Wastepaper Theatre," 4.
- 12/ Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *Life Is a Dream*, 82–83.
- 13/ Edwin Honig, "Foreword," in Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *Life Is a Dream*, trans. Edwin Honig (New York: Hill & Wang, 1970), ix–x.
- 14/ Christian Dietrich Grabbe, in *Anthology of Black Humor*, ed. André Breton, trans. Mark Polizzotti (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997), 70.
- 15/ James E. Schevill to UC President Robert Sproul, October 30, 1950, in

“The University Loyalty Oath: A 50th Anniversary Retrospective,” University of California History Project, accessed July 8, 2023, [https://www.lib.berkeley.edu/uchistory/archives\\_exhibits/loyaltyoath/symposium/schevill.html](https://www.lib.berkeley.edu/uchistory/archives_exhibits/loyaltyoath/symposium/schevill.html).

16/ Edwin Honig, “Rehearsing Emily Dickinson’s Puppies,” in Waldrop et al., *The Great Wastepaper Theatre Anthology*, 81–87.

17/ Keith Waldrop, “Hungarian Diversion,” in Waldrop et al., *The Great Wastepaper Theatre Anthology*, 146–47.

18/ Edwin Honig, “Peter Kaplan, Friend,” in *Pourboire 16: Peter Kaplan’s Book*, eds. Jaimy Gordon and Ray Ragosta (Providence: Pourboire Press, 1978), 54–55.

19/ Robert Francis, “Peter Kaplan,” in Gordon and Ragosta, *Pourboire 16*, 47, original italics.

STEPHANIE ANDERSON

## An Interview with Patricia Spears Jones

*In the 1970s and 1980s, poet, playwright, editor, and educator Patricia Spears Jones published a mimeographed magazine titled W. B. #1 (1975), coedited an anthology of writing by New York City women called Ordinary Women (1978), and worked on the editorial staff of the Heresies Collective, a group of feminist artists and critics that published the journal Heresies from 1977 to 1993. Stephanie Anderson interviewed Jones via email in July and August of 2015, touching on the landscape of New York City poetry in the 1970s, and how the situation of feminist, anti-racist literary work has—and hasn't—changed in the decades since.*

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SA: *Your mimeo mag W. B. came out in 1975, and the title page thanks The Poetry Project “for the use of their facilities.” Will you talk a little bit about the magazine’s context and why you started it?*

PSJ: I was going to workshops and hanging out at The Poetry Project. It was the mimeo magazine time, and Maureen Owen and others urged me to develop a journal. I am proud of it. Lee Breuer, who is one of the founders of Mabou Mines, contributed, as did Levi Frazier Jr., one of my college classmates, who also happens to be a Black American. Indeed, as with many of my projects, race and gender diversity were very much in the midst. I think I was multicultural in my focus long before it became a convention.

*Did you have any models, at the Project or elsewhere, for this kind of multicultural endeavor? What were some of the challenges to diversity in 1970s New York art scenes?*

I think I was basically the start of that in many ways—the Project was for the most part white and male. So anybody who was not

white or male was a diversity. Ha! Downtown was much smaller and there was a lot of mixing it up in the loft jazz scene, in some experimental theater. But for the most part, then as now, New York City was hypersegregated. Because I was not a native New Yorker, I pretty much talked to everybody: Jews, Puerto Ricans, Asians, etcetera. And because of the rise in cultural feminism, there were many opportunities to work with poets and artists: June Jordan rounded many of us up for a protest against *The American Poetry Review* (APR); the “Sisterhood,” which was for Black women writers, met on the Upper West Side and in Brooklyn. The Basement Workshop was the closest to having a multicultural ethos, even though it was located in Chinatown and was actively engaged in improvements for its citizens. Fay Chiang, who later coedited *Ordinary Women*, was an early member of the Basement Workshop. And of course, almost anyone with a hankering to showcase their talents (whether they had any or not) could check out the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. The remnants of the Umbra workshop were seen in Ishmael Reed, Steve Cannon, and Joe Johnson’s Reed, Cannon & Johnson imprint, which CUNY Grad Center folk are documenting with the help of David Henderson, one of the poets still active in New York City. Sometimes these various groups came together, but mostly not. Of course, we were all so very young.

*What was the protest against APR, and how was it important to you?*

June Jordan, who wrote columns for APR, pointed out that she and Alice Walker and other poets of color never had their actual poems published in APR, and at that time most of the poets published were white and male. It was fascinating to participate in a protest run by poets who were successful and who still faced serious discrimination. The irony was that one of the younger poets who I asked to send work to APR and who was published by the magazine was white and male!

*What is the significance of the mimeo mag’s title, W. B.? And the subtitle “(short works)”?*

I can’t remember why I called it *W. B.*, but it was some kind of talisman—those two members of the alphabet. “Short works” was just

that: the pieces were not long. Remember, I had to type out each of those darn pages and then run them off and then get friends (yeah) to help me collate and bind them. The mimeo scene was full of fun, camaraderie, and support. But it still cost more than I could do, despite all the volunteer efforts, so I only did one issue.

*Did you produce them at The Poetry Project?*

Yes. And it was fun.

*Ordinary Women is obviously a fairly different endeavor from W. B.—Ordinary Women is an anthology, offset printed, perfect bound. How did the idea for this collection come about?*

It came about from conversations with other young women poets writing and working in New York City who wanted to see our work presented. We wanted an anthology that was intentionally diverse, because most women's anthologies were white with token writers of color. We had heard of the *Third World Women* anthology from the West Coast, and we wanted something that came close to that. Sara Miles and I asked Fay Chiang and Sandra Maria Esteves to join us, and we did outreach to white, Black, Asian, and Latina poets. Cynthia Kraman and Lois Elaine Griffith, who is an artist and a poet, were also extremely important to the success of the anthology. Adrienne Rich was a supporter and granted us funds for the publication, and she wrote a wonderful introduction. We wanted to show that NYC women poets were like all the other young women in the city—making our way in our world the same way that actors or designers or political activists were making their way. Ultimately, I think we found a way to show autonomous women poets with varied life experiences who walked these sometimes mean, sometimes wonderful streets.

*How long did it take to put OW together? The “Foreward” [sic] describes an intensive manuscript solicitation: “We solicited manuscripts through notices in women’s papers, poetry newsletters, community centers, friends....”<sup>1</sup> How did selection and production work, and what were some of the hurdles?*

About a year from outreach to production. As with any collection, we had the usual issues: some women poets objected to a gender-based anthology; our desire for diversity was paramount, but many felt like it might be tokenism; there were aesthetic differences among the editors. But in the end, we were satisfied with our list and the poems that we selected.

*What was your favorite part of making the anthology?*

Getting that wonderful range of poets in print; many have gone on to produce books, develop new organizations, teach, etcetera. We did not request permission to do this. We did not ask for grants. It was our limited funds, our ideas, our time on the line. I feel like we gave women poets a great model for how to avoid tokenism. There were criticisms, as there should be. But we cast a wide and cleverly made net across this city and came back with some interesting young women poets and their work. And I am sure others took that as a sign to do something similar—at least I hope so. And I am grateful that as of this writing, Sara, Fay, Sandy, and I are still breathing and still making great work in different ways. We all respect the ability of women to make a world we want to live in, and we continue to try and make that world.

*What was the reception of the anthology like? How did you respond to the critique that, as Eileen Myles wrote in a mixed review for The Poetry Project Newsletter, the “gathering of these poems seems to have sprung from a sociological impulse, not an aesthetic one”?*<sup>2</sup>

Eileen Myles was doing the usual “poetics” versus agitprop line. They were roundly denounced for that petty review. But this was the kind of mindset that allowed white poets to question the “quality” of the work of poets of color, even the most formal and conventional, because said poets might use words to describe the skin tones of Black people. Racism can be blunt or subtle, simply the status quo. And patriarchal notions, even from those with serious rage against the patriarchy, show up—it’s part of our cultural DNA. Again, there were many women who did not want to be part of gender-based projects. It has always seemed to me that these kinds of critiques are part of America’s difficulty

with marrying very public issues with private concerns in art—and it is a kind of fallout from McCarthyism. That is, political poetry and art were suspect because they dealt with those public concerns—the antiwar poets of the 1960s received similar critiques. I would suggest that Myles has changed their tune given their work with AIDS activism and the LGBT community. But this criticism matters little because the work aesthetically and politically continues to shine.

*In the introduction to Ordinary Women, Adrienne Rich writes, “The jazz poetry movement, the mass antiwar readings of the 1960s, the grassroots cultural centers where music and poetry come together, and above all the surge of women’s poetry readings, have created a new oral style, an almost tribal awareness, the poem not as artifact of solitude but as cry of recognition, outreach, accusation, celebration. And so this is often a poetry meant to be spoken and heard.”<sup>3</sup> Almost forty years later, do you agree with this assessment of the rise of orality in poetry? Do you think it continues?*

Yes, I do. That is why slam poetry and open mics all work. That is why The Poetry Project’s series are still amazing. That is why there are collective programs from Black Poets Speak Out to One Million Poets. While there will always be poets who veer toward monasticism, solitude, the carefully tended garden, there will be others who will speak to, speak of, and speak out about specific communities. The trick is to create work that can do that and reach farther than one’s own tribe.

*When did you start working with the Heresies Collective?*

1980.

*You were on the editorial staff of issue 17, the “Acting Up!” issue (1984). Will you talk a little bit about your experiences with the Heresies Collective and with the collective publishing model of the magazine?*

Working at Heresies was complicated. Coming to consensus on anything is difficult, and the range of personalities, ideas, agendas often brought up unexpected conflicts, and there was never enough



money. That said, these women were fierce in their art-making and their commitment to a feminist ideal. The conversations were powerful: Lucy Lippard, Sabra Moore, Sue Heinemann—they gave younger women like me great models of women’s creativity and intellectual rigor. The “Acting Up!” issue was my first foray into that kind of intellectual rigor. We really identified many of the people and trends that would shape or reshape theater and performance—I am pleased with our capture of a feminist moment in that issue.

*“Acting Up!” contains excerpts from your collaborative theater piece Women in Research (with Cindy Carr and Lenora Champagne). Was it difficult to move between the media of the stage and the page? Or to translate performance to the page?*

Actually, I think our excerpt works on the page because the writing was really good. If the writing is strong, then the themes and concerns in the piece will be conveyed, no matter the medium.

*So many of the concerns that motivated your involvement in small press publishing—issues of representation and privilege, and the elision of voices of writers of color—are currently being discussed in the poetry world. In your experience, what are some of the similarities and differences between the discussions as they currently play out versus when you were editing Ordinary Women in the late ’70s?*

It is simply larger—the number of people involved in these conversations—and more theory driven. Words like *intersectionality* or *ally* are simple ways in which people are trying to define themselves and others. And there are always “others,” whether we like it or not. The main difference is that whites are now having to confront their whiteness as whiteness. It has taken decades for Black Americans, for instance, to explore a range of ways of being Black, with some seeing this in opposition to whiteness and others who see assimilation into more mainstream culture as the key to success. Now the mainstream is shrinking—whites will no longer be in the majority soon, and, well, not one group on this planet has ever given up power with grace. Not one, and this nation has a very nasty racist history. But while the violence

and anger and missteps taking place now—which spill into the art world—are awful to experience, it also feels like a birth of a different, more complicated, and, yes, shared culture. A culture where Blacks can lead without racist framing, or whites can lead without presumptions of superiority, or mixed-race people are allowed to explore all of their heritages. And finally, privilege is at issue for the children of the upper middle class and super wealthy, and they can be any color. How do they “intersect” with the rest of us? Will they support work that does not mirror their own backgrounds? The poets of the 1960s and 1970s could explore their ideas, leave behind bourgeois convention because the economics was not so damning. Now, that is pretty much impossible. A culture based in lives of privilege is often formal, often static, or overly technological and static. Class privilege can support a new vision or damage one.

*What advice would you give a young woman now who wants to publish a magazine or anthology?*

My only advice to anyone is to try and do what you want to do to the best of your ability and to find and keep good friends who give you advice, hugs, and support your dreams. And be honest with yourself and with others. The more people who “game” the system, the worse the work is. Go for excellence; that is what lasts.

## NOTES

1/ Fay Chiang, Sandra Maria Esteves, Patricia Jones, and Sara Miles, "Foreward," in *Ordinary Women: An Anthology of Poetry by New York City Women*, eds. Sara Miles, Patricia Jones, Sandra Maria Esteves, and Fay Chiang (New York: Ordinary Women Books, 1978), 12.

2/ Eileen Myles, "Ordinary Women," in *The Poetry Project Newsletter*, no. 56 (June 1978).

3/ Adrienne Rich, "Introduction," in *Ordinary Women*, 8.

STEPHANIE ANDERSON

## An Interview with Renee Tajima-Peña

*From 1981 to 1983, filmmaker Renee Tajima-Peña was the managing editor of Bridge: Asian American Perspectives, a magazine that ran from 1971 to 1985 and published an eclectic array of writing on Asian American culture and politics. Bridge was associated with the Basement Workshop, an influential Asian American arts and activist organization in New York City. In this interview, Stephanie Anderson talks with Tajima-Peña about Bridge, the Asian American movement, the relationship between film and literature, and more. The interview was conducted via email between November 2021 and July 2022.*

### §

SA: *Perhaps we could begin by situating your work with Bridge in the context of the journal's history and the larger historical moment. How and when did you become involved with Bridge?*

RTP: I'll start with the larger context of what was going on then with Asian Americans and culture through my personal experience. I graduated from Harvard in 1980 and wanted to become a filmmaker. That was akin to an Asian American woman deciding to play point guard in the NBA. I tried to get nonpaid internships at every studio and network I could think of and never even got calls back. I had white male classmates who landed paid work in the business, sometimes even in the writer's room, but that was the industry at the time. Even at PBS with its public media mission—Grace Lee has a great podcast on PBS's legacy of whiteness, *Viewers Like Us*—there were only a handful of Asian Americans who weren't doing maintenance or clerical jobs. Karen Tei Yamashita, who was just honored with a lifetime achievement award from the National Book Foundation, was working at KCET Los Angeles as a secretary.

I also got a job as a secretary—for the “Mr. Bill Show,” the Claymation character on *Saturday Night Live*. I lasted six months. Since I’d been a student activist, I got involved with Asian American movement work in New York and found out about the Chinatown media arts center, Asian CineVision. It had been all volunteer, and they were hiring their first paid director position, and I got the job. \$2.50 an hour, if that. ACV mounted the Asian American International Film Festival, did community video training, and had a Chinese-language public access program; we did film screenings in the Chinatown public library across the street.

*Bridge* had already been published since 1971. At some point, we began administering the Basement Workshop and also took over the publication of *Bridge*. I became the managing editor—as the director of a bare-bones community nonprofit, I wore a lot of hats! I didn’t have any professional experience; I was only about twenty-one or twenty-two when I became the editor in 1981. I had edited an alternative newspaper when I was in high school, but that was about it.

*Bridge* had an all-volunteer editorial board and contributors that thankfully included people with real skills—my sister Marsha, who had a PhD in art history from UChicago; the poets Kimiko Hahn, Luis Francia, and Walter Lew; the activist Rockwell Chin; the photographer Corky Lee; and various artists and writers. Shanlon Wu was also on the editorial board—he’s now a high-powered attorney and CNN legal analyst who briefly represented Rick Gates, the Trump campaign aide.

Anyway, in the early 1980s the Asian American political and cultural movement was not new—it goes back to the 1960s—but it was still in a fairly nascent, grassroots stage. And it was evolving. During the 1980s and ’90s, it continued to grow. Demographically the Asian American population was really booming, and to an extent there was a “professionalization” of people and structures within the movement—Asian American studies was fighting for legitimacy, academics were trying to get tenure, filmmakers were going into MFA programs and slowly making broadcast or theatrical films, organizations were getting boards of directors—that kind of thing.<sup>1</sup>

And an activist brand of cultural organizing continued to resist, such as Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network, which included a number of Basement Workshop veterans. In 1991 Godzilla called

out the homogeneity of the Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial and its “conspicuous absence of Asian American visual artists.”<sup>2</sup> Artist-of-color criticism of the Whitney led to a very different Biennial in 1993, the one that got the white establishment critics up in arms. I was part of a collective installation in that show, *Those Fluttering Objects of Desire*, that Shu Lea Cheang put together as “tales of postcolonial interracial desire through reconstructed red phones, appropriating the 900-phonesex and 25-cent-per-peep pornography apparatus.”<sup>3</sup> My contribution was a phone-sex audio remix of James Brown to quotations from Mao Zedong’s *Little Red Book*, performed by the *Dogeaters* playwright Jessica Hagedorn and the writer/performance artist Robbie McCauley.

Anyway, back to the Asian American arts community in New York. We started to get small grants from the NEA, the New York State Council on the Arts, donors, businesses, and the like to publish *Bridge*. Kitty Carlisle Hart, the actress and wife of the playwright Moss Hart, was the chair of NYSCA at the time, and she famously thought it was a magazine about the card game bridge. She was actually really great. She would charm all of the upstate New York legislators and get them to approve budgets that funded artists and organizations of color and controversial work. She was a real champion for the arts.

As in the previous decade of *Bridge*, we covered arts and politics. I think we were more multiethnic and included a larger proportion of US-born Asians than *Bridge* had in the 1970s. For example, Kimiko is mixed-race Japanese, Luis is Filipino, Walter is Korean. It was a time of growing panethnicity in the Asian American political and culture movement. I want to emphasize that it wasn’t the beginning of that panethnicity—for example, the 1940s labor movement in Hawai’i and the ethnic studies strikes of the late 1960s involved Filipinos, Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and others. Keep in mind that up to the 1970s, the Asian American population was small and overwhelmingly Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino. That all changed with the impact of the 1965 immigration reform and migration from Southeast Asia after the American War in Vietnam. In the late ’70s, the Chol Soo Lee case, and beginning in 1983, the Vincent Chin case, mobilized panethnic Asian American organizing and drew from the panethnicity of the continuing labor movement, ethnic studies, and other struggles. *Bridge*

captured a lot of what was going on at that time and came out of that ferment. Everyone was living it.

*What was your sense of Bridge's legacy at that point?*

I didn't think about legacy. I thought about the moment, and the role of *Bridge*—like filmmaking—as a cultural organ of the movement. Asian American publications have served that function since the earliest immigrant publications. In New York in particular, it was actually a great time for Asian American journalism. There were Chinese-language newspapers from left, right, and center perspectives, there was a Japanese American paper, there were in-language Asian publications. On the East and West Coast, there were publications of left formations, and alternative papers like *Gidra* and *New Dawn*. I think the UCLA Asian American Studies Center “Mountain Movers” project talks about those publications.<sup>4</sup>

*How was the editorial staff of Bridge organized?*

All volunteer. People primarily took on roles related to their skill set. I'm fuzzy about the details, but you can ask other people on the editorial board who have better memories than me. I just remember it was a lot of work.

*How varied were your responsibilities?*

Everyone did everything. I would regularly work until 2 a.m., 24/7, but not only on *Bridge*, so it's a bit of a blur. I had to do fundraising, writing, editing, finding images, keeping on top of logistics. But we were all doing everything. We were a barely funded Asian American nonprofit operating out of a walk-up in Chinatown, pre-internet, when things were typeset manually and the layout had to be done by hand.

*Of the many things you were doing—“fundraising, writing, finding images, logistics,” and so forth—what was your favorite?*

Fundraising and logistics are dirty jobs that somebody has to do, and not my favorite. But we all had to do everything in our careers apart from making art or films or writing or performing. The late great Corky Lee was a photographer, but he also worked at Expedi Printing, and that's where we printed *Bridge* and our film festival posters, protest flyers, everything. We'd call Corky. I learned a lot of skills about publication layout and prepping for printing that you can just do on your Mac now. I did love seeing the magazine come off the press, because it was always so exciting to see the covers. Publishing *Bridge* was a communal experience. We met in person, put it together, and schlepped it around to sell it in person. It was a community.

*One of the things I love about Bridge is “its iconic blend of Asian American political issues, critique, art, poetry, and fiction.”<sup>5</sup> The pieces are often in conversation to an astonishing degree. And the pages are packed! What were some of the editorial strategies that ensured this effect?*

*Bridge* reflected what was happening in those worlds because everyone contributing to it was immersed in Asian American politics, arts, literature, intelligentsia, community, imagining. That's a lot different from the conventional writer who lands in a space and interprets what they see from an outsider's lens. We were insiders. And that in itself was an act of resistance, to stake a claim to our own stories. At the time, insider knowledge wasn't respected, of course, because outsiders wanted to reproduce the status quo. In academia, scholars of color were accused of doing “activist” research. In filmmaking, there were suits in the PBS system who were suspicious of us as Asian American filmmakers taking on an investigation of a racially motivated killing for *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* But the power of *Bridge* was precisely because we were insiders.

*In the essay “Moving the Image,” you discuss the importance of eclecticism and the “plurality of cultural influences” in seriously considering Asian American filmmaking aesthetics, and one can see how these resonate in the pages of Bridge as well. How did literature and your early involvement in writing and filmmaking all influence each other?*



I never went to film school and never got any formal training. I learned filmmaking on the job, so I didn't have many influences other than the culture at home, in the neighborhood, at school; the TV shows and movies I saw, the music I listened to, the books I read. I had grown up in a multiracial community near Los Angeles: Asian, Black, Latinx, white. It was a totally hybrid cultural existence. I once wrote about how it was, "feeling as much at home with the Delfonics as the Shigin; even closer to the Black Power movement than the Cultural Revolution. So it seems to me the natural order of things, as a filmmaker, is to use jazz and rhythm & blues in films about Asian Americans, as it is to draw from the style and sensibilities of the German-born [Charles] Bukowski, who wrote about the neighborhood milieu where my mother grew up."<sup>6</sup>

When I started out in the 1980s, a lot of documentary practice drew from genres of journalism, direct cinema, and ethnographic filmmaking. But not knowing any better, I just went by what I liked. And I was really drawn to literature, fiction, and scripted film and television. I brought that mix into my filmmaking, partly as a strategy of necessity in locating relatable cultural reference points for non-Asian American audiences: the murder story, the humor of a road trip, the melodrama of a family reunion.

In the documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1987), I drew on literary and dramatic influences to negotiate an Asian American experience that most viewers probably knew little about. The dramatic structure and fractured storytelling approach are based on two fictional works that really influenced me—the multiple perspectives of the play and movie *Rashomon* and the parallel storylines of the 1980s television drama *Hill Street Blues*. Was the killing a barroom brawl or a hate crime? Using a narrative strategy like the one in *Rashomon* makes it possible to explore the subjectivities and social locations of witnesses to the crime and its aftermath, and to maneuver through ambiguities of perception and fact. In *My America...or Honk if You Love Buddha* (1997), I was influenced by Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, and by the outsider's quest for humanity along the peripheries in Carlos Bulosan's novel *America Is in the Heart*.

*Your work is sometimes called lyrical. What do you think about the relationship between poetry and film?*

That's a compliment! Not sure I've heard that before. I'm interested in people's interior lives, which is often memory or dreams, and so I think about the poetics of a scene. I do wish I could be as concise as a poet, though. Poetry is very cinematic, very descriptive. There's an internal visual and rhythmic logic to a film's construction. Really great editors know how to construct a film that way, and I've worked with some amazing editors like Holly Fisher, Johanna Demetrakas, and Jean Tsien. I think of it as the choreography of the edit. Documentary editors don't get half the credit they deserve for making a film sing.

*I believe you did your last issue as managing editor of Bridge in late 1983, and you and Christine Choy made Who Killed Vincent Chin? in 1987. What led up to that important film? What are some of the joys and difficulties of collaboration for you?*

I was sitting in our office at Third World Newsreel when I opened an envelope that had been sent by a local activist. Inside, there was a newspaper clipping and a note describing the murder of Vincent Chin. This was in the spring of 1983. In March, his killers Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz had pleaded guilty to manslaughter, so there was really no trial, there was a plea agreement. Judge Charles Kaufman sentenced them to approximately three years of probation and a \$3,000 fine. They would not spend a day in jail.

I was shocked at the light sentence for such a brutal murder. I had been hearing about incidents of anti-Asian violence and of racial violence in general. But like many cases of racial violence, Vincent Chin's killing wasn't getting the attention it should. Chris and I were filmmaking partners at the time, and we decided to make a film about the case. We teamed up with WTVS/Detroit Public TV and really lucked out that the station general manager, Robert Larson, and the head of cultural programming and special projects, Juanita Anderson, came on as executive producers. Juanita was one of the handful of Black women production executives at PBS during that time, and she really got the story and the politics of an Asian American film team taking on the investigation of the case. She was also a Detroit native and knew the city beyond the "murder capital" stereotypes that were so prevalent at the time.

Juanita and Bob insulated us from the PBS suits who didn't trust that Asian American filmmakers could be "objective," as if professionalism is biologically determined. Our main funder, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, wanted us to be overseen by a white male journalist. Juanita and Bob told us, just make your film and we'll deal with him. It was a great team. The filmmaker Nancy Tong was associate producer, and she conducted all of the Chinese-language interviews, including with Lily Chin. Nancy and I spent three months in Detroit researching the case, meeting all of the players and developing the story. When I talk about an editor choreographing a film, I think of our editor Holly Fisher. She's brilliant. And her provenance as an experimental filmmaker really made a difference. She understood how to choreograph the layers.

*At the end of "Moving the Image," you suggest that it "may now be time to look back" to get new perspectives and move forward.<sup>7</sup> What forms of this "looking back" might you suggest to an aspiring young filmmaker, writer, or scholar?*

I was just in Detroit for the Vincent Chin 40th Remembrance & Rededication, a four-day convening that was launched by the original activists of American Citizens for Justice (ACJ), including Roland Hwang, Jim Shimoura, and Helen Zia. There was nothing nostalgic about the event, no one was fixed in the past. It was all about figuring out what that collective experience of the Vincent Chin case tells us about the fight today.

The Justice for Vincent Chin campaign was seminal: It was the first time Asian Americans were recognized as a protected class in a federal civil rights criminal prosecution. It was a recognition that Asian Americans experience systemic racism, that we are not the "model minority," and going forward, the question of race could be factored into incidents of violence toward Asian Americans. It had to be considered when a white supremacist murdered Joseph Iletto, it had to be considered when Balbir Singh Sodhi was murdered after 9/11, it had to be considered when six Asian immigrant women were gunned down in the Atlanta area in March 2021. But today those civil rights protections are being rolled back, one by one.

It took an engagement with history to change the narrative of the Asian American model minority in the first place. The ACJ activists framed Chin's murder as a part of a long history of racial violence and scapegoating. Asian Americans have always fought to define ourselves and tell our own story. That hasn't changed. Right now we're in a golden age of the Asian American story and presence, from K-12 curriculum requirements to blockbusters like *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*.

At the same time, however, there is a right-wing backlash to our story wrapped up in anti-critical race theory attacks and banned books. Even children's and YA books like Laurence Yep's *Dragonwings* have been banned by school districts. We can't assume that we'll be able to teach the Vincent Chin story or the truth of our history unless we wage that fight.

*What are you working on now?*

I'm working on narrative-shift initiatives with different AAPIs in media, activism, philanthropy, education, and cultural strategy. Also developing more documentaries!

## NOTES

1/ See Renee Tajima-Peña, “Toward a Third Wave: Why Media Matters in Asian American Studies,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 17, no. 1 (2014): 94–99; and Renee Tajima, “Moving the Image: Asian American Independent Filmmaking 1970–1990,” in *Moving the Image: Independent Asian Pacific American Media Arts*, ed. Russell Leong (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center and Visual Communications, Southern California Asian American Studies Central, 1991), 10–33.

2/ Godzilla’s letter to the then director of the Whitney, dated May 13, 1991, is reproduced in *Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network, 1990–2001*, ed. Howie Chen (Brooklyn: Primary Information, 2021), 99.

3/ Shu Lea Cheang and Kimberly SaRee Tomes, “Shu Lea Cheang: Hi-Tech Aborigine,” *Wide Angle* 18, no. 1 (1996): 4.

4/ See “Mountain Movers | AASC,” eds. Russell Jeung, Karen Umemoto, Harvey Dong, et al., UCLA Asian American Studies Center, April 2019, <https://www.aasc.ucla.edu/aascpress/mm/>. The website links to the book project and is also a digital archive of videos, documents, and more. See also Amardeep Singh, “Asian American Little Magazines, 1968–1974,” Lehigh University, <https://scalar.lehigh.edu/asian-american-little-magazines/index>.

5/ “Bridge Magazine—Basement Workshop,” Museum of Chinese in America, Google Arts & Culture, <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/bridge-magazine-basement-workshop/-wHJcLubNwNUPQ>.

6/ Tajima, “Moving the Image,” 13.

7/ Tajima, “Moving the Image,” 32.

## Krupskaya Books: Some Notes on Collective Practice

Obsessed with details, dust motes, and plant cuttings, we look to description as a place to start. We begin with our own engagement with Bay Area small press writing, with our work as editors and publishers for Krupskaya Books. The press was founded in 1998 and to date has published forty-eight titles, circulating through many small press writing communities. The projects range from Renee Gladman's *The Activist* (2003), a crucial text that has proven foundational for a new generation of writers, to our most recent project: a box set of four books by Bay Area artists Rebeca Bollinger, Sofía Córdova, Pam Martin, and Yedda Morrison. All share a commitment to expanding the kinds of conversation that writing makes possible in those places where culture unfolds in the face of relentless institutional entwinement, relentless consolidation, relentless homogenization.

Working together, we have learned not to do what is most efficient or expedient—that is, not to rely on what we do well or already know how to do but rather to work toward those places where we might encounter something newly possible within the realm of the literary and the relations it gives rise to. We find our way through collective thought, through perplexity, through the sometimes frustrating, sometimes pleasant friction where ambitious vision meets material restriction.

This last January, after arriving home to a basement flooded by the first in a series of atmospheric rivers, one of us took a walk and prepared her thoughts for an MLA panel on Bay Area Poetry Today, putting forth an allusive series of questions and ideas on stories that still feel resonant. Questions about the ways that Bay Area poetry might be different from, say, ten years ago. Wondering about the circles and locations that define it now, its presses and friendships and institutions and relations to New York or a national literary culture, questions we are fond of in their impossibility. We were thinking about decades, and how weird it is that soon it will be ten years since the

2015 *Chicago Review* forum on Sexism and Sexual Assault in Literary Communities, edited by Andrew Peart and Chalcey Wilding.

We were thinking about Kevin Killian, all the personal and collective losses.

We were thinking about what continues, what is mobilized in the face of all that imperils small communities. The astonishing fact of Artists' Television Access (ATA): the continued existence of a small artist-run gallery and theater that "cultivates and promotes culturally-aware, underground media and experimental art" in the middle of San Francisco's Mission area, a neighborhood transformed by waves of tech money.<sup>1</sup> At a reading there last fall with Danielle LaFrance and Ted Rees, the small space was packed with familiar and unfamiliar faces, all howling together with laughter during the short films of gay filmmaker Curt McDowell. Afterward, with a wry smile and raised eyebrows, a friend described the wild parties at McDowell's, who would have been seventy-seven last year.

We were thinking too about relatively new presses and journals central to any conversation about the Bay Area: Eyelet, Dogpark Collective, Black Freighter, *Bæst*. We were thinking about spaces that have held it down, from intimate house reading series like Woolsey Heights to the bookstore Medicine for Nightmares. We were thinking about the expansive energy of Paradiso—Noah Ross and Claire Grossman's new series—and how it is held in the remarkably spacious Finnish Brotherhood Hall, with all its windows open, the air coming through fresh and pollinated, unfreighted by former associations. We were appreciating Small Press Traffic publications such as *Traffic Report* and *The Back Room*, which recently published an interview by Caleb Beckwith (one of the editors at Dogpark Collective) with Hung Q. Tu (one of the initial Krupskaya editors), whose book *Structures of Feeling* the press published in 2003.

Caleb Beckwith: Since this interview is for Small Press Traffic, I'll start by asking about the scene that we share across time and now space. Can you tell me about the Bay Area poetry scene in which you were active? How did your work fit with what others were writing at the time? And in what ways, if at all, did participating in the Bay scene shape your poetics?

Hung Q. Tu: I'm not qualified to answer those questions. Insofar as my memories of those days are so fragmentary and hazy, the best I'd be able to do is offer the most impressionistic (and unreliable) report. I will just say, I remember them with fondness.<sup>2</sup>

We feel the same but still would have liked to read the answer. We were thinking about all of this and talking together about what it had been like over the years, working together, the materiality of the work itself. Not just the way we used to carry a crate around from house to house, full of manuscripts, rotating the reading through the collective. But that too. We could not manage to perform a long backward glance, a sweeping view, could not gather the past into a narrative through line. The relationships and conversations—those are what we remember.

Was *materiality* the right word for it?

Sitting around a kitchen table turning the pages of a dummy book slowly, then fast.

Messing around with a pair of pinking shears that produced all kinds of interesting cuts in paper, with names like Scallop, Flash, Wave, and Heartbeat. Doing things together with our hands.

Driving down the alley, full of treacherous potholes, behind Small Press Distribution with the back seat and trunk full of boxes.

Emailing PDFs back and forth with notes.

Sitting together at a restaurant, at a cafe, in front of the computer, moving text around by hand, picking up a piece of paper and folding it in a particular way to demonstrate what the final shape might look like.

Standing behind the wooden podium together awkwardly at Alley Cat Books before it was Medicine for Nightmares. Playing the recording of a writer living in rural France, propping the laptop close to the microphone and hearing the first line ring out—"Whilst the Communistic Fox / Merrily Becries / Its Fuck"—at the release party for the chapbook set *Starlings*, *narrative*, and *Julian*.<sup>3</sup>

The sound of rain coming down very hard on the roof, listening to a writer published by the press long before one of us was part of the collective and whom the other of us had not yet met in person.

Doing molly with a writer after typesetting their book and walking for miles in the rain with a dog.



Calling a writer to let them know we wanted to publish their book, and the writer thinking we were bill collectors at first, then becoming friends and still being friends.

Sitting next to a dear friend at the 2019 California Book Awards ceremony in the cool dark of the room while, outside, a heat wave rolled through the Bay Area. Watching writers accept their awards on the video screen. Thinking again how much we distrust prizes and awards generally and yet feeling so excited for our friend, and to see her book on memory and childhood sexual trauma recognized this way, the only time a book published by Krupskaya has received a prize.

Cleaning out boxes in the basement in 2013 because Michael Basinski, then curator of Special Collections at the University at Buffalo, had purchased Krupskaya's archive. Grateful that the boxes wouldn't be left to mold there. Imagining a researcher someday opening the boxes and finding drafts upon drafts with handwritten edits in the margins, seeing something in the notes that leads to a new way of reading.

Moving boxes of books too many times to count, from garages to basements to storage spaces, driving across the Bay and back and across again.

Publishing dead writers and living writers who have since died. Sitting with a writer and their first book and selecting a typeface together in ecstasy.

## NOTES

1/ “About Us,” Artists’ Television Access, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://www.atasite.org/about/>.

2/ Caleb Beckwith, “Hung Q. Tu in Conversation with Caleb Beckwith,” *Traffic Report*, Small Press Traffic, Spring 2022, <https://www.smallpresstraffic.org/traffic-report/hung-q-tu-caleb-beckwith>.

3/ Lisa Robertson, *Starlings* (San Francisco: Krupskaya, 2017), unpaginated. See also Wendy Trevino, *narrative* (San Francisco: Krupskaya, 2017) and Julian Talamantez Brolaski, *Julian* (San Francisco: Krupskaya, 2017).

KATE ROBINSON

## Life Fabric: Bay Area Poet-Publishers, 2010–2023

Within the first week of moving to Oakland in the summer of 2010, I went to a reading hosted by Sara Larsen.<sup>1</sup> I'd been lured there by my professor from The Evergreen State College (TESC), D Wolach, who was in town to read with Rob Halpern, my favorite poet at the time. I'd spent the prior couple years at TESC getting really excited about experimental small press poetry via D's classes; it seemed like a way to channel my compulsive writing into something that aligned with my values and politics. This poetry world resembled the DIY punk scenes where I'd spent my teens and twenties: a network of passionate people who didn't mesh with the mainstream—politically, aesthetically, or both—taking it upon themselves to create their own artistic opportunities for themselves and their peers and comrades. Punks put on shows at punk houses and start labels and zines.<sup>2</sup> Poets put on readings in living rooms and start small presses. This is the essence of “DIY” to me: a niche underground community generating its own culture.<sup>3</sup> And like the punk underground, the small press poetry world had a fascinating lineage that went back decades, especially in the Bay Area.

The vast majority of readings I have attended in the East Bay have taken place in people's living rooms. I myself have cocurated two separate house reading series (Sponge and Manifest), but there are also Woolsey Heights and Islet and Just Like Honey, as well as one-offs or occasionals in the living rooms of individual poets. There is an intimacy afforded by a house reading, which jibes with that community vibe, but more immediately, it offers a convenient way around the difficulties of finding free—or even merely affordable—comfortable, and accessible venues. If I could make an avatar that symbolized the Bay Area scene, it would be a living room cluttered with books and bodies. Poets on the floor, draped across one another, poets leaning in corners or doorframes, hunched in a small hallway,

poets cupping chins in hands or leaning against friends' shoulders on the couch, one poet perched atop a bookshelf, head bowed in a perfect listening pose.

Our publishing activities, too, interweave with home and family lives. We print in our friends' garages; we edit and design from our couches; we bind at our kitchen tables, and we see the people we're publishing in person at events in other people's houses.<sup>4</sup> We number broadsides at the dining table while the dogs circle our feet, and we get to know each other better, sipping La Croix and coffee and beer. We get to know people's kids, who offer us a beverage or a joke or a hug to sustain us while we're working. I've sewn Eyelet chapbooks at Jacob Kahn's house and packed *Tripwire* mailings in David Buuck's backyard. To my mind, locating the activities of small press publishing—from acquisition to production to distribution—within a web of interpersonal connection is EVERYTHING.

Dogpark Collective grew out of a recurring date for drinks Eric Sneathen and I were having. We didn't intend to start a press together; we were just talking about small presses and what we each wished existed, sharing ideas for publishing projects we each had. We had both been seduced to Oakland by the histories of Bay Area writing. For Eric, New Narrative slaked his thirst for gay literature, history, and cultural visibility. For me, discovering Language writing was a rare moment when I felt my philosophically and politically oriented ADHD brain reflected in writing. The histories of poets publishing one another in the Bay, from the '40s to the '90s, from Bolinas to Berkeley, in mimeo and in letterpress editions, also resonated with my DIY spirit. At that point in time, though, it felt like there weren't enough local publishers in our little corner of poetry. In fact, my partner and fellow poet Caleb and I had discussed starting a press, but we hadn't quite figured out how.

Eric, Caleb, and I all admired what Krupskaya had accomplished in particular. The heady books they have published since their founding in the late '90s—with Jocelyn Saidenberg, Rodrigo Toscano, and Hung Q. Tu at the helm—outline a representative and deeply thoughtful breadth of experimental Bay Area writing. Further, their collective editorial approach, wherein people have come and gone from their roles as editors, has helped the press continue on for over

twenty years. Krupskaya's publishing ethos—a feeling of community that dovetails deftly with intellectual and emotional rigor—has come to characterize the Bay Area poetry scene as a whole for me.

When the New Narrative conference Communal Presence was over, the organizers had about \$1,000 left in their budget.<sup>5</sup> Circling back to our conversation over drinks a few months earlier, Eric reached out to me and Caleb to see if we wanted to use that money to get our press off the ground. His only condition was that we agree to publish something small that had grown out of the conference. We agreed with our own condition: that he join us in the endeavor. We named it Dogpark because we wanted to be able to house the breadth of aesthetics and formal approaches of contemporary poetry rather than hewing too close to one or another. Like how at the dog park all the different breeds run around and play, get in tussles, make up... or don't! Our first publication was a chapbook-length excerpt from Bruce Boone's *WALLPAPER*.

In addition to occurring amidst our home lives, the work of producing books happens alongside our day jobs: in the evenings, on the weekends. Although this has always been part and parcel of small press publishing, the sort of day job that could support this lifestyle has changed significantly over the years. As a young punk in Olympia, WA, in the mid-2000s, one could pay their rent with a part-time customer service gig, leaving plenty of time for band practice, booking shows, zine-making, even going on tour. While bygone eras might have afforded a similar lifestyle in the Bay Area, in 2010 and beyond, such a life feels unattainable for anyone without a trust fund or some other stream of capital beyond just selling small press poetry books. DIY poet-publishers must hold down full-time jobs and do this work in the margins, and those full-time jobs have to afford both the disposable income to invest in publishing projects and the energy for the labor involved. There is truly no way of knowing how many potential poet-publishers have been curtailed by the brutality of the Bay Area economy in the past twenty years.

Despite its roots in the underground, the specter of the institution looms large over the scene of experimental poetry. Poetryland resonated with the DIY punk in me, but I might never have learned of its rich history and its present if not for an institution of higher education.

Within the classroom, poet-professors working as academics disseminate the writing of their peers and progenitors to students; institutionally, universities act as funding entities, either as runoff from programing initiatives or in the form of grants. UC Berkeley money helped bring Dogpark to fruition. However, as most artists and writers are acutely aware, funding for the arts has drastically dwindled in the past few decades, and what remains is extremely competitive. Given this landscape, the relative dearth of contemporary publishers in the Bay Area comes as no surprise.

The money from UCB helped launch us, but Dogpark's activities are otherwise funded by dues from the members of the collective and book sales. This model means our output is limited by our personal incomes. But this limit keeps us humble: we can only publish two to three books a year, MAX, EVER! Ultimately, this is also what sustains our DIY ethos: we don't come to rely upon grant funding that might dry up, and we don't, out of enthusiasm and excitement, try to commit to a publishing schedule we can't reasonably keep up with. It also means Dogpark is in control of who and what and when we publish, unmediated by the demands of a funding institution.

Given the shifting constraints on our resources, sometimes Dogpark has a budget shortfall that impacts our ability to produce books on a predetermined timeline.<sup>6</sup> It is usually within these moments of precarity that questions around the role of "professionalism" in small press publishing have come up over and over: What is professionalism when publishers are donating their labor and resources—time, equipment, materials, money, mental and emotional space, the goodwill of network connections, and more—from the margins of their lives and livelihoods? I don't ask this to be obtuse—the term "professionalism," after all, reaches beyond the bounds of the paid labor of professionals—but is professionalism a demeanor or a set of skills and knowledge? Should small presses hold themselves to the standards of other professionalized industries? Is small press publishing an *industry*? *Should* it be?

If you've decided to "professionalize" as a poet-publisher, that mostly means you're an academic, which of course means you also have to teach and you have to publish your own writing and you likely do not make a living wage and the amount of work you could be doing at any given time to better legitimate yourself, to better

position yourself, your work, your livelihood, is always *more more more*: committees, conferences, articles, etcetera.<sup>7</sup> It's an exhausting and extremely unstable life, and ultimately risky to one's well-being.

If you've decided not to "professionalize" as a poet-publisher, you still have to have some other kind of job and you likely steal time from said job (like I'm doing right now to write this essay) and you are likely the type of person who generally overcommits yourself and you likely have professional or financial advantages and privileges that allow you to dump money into an expensive and sizable side project. The structure of your day-to-day life likely looks vastly different from that of the "professional" poet-academic.

Every poet-publisher wants to make good books, do good work, and be validated by their audience. From my vantage point, there is an intractable continuum between tying oneself or one's project(s) to the institution and completely DIYing it that every poet-publisher must locate themselves upon.<sup>8</sup> People also slide along this cable throughout their lives, it seems, alternatively seduced and repulsed by the institution.... I feel like the tension only increases with time.

I want to make books for the sake of making books, to support the work of my peers, especially work that might not otherwise find a home, to exercise my editing, design, and printing skills, to participate in intellectual and creative exchange. Publishing is at the core of my art practice, and the donations I've made of my collective dues and hours upon hours of physical and mental labor are to that end.

But I still daydream about teaching sometimes, maybe in another twenty years.

## NOTES

1/ I marveled at that living room, as packed as any show I'd been to at Phoenix Haus (a long-standing but now defunct punk house in Olympia, WA). Michael Cross and Katja Geldhof Cross welcomed me with such zeal that I'll forever think of them as the Bay Area poetry welcome wagon. Lindsey Boldt crossed the living room and said, "Hey! Don't I know you?" and we mutually groped back into our brains to remember that we'd met years before, at the Phoenix Haus of all places, before she left Olympia for California. Brian Ang, down from Davis, introduced himself a couple days later when I ended up at Condensery (a house reading series hosted by Zoe Tuck and Jackqueline Frost circa 2010). A few days after that Condensery reading, I made my way to Michael's and Katja's house in East Oakland to help with some handwork circling words on a Compline Press (Michael's publishing endeavor) broadside of a Joan Retallack poem, another poet that was close to my heart. Years later, I started printing covers for Dogpark books in Michael's and Katja's garage, on the same press on which Michael prints Compline books and ephemera. I now count their ten-year-old, Ezra, among my dearest friends.

2/ Punk houses are DIY venues where punks live. In addition to hosting shows and giving touring bands a place to crash, they are usually stuffed to the brim with as many roommates as they can manage, and messy as hell (if not downright disgusting).

3/ "Underground," here, could be swapped out for "independent," but "underground" feels slightly more specific in that it implies that one must dig to find it, like a special mineral or jewel that not everyone can automatically access. This could be construed as insidery or gatekeeping, but it's also a protective measure that keeps the community insulated in one way or another, or creates a sense of being able to generate your own world separate from the mainstream.

4/ Or at least we used to! The Bay scene has been a bit slow to recover from the pandemic, truthfully. It is hard to secure space in such an expensive city, and the effects of the pandemic have closed some of the reliable venues. Some house readings also got shut down because of pandemic-related moves and the like. People have just been a lot more cautious in general than it seems other cities have been; we are absolutely not anywhere close to pre-pandemic levels of events!

5/ The New Narrative conference was held at UC Berkeley in 2017 and primarily organized by Daniel Benjamin and Eric.

6/ The reality of pulling off running a press in addition to the rest of one's life constantly runs up against conflicts in expectations between



collaborators or authors and publishers, exhaustion, miscalculated capacities, out-of-control materials budgets, incompatible working habits, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

7/ I'll define professionalizing here as drawing an income from your vocation, in this case being a poet to some extent or another, and for the purposes of this essay, also a publisher.

8/ Nonprofit, college or university, foundation, or other funding entity.

## The Women's Press Collective, 1969–1977

In Judy Grahn's memoir, *A Simple Revolution*, the poet recalls a question asked in the late 1960s by her then partner, the artist Wendy Cadden: "Just why is it that you write? What is it for?"<sup>1</sup> The question provoked a moment of "pure consciousness" in which Grahn began to think deeply about her role as a working-class poet, political activist, lesbian, and feminist.<sup>2</sup> She formed a conviction that a "poet of the world is of use in the world."<sup>3</sup> For Grahn and her peers, feminist poetry was intimately bound to revolutionary struggle, not merely an artistic craft but a political tactic.

Echoing a line from Muriel Rukeyser's 1968 poem "Käthe Kollwitz," "I am in the world / to change the world," Grahn's maxim expresses the political and literary outlook of the Women's Press Collective (WPC), the Oakland-based lesbian feminist press founded by Grahn and Cadden in 1969.<sup>4</sup> Rukeyser's poem, and its oft-quoted call-and-response, "What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? / The world would split open," capture the spirit of what the feminist poet Jan Clausen describes as the "largely lesbian underground of insurgent small press poets" that emerged in the first half of the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> Grahn and the WPC stood at the vanguard of this movement-within-a-movement, shaping and expanding the political and aesthetic possibilities of a lesbian feminist poetics.

The press began in the living room of Grahn and Cadden's crowded Oakland home, with a mimeograph bought cheaply from Diane di Prima and a few basic printing skills picked up from the women of the Boston-based New England Free Press. Of the ATF Chief offset press that the collective purchased in 1969, Grahn recalls, "We didn't know anything. And no one was going to teach us."<sup>6</sup> Teaching themselves began with taking the machinery apart, learning how it worked, and reassembling it. This deconstructive process resembled, in another form, the work undertaken in consciousness-raising (CR) discussion groups, where old narratives of a natural patriarchal social order were

painfully disassembled and scrutinized. Martha Shelley, a member of the WPC and a cofounder of the Gay Liberation Front, gestures at the transformative power of this work in her poem “Installing a Fan at the Women’s Press Collective”:

Cutting a hole to  
build in a fan to  
move out the air of the pressroom.  
Each task is the first time  
and now, I told a friend  
if men jail me I can break out.  
They have and you did,  
she said.<sup>7</sup>

The connections Shelley draws—between physical and psychological confinement, between practical skill and self-knowledge—were integral to CR as a theory of political change. CR groups were the creative engine of the feminist movement, producing influential political writings like New York Radical Women’s 1968 *Notes from the First Year*, and modeling a form of knowledge production that—in theory at least—emerged collectively and nonhierarchically through women’s discussions of their own lives. The democratic and nonhierarchical ethos of CR is embedded in the WPC’s organizational structure, as is a commitment to produce what Clausen calls the “literary counterpart” of CR: feminist poetry that speaks of and to the lives of ordinary women.<sup>8</sup>

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1969 saw the founding of two other radical presses in the Bay Area: Paul Mariah and Richard Tagett’s San Francisco-based Manroot, which focused on gay men’s writing but occasionally published poetry by lesbians, including Grahn and Lynn Lonidier, and Alta Gerrey’s Shameless Hussy in Oakland, the first self-declared feminist press in the country. While Shameless Hussy published poetry by a diverse range of women and men—including work by Susan Griffin, Pat Parker, Ntozake Shange, Paul Mariah, and Dan Georgakas—the WPC was the first press to focus on writing by lesbians. Between 1969 and 1977, the collective published twenty-four books of predominantly

poetry but also memoir, prose fiction, political essays, and a how-to manual on gun ownership for women. In the upswing of a lesbian movement, they forged a semi-separatist existence. The press did not publish work by men, but its relationship to separatism as a political ideology was contingent and fraught. This was due in part to the personal and political background of its members, whose connections to anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and gay liberation organizing made them generally less amenable to a radical feminist position that declared men the singular enemy of all women. Still, all the work of the press, from selecting and editing manuscripts to acquiring materials, repairing equipment, typesetting, printing, and distribution, was performed by queer women, many of whom lived together in a house on Oakland's Terrace Street. In the early 1970s, they moved the press from their home to the back room of the feminist bookstore A Woman's Place, where they remained until the press's closure at the end of the decade.

The approach taken by Grahn and Cadden as they assembled the press's first publication, an anthology called *Woman to Woman*, demonstrated their commitment to a communal, grassroots poetics. Grahn first compiled the work of dozens of poets, both canonical and unknown, and asked fifty or sixty women in her community to select their favorites for publication. She included a series of her own "Common Woman" poems, to which one reader responded, "Common as a telephone directory...this is not poetry."<sup>9</sup> The complaint hit on an inadvertent but apt metaphor for Grahn's early work. Her poems were built to communicate, and they traveled widely, passed around in bars and at protests. She recalled seeing mimeographed copies of her 1965 poem "The Psychoanalysis of Edward the Dyke" on fridges in strangers' kitchens. In this prose poem, the protagonist is asked by an overbearing doctor to explain "what the word 'homosexuality' means to you," and responds, "It means I can do what I want."<sup>10</sup>

Here, the poem's protagonist seizes the power to define herself on her own terms. The project of self-definition is evident, too, in Grahn's decision to publish "Edward the Dyke" with the subtitle "and other poems," even though the text arguably conforms more closely to a short-story structure. Grahn suggests that by "insisting that 'Edward' was a poem, I was telling myself that women must define what our poetry is. I believe this about every other aspect of our lives also."<sup>11</sup>

This line ties together the twin projects of the WPC: to redefine poetic language and to draw out the political potential of a collective lesbian identity.

Grahn's embrace of an expansive lesbian identity still resonates. The term "WLW," for instance, now ubiquitous in queer corners of the internet, owes its origins to the opening lines of Grahn's 1971 poem "A History of Lesbianism":

How they came into the world,  
the women-loving-women  
came in three by three<sup>12</sup>

It was a term she settled on, in part, to draw her lesbianism and her partner's bisexuality together into a community that could bear difference as well as sameness. For the press collective, which was made up of Black, Asian, and white queer women from working- and middle-class backgrounds, it was particularly urgent to forge such a community. "A History of Lesbianism" records the surging momentum of a queer community that expands "until there were more / than you could count."<sup>13</sup> It moves the scale of Edward the Dyke's declaration that homosexuality "means I can do what I want" from the individual to the collective. This sense of communal self-fashioning is at the heart of the WPC's poetic project.

The WPC's output reflected its members' commitment to poetry as political tactic. Their catalog included an anthology of poetry by the women of the Weather Underground and a collection of poems and essays by and about Joan Little, a young Black woman facing the death penalty for killing a prison guard in self-defense. Their work was sustained by a network of activists' households that fanned out across the Bay Area. In the absence of public venues where lesbian poets could safely read their work, crowded living rooms became movement hubs, artist studios, print rooms, bookstores, community centers, and performance spaces. Grahn describes one reading in a lesbian house on Addison Street in Berkeley in which she read shirtless by candlelight to a small audience of "militant dykes and friends," ending with a ritual burning of her work in homage to the supposed destruction of Sappho's poetry.<sup>14</sup> These readings, and the press itself, were bound to a broader feminist project of reimagining

public and private spheres, an attempt to transform the home from a site of familial violence and drudgery to one of eroticism and creativity, where intimate bonds coexisted with the demands of political and artistic life.

Closely bound to these intimate performance spaces, the work that emerged from this scene constitutes a late twentieth-century dyke poetic vernacular: short lines threaded with lowercase *i*'s, a tone of urgent disclosure, frank accounts of waged work and romantic longing where scraps of sixties slang and movement jargon brush up against the names of friends and lovers. Following *Woman to Woman*, the WPC became the first press to publish a poetry collection by an Asian American lesbian, *Eating Artichokes* by Willyce Kim, in 1972. It was followed by a reprint of Pat Parker's *Child of Myself* and, the next year, Martha Shelley's *Crossing the DMZ*. The poems of these collections are wiry and direct, by turns defiant, work weary, lustful. They sketch imagined dialogues with comrades and hostile family members. They speak directly to each other, in poems like Kim's "Some Thoughts for the Common Woman's Poet," which runs alongside a photo of Grahn in Kim's *Eating Artichokes*, and in Parker's "For Willyce," from her 1973 collection, *Pit Stop*:

When i make love to you  
i try  
with each stroke of my tongue  
to say i love you  
to tease i love you  
to hammer i love you  
to melt i love you

& your sounds drift down  
oh god!  
oh jesus!  
and I think  
here it is, some dude's  
getting credit for what  
a woman  
has done,  
again.<sup>15</sup>

These poems, which speak candidly and often joyfully of queer sexuality, fed a growing appetite for testimony of lesbian life. They also offer a brief glimpse of the ways that lesbian poets of color found space within the WPC to form and nurture tenderness and intimacy between one another.

Meeting the demand for accounts of queer life did not, however, mean printing anything and everything by lesbian poets; Willyce Kim recalls a selective editorial process at the press led by Grahn and Cadden, who went through a “weeding-out process” with each manuscript.<sup>16</sup> In theory WPC made decisions by consensus and without hierarchy, but Grahn and Cadden often held final sway. At times, Grahn balked at the press’s democracy. When Diane di Prima sent a manuscript of poems to be published with the press, members of the collective turned it down, to Grahn’s great frustration. It was widely felt that di Prima’s work was not, in the parlance of the era, sufficiently “women-identified”: she was too closely associated with the boys of the Beats and the New York School. On another occasion, members of the collective asked Grahn not to reprint Pat Parker’s *Pit Stop* on political grounds. Grahn interpreted this as an objection to Parker’s wry critique of feminist political meetings in poem “[I’m so tired]”:

I’m beginning to  
wonder if  
the tactics  
of this revolution  
is to  
talk the enemy to death<sup>17</sup>

It’s also possible that they objected to an un-sisterly tone in a poem that begins,

Bitch!  
i want to scream  
I hate you<sup>18</sup>

Either way, Grahn was unmoved. She printed it.

Alongside political and aesthetic tensions, the women of the collective were approaching their financial limit. Most of the WPC's publications sold somewhere between a few hundred and a few thousand copies, and their profit margin was small; the group priced their work far below market rates and subsisted on small grants amid countless hours of unpaid labor. By the mid-1970s, burnout and economic precarity led some of its core members to drift away from the press. For some, this was a blow to their dream of a collective and self-sustaining feminist life. Kim recalls, "I needed more money so I left them to get a forty-hour-a-week job. It was hard."<sup>19</sup> In August 1977, the collective announced that they were disbanding. Within their statement, which celebrated the press's work and its influence within the sphere of lesbian feminist publishing, they critiqued an economically unsustainable structure of small press publishing that excluded the majority of working-class feminists.

Instead of closing, however, the press merged with the Baltimore-based Diana Press, which had the financial backing of a controversial network of credit unions, the Feminist Economic Network (FEN). Articles in *Sojourner*, *Quest*, *Plexus*, and other periodicals give a tumultuous account of FEN: secret meetings, mysterious loans, bullying, grueling working conditions, fistfights. Writing for *Quest* in 1976, Bat-Ami Bar On recalls FEN's 1975 convention, in which the group declared their aim to "accept financial leadership of the feminist movement" and to do so within an explicitly hierarchical organization in which an (all-white) board of directors retained full decision-making power. The debate raised questions about who held economic and political power within the feminist movement and about whether cooperation among "un-equals" in a sisterhood stratified by race and class was truly possible.<sup>20</sup> On one side were feminists who had grown weary of what Jo Freeman called "the tyranny of structurelessness," who felt that a for-profit venture was necessary in a movement bereft of financial resources.<sup>21</sup> On the other side were feminists who feared that FEN marked a capitalist and authoritarian turn within the women's movement.

Martha Shelley was one of FEN's most vocal opponents. In 1977 she wrote and circulated a pamphlet entitled "What is FEN?" denouncing what she described as racist and exploitative labor practices in the



organization, in which women of color were underpaid, overworked, and had no decision-making power. The Black and Asian women interviewed for Shelley's piece also describe a refusal to grapple with the politics of race and class within the organization. One interviewee who describes herself as "a Third World Woman" states that there was "no room" in FEN for class analysis. "By inference, men seemed the only enemy." For those who opposed FEN, the stakes were the future of the feminist movement. In her own words, Shelley's article was written "in the heat of battle."<sup>22</sup> When her piece was reprinted in the feminist periodical *Big Mama Rag*, a scrappy illustration set the tone: the word "feminism" torqued into a whip, brandished by a woman on a chariot marked "shit jobs" on its side. Shelley viewed Grahn and Cadden's decision to merge with Diana Press—one of FEN's members—as a betrayal of the WPC's politics of anti-racism and worker control. It caused both a personal and political rift; Shelley severed ties with the press and, for many years, with Grahn.

Diana Press had its own troubles, its archive thick with letters alleging financial mismanagement and unpaid royalties. In 1979, following a devastating break-in, Diana Press and the WPC closed for good. Like FEN, this break-in stirred controversy; some feminist commentators blamed the FBI, while others hinted at an inside job. But by the end of the 1970s, queer feminist presses like Diana and the WPC faced larger issues. The revolutionary promise of the late 1960s had been tempered by a decade of state-led counterinsurgency, and a new economic order was on the horizon. Under the Reagan administration, cuts to education, arts funding, and welfare provision made the always-precarious subsistence of artists and radicals significantly harder. Jan Clausen, writing in 1982, warned that the small press poet who came of age in the 1970s was "likely to be surprised at what a difference even small grants and occasional gigs made, once they are gone."<sup>23</sup> External forces were not the only threat. Clausen felt that a once-radical and experimental feminist poetry scene had, by the 1980s, curdled into something more paranoid and dogmatic. The 1980s were the decade of the so-called sex wars—an ideological struggle that surfaced many of the feminist movement's most bitter fault lines.

Given the scale of economic pressures and internecine discord, what is surprising is how much of the women's liberation small press

ecosystem did endure into the 1990s and beyond. Kitchen Table Press, founded in 1980 by Barbara Smith, continued to publish work by women of color into the early 1990s; Spinsters Ink, a lesbian feminist press founded in 1978 by Maureen Brady and Judith McDaniel, remained active until the mid-2000s. Of the small feminist poetry presses that emerged out of the homes of women in the Bay Area in the 1970s, at least one—Kelsey Street Press—is still in existence. Willyce Kim emphasizes this aspect of the WPC's afterlife in a 1991 interview: "When I originally walked into A Woman's Place bookstore, they had maybe one rack filled with women's poetry, women's prose, lesbian [writing]. Now there's hundreds of books."<sup>24</sup> The WPC expanded what was possible for lesbian poets, even if little remains of the feminist community spaces that once made the WPC itself possible.

The gains that Kim describes and the losses that Clausen predicts are both alive in the legacy of WPC and the lesbian feminist small press movement more broadly; neither eclipses the other. In the decades since the press collective disbanded, some strands of queer feminist poetry have gained a once-unimaginable foothold in mainstream and academic publishing spheres. In the process, however, this work has largely been decoupled from its origin in social movements. For a twenty-first-century reader, part of the pleasure of the WPC is in finding poetry that speaks forcefully of these origins. Its account of itself is heated—loving but unromanticized. Recording a moment in which, as the photographer Cathy Cade recalls, "poetry somehow united us as a community," the WPC provides one answer to the question of what it meant and could mean for poets to be "of use in the world."<sup>25</sup>

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ELIZA BROWNING

## The Revolutionary Legacy of City Lights's Literary Gathering Place

Marking its seventieth birthday in February 2023, two years after the death of its founder Lawrence Ferlinghetti, City Lights remains one of America's most celebrated independent bookstores. Equally integral to the life of the store is City Lights Publishers, the small press with which it forms a countercultural center and community gathering space for writers, readers, and activists. In 1955, Ferlinghetti launched City Lights Publishers with the Pocket Poets Series, eventually producing over two hundred fiction and nonfiction titles in seven decades, with a dozen or so new books published each year. Specializing in world literature, poetry, and left-wing nonfiction, City Lights has long been associated with its commitment to innovative form and progressive activism, specifically its resistance to censorship and unapologetic antiauthoritarian politics. This bookstore/publisher combination is integral to Ferlinghetti's vision of a "literary meeting place" inspired by Paris's Shakespeare and Company, bringing cutting-edge and emerging writers to everyday readers.<sup>1</sup> "It is as if," he says, "the public were being invited, in person and in books, to participate in that 'great conversation' between authors of all ages, ancient and modern."<sup>2</sup>

City Lights has largely been shaped by Ferlinghetti's vision over the course of its seventy-year existence. While studying for his doctorate in Paris from 1946 to 1950, Ferlinghetti and another American ex-soldier named George Whitman frequently discussed opening a bookstore in the same collaborative spirit as Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare and Company, which Whitman went on to open in a new iteration in 1951. Meanwhile, Ferlinghetti moved to San Francisco in 1950, where he dreamed of creating a literary meeting place for young writers to congregate and share ideas. In 1952, Ferlinghetti contributed some translations of Jacques Prévert to a new literary journal called *City Lights* edited by Peter D. Martin, before meeting Martin the following year. Together, Martin and Ferlinghetti opened the nation's first

all-paperback bookstore, a novel idea in a time when bookstores were, as Ferlinghetti describes them, “stuffy” and “inhospitable to writers and young people.”<sup>3</sup> This bookstore would be different: it was open until one or two in the morning, sold magazines and alternative newspapers, and had lidded book racks outside reminiscent of the bookstalls next to the Seine. They each contributed \$500 and purchased a tiny storefront on Columbus and Broadway in North Beach, a venture which would eventually grow to overtake the entire building.

From the start, the store cultivated a reputation as part of San Francisco’s Beat community. In the 1950s and ’60s, tour buses with passengers eager to spot “beatniks” began pulling up outside, and young writers heading in the footsteps of their heroes would tell their friends, according to chief buyer Paul Yamazaki, “I’m headed out West—send my mail to City Lights.”<sup>4</sup> Together with bookstore manager Shigeyoshi Murao, Ferlinghetti curated a clientele that included Beat writers Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Neal Cassady, and William S. Burroughs, who all gave readings and socialized under a handwritten sign that read “Have a seat and read a book.” With Murao managing the store, Ferlinghetti became increasingly absorbed by the press. The Pocket Poets Series was inspired by the poetry book series *Poètes d’aujourd’hui*, edited by Pierre Seghers, which he had encountered in France. From the inception of the press, Ferlinghetti’s editorial vision was antiauthoritarian and revolutionary. Claiming that “poets and artists should be enemies of the state,” Ferlinghetti refused to accept grants or government funding in order to maintain City Lights’s independence.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, he had free rein to publish more controversial works of literature, including an impressive list of early titles such as *Here and Now* by Denise Levertov (1957), *Gasoline* by Gregory Corso (1958), *Lunch Poems* by Frank O’Hara (1964), and *Revolutionary Letters* by Diane di Prima (1971).

City Lights earned its place on the map, however, with the controversy surrounding Allen Ginsberg’s long poem “Howl.” In October 1955, just after founding the press, Ferlinghetti heard Ginsberg read the poem at San Francisco’s Six Gallery and immediately recognized him as a revolutionary new voice in American poetry. He sent him a telegram the same evening that echoed Emerson’s letter to Whitman upon first reading *Leaves of Grass*: “I greet you at the beginning of a great career. When do I get the manuscript?”<sup>6</sup>

Although Ginsberg had never anticipated publicly reading “Howl,” let alone publishing it, Ferlinghetti published *Howl and Other Poems* in November 1956. Ginsberg’s childhood pediatrician, the poet William Carlos Williams (himself a 1957 Pocket Poet), wrote the introduction to lend an air of authority to the collection’s depiction of drug use and homosexuality. Prior to the book’s publication, Ferlinghetti asked and was assured by the American Civil Liberties Union that the organization would defend him if he was arrested for obscenity.<sup>7</sup>

*Howl* attracted little attention until police arrested Murao and Ferlinghetti for selling the collection.<sup>8</sup> In March 1957, Collector of Customs Chester MacPhee had seized a shipment from England of the book’s second printing but was later forced to release the books because the US Attorney’s Office had decided not to prosecute *City Lights*. On June 1, however, local police raided *City Lights* and arrested Murao on the charge of selling an obscene book (Ferlinghetti later turned himself in). While Ginsberg was in Tangiers at the time and avoided charges, both Ferlinghetti and Murao faced a possible \$500 fine and six-month jail sentence. The ACLU posted their bail, assigned defense counsel Albert Bendich to their case, and hired the pro bono services of famous criminal defense lawyer J. W. Ehrlich. Legal action against Murao was eventually dropped because it couldn’t be proven that he knew the contents of the book, but Ferlinghetti was forced to stand trial from August 16 to October 3, 1957. The prosecution argued that *Howl* was anti-American. Respected writers and professors testified for Ferlinghetti, leading to Judge Clayton W. Horn’s verdict that *Howl* was not obscene and was protected by the First Amendment due to its “redeeming social importance.”<sup>9</sup> Horn’s decision set the precedent that enabled Grove Press to publish previously banned works such as D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer*, and Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch*. Significantly, the trial stimulated national interest in Ginsberg’s poem, making it an immediate bestseller.<sup>10</sup> By 1958, there were over twenty thousand copies in print; today there are over a million. Ginsberg continued to publish seven poetry collections with *City Lights* for the next twenty-five years.

The *Howl* trial not only set an enduring precedent for revolutionary American literature but also launched *City Lights*’s antiauthoritarian reputation. Throughout the 1950s and ’60s, *City Lights* published

trailblazing works of poetry and literature by then-emerging writers such as Kenneth Patchen, Allen Ginsberg, Kenneth Rexroth, Marie Ponsot, Denise Levertov, Norman Mailer, Paul Bowles, Frank O'Hara, Philip Lamantia, and Charles Olson. It also published translations of well-known avant-garde writers, such as Antonin Artaud, Henri Michaux, Pablo Picasso, Nicanor Parra, Jean Genet, and Jacques Prévert. The store continued to cultivate its beatnik aura, releasing Charles Bukowski's first book in 1972 and hosting a reading at the store. A bar across the street named the Vesuvio Cafe opened in 1948 and quickly became a hangout for Beats like Cassady, Kerouac, and Burroughs. In one incident, the poet Gregory Corso, drunk after a night out at Vesuvio, smashed the window of City Lights and went in to raid the cash register. Ferlinghetti generously interpreted the incident as Corso claiming an advance on his royalties and declined to press charges.<sup>11</sup>

City Lights's commitment to emerging and subversive writers was inextricably intertwined with its community building. Ferlinghetti frequently drove young poets to readings in Berkeley in his Volkswagen van, and he let the homeless and hippies sleep in it at night. The bookstore staff also allowed visiting poets and writers to sleep on a bed in the office the night before a reading, reminiscent of Shakespeare and Company's famous Tumbleweed program, which hosts travelers at the bookstore overnight in accordance with George Whitman's motto: "Be not inhospitable to strangers, lest they be angels in disguise." The bookstore was guided by a commitment to progressive social activism. In 1969, Paul Yamazaki was a student serving a six-month jail sentence for his participation in the San Francisco State College protests when he learned he could be released early with the condition of a job offer; his friend Francis Oka arranged for City Lights to hire him due to their solidarity with the striking students. Yamazaki began boxing books in 1970, eventually becoming chief buyer and instituting a pioneering system of section curatorship now used in independent bookstores around the country, where each staff member curates a section (such as poetry or queer studies) based on their individual knowledge of the field.<sup>12</sup> The system enabled the store to stand out in specialized areas, including works by independent presses, writing in translation, poetry, and works from underground or little-known authors.

In the early 1960s and '70s, City Lights expanded its repertoire by producing a series of public events in partnership with local groups such as Theater Artaud, which frequently sold out shows. It hosted a range of performers including the Russian poets Yevgeny Yevtushenko and Andrei Voznesensky as well as familiar names such as Bukowski and Ginsberg. City Lights grew to be the center of San Francisco's underground literary scene and began receiving hundreds of submissions for publication, which were stamped with a "SORRY, EDITOR TOOK OFF" rejection stamp by Ferlinghetti. In the 1970s and '80s, City Lights published new work by cultural icons such as Sam Shepard, Diane di Prima, and Charles Bukowski and translations of Charles Baudelaire, Georges Bataille, Marguerite Duras, Gilles Deleuze, and Pier Paolo Pasolini. In recent decades it has published writers such as Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky as well as new translations of André Breton and Pablo Neruda. Currently, the publishing team is producing a select series of work that "captures the spirit of insurgence from around the world and at home," as well as a series called City Lights Spotlight that aims to promote emerging poets according to Ferlinghetti's original vision for Pocket Poets.<sup>13</sup> Its editorial vision has continued its founding commitment to publishing revolutionary works, with recent editors Nancy Peters and Elaine Katzenberger increasingly producing books by women and people of color.

City Lights Books has expanded several times over the years, and its original focus has shifted. Originally a cramped, paperback-only store, it now offers three floors of new release hardcovers and paperbacks from major publishing houses, along with an impressive range of titles from small specialty publishers. The store features an extensive selection of poetry, fiction, translations, politics, history, philosophy, spirituality, music, film, and cultural studies, all curated and handpicked by its staff. Despite retaining its iconic status, City Lights has in many ways grown to resemble a more conventional independent bookstore. The store has attempted to retain its radical roots: in 2001, staff hung banners on the store's exterior that read "Dissent is not un-American," sparking the politically engaged "Storefront Banner Series." Tourists are more likely to stumble across a reading by a budding poet or a selection of house-printed radical literature than tables of mass-market paperbacks, broadening their exposure to independent titles and encouraging them



to linger, start conversations with other patrons, and return again and again.<sup>14</sup> However, the store's shift away from a literary gathering place has resulted in a more commercialized, less radical model. Committed to upholding its reputation as an iconic countercultural space, City Lights has focused more on attracting tourists and preserving its legacy than cultivating a genuinely new space for emerging artists and writers. This delicate balance is indicative of the challenges indie bookstores face: while City Lights's move toward greater commercialization, like that of other flagship indies such as Shakespeare and Company, might detract from its original ethos, it has also enabled the tiny institution to survive the challenges of censorship, COVID-19, and online shopping, as well as expand its reach to new generations of readers.

This accessibility, however, is critical to City Lights's reputation for social justice and political activism. Although the press's reputation was built on the strength of its poetry, the store has leaned further into progressive politics in the past decade, publishing books of political nonfiction by Angela Davis, Chomsky, and Zinn. Such a shift might be representative of not only its radical legacy but the shifting US political climate. A browser is now likely to encounter a varied selection of new titles such as the collected prose of Ted Berrigan, poems inspired by John Coltrane, a biography of Harriet Tubman, and *Before Whiteness*, a City Lights Spotlight book by Afro-pessimist poet and scholar D. S. Marriott that "turns Blackness into a question of reading, of inscribing and decoding Blackness in poetry."<sup>15</sup> Undoubtedly attuned to contemporary political movements like Black Lives Matter and to anti-racist literature, City Lights is also increasingly aware of what sells: the press's first children's book, Kate Schatz's *Rad American Women A-Z*, was also its first to hit the *New York Times* Best Seller list.

Given City Lights's historical commitment to social justice movements, such a focus feels genuine rather than swayed by market trends. While many of the so-called Big Five publishers respond to contemporary events in order to maximize profits, City Lights's publication of provocative political treatises and conversation starters, such as Mumia Abu-Jamal's *Have Black Lives Ever Mattered?*, emerged out of its long-term commitment to radical politics. The Open Media Series, for instance, features the motto "Arm Yourself With Information," and its titles are meant to "inform, inspire, and

potentially radicalize their readers” by sparking conversations about climate change, racism, the prison industrial complex, and gun violence.<sup>16</sup> This evolving focus is representative of the new direction City Lights appears to have taken: radical poetry, having lost some of the shock value it embodied in the press’s early days, has increasingly been supplanted by political nonfiction. However, this shift also signals the press’s willingness to engage more overtly with the political debates dominating American culture today and to take a clear stance on these issues. Rather than capitalize on the media attention focused on recent movements like Black Lives Matter to promote its small series of annual titles, City Lights interrogates contemporary political events on a sustained and deeper level with books that examine the history and lasting cultural impact of racism. Moreover, the press’s focus on a select series of titles each year ensures its publications will have a wider impact beyond the current cultural moment and aims to introduce the bookstore’s wide-ranging audience of poets, philosophers, translators, and Beat fans to books that they otherwise wouldn’t have necessarily picked up.

Ever since the COVID pandemic and Ferlinghetti’s death, City Lights has struggled to overcome a series of challenges. Formerly shutting its doors at midnight, the store now closes at 10 p.m., and for months it remained shuttered. Its famous in-store readings now largely take place on Zoom and in the adjacent Kerouac Alley, but these don’t retain the fluidity and intimacy of the store’s original events.<sup>17</sup> Two years ago, a GoFundMe campaign raised a half-million dollars in less than a week to make it possible to pay salaries and keep the lights on.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, as it held a series of events to commemorate its seventieth birthday, City Lights continues to thrive. The National Book Critics Circle recently awarded it the Toni Morrison Achievement Award, with prize committee chair Jacob M. Appel remarking, “The impact of City Lights on American literature has been revolutionary.”<sup>19</sup>

Part of City Lights’s success is reliant on successfully marketing leftist politics to a mainstream audience—a disjuncture that underscores the difference between its business model and the progressive titles it publishes. However, City Lights has thus far resisted the corporatization of bigger enterprises: it retains and nurtures employees for decades, curates a small list of select titles, and foregrounds community

gatherings, all choices that preserve Ferlinghetti's original intentions despite the store's expansion. Not only did City Lights revolutionize the bookstore model, bringing Shakespeare and Company's vision of a community gathering space to the American public: its titles have helped shape the future of American literature by institutionalizing and defending the nascent Beat movement. Moreover, Ferlinghetti cultivated connections to the wider literary community in the Bay Area and beyond by spotlighting emerging writers, partnering with arts and cultural institutions, and curating public events designed to facilitate connection and discovery. City Lights both reimagines what a bookstore can be and transforms reading from a solitary activity into an act of community collaboration and resistance. San Francisco poet laureate and author of City Lights's *Revolutionary Letters* Diane di Prima wrote in a later poem, "And dig it, City Lights still here, like some old lighthouse."<sup>20</sup> Sixty-two years later, it's still here.

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## Irving Rosenthal and the Free Print Shop in San Francisco

Irving Rosenthal, much like his writing, rarely stayed put for long—that is, perhaps, until San Francisco, in the bloom of 1960s communalist living, where his ideals would not only rest but spread freely. If a single dictum to summarize the unfettered character of his life and writing exists, it is this line from his 1978 pamphlet “Deep Tried Frees”: “Free strikes a chord in the hearts of the poor—the joy of being invited, rather than prevented, from doing something.”<sup>1</sup>

Born in San Francisco in 1930, Rosenthal attended Pomona College before moving to Chicago to pursue graduate studies in human development at the University of Chicago. In 1958, he served as editor of *Chicago Review*, overseeing three issues that featured Zen poetry, new poets from San Francisco, and—most famously—a thirty-page excerpt from William S. Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch*. A column in the *Chicago Daily News* denounced the Burroughs excerpt as “one of the foulest collections of printed filth,” and in response to the controversy, the University insisted that the next issue be “completely innocuous.”<sup>2</sup> Protesting what he saw as an act of suppression, Rosenthal resigned along with most of the staff, taking the galleys for the next issue with him.

Rosenthal left Chicago for New York City after he had founded another magazine, *Big Table*, alongside *Chicago Review* poetry editor-emeritus Paul Carroll. As Rosenthal enthuses in his editorial notes for the first issue: “A non-profit corporation has been formed, and so we have launched *Big Table*. Paul Carroll will be its editor, and I can hardly wait to see his first issue. For I have stolen number 1 from him to fulfil what I wish to be my last editorial responsibility.”<sup>3</sup> Rosenthal and Carroll blatantly flouted the University of Chicago’s advice to tone down their publications—on the contrary, they doubled down, refusing to be “prevented from doing something.” The first issue of *Big Table* included ten full chapters from Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch*, which the magazine describes in its “Notes on Contributors” as a

“mosaic seen alternately through the ‘dead, undersea eyes of junk,’ and the ‘peeled nerves and sense’ of ‘junk sickness.’”<sup>4</sup>

For the next three years, Rosenthal traveled: he saw Cuba, Morocco, Greece, and Spain before returning to New York City in 1964. He started a small press that year, Carp & Whitefish, which distributed hand-bound artist books such as Edward Marshall’s *Transit Glory* and Philip Whalen’s *The Invention of the Letter: A Beastly Morality*. Rosenthal planned on moving to San Francisco permanently, but first he wanted to finish as many of his New York printing efforts as possible. He intended to distribute copies of these books, anywhere from fifty to one hundred, to a limited number of bookstores in New York, but he only received small orders from them. Hoping to get rid of as many copies as possible before moving to San Francisco, he applied for a New York peddler’s license for two dollars.<sup>5</sup> While it is not clear how many books Rosenthal sold with this license, a month after receiving it, he was off to San Francisco.

## §

Even today, the social practices that defined Rosenthal’s milieu pervade San Francisco’s Mission District. Free art, a free food pantry, a community garden, and countless referrals to other (once again, free) services survive the counterculture of communalist living that Rosenthal’s Free Print Shop and newsletter *Kaliflower* (1969–72) nourished. Rosenthal started the Free Print Shop with his friend Hibiscus (also known as George Harris III), best known as the founder of gay experimental theater group the Cockettes, out of the Sutter Street house in 1967. Both endeavors continued the San Francisco Diggers’ philosophy of providing free information and services to the many communes that were springing up all over San Francisco in the late 1960s.

In fact, starting in 1967, many groups across California, Oregon, Arizona, Wisconsin, and elsewhere took the Digger name, much as the San Francisco Diggers (1966–68) had taken it from their seventeenth-century English antecedents.<sup>6</sup> The Sutter Street Commune was also known as “The Friends of Perfection,” but only when dealing with the mundane things of life—sales receipts, information requests, legal matters, and so on. The name stems from

the commune's interest in the philosophy of Christian "perfectionism" espoused by nineteenth-century preacher and utopian socialist John Humphrey Noyes.<sup>7</sup> Particularly appealing were the practices of communalism, open (or "complex") marriages, and "mutual criticism" instituted in the Oneida Community, a commune founded by Noyes in upstate New York in 1848.<sup>8</sup>

Sutter Street was one of several hundred communes in the Bay Area in the 1960s, a number of which took inspiration from the Diggers' passion for artful, intentional living. Through performance art and direct action, the Diggers sought to create a "free city"—a society free from money, private property, and other strictures of capitalism. Their everyday activities centered on distributing free food in Golden Gate Park and maintaining a presence on Haight Street, where they broadcast their events, editorials, pronouncements, and manifestos by hand and through word of mouth. The Sutter Street Commune—located not in The Haight but in a Victorian house near the neighborhood currently known as Japantown—similarly participated in these experiments of direct action that the Diggers had undertaken in 1967. However, as Rosenthal notes in "Deep Tried Frees," the Sutter Street Commune and others pivoted from the Diggers in at least one crucial way: "hard drugs moved in and the focus of activities moved off the street into the various communal households. The street, as it were, burned down."<sup>9</sup> Direct action took to the "underground"—both metaphorically and literally in the case of the Print Shop.

Rosenthal's Free Print Shop was in the basement of the previously mentioned Victorian, in a redevelopment area owned by the city of San Francisco. Over the next several years, the Free Print Shop published many materials; the Friends of Perfection collection at the California Historical Society includes hundreds of the shop's materials advertising a variety of causes and events, including "Free the Presidio 27," "Bring Huey Home," "Hells Angels Party," "The Non-Violent Revolution of India," and "Gay Liberation Now."

These commitments echo Rosenthal's philosophy of art. He laments the incompatibility between price and value:

I asked myself what a work of art was worth. What is a poem worth? When I edited the *Review* I inaugurated a policy of payment to contributors—\$5, \$10, \$15, \$25—token sums, that would, I hoped, make the recipients feel as though their work had value. But after I had written a book, and suffered the humility [*sic*] of seeing it treated by the publisher as a piece of meat, and after I had seen my Marshall books, each one strung with two beads, treated by a bookseller like Greenwich Village earrings, I came to the conclusion that works of art don't belong in the marketplace, being qualitatively different from pork chops and costume jewelry.... When I came to San Francisco the last stone of this fence of reasoning fell into place. Let others keep an eye on the market and dollar-up their art-work; as for me, mine was unpriceable—it was to be bestowed.<sup>10</sup>

In 1967, Rosenthal published his first and only novel, *Sheeper*, with Grove Press—one of the most influential publishers at the time that ran against the grain, with titles such as Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (after a three-year-long obscenity trial with the US government). A heady mixture of political idealism, incestuous passion, black magic, and vegetarianism, *Sheeper* is ultimately about the romance of writing; it was met with little interest and remains out of print to this day. It was this same year that Rosenthal left for San Francisco with the intention of setting up his own commune free of censorship, where he would live for the rest of his life.

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When Rosenthal moved to San Francisco, members of the Diggers helped transport his printing press to the basement of the Sutter Street Commune.<sup>11</sup> This underground publishing house became known as the Free Print Shop, a publishing venue open to Bay Area communes. They announced their opening with a flier that stated: “The Sutter Street Commune invites you to submit manuscripts, drawings, manifestos to our Free Print Shop. Free distribution guaranteed for whatever we print.”<sup>12</sup> Notably, the announcement was printed on silk cloth-faced paper, thanks to the commune's contacts with the Zellerbach Paper Company, also based in San Francisco. The paper was sold to the commune at reduced rates from odd, surplus lots, much to both parties' benefit.<sup>13</sup>



Over the years of its existence, the shop produced hundreds of publications: books, pamphlets and fliers (for services, ecology groups, political protests, and free events), order sheets for Food Conspiracy (a group that pooled food stamps and bought food in bulk), and Free Medical Clinic prescription forms. They used an ATF Chief 15 offset printing press: versatile and sturdy, this machine served the shop for many years. With it, the publication of *Kaliflower* became the main activity of the commune, the print shop its soul. In addition to the Chief 15, the shop had light tables, a darkroom, inks, chemicals, and a number of mechanical tools. Its personnel included not only writers but printers, photographers, and others who prepared negatives to burn onto the Chief 15's printing plates after the writers and editors had submitted their work.<sup>14</sup>

Publications distributed by the Free Print Shop—as well as activities organized by the Sutter Street Commune—gradually came to be known under the same name, *Kaliflower*, borrowed from Kali Yuga, the Hindu term for the last and most violent age of humankind. At the commune, every Wednesday night was “*Kaliflower* night,” when the final printing of the week's issue took place. The Thursday after was “*Kaliflower* day,” when the publication was bound and distributed to other communes in the area. For the three years of its publication, circulation grew until nearly three hundred communes received *Kaliflower* every Thursday. Eventually the publication's circulation grew large enough that it challenged the founders' ethos of staying small and anonymous, so *Kaliflower* was suspended. Peter Evans—a former librarian at the California Historical Society—recalls visiting Rosenthal at the commune (lovingly referred to as a “farm”) in 1972, when Rosenthal reportedly complained that he didn't “want [*Kaliflower*] used by researchers for distribution, by gov't agencies, for meaningless writing,” and that he “might close [the] collection for 5 years.”<sup>15</sup>

In the beginning, each commune had its own plywood board, located in a communal space, on which messengers would hand-package the publication. One of these boards still exists in the Friends of Perfection collection at the California Historical Society. A bamboo tube attached to the board held messages for the deliverer to pick up—messages that might be printed in the next week's issue. Members from other communes would come to Sutter Street and pick up their

copy, and later to Scott Street, where the commune eventually moved. Internally, members spent the morning binding *Kaliflower* using *sashiko*, a Japanese method of stitching either on the top or the side. Every issue was a different color: a bouquet not unlike the gathering that made the issues possible, as friends from other communes would also show up on *Kaliflower* day to help bind.

For the first seven years of its existence, members of the Sutter Street Commune lived and cultivated their practice in two successive Victorian houses. However, the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency soon tore down many of these Victorians, and some members could not salvage everything from their former residences prior to their destruction. Nevertheless, the California Historical Society received a donation of copies of *Kaliflower* in an old Japanese steamer trunk—lined with Japanese paper on the inside—that was retrieved from one of these very houses.

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The Friends of Perfection collection was donated to the California Historical Society in 1973; it comprised a full run of *Kaliflower*, individually designed envelopes, a plywood clipboard used to distribute the publications, and an extensive set of broadsides, posters, and other printed matter. It also included miscellaneous printouts associated with the Free Print Shop dated between August 1968 and December 1972. The donation paperwork was signed by Irving Rosenthal himself, Eric Noble (who founded and still maintains the Digger Archives), and Peter Evans (then the librarian of the Society).

It was in fact a visit from Eric in December 1997 that alerted me to the collection's existence. He reported that a group of researchers had contacted the Society about accessing it but were told that the Society was not in possession of the collection at all. I gasped at his comment and brought out a folder from my office; new to my position as library director, I was still working my way through the collections and had been in the middle of reviewing the donor folder for the Friends of Perfection folio. I told Eric that I had seen that trunk; however, our files incorrectly indicated that it was still stored at the Society's former location in Pacific Heights. I retrieved the Japanese steamer trunk from the basement then and there, at our new location, and we

opened it together—the whole collection was there. I then registered all its materials and created a finding aid for the Online Archive of California, where it remains available today.

This was the beginning of my interest in *Kaliflower*, the Sutter Street Commune, Irving Rosenthal, and the whole history of communes in San Francisco. Although I never, unfortunately, met Rosenthal, I am more than pleased to be able to write about his contributions to San Francisco's commune societies. In researching this article, I ran across a recent auction (2022) of thirty-seven issues of *Kaliflower* at a San Francisco auction house, Pacific Book Auction Galleries. The estimated value was \$4,000 to \$6,000—and the set eventually sold for over \$16,000.<sup>16</sup> I am not sure that Rosenthal, a devotee of free materials, would have been pleased with this, but it does indicate the importance of his contributions. Closer to his vision might be the stipulations to the Friends of Perfection collection at the California Historical Society: the archival materials are available for all researchers, but only if they are willing to comply with the donors' wishes. And, according to Eric, "chief among these was that there would be no monetary profit involved, nor any use 'as mere fodder for academic dissertations or empty, exploitative books'"—conditions that perhaps rebuff the numbered few on the side of money and instead seek to strike a chord in the hearts of those in community with one another.<sup>17</sup>

## NOTES

- 1/ Irving Rosenthal, "Deep Tried Frees," *Kaliflower* 3 (April 30, 1978): 11. Available online at the Digger Archives, "Deep Tried Frees," <https://www.diggers.org/kaliflower/df.htm>.
- 2/ Irving Rosenthal, "Editorial Notes," *Big Table* 1 (1959): 4.
- 3/ Rosenthal, "Editorial Notes," 6, original italics.
- 4/ "Notes on Contributors," *Big Table* 1 (1959): 2.
- 5/ Rosenthal, "Deep Tried Frees," 3.
- 6/ "Kaliflower: The Intercommunal [Free] Newspaper," the Digger Archives, <https://www.diggers.org/kaliflower/kf.htm>.
- 7/ Jennifer Schaffner, James Lake, and Patricia L. Keats, Friends of Perfection Records, MS 4008, California Historical Society, San Francisco.
- 8/ On Noyes and the Oneida Community, see Lawrence Foster, "Free Love and Community: John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Perfectionists," in *America's Communal Utopias*, ed. Donald E. Pitzer (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 253–78.
- 9/ Rosenthal, "Deep Tried Frees," 11.
- 10/ Rosenthal, "Deep Tried Frees," 7.
- 11/ "Kaliflower," the Digger Archives.
- 12/ Schaffner, Lake, and Keats, Friends of Perfection Records, MS 4008.
- 13/ "Kaliflower," the Digger Archives.
- 14/ "Kaliflower," the Digger Archives.
- 15/ Eric P. Noble, email message to the author, June 2, 2023.
- 16/ See the now-closed listing "Lot 431—37 issues of Kaliflower," PBA Galleries, San Francisco, sale 762, "Fine Literature with Counterculture, Bukowski and the Beats," June 19, 2022, <https://www.pbagalleries.com/view-auctions/catalog/id/607/lot/199090/Thirty-seven-issues-of-Kaliflower>.
- 17/ Noble, email message to the author, June 2, 2023.

PARTIAL BIBLIOGRAPHY ON ROSENTHAL, THE FREE PRINT SHOP,  
AND *KALIFLOWER*

The Free Print Shop

The Digger Archives. Online at <https://www.diggers.org/>.

This website was created and maintained by the archivist Eric Noble, formerly of the Diggers. A few images of *Kaliflower* and its members can be found here, but not all are digitized.

The Friends of Perfection Papers. The California Historical Society, San Francisco, CA, MS 4008.

The finding aid for this collection can be found at the Online Archive of California. The Friends of Perfection Papers contains materials on the Sutter Street Commune, the Free Print Shop, and *Kaliflower*. There is a link within the finding aid to a nine-page catalogue raisonné of the Free Print Shop's publications. The collection consists of four boxes, two flat boxes, and one trunk. It includes one of the plywood boards used to distribute *Kaliflower*.

Haight Street Diggers Records, 1966–1969. The California Historical Society, MS 3159.

This collection is one box and includes publications printed by other communes of Diggers, but not the Free Print Shop.

Johnston, Alastair. "Irving Rosenthal: 'Your money or your life!'" RealityStudio, July 1, 2018. <https://realitystudio.org/criticism/irving-rosenthal-your-money-or-your-life/>.

An article with images of *Kaliflower* that speaks to Rosenthal's life and involvement with publishing in both New York and San Francisco.

Keats, Patricia L. "*Kaliflower* and The Free Print Shop." *California Chronicles*, the California Historical Society, August 8, 1998.

An article written by the librarian at the California Historical Society on the Friends of Perfection Papers and its donation to the Society. Can be accessed online via the Wayback Machine.

## Images of *Kaliflower*

Incunabula. Twitter thread. September 18, 2021, 8:51 a.m., <https://twitter.com/incunabula/status/1439225614498684936/>.

This Twitter thread by @incunabula has images of many issues of *Kaliflower*. There are twelve issues illustrated separately, which can be enlarged. There are also fifteen images of issues, and one in particular illustrates the hand stitching used to bind them. All are in color.

## Irving Rosenthal Papers

The Irving Rosenthal Papers, 1950–1996. Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, M1550.

A large collection, thirty-two manuscript boxes, plus various other containers. This collection includes correspondence by and to Rosenthal and materials relating to his editorship of *Chicago Review*.

The Irving Rosenthal Papers. The University of Delaware Library, Special Collections, Newark, DE, MSS 0337.

Twenty-eight letters, 1963–67, written mostly from Morocco, and a manuscript version of *Sheeper*.

In Jargon's Penumbra: An Interview with F. Whitney Jones,  
President of the Jargon Society

*In June 1951, Jonathan Williams published a little collaborative piece with his friend David Ruff, Garbage Litters the Iron Face of the Sun's Child, which the poet and publisher Kyle Schlesinger described as a modest "handbill."<sup>1</sup> This piece of ephemera launched one of the most important small presses of the twentieth century. Jargon is perhaps best known as the publisher of books by Charles Olson, Louis Zukofsky, Mina Loy, and Lorine Niedecker, among many others. It's typically associated with Black Mountain College, which Williams attended on and off from 1951 until its closure in 1957, and where Jargon went from a fledgling experiment to the publisher of Olson's magnum opus *The Maximus Poems*. But Jargon is much more than a press, and direct affiliation with any institution, group, or writer (other than Williams himself) is transitory if not misleading. Jargon is Jonathan Williams and vice versa. However, seventeen years after its founding, Jargon transformed into the nonprofit Jargon Society and took the latter part of its new title quite seriously.<sup>2</sup> The Jargon Society encompassed Williams's broad network of writers, artists, and friends, many of whom participated in its day-to-day operations. Perhaps principal among these volunteers was F. Whitney Jones, who served as the Jargon Society's president from 1977 until Williams's passing in 2008.*

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AM: Hi, Whitney. Thanks so much for agreeing to chat with me. I've been following your work with the Jargon Society for many years, mostly as a fan and reader of the press, but recently I had the pleasure of connecting with you while researching Jargon's operations in the 1970s and '80s, to which you were integral. I want to talk about that, but perhaps we can start off with a general question. What is your background and how did it lead you to cross paths with Jonathan Williams?

WJ: Having received a PhD in English from UNC Chapel Hill in 1970, where I also taught from 1967 to 1971, I taught English and humanities at St. Andrews Presbyterian College from 1971 to 1977.<sup>3</sup> At the instigation of poet Ron Bayes, I organized a Black Mountain College Festival in 1974 that included Buckminster Fuller, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Robert Creeley, Edward Dorn, and others including Jonathan Williams.

Jonathan and I hit it off, and at his encouragement I organized a Jargon Festival in 1975 that included Jonathan, Tom Meyer, Fielding Dawson, and Lyle Bongé in residence for a week. That resulted in the publication of *Hot What?*, which included text by JW, photos by Bongé, and collages by Dawson. Tom Patterson and I created Mole Press for the book, using his parents' address in Dublin, Georgia. It was a dry run for Tom's and my later roles at Jargon.<sup>4</sup>

We followed that with visits from Joel Oppenheimer, Paul Metcalf, and M. C. Richards. Our final event was a week's residence from Basil Bunting, JW, and Tom Meyer in 1977, again with the encouragement of JW. Basil was a delight: full of stories of his experiences in the Middle East during the Second World War, living with Ezra Pound, meeting the Queen. He gave an amazing reading of *Briggflatts*, which, by the way, is one poem that means most when read out loud. He spent the weekend avoiding Sister Bernetta Quinn, the Pound scholar who had attended with hope of spending time with Basil. Basil told me he couldn't stand being with literary scholars who wanted to talk about his work.

My role in each of these events was to arrange the residency, find the funding, promote the events, turn out an audience, and oversee any publication. JW appreciated my involvement in these activities, especially their funding. He connected me with Phil Hanes, a key supporter and Jargon board member, who encouraged me to move to Winston-Salem and become the development director at Old Salem in 1977.<sup>5</sup> Upon arrival in Winston-Salem, I was invited to the annual Jargon Society board meeting, where I was, to my surprise, elected president.

*There's a lot to unpack here, but let me walk this back a bit. It was your involvement with Black Mountain College that led you to Jargon. Was your doctoral work related to BMC, or was it Bayes's influence that pushed you in that direction?*



Good question. I graduated from Hamilton College with a BA in English but spent my junior year in Paris studying French art and literature. My PhD from Chapel Hill was in English Renaissance literature. My dissertation was on Spencer's *The Shepheardes Calender*.

At St. Andrews, I taught a variety of subjects including Shakespeare, modern poetry, Native American literature, and Black literature, as well as taking students to London and Paris for January terms. Ron Bayes asked me to organize the BMC Festival because he knew me to be endlessly curious and open to new adventures. My interest was piqued originally because I was interested in the idea that BMC was a community rather than an institution, and St. Andrews in the '70s bore some similarities as a creative community. The Jargon Society struck me as more of a creative community than an institution as well.

*I imagine that your time in academia was very different from your work with Jargon and Old Salem. Perhaps you could talk a bit about leaving St. Andrews for a new sector and city?*

While I was teaching at St. Andrews, I was part of a team that changed the way we taught the core humanities course required of all freshmen. The idea was to shift from teaching to small-group learning where we were trained to be facilitators. I decided after ten years of academia to do something else using my skills as a facilitator, an organizer of projects, and a fundraiser. I had organized many events like the BMC Festival and so had done a lot of fundraising. I had written successful grant proposals to fund summer projects for myself. So I had some experience in the world of fundraising. What I discovered doing development at Old Salem was that raising money involves understanding and shaping a project. Telling a story. Researching skills. So to my surprise, the transition was quite easy.

*Roles within the Jargon Society seem to have been ephemeral, aside from Williams firmly at the helm calling the shots. But I believe that you, and perhaps Thorns Craven, served the longest.<sup>6</sup> What were your responsibilities as president?*

Thorns and I worked as the administrative team. I handled fundraising and he handled financial matters. We worked together to oversee

income and expenses for each of the Jargon publications as well as salaries for JW and Tom Meyer, and for Tom Patterson and the Southern Visionary Folk Art Project. We also spent several years negotiating the acquisition of JW's archives by SUNY Buffalo.

Each of the publications included some funding from patrons whom JW solicited, some funding from the Jargon board, and the balance from grants and wealthy individuals. Every publication had a donor unique to that project. For one of Lyle Bongé's books, I had to negotiate a grant from a New York foundation that gave only to projects in the greater NYC area. Lyle had saved the life of one of the trustees during the Korean War, and the trustee was encouraging the gift. We received a grant for \$25,000, and in exchange several hundred copies of the books went to schools and libraries in the NYC area.

Fundraising was important because none of the publications ever sold enough to break even, and we were slow to pay the printer for many of them. The one exception was Ernie Mickler's *White Trash Cooking*, of course.

*What were some of the first projects you worked on or raised funds for?*

One of the first was Joel Oppenheimer's *Just Friends/Friends and Lovers: Poems 1959–1962*. This was one of several titles on the Jargon list that was not published when it was announced in the '60s. I had arranged for a visit to St. Andrews by Joel and later interviewed him in New York for an issue of *The St. Andrews Review*. He was upset with JW for not publishing the book as promised. Joel was a prolific poet and published many books after his first publication by Jargon. From his perspective, this missing title left a gap in his published work. From JW's perspective, there was no hurry to get the book in print as Joel was so successful. Joel pressed me to urge JW to get going on the publication, which I did, and JW somewhat reluctantly proceeded.

In some ways, this is what Jargon was all about: finding and publishing writers and photographers who had no audience, not already successful ones. JW operated more like a collector who enjoys the act of discovery but is not that interested in sharing the discovery with a large public.

*I imagine that approach provided complications from an administrative standpoint, but White Trash Cooking seems to take the cake in terms of causing problems. Could you talk about that experience?*

*White Trash Cooking* was a total anomaly on the Jargon list. The typical publication would have a small print run, receive no reviews or public notice, and sell very slowly, causing storage issues with our backlist. We were in debt and in search of new and less expensive storage when JW proposed a new publication at a board meeting where we had decided to postpone any new works until we could rectify our financial struggles. He broached the subject by saying that he thought it might really sell a few copies. It came to us because other publishers hated the title. What it was, as we first saw it, was a shoebox full of recipes on notecards with photos of some of the food and the people attached to the recipes.

After quite a discussion, we voted to move ahead with loans from board members Don Anderson and Philip Hanes and from Kit Wolcott, a friend of the author, Ernie Mickler. We printed a modest number, of which Philip mailed off a hundred or so to his Christmas list of well-known friends: Harper Lee, Jesse Helms, Helen Hayes, and a few others. Many wrote back with glowing comments about the book. It somehow appeared in an article in *Vogue* magazine and by the end of the year was in *Publishers Weekly* as a phenomenon where people were buying multiple copies.

The problem was we couldn't afford to keep up with the demand. There was such a delay between the cash from the sales making its way back to us that we couldn't pay the printer fast enough to keep it in print. Thorns and I flew to New York to meet with the three top cookbook publishers, each of whom wanted the book. Their first question was whether or not there was a sequel. We assured them there was (although there had never been any discussion of one). We learned that cookbooks drive most publishers, as they sell well and for a long time. We also learned that sequels drive profits up. The publishers were curious to know our marketing plans and budget. We of course had neither.

We returned with three bids for rights to the book. While we were debating our next step, a proposal arrived out of the blue from Phil Wood, publisher of Ten Speed Press. It included a poster of the cover of the book, an appreciation of the value of the book, better terms

than our other offers, and a promise that the book would never go out of print. We gladly took his offer.

By the end of the next year, *White Trash Cooking* had become the number-one-selling cookbook, outselling *The Joy of Cooking*. Jargon settled two lawsuits, one from the Junior League of Charleston claiming that several of the recipes were from their out-of-print cookbook, and one on behalf of the woman whose photo appeared on the cover of the book. Ernie's response to the first suit was that he never asked people where they got their recipes, and to the second that he did ask for permission to use the photograph.

JW had no interest in becoming a successful cookbook publisher, so the sequel was solely a Ten Speed Press effort. Thorns was occupied for years making sure that funds from the book were paid to Ernie and his estate.

*Jargon seems to have gone in a different direction in the '80s, away from poetry and toward art brut projects, e.g., White Trash Cooking and the Southern Visionary Folk Art Project. Can you talk about that change? Did it affect the way you had to operate?*

In some ways *White Trash Cooking* and the Southern Visionary Folk Art Project were connected to each other. They both appealed to JW's interest in the discovery and preservation of unknown and unappreciated artists who were outside the mainstream. They coincided with a rising public interest in all things Southern. With Howard Finster's work on albums by R.E.M. and Talking Heads, there was a major interest in Southern Visionary Folk Art among younger people.

Ernie Mickler appeared on *David Letterman* and *Good Morning America*. Tom Patterson was invited to do slide presentations on Southern Visionary Folk Art to groups ranging from Rotary Clubs to art museums to private family foundations, all eager to learn more. We were successful in raising funds for both projects because they naturally appealed to so many people.

For several years, JW traveled with Tom Patterson and Roger Manley, photographing artists and sites. He built a wonderful collection and created a gallery space in his home in Highlands to display the work.

Money from *White Trash Cooking* continued to provide some stable support to cover the basic expenses of Jargon. After an interlude

of a few years, however, JW was back to publishing books on the list that were more in line with what Jargon was known for, and we were back to struggling to find financial support.

*The number of Jargon publications started to dip in the late '90s into the 2000s. Can you talk about operations during the last decade of Williams's life?*

My own involvement with Jargon diminished as my fundraising business grew in the '90s. By the end of the decade, I had thirteen employees, and we were managing capital campaigns across the South.

In 1991 we concluded negotiations with SUNY Buffalo to acquire the archives of JW in exchange for an annuity for him. Robert J. Bertholf led the effort to locate JW's archive there after a failed attempt to interest either UNC Chapel Hill or Duke University. The annuity was a modest sum that provided some guaranteed annual income to JW.

Thorns continued to watch over financial matters and Don Anderson and Philip Hanes remained involved, but I think that the energy was gone for most of us for Jargon, as we were dealing with other priorities in our lives.

*Aside from your work as president, you also published works related to Jargon, e.g., *Hot What?* and *Williams's letters in Selected Correspondence: Collected Serendipity*.<sup>7</sup> As a chronicler of the Jargon Society, could you share your thoughts on its legacy?*

Jargon and JW leave an extraordinary legacy. On the one hand, the Jargon list is a unique collection of creative minds at work during the second half of the twentieth century. On the other hand, it is a testament to the taste and curiosity of a single creative force, Jonathan Williams. To dip into the Jargon list is to get in the VW with JW and take a road trip across the country, stopping to meet, get to know, and spend some time with a diverse group of writers and artists who have something quite fascinating to share. At a moment in time when we are distracted by any number of battles in the culture wars, it is refreshing and redeeming to take the Jargon journey.

## NOTES

1/ The artist, printer, and engraver David Ruff is often credited as the cofounder of Jargon, which I think is a bit misleading. Ruff collaborated with Williams on the first Jargon publication, contributed an engraving, and printed the publication at the Printer's Workshop, which he ran in San Francisco; however, his involvement with Jargon ended there. Schlesinger writes: "Ruff's 1951 collaboration with Williams, whose 'Patchenesque' poem met Ruff's image on a small, single sheet of yellow paper, is perhaps best described as a handbill. Ruff carved his image into copper plates...and printed the text from handset Lydian type.... Its publication on June 25, 1951, in an edition of just fifty copies, marks the beginning of one of the greatest of the great postwar American private presses." Kyle Schlesinger, "The Jargon Society," in *The Lord of Orchards*, eds. Jeffery Beam and Richard Owens (Westport, CT: Prospecta Press, 2017), 299.

2/ Williams had been trying to start a nonprofit since the '50s, mostly to alleviate the financial burden of publishing books. His first attempt was the Nantahala Foundation, which may be considered an early incarnation of the Jargon Society.

3/ Now St. Andrews University.

4/ See Jonathan Williams et al., *Hot What?: Collages, Texts, and Photographs* (Dublin, GA: Mole Press, 1975). Tom Patterson served as the Jargon Society's executive director from 1984 to 1987, during which time he oversaw Jargon's Southern Visionary Folk Art Preservation Project. For more on the Jargon Society, Jonathan Williams, F. Whitney Jones, and Tom Patterson, see Andy Martrich, "Navigating Distance in Locality: An Interview with Tom Patterson, Featuring Photographs by Jonathan Williams," *Jacket2*, June 17, 2020, <https://jacket2.org/interviews/navigating-distance-locality>.

5/ Old Salem Museums & Gardens is an institution in Winston-Salem dedicated to the cultural history of the American South.

6/ Thorns Craven served as Jargon's lawyer and treasurer from the late '70s onward.

7/ See Jonathan Williams and F. Whitney Jones, *Selected Correspondence: Collected Serendipity* (Winston-Salem, NC: Mole Press, 1989).

A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL CHECKLIST OF JARGON SOCIETY BOOKS  
WITH WHICH F. WHITNEY JONES WAS DIRECTLY INVOLVED

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### A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL CHECKLIST OF JARGON SOCIETY BOOKS WITH WHICH F. WHITNEY JONES WAS INDIRECTLY INVOLVED

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These lists were adapted from the Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center's bibliographical checklist for the Jargon Society, compiled by Carissa Pfeiffer.

SHANNON THARP

“You do want it to mean something to someone else”:  
besmilr brigham’s *Run Through Rock*

There’s a book that I’ve returned to for the past twenty years, and I’m ready to discuss it. The book, out of print but certainly not lost, is *Run Through Rock: Selected Short Poems of Besmilr Brigham*, edited and selected by poet C. D. Wright, and published posthumously by Lost Roads Publishers in 2000. Per WorldCat, thirty-seven libraries across the United States hold copies, while a few copies are held by a handful of libraries in Botswana, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Cue interlibrary loan.

In 1993, Wright, poet Forrest Gander, folklorist Michael Luster, and photographer Deborah Luster were working on *The Lost Roads Project: A Walk-in Book of Arkansas*, a literary map and guidebook of Wright and Deborah Luster’s home state and a catalog for a walk-in exhibit of the same name that depicted Arkansas as a state of letters. Poets, fiction writers, songwriters, historians, folklorists, and other writers are represented in the book, with each writer’s life span, genre, birthplace, and bibliography given an entry.<sup>1</sup> One of those entries is besmilr brigham’s.<sup>2</sup> In Wright’s attentive preface to *Run Through Rock*, she describes the synchronicities and happenings that led her and brigham to meet.

Grazing among the shelves at the Arkansas Room of the public library, I pulled Besmilr Brigham’s *Heaved from the Earth*, and read it on the spot. I located her mailing address in a directory of writers. I phoned the postmaster of Horatio, Arkansas, and asked if Besmilr Brigham was still living there. Indeed she was, and though she did not respond to a written query, the postmaster of Horatio sent a message to Besmilr by her rural carrier, and I was informed by the postmaster, via the rural carrier who had spoken to Ms. Brigham directly, that she considered herself a Mississippi writer. Since she and her husband Roy had been living in south Arkansas at her parents [*sic*] old homestead for many decades, I thought she

qualified for dual citizenship. I then requested that the rural carrier ask Ms. Brigham if we might have an audience.<sup>3</sup>

The answer to the request was yes, and when Wright, Gander, and the Lusters arrived in Horatio, they stopped at a gas station to call the postmaster's house so that the postmaster could drive to meet them and lead them to the homestead.

## §

Born September 28, 1913, in Pace, Mississippi, in Bolivar County near the middle of the Delta, Bess Miller Moore arrived the same year as fellow poets Robert Hayden and Muriel Rukeyser. The year that the Lincoln Highway, the first transcontinental highway in the US, was dedicated. The year that H. D.'s first published poems appeared in *Poetry* magazine. The year of the hottest temperature ever recorded on Earth: 134°F in Death Valley, California. In "Notes for Anne," correspondence from Brigham to Anneliese Heyl, Brigham writes of her name's origin, "Aunt Hettie is even responsible for my name! I should be named for my two grandmothers, she said... and from the beginning for her i was Bess Miller."<sup>4</sup> Eventually, Bess Miller changed her name to the phonetic *besmilr*. As she told Wright, it was closer to the way people spoke.<sup>5</sup>

From Pace, the Mississippi River is about twelve miles, as is the Arkansas state line. On a map, Horatio, Arkansas, and Pace, Mississippi, nearly parallel each other, their coordinates only a few degrees different. Both are westerly in their states, one (Horatio) more southwesterly than the other (Pace), and both are near state lines. In *Run Through Rock*, Wright confirms Brigham's tendency toward southwesterly movement throughout her life: "The Brighams' nomadicism takes them to the deep north—to Nova Scotia and Alaska—but most of the time they head south by southwest—Arkansas, Mississippi, Texas, New Mexico, Old Mexico, and the writing strikes deepest in those regions."<sup>6</sup>

For the reader who's encountering Brigham's work for the first time and for the reader who's visiting an old friend, Wright's preface offers a discerning picture of Brigham and lends context to, as Wright puts it, the legacy of a solitary reader and writer who read because she loved it and wrote because she had to.<sup>7</sup> The suggestion of a solitary reader and writer puts me in mind of the solitary plover in Lorine Niedecker's "Paeon to Place":

I was the solitary plover  
a pencil  
    for a wing-bone  
From the secret notes  
I must tilt

upon the pressure  
execute and adjust  
    In us sea-air rhythm  
“We live by the urgent wave  
of the verse”<sup>8</sup>

The figure “We live by the urgent wave / of the verse” is a line that Niedecker adapted from Robert Duncan’s essay “Towards an Open Universe.” It happens that brigham studied with Duncan at the New School for Social Research in New York when she was a student there in the 1950s, and they continued their correspondence, with brigham later dedicating poems to Duncan.<sup>9</sup> Comparisons between brigham and Niedecker have been drawn and are likely to continue; some are apt, while others tank. The two were born a decade apart and saw their poetry first published by small presses, and their writing received attention in the middle and later junctures of their lives. For instance, brigham’s “Yaqui Deer,” her first published poem, appeared in the July 1966 issue of Margaret Randall and Sergio Mondragón’s little magazine *El corno emplumado*.<sup>10</sup> At the time, brigham was fifty-two years old, soon to be fifty-three. Niedecker’s work had been published five times in ten years before poet Robert Creeley accepted some of her poems for publication in the Spring 1956 issue of *Black Mountain Review*.<sup>11</sup> At the time, Niedecker was fifty-two years old, soon to be fifty-three. The two stand separately and alongside each other, each with their own poetics of place and itinerancy, their own lyric, their own sensibilities, their own ear.

Robert Yerachmiel Snyderman, a former student of Wright’s who organized and prepared brigham’s manuscripts and personal papers for transfer to Yale’s Beinecke Library, writes, “I see brigham’s place in U.S. American poetry to be less of a concern than many might suppose.... Although, brigham loved literature, and would have claimed to have raised herself by it, brigham’s life and work did not necessitate a context limited to literary movement or what the ‘first’

world considers culture.”<sup>12</sup> In a 2012 interview for *Guernica*, Wright was asked, “What’s the goal of a poet like Besmirl Brigham who won’t publish except on the insistence of someone else?” She responded, “Well, Besmirl Brigham did publish quite a lot. She happened to be uncovered at a point when the magazines were scouring for women. She was, however, sought out only for about a decade. She lived a rural, itinerant life. It didn’t mesh with having a ‘career.’ She had a calling.”<sup>13</sup> I think here of poet Alejandra Pizarnik’s response to an interviewer’s question about whether her career was impeded by the fact that she was a woman. Pizarnik answered: “Poetry isn’t a career; it’s one’s fate.”<sup>14</sup>

## §

The first besmirl brigham poem that I read was “The Room.” I was twenty years old in a poetry class when my mind snagged on this figure at the poem’s end:

learning—  
we sit  
creatures without wings,  
cropped;  
studying ways  
to hold our not-firm feet  
sturdy as pigeons

under the chairs<sup>15</sup>

Do you see a figure sitting there: “learning” its head; “creatures without wings” extended arms (possibly resting on something); the word “feet” a foot at the end of a straightened leg; “sturdy as pigeons” the seat of a chair; and “under the chairs” literally under the chair, the letters in the phrase doubling as pigeons? Looking at it another way, one might see a creature with wings. This figure, its lineation and breaks, this sculpture, always leads me to question what I think I see or don’t.

Of brigham’s poetry, Wright observes, “A conclusion is rarely dramatic or conclusive. She is bent on the process, she writes in time.”<sup>16</sup> Further, “Tell Our Daughters,” a poem that brigham read for “The Word,” an episode in the PBS series *The United States of Poetry*, holds a strophe that’s bent on the process of writing and the

process of growing: “a word becomes / a bitter thing / or a word is / an imagination.”<sup>17</sup> And in “To the Unwritten Poems of Young Joy” one reads “i try to bring a unity to myself / to all the figures i am.”<sup>18</sup> Throughout *Run Through Rock*, shape and perception shift, figures arrive and recede, holidays come and go, animals are with us and a part of us, color is everywhere, things break and need mending or stay broken, weather is crucial, and love, death, grief, and tenderness are constants. Place-names are recurrent: Arkansas, Chiapas, Coatzintla, Mexico City, Mississippi, New Mexico, Redfish Bay, Sevier County, Tampico, Tehuantepec. Writing in time, brigham brought a specificity to the very instances she occupied and the very instances that occupied her at junctures throughout her life. Put another way and plainly, brigham’s poetry is in and of the moment, wherever the poet locates herself. She transfers an energy from source to self to poem to reader, and she does so with an eye and an ear toward pacing that reads as a gradual unfolding, a revealing, a disclosure. Writing in time, brigham makes something known. She extends herself. As Wright notes, “One could almost say writing was the key instrument of her humanity. Except for family, she opted for the company of animals, domestic and wild, diurnal and nocturnal, whole and broken. Inside is the place for illness or death or retreat from sudden weather. Outside is where the mind resides; outside is home.”<sup>19</sup>

In *Run Through Rock*, one of the poems that typifies brigham’s keen eye and instrument, her thinking outside, is “the fossil stone,” here in its entirety:

heaved up out of the sea, the land-  
animal that crawled out of it  
thrown in fire, volcanic age  
against our own age insecure and  
certain

strange little creature that lived in  
water  
the great snail, related  
to those tiny things we as children  
followed  
tracing silver trails through grass  
its feeler thorns

so easily frightened  
did it suck itself in and die in (the  
stone and porous matter  
that is still and yet moves  
with the shape its moving made it

used now as a door prop  
in a country house in Arkansas, the wind  
doesn't touch it<sup>20</sup>

Figured here, the poem itself is continuous as the stone that's still yet moves with the shape its moving made it. One feels brigham's great sense of things, from the primordial to this very instant where a stone holds a door open and is unaffected by the air's movement. Though there's life in the stone, it's not moving, but everything around it is. There in time, the writer observes and unites what's around her. Asked why she wrote poetry, brigham said, "Poetry is functional with sound.... We live inevitably in an abstract world.... Very much we only see in the remarkable, the exaggerated. You do want it to mean something to someone else."<sup>21</sup> Part of what we're here for, I think, is to know (each other) and be known (by each other). *Known* not as in famous, but as in understood, or even misunderstood. The process of knowing someone, of someone knowing you, is difficult, joyful, remarkable as it occurs. It's a kind of reaching. In reading *Run Through Rock* and concentrating on besmirl brigham, I feel that reaching.

### §

The date on *Run Through Rock*'s preface, September 30, 2000, is besmirl brigham's death date. Throughout his life with besmirl, Roy Brigham kept a bibliography of her publications as well as typescripts and copies of journals. Wright started to piece the book together with some selections from brigham's *Heaved from the Earth* (1971) and continued with selections from uncollected typescripts that Roy Brigham sent her. Wright notes of the book's order that it's not chronological, or otherwise categorical, but nomadic.<sup>22</sup>

At the time of *Run Through Rock*'s publication, Wright and Gander were coeditors of Lost Roads Publishers. Lost Roads was founded as a small press by poet Frank Stanford and Wright in 1977

in Fayetteville, AR. After Stanford's death in 1978, Wright took over editorship. In 2009, Susan Scarlata became executive editor of *Lost Roads*, now located in Wyoming, my home state. From 2012 to 2018, *Lost Roads* commemorated brigham's work and memory through the Besmilmr Brigham Women Writers Award, publishing books of poems by women writers living in rural areas or away from the coasts in small cities with less than a million people.<sup>23</sup>

In the two-plus decades since her death, attention to brigham's life and writing has been somewhat sparse, with work surfacing every several years. Steady consideration has been given to brigham through the following pertinent work: Emily Carr's "Or to Begin Again: besmilmr brigham";<sup>24</sup> a 2023 small-run chapbook of brigham's work, *Gathering Brief Shells By The Sea*, edited by Cody-Rose Clevidence and Alicia Wright; C. T. Salazar's "Flesh with Thicket Wonder: On Reading besmilmr brigham";<sup>25</sup> and Snyderman's "Fierce Light," an entire issue of *Evening Will Come* dedicated to brigham's life's work.<sup>26</sup> Aside from the previously mentioned PBS series, *The United States of Poetry*,<sup>27</sup> footage that Gander filmed of brigham reading her poetry can be viewed on YouTube.<sup>28</sup> Interested readers can find some of brigham's poems freely available online for reading and viewing in the little magazine *Extensions* via Eclipse,<sup>29</sup> while brigham's first published poem, "Yaqui Deer," can be read and viewed online in issue 19 of *El corno emplumado* via Open Door Archive.<sup>30</sup>

Given the work that's surfaced, it's clear that growing interest in brigham's poetry and life exists. While *Run Through Rock* may be out of print, it's findable, and it's a great companion to any number of the resources related to brigham's poetry and life. While brigham's poetry may be currently underread, I'd like to resist burdening her with labels that are often attached to a writer whose work receives intermittent attention while they're living. Time has its way of leveling all this, and brigham's writing has been here with us and for us for quite a while. Now it's up to us to take it up. In *Run Through Rock*, besmilmr brigham makes what she makes in her own time and makes space for us to, in her words, "make / their own growing time // big with tenderness."<sup>31</sup>



## NOTES

- 1/ "The Lost Roads Project," The University of Arkansas Press, <https://www.uapress.com/product/the-lost-roads-project/>.
- 2/ For the purposes of this essay, outside of titles and quotes besmilmr brigham's name will appear in all lowercase letters, as this is the name that brigham appended to much of her published work.
- 3/ C. D. Wright, "Preface," in Besmilmr Brigham, *Run Through Rock: Selected Short Poems of Besmilmr Brigham*, ed. C. D. Wright (Barrington, RI: Lost Roads Publishers, 2000), unpaginated.
- 4/ besmilmr brigham, "Notes for Anne," *Evening Will Come*, no. 49, January 2015, <https://thevolta.org/ewc49-bbrigham-p13.html>.
- 5/ "besmilmr moore brigham (1913–2000)," Encyclopedia of Arkansas, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/besmilmr-moore-brigham-1026/>.
- 6/ Wright, "Preface," unpaginated.
- 7/ Wright, "Preface," unpaginated.
- 8/ Lorine Niedecker, *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*, ed. Jenny Penberthy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 265.
- 9/ "Recent Creative Writing Events at NMSU," Creative Writing at NMSU, March 11, 2012, <http://clarabellenmsu.blogspot.com/2012/03/recent-creative-writing-events-at-nmsu.html>.
- 10/ Besmilmr Brigham, "Yaqui Deer," *El corno emplumado*, no. 19 (July 1966), 115–23.
- 11/ Jenny Penberthy, "Life and Writing," in *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*, 8.
- 12/ Robert Yerachmiel Snyderman, "Pre-Face: 'what do we fear/losing the things a man loves/shelter,'" *Evening Will Come*, no. 49, January 2015, <https://thevolta.org/ewc49-rsnyderman-intro-p1.html>.
- 13/ Reed Cooley, "C. D. Wright: The Obstacle Worth Engaging," *Guernica*, December 4, 2012, <https://www.guernicamag.com/c-d-wright-the-obstacle-worth-engaging/>.
- 14/ Jake Marmer, "Poems from Buenos Aires," *Tablet*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/alejandra-pizarnik-poetry>.
- 15/ Brigham, *Run Through Rock*, 61.
- 16/ Wright, "Preface," unpaginated.
- 17/ Brigham, *Run Through Rock*, 104.
- 18/ Brigham, *Run Through Rock*, 59.
- 19/ Wright, "Preface," unpaginated.
- 20/ Brigham, *Run Through Rock*, 79.
- 21/ Wright, "Preface," unpaginated.
- 22/ Wright, "Preface," unpaginated.
- 23/ "Submissions," Lost Roads, <https://www.lostroads.org/submissions>.

- 24/ Emily Carr, "Or to Begin Again: besmилr brigham," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 19, no. 1 (2012): 62–81.
- 25/ C. T. Salazar, "Flesh with Thicket Wonder: On Reading besmилr brigham," *Annulet: A Journal of Poetics*, no. 2, Winter 2021/22, <https://annuletpoeticsjournal.com/C-T-Salazar-Flesh-with-Thicket-Wonder>.
- 26/ Robert Yerachmiel Snyderman, ed., "Fierce Light: from the unpublished manuscripts of besmилr brigham," *Evening Will Come*, no. 49, January 2015, <https://thevolta.org/ewc-mainpage49.html>.
- 27/ Besmилr Brigham, featured poet, *The United States of Poetry*, episode 5, "The Word," directed by Mark Pellington, produced by Josh Blum and Bob Holman, aired February 19, 1996, Washington Square Films. Available on YouTube at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y\\_HAskxdFPg&t=2s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y_HAskxdFPg&t=2s).
- 28/ Forrest Gander, "Besmилr Brigham filmed by Forrest Gander," October 6, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mAYGf4gejHc>.
- 29/ besmилr brigham, poems, *Extensions*, no. 5/6, 1970, 37-67, <http://eclipsearchive.org/projects/EXTENSIONS/Extensions5-6/html/Extensions5-6.pdf>.
- 30/ Brigham, "Yaqui Deer."
- 31/ Brigham, *Run Through Rock*, 104.

## Impression Techniques: Spending Time with the Two Women Behind La Impresora in Puerto Rico

It's after 10 p.m. when I finally land in San Juan and my friend Luis Othoniel Rosa picks me up so we can drive two hours west along Puerto Rico's northern rim to Isabela, the coastal town where Nicole Cecilia Delgado lives. We drive through the city; I wonder which tall buildings are owned by absentee landlords. We pass the sprawling suburbia of Bayamón and the nestled mountain towns looming beneath the green covering that ascends in the distance on our left. I hear the coquí for the first time, and Luis tells me that their rhythms have changed since Maria.

Nicole's home, a white-stucco multilevel building, sits on a corner just below Isabela's quaint town square. A rooftop balcony filled with twinkly lights and nurtured plants welcomes us. Nicole has made lentils. It's warm. I have come from winter in Nebraska. The ocean is visible over the houses sloping down the hill. There it is, about a mile out—that darkest blue sea of the late night.

Nicole and Amanda Hernández codirect La Impresora, a small-scale independent printing studio and press in Puerto Rico for poets and visual artists. I am there to finish a translation of a hybrid text by Luis, *Calima*, which La Impresora is publishing. And I am there to get to know Nicole, whose book *añosluz* I have also started translating.

It's late now. Luis, Nicole, and I have stayed up talking under the night sky. I know I have misunderstood large parts of our conversation, both because of my Spanish fluency level and because Luis and Nicole are old friends. Luis nudges us to plan out tomorrow's work. Nicole suggests we start with coffee and a quick swim at Playa Jobos—brilliant, calm sea of the early morning.

In the translator's note to Delgado's most recent collection, *islas adyacentes / adjacent islands* (2023), published as a collaboration by Ugly Duckling Presse, Doublecross Press, and La Impresora, Urayoán Noel speaks to Nicole's "radically communitarian" work as a writer,

editor, publisher, and bookmaker.<sup>1</sup> This introduction takes the form of a letter to Nicole that points to such work by asking her a series of questions regarding the dynamics of their friendship, their political commitments, the use of technology, and the geopolitical situations of Mona and Vieques, two smaller islands on either side of Puerto Rico. These islands, and the camping trips Nicole took to them, structure the sequences of the book, which she's on a deadline to finish while I'm there. Just a few small printing details to sort out: a dark turquoise and orange center band that enfolds the book, a small accoutrement to heighten the reader's sensation of opening something handmade. I move soy-based, nontoxic ink drums in and out of the printer. Nicole's hands fold a test band around a spine. Everything is tactile.

Noel calls Delgado's poetry a practice of "counter-archive," that which not only documents the body as it survives but also orients and activates it in the process of documentation.<sup>2</sup> La Impresora is this, too. It moves with a commitment to place and to artists and writers encountered "en el camino," as Nicole says.<sup>3</sup> The press is a revolving door where volunteers, friends, and collaborators exchange projects and skills. There is an along-the-way mentality at play. Each thing treated with care, each book with its particular set of questions and design needs. La Impresora is a practical and alchemical project, protective but not insular—discerning, nurturing, and wild.

"I think I've always been at odds with intellectual work," Nicole writes in *islas adyacentes*, "perhaps because when I was a girl I felt that it imposed a slightly cruel distance from everything that was healthy and simple, like community. Over the years, I've tried to defend a type of creation, poetry, writing that can be that: physical work, bodily activity, the use of tools, movement in space."<sup>4</sup> I understand Nicole's pointed use of the word *intellectual* here—the way institutions threaten to carry one's poetics away from the corporeal. I was drawn to translation work because I felt my instincts as a writer and reader moving toward a deeper study of linguistic subtleties, but I also wanted a human connection—movement—to exist beyond languages. There is a kinship between my work as a translator, my attempts to keep one foot out of academia, and Nicole's commitment to physical making.

I follow Nicole to the guillotine to cut a proof of *Calima* to our desired size. It will be thick and rectangular with a flipbook element. She reaches up for the blade's handle, then bends her back and knees

slowly—the sound of stacked paper chopped through. I don't realize Luis has taken a photo of us, but later when he sends it to me, I study myself watching her. We are both smiling, and to my surprise, I look at ease.

## §

Where other institutions have undervalued the power of the handmade book, La Impresora has served as a kind of trade school, partnering with writers and artists interested in learning the craft. Recently, the press published an anthology titled *Ese lugar violento que llamamos normalidad* (That violent place we call normality), which collects the work of ten poets who participated in an intensive editing and bookmaking workshop taught by Nicole and Xavier Valcárcel.<sup>5</sup> Valcárcel was one of the first writers published by La Impresora in their foundational series Trabajo de Poesía, and is a longtime friend and collaborator of Nicole's who runs Atarraya Cartonera, an editorial project they started together in 2009.

La Impresora, for its part, originated in 2015 and was located on Avenida Fernández Juncos in South Santurce. In 2017, the press moved to a small street near Calle Loíza, a happening and gentrifying area just blocks from the beach in San Juan. When Nicole purchased the building in Isabela in 2020, the press's main operations moved beyond the city's hustle. The space in Isabela is three stories: the printing studio on the first floor, which contains two single-color risograph printers, a half wall of thirteen ink drums, a guillotine, a long closet of paper, a collection of bookmaking tools, and a cozy room for visiting artists; the second floor is Nicole's home; and then, of course, the rooftop balcony.

Nicole tells me moving out of the city has allowed her and Amanda to think beyond the idea of the metropolis as artistic center, though it's clear this impulse has always been a part of their ethos. They are not simply publishing authors on the fringes—the press, and Nicole as a writer, are committed to refiguring conceptions of centrality altogether. Nicole writes, "From Vieques / Puerto Rico / is / El Yunque. // Solid vision / that shifts the horizon and sustains it."<sup>6</sup> El Yunque refers to one of the rainforest's most beloved peaks—a word the Spanish used to describe the benevolent Taíno god Yúcahu, who protects his worshippers from the god of chaos and hurricanes. From

the north shore of Vieques, the only thing visible on the main island might be the mountains, might be—though it is not the tallest—El Yunque. The mountain metaphorically obscures San Juan, too far to be visible at all, and this topographical refiguration of a center offers a framework for understanding La Impresora’s publishing instincts. In his letter, Noel explains how La Impresora has often worked with those from “other spaces (the western region of Puerto Rico, Chiapas, Nuyoricana Loisaida or El Barrio, a certain Santurce) less visible in official histories.”<sup>7</sup> *La piel del arrecife*, an anthology of poetry by trans Puerto Ricans edited by Raquel Albarrán, Roque Raquel Salas Rivera, and Val Arboniés Flores, collects the work of over twenty writers and is available online as a free PDF. *Arrecife* means reef, and the collection is organized into four sections that, the editors explain, “correspond to characteristics our communities share with the reefs, in the overflowing context of multiple and complex engenderings witnessed by our ancestors.”<sup>8</sup> The anthology plays with many forms of queering language in Spanish. In one of my favorite small poems, “Notita,” Liev A. Santos uses the final line to replace the masculine letter -o in *solo* with the letter -e. In English, *sole* means a singular thing or a type of fish, but the word is pronounced like *sol*, the Spanish word for sun. Here is the whole poem:

Solo te quiero decir  
que cuando te sientas solx  
yo estaré aquí pa’ ti  
aunque a veces yo me sienta sole.<sup>9</sup>

In an appendix, Nicole, Amanda, and two of the anthology’s editors offer some notes on the process of making the book. This section illustrates La Impresora’s multidimensional commitment to community building. The final push to realize the project came from experiences of shared grief and commemoration: editor Raquel Albarrán and Alexandr Milán, a beloved trans activist, both died within a few days of each other in September 2022. Nicole writes, “En honor y amor a ellos decidimos liberar este libro al universo, desde una perspectiva abolicionista (como Raquel A. hubiera querido), en su versión actual, sin hacer ediciones adicionales. Sean sus cabos sueltos parte de su belleza y que su brillo se expanda en todas direcciones.”<sup>10</sup>

And Salas Rivera, in his note, shares a moment that helped him choose his name: “Mi nombre es Roque. Ese nombre que escogí, me lo sugirió por primera vez Raquel Albarrán, una de mis mejores amigas, en una llamada telefónica.”<sup>11</sup>

*Water Ripples* by Jacqueline Jiang, a debut collection La Impresora published just this year, also answers to the press’s vision and aesthetic values. It includes a loose broadside featuring a brilliant and horrifying story about shark fin soup and death titled—cleverly—*Fin*. The poems in the book offer a tonal contrast to the broadside’s story, making the whole project feel layered, strange, and delightful. The poems attempt to make sense of being born in Puerto Rico to Chinese parents. Some of the poems are entirely in English or Spanish, some play with Spanglish, and others weave Chinese mythology into the poet’s mythmaking. The book asks: What is possible for our identities as we consider and construct our histories? In “La China: Atabey,” Jiang invokes Atabey—a spirit in Taíno mythology who birthed herself—to meander through her own self-creation. Jiang writes:

On the inside, I am la guerrera only.  
There isn’t a word in the dictionary to sample  
the pronunciations that come out of my mouth,  
no image that can paint the picture of  
my Chinese lips reciting Pedro Albizu Campos  
in street Spanish.<sup>12</sup>

Here Jiang turns the interiority of a word into sound and then into image and finally back into sound. The stanza is a theoretical musing on how the poet formulates themselves through the ethnic and linguistic dissonance of their lived experience. Near the end of the poem, she writes:

If my soul was sewn together to this land  
many lives ago,  
then I have finally arrived,  
[...]  
I can swim in the Carribbean Sea  
I can speak the Taíno terms I have learned,  
lay in my hamaca under the sun  
and look to Atabey with satisfaction.<sup>13</sup>

When I meet Amanda, it's late morning. She's unloading boxes of La Impresora's books from her trunk to display at a local pop-up fair for handmade goods. We have driven into Manatí, a small town halfway to San Juan. A big house in the center square has been converted into a community space. Amanda, waving her hands to hurry up, bickers with Nicole about something I don't catch. I can tell she is funny. Amanda is also a poet: she's published four collections with La Impresora, and *Yellow Struck*, an English translation of her 2016 collection *Entre tanto amarillo*, was recently published by Editorial Pulpo.

Luis and I run to pick up fried-food reinforcements, and when we return, Nicole and Amanda are sitting behind their display laughing. I sit down and try not to be imposing, though I want to know about Amanda's cool leg tattoos. Nicole holds a paper cup of fresh coffee from the small-batch brewer next to us. Her dark, short, wavy hair is still a little wet. I wander around the booths making a list in my head of which books I want most from La Impresora. For now, I end up with Mara Pastor's *Las horas extra* (2022) from the series on contemporary poetry Trabajo de Poesía; Francisco Félix's *Sobre los domingos* (2019/2021) from the press's Crónica series, which features experimental nonfiction; and finally, a folded broadside of "Fresas / Strawberries" by Ana Portnoy Brimmer from the series Poema Suelto, which features individual poems in beautifully produced pamphlets. Luis buys a tote bag with Bayamón's suburban sprawl screen printed on the front. When it's time to pack up, a chatty gentleman catches Amanda with a stream of questions that answer themselves. Amanda smiles, exudes patience, then she and Nicole side-eye each other, and I sense their whole world of humor, clairvoyance, and dedication.

The two women started working together in La Impresora's early days. Nicole had just figured out how to purchase the press's first riso printer during a residency at Beta-Local, an organization in San Juan that supports contemporary art projects, and Amanda needed an internship to finish her MA in Arts and Cultural Management from the University of Puerto Rico in Río Piedras. Originally Amanda's internship was unpaid, but their meeting coincided with a contract



granted by the city of San Juan to organize FLIA (La Feria de Libros Independientes y Alternativos de Puerto Rico), a bookfair Nicole had been hosting since 2012. The contract allowed Nicole to offer Amanda a stipend, and they organized FLIA for four years until it was put on pause due to the pandemic. As they realized they could generate income together around projects they loved, things got more serious.

## §

From a foot of fresh snow in Nebraska, I reconnect with Nicole and Amanda over Zoom a few months after my visit. Amanda is in San Juan, where she lives and maintains the press's smaller studio. From there, she handles a chunk of the distribution to local bookstores, cafés, pop-ups, museum stores, bookfairs, and university libraries, which occasionally purchase large selections of their inventory. Here she also finishes binding many of La Impresora's books by hand, one of her favorite parts of the work. Risograph printing is an analog process. It's mechanized screen printing. After a text has been formatted digitally, proofs are made to accurately situate text, image, and color alignments. These are meticulous adjustments. Even after everything is corrected, the process results in minor imperfections and variations. Amanda calls these "the virtues of the object itself." We fix our hair in the camera. I see a single risograph printer covered in stickers and the edge of a large worktable behind her.

Nicole signs on from Isabela, her face framed by a wall of books and her dog Luna in the corner. I ask them what has changed about La Impresora since the press received a large employment-initiative grant from the Centro de Economía Creativa in Puerto Rico in 2022, which allows them to support themselves with annual salaries, healthcare, and a \$20,000 yearly budget for the organization's creative projects over a three-year period.<sup>14</sup>

"The hustle," Nicole says. This recent initiative has shifted their sense of well-being and peace of mind entirely. Nicole hasn't had a fixed salary in nearly twenty years, and it's Amanda's first one ever. The grant has meant they can dedicate themselves fully to La Impresora, moving their attention to projects that were neglected simply because there was no budget. For this extended moment, they've been able

to systemize their workflows and calendars, and focus on their series with a deeper sense of curatorial purpose. This refreshing stability has also honed their working relationship. “Amanda thinks systematically, and she’s fast,” Nicole says, “I think abstractly and handle the conceptualization of things.” “Sometimes I struggle with being direct,” Amanda says, smiling, “and Nicole does not.” They balance each other out, and they’ve achieved their rhythms organically. They listen to one another. Their mutual support and understanding run deep.

In January of this year, Penguin Random House and the Community of Literary Magazines and Presses (CLMP) announced *La Impresora* as the winner of the \$10,000 Constellation Award, which honors an independent literary press championing the writing of people of color.<sup>15</sup> And in November, Nicole’s poetry was included in the Whitney Museum of American Art’s exhibition “No existe un mundo poshuracán’: Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane Maria,” which also featured many of *La Impresora*’s collaborators.<sup>16</sup> The Whitney purchased a large selection of their catalog for its museum store. Nicole says, “It really is the first place our books are being sold in New York,” though *La Impresora* has always worked within the visual arts, which has often expanded their connections and curatorial understanding beyond what Nicole sees as the more conservative and insular networks of the literary world.

## §

Nicole first encountered a risograph machine while living in México City around 2008. A group of radical feminist women, older than her, had run a magazine in the ’90s—vanguards of a technology and print studio they had moved on from by the time Nicole arrived.<sup>17</sup> But there was a young woman taking care of the collective’s house who noticed Nicole’s handmade books and showed her two printers and a mountain of tools not being used in a room behind the kitchen. To reactivate the space, she invited Nicole to teach a workshop for women poets. “And the workshop ended, and things changed, and I forgot about the machine,” she says. Nicole started seriously considering the machine for her work years later during her residency at Beta-Local

when the risograph was experiencing a resurgence due to its efficiency and ecological character. She says her body remembered how to use it. Amanda and I smile through our cameras. “The skills women give each other along the way,” I respond.

When I ask them to comment on the future of the press, Nicole says, “Well, we have two years left of the employment grant and new machines that will endure.” Amanda mentions FLIA and says they know how to return to the hustle of commissions, writing grants, and applying to scholarships.

When I ask them to tell me what it is they make and why, they say, “Libros lindos.”

Then they conjure stories from their childhoods. Girls making collages—folding, cutting, gluing paper. Girls imagining and editing worlds with their hands. Girls binding together things that appear frivolous but are not. Folding paper is intimate; to unfold is to open. Amanda says, “It wasn’t until it started to happen that I understood this beautiful dream was a possibility.”

## NOTES

1/ Urayoán Noel, “Translator’s Note,” in Nicole Cecilia Delgado, *islas adyacentes / adjacent islands*, trans. Urayoán Noel (New York, NY, and Isabella, Puerto Rico: Ugly Duckling Presse, Doublecross Press, and La Impresora, 2023), 35.

2/ Noel, “Translator’s Note,” 36.

3/ I interviewed Nicole and Amanda via Zoom on February 15, 2023. I pulled and translated this quote—and the others included throughout the profile—directly from that interview.

4/ Delgado, *islas adyacentes / adjacent islands*, 7.

5/ The anthology *Ese lugar violento que llamamos normalidad* may be found in La Impresora’s online store. See also Xavier Valcárcel, *Fe de calendario* (Isabella, Puerto Rico: La Impresora, 2016).

6/ Delgado, *islas adyacentes / adjacent islands*, 21.

7/ Urayoán Noel, “a correspondence (summer 2020),” in Delgado, *islas adyacentes / adjacent islands*, 5.

8/ *La piel del arrecife: Antología de poesía trans puertorriqueña*, eds. Raquel Albarrán, Val Arboniés Flores, and Roque Raquel Salas Rivera (Isabella, Puerto Rico: La Impresora, 2023), 7. I’ve translated this sentence from the anthology’s introduction for the sake of clarity: “Las secciones del libro corresponden a características que comparten nuestras comunidades con los arrecifes, en el contexto rebosante de múltiples y complejos engendramientos que testimoniaron nustrxs ancestrxs.”

9/ Liev A. Santos, “Notita,” in *La piel del arrecife*, 59.

10/ Nicole Cecilia Delgado, “Notas a esta edición,” in *La piel del arrecife*, 72. I chose to leave this quote in Spanish in the body of this essay because that is the language Delgado offers in the anthology itself, and I wanted to preserve some sense of intimacy and privacy. Here, in the endnote, I offer my translation: “In honor and love of these two people we decided to release this book to the universe, from an abolitionist perspective (like Raquel A. would have wanted), in its current version, without additional editing. May its loose ends be part of its beauty and may its brilliance expand in all directions.”

11/ Roque Raquel Salas Rivera, “Notas a esta edición,” in *La piel del arrecife*, 73. See the previous note for my translation rationale. In English, this quotation might read: “My name is Roque. That name was first suggested to me by Raquel Albarrán, one of my best friends. We were talking on the phone.”

12/ Jacqueline Jiang, *Water Ripples* (Isabella, Puerto Rico: La Impresora, 2023), 23.

13/ Jiang, *Water Ripples*, 24.

14/ Mellon Foundation News, “Centro de Economía Creativa and Mellon Foundation Announce ‘Maniobra’ in Puerto Rico,” May 2, 2022, <https://www.mellon.org/news/centro-de-economia-creativa-and-mellon-foundation-announce-maniobra/es>.

15/ Community of Literary Magazine and Presses (CLMP), “Member Spotlight: La Impresora | Perfil: La Impresora,” January 17, 2023, <https://www.clmp.org/news/award-spotlight-la-impresora-perfil-la-impresora/>.

16/ This line is borrowed from Salas Rivera’s poetry collection *while they sleep (under the bed is another country)* (Minneapolis: Birds LLC, 2019), unpaginated, footnote 20.

17/ For more information on this collective and their magazine *La correa feminista*, see the archival project “Digitalización de los archivos Históricos del Feminismo en México,” which has preserved multiple feminist magazines from the mid- to late-twentieth century and is housed at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Information is available online at <https://archivos-feministas.cieg.unam.mx>.

CARY STOUGH

## An Interview with Black Ocean's Janaka Stucky and Carrie Olivia Adams

*Around 2006, when I came to poetry, the American scene was undergoing massive changes both in palette and methods of consumption. The internet, woven in seemingly endless blank text, suggested an ease of entrance into the community of publishing and a grand democratization of access for potential readers. Small press publishing no longer had to rely on catalogs or the hipness of independent booksellers: two things to which I, in the culturally secluded Missouri Ozarks, had little access. The MFA creative writing program boom, Bush-era noncomplacency, and faster online connection induced a cadre of young writers, editors, and publishers to develop the first models of online poetry marketing and raised the profile of independent publishing forever. Bolstered by a proliferation of web journals and the ability to share updates via social media, these editor-authors would go on to define the aesthetics of the time which, for at least a decade, was both innovative without theoretical pretension and accessible without the intention to pander.*

*Black Ocean Press, founded in 2004 by poets Janaka Stucky and Carrie Olivia Adams, published the bulk of the titles I consider definitive of this era. Black Ocean books were prominent among the volumes passed around at our college lit mag meetings. My introductions to Black Ocean, such as Zachary Schomburg's *Scary, No Scary*, shook me from my professors' provincialism toward broader possibilities of content, form, and especially attitude, with their echo of the dominant youth culture—as ironic and sincere at once as shutter shades and finger tattoos. Where the poetry market had been dominated by annual awards calendars, churning out the easily fungible “first book author,” the new scene, whose online connectedness allowed for up-to-date access to poetry as it was being made, ensured that my favorite authors would never get lost or buried.*

*At the time of this interview, a stack of eighteen Black Ocean titles stood beside my laptop like a punkier Anne Truitt sculpture, along whose*

body is scrawled the names of such authors as Elisa Gabbert, Julie Doxsee, Brandon Shimoda, and Tomaz Šalamun. One of the press's early design collaborators, Denny Schmickle, drew from the history of graphic screen printing to create covers of arresting novelty, such as the constellated coffin in a suburban night sky on the cover of the press's first hit, Zachary Schomburg's *The Man Suit*. The design was simple, authoritative, and met rather than mirrored the energy of the book's singular oddity. Before I saw *Donnie Darko*, I thought Schomburg had created both the name and concept behind the title. This is how the moment felt—like everything cool was connected.

## §

CS: Looking at your catalog, it seems that pretty much out of the gate you had well-drawn aesthetic parameters for what you would publish and how it would look. I mean the aesthetics of the books' designs, with each book measuring 5½" or 6" × 7.5", featuring distinctive cover art by graphic artists. I imagine quite a bit of energy went into that, and given such context I'm eager to ask: What's the origin story of *Black Ocean*?

JS: The genesis of the press goes all the way back to my teenage years, coming up in the New England DIY/punk/anarchist scene, through which I got involved with the national zine culture at an early age. At the same time, I was intensely immersed in reading and writing poetry, and so by the time I was eighteen I was already dreaming about starting my own press. Fast-forward a number of years and two poetry degrees later, and at the age of twenty-six I was trying to determine what my next move in life would be. Broke but ambitious, with an MFA in hand and no meaningful job prospects, my two paths ahead seemed to be returning to school for a PhD or starting that press I had been dreaming about for almost ten years. I chose the latter and reached out to Carrie, one of my closest friends from grad school, to see if she would join me. Fortunately, she agreed!

When the idea to start *Black Ocean* came up, I had two ambitions in mind. The first was to publish out-of-print works by two of my favorite poets: Bill Knott and Frank Stanford. The second ambition was to create an independent publisher that made beautiful and exciting books. *Black Ocean* began in 2004, and back then there

weren't nearly as many indie poetry publishers as there are now. Aside from Verse (which merged with Wave) and Fence and a couple of others, there weren't many people doing what we do in the world of poetry. It's worth mentioning that we did start off by publishing in three genres: poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. We immediately scaled back to just poetry after the first year but began publishing prose again in 2014. At the time, poetry publishing was not an especially exciting world in the US. The larger, established publishers often treated new poetry as backlist titles out of the gate, with little attention to publicity and marketing. Independent publishers, beyond a handful of newer houses, were mostly producing fairly ugly books from a design and production perspective. I wanted to create a press that would bring the attention of a major publishing house to quality and design, and treat poetry as a genre with frontlist potential. I had little to no industry experience, but I did have modest ability as a graphic designer thanks to my years of experience in the world of zines—and visual art is my second love after poetry. Having abandoned my fine art portfolio to pursue a life of letters, designing books scratches that itch for me. Carrie, on the other hand, came to the table with some publishing experience—and has continued to make a career for herself in book publicity and marketing outside of her work with Black Ocean.

We've come a long way since 2004, and in some ways we're still the same. We now have over seventy-five titles in our catalog, after acquiring the Seattle-based poetry publisher Gramma Press with their nine titles in 2019. And in 2022 we announced the formation of Chapter House, an indie publishing group formed by the merging of Black Ocean with LA-based publisher Not a Cult. This gives us footprints in Boston, Chicago, and LA, and opens the door for a forthcoming SF imprint alongside a few other endeavors. Perhaps most significantly for me, we are finally reissuing Bill Knott's debut collection of poetry, *The Naomi Poems*, in the fall of 2023—a lifelong dream of mine come true.

*The press also published Handsome, a literary journal. It seems to have teed up some of the authors you would eventually publish in book form. What kind of processing went on behind publishing a magazine beside full-length collections?*



JS: We had a really good run of *Handsome*, which I'm immensely proud of. That being said, it often felt like running a poetry journal was even harder than publishing indie poetry books. Editorially, I almost immediately handed over the reins of *Handsome* to two other friends from grad school, Paige Ackerson-Kiely and Allison Titus, who are both accomplished poets in their own right. Because *Handsome* was truly a labor of love, we allowed ourselves to be relaxed about the schedule, putting it out whenever we felt like we had a solid issue compiled. The magazine allowed us to promote poets whose work excited us, without the constraints of investing in an entire book. Nonetheless, after an eight-issue run, it began to feel untenable, and we decided to focus our energy elsewhere.

*I assume Zachary Schomburg's The Man Suit meant as much to Black Ocean as a press as it did to readers who loved it. I started undergrad at Mizzou in 2010, three years after the book was published, and even then it was still being passed around like a magic introduction to poetry of the "now." Grad students, undergrads, professors—we were obsessed. We couldn't ignore it, whether or not we agreed on whether it—to use a term endemic to the period—earned its acclaim. It was a book of prose poems, mostly, and though Charles Simic's The World Doesn't End had won the Pulitzer all the way back in 1990, the form had never really caught on with the American poetry establishment. Regardless, the book had a moment of its own that is difficult to refute, and its popularity led readers to the rest of your catalog. Books like Joe Hall's Pigafetta Is My Wife, a twist on the popular "persona-poem sequence" trend of the time, or Feng Sun Chen's mythopoetic Butcher's Tree expanded the boundaries of typical poetic expression. The influence of these books shows up everywhere. Did you have a sense of your effect on poetry culture? Or, to put it another way, was it ever your intention to affect poetry culture? Did you have any sense of a critical project?*

JS: Well, to use your first example, it was impossible to ignore the effect which *The Man Suit* had on contemporary poetic culture. It was our fourth title, published in our second year of operation, and was chosen by the New York Public Library as one of their 25 Books to Remember from 2007—alongside only two other poetry titles, by Margaret Atwood and Robert Hass. At twenty-nine years old, shipping

books from my bedroom, I suddenly found myself at a gala event in NYC rubbing shoulders with editors from what are now the Big Five and celebrating the biggest names in contemporary literature which shared that year's list with our own books—authors like Denis Johnson and Junot Díaz. It was insane. Over the years, a lot of people like yourself have told me how meaningful—even formative—our books have been for them. I've lost track of the number of people who have shared tattoos inspired by our books and their covers. That kind of response has honestly kept this press going through years when it was putting me personally in five-figure credit card debt, when I could barely afford to pay rent or buy groceries.

COA: There's no doubt that *The Man Suit* changed the game for both poetry and the press in a way that seemed completely surprising and exciting. It's hard to predict or know what book will have that kind of breakout power, but we had a hunch the first time we heard Zach read and knew that we had to publish his work. As Janaka said earlier, there really weren't that many small publishers at the time that Black Ocean was getting underway, so I think we definitely went into it with a sense of mission. We saw a real need and a hunger for new voices that wasn't being fed by what was out there, and so, absolutely, on one level our goal was to change poetry culture by creating a space and vehicle for the great work we knew existed and needed a home and a champion. We continue to be so humbled by the success that mission has achieved.

*It seems like you have a dedication to creating ongoing publishing relationships with authors. Zachary Schomburg, Julie Doxsee, and Joe Hall have all published more than three books with the press. Is it part of your broader mission to hold onto artists, supporting them throughout their careers?*

COA: Without a doubt. Our goal has always been to create a home for our authors. I love building those relationships over time and being able to provide that kind of support for writers. I think it's not only humane but also smart publishing. If you see their names tied to a new book, you can almost certainly know it's a Black Ocean book. It surprises me how rare this is in the indie book world. The focus

always seems to be on first or second books, but what are mid-career poets supposed to do? Go back to the \$30-a-submission contest hustle? That doesn't seem fair to poets who have proven themselves and their work and are still doing interesting things. I'm always asking: What are you working on next? In the act of editing our poets, I become one of their biggest fans, which means that I always want to see more of their work.

*Black Ocean has also published a lot of publishers: Zachary Schomburg of Octopus Books; Joshua Marie Wilkinson, editor of Letter Machine Editions and founder the website that gave me a personality, The Volta; the great Brian Henry of Verse Books; Matthew Zapruder of Wave Books; and the late Matthew Henrikson of TYPO Magazine. Did these relationships develop through the business, so to speak, or do you think it's more of an indication of a time in which it was customary for poets to be publishers as well? Both of you, it should be said, are accomplished poets yourselves.*

JS: This is interesting—I've never considered this before! I think this was very symptomatic of the publishing "moment," if you will, that we were operating in during the first ten years of Black Ocean's existence. As previously mentioned, there was dissatisfaction with the publishing opportunities available to so many of us. All those people (and others) that you mentioned can be mostly classified as the youngest of Gen X, or perhaps Xennials, who I think—as a generation—were culturally imbued with a DIY ethos of the '80s and early '90s. So when we didn't like what was available, we went out and made our own opportunities. I doubt any of us starting these presses saw them as a business opportunity, or a career, or even a way to be noticed. We saw them as a natural extension of the work we were already doing as individual poets to shed light on the art which we love.

*The influence of poetry in translation is clear on the poets of the 2000s and 2010s. Maybe that's one thing for which we can thank the big university publishers. Of course, the French Surrealists—small press publishers themselves—got a lot of praise, but the attention wasn't exclusive. Poet and one of the publishers of Action Books Johannes Göransson wrestled the visceral necropoetics of Sweden's Aase Berg into*

*English. And you have released two other series of translations, both substantial in their scope and breadth of translators: four collections of Slovenian Tomaž Šalamun's work, as well as six collections from various poets in the Moon Country Korean Poetry Series. Not many small presses were publishing work in translation in 2009 when you came out with Aase Berg's With Deer, let alone with such a striking hunter-orange cover! Adhering to your format indicated a great respect for work in translation that neither elevated nor subdued the work in relation to everything else in the catalog. After all, these titles weren't accompanied by introductory monographs written by some expert. They were placed alongside the other poetry in the catalog. Could you first speak to the influence of poetry in translation on the poetics of the 2010s? Then, could you speak about Black Ocean's specific dedication? Tomaž Šalamun, for example, was such a giant flame that you have, thankfully, kept fanned.*

COA: I never thought about there being a heightened interest in translation that developed a decade or so ago. For me, it feels like a very natural thing to be constantly curious about what poetry might be out there that we don't have access to; I've always suffered from a sort of literary FOMO, which has led me down a lot of rabbit holes, such as specializing in comp lit as an undergrad and studying Japanese (poorly) for the last ten years or so. When I was a student in Vermont College's MFA program, I took part in a residency in Slovenia that further cemented my interest in the exchange and collaboration that poets could have across cultures and languages. We're all doing the same work, shaped and limited by the tools at hand: our languages. And there's so much we can learn from each other in how we approach those tools. Translation makes that possible, and supporting translation has always felt like a natural extension of our mission as a press—finding those gaps and niches where overlooked voices can break through. I feel so lucky to have worked with some incredible translators, and seeing how they approach the art and skill of translation can be powerfully instructive as a writer and editor.

JS: Speaking specifically to the translation series from Black Ocean that you mentioned, they all came about very organically. Johannes's translations of Aase Berg were brought to my attention by another

Black Ocean author, Rauan Klassnik, and after Johannes agreed to work with us on *With Deer*, it turned into an ongoing relationship across numerous Swedish translations over the years with us.

With regards to Tomaž, I met him in 2008 or 2009—and he had already been a reader and admirer of Black Ocean, even though we only had a handful of books out at the time. In 2013, he submitted *Justice* for our consideration, which we eagerly accepted. After he was diagnosed with terminal cancer, he asked that we work with his wife, Metka, to ensure that Black Ocean could remain a home for his work in the US—and we lined up several titles with him that we then published posthumously over the last seven years.

That brings us to Moon Country. In 2017, I received a grant from the US Embassy in Seoul to visit as a poet and cultural ambassador. While there, thanks to the introductions made by translator Jake Levine, I developed a relationship with the Literature Translation Institute of Korea and several Korean poets. That trip evolved into the Moon Country series, which publishes new English translations of contemporary Korean poetry by both mid-career and up-and-coming poets who debuted after the IMF crisis. We've been publishing two titles per year in that series for the past few years, and plan to keep it going through 2024, until we hit ten books.

*You've posthumously published the selected work of Massachusetts punk rock/DIY artist Dominic Owen Mallary, as well as two books of poetry by Sadie Dupuis, of the band Speedy Ortiz. Are the music worlds and poetry worlds as distinct as they seem? How integral are other art scenes to your publishing interests?*

JS: As a poet who has been published by Jack White's publishing company, and as someone who is releasing an album on experimental record label Neurot Recordings—in which I perform my most recent book to the musical accompaniment of Lori Goldston (cellist for, among others, Nirvana)—obviously if you ask me I don't think they're distinct from each other at all! There is a quote I like to toss around, even though I don't know who it's attributable to, which goes something like, "All poets want to be rock stars, and all rock stars want to be poets." I don't think the former is always true, but I do think the latter is—which is an interesting paradox of cultural currency and

perceived value. When I think about the non-ambient music which has been most important in my life, the lyrics of those songs have also influenced me as a poet as much as any of my favorite writers. I think regardless of whether either flavor of artist wants to “be” the other kind, musicians and poets are almost always heavily influenced by each other, and so the synthesis of crafts feels inevitable—and definitely worth celebrating when the results are compelling.

*How has the project or outlook of Black Ocean changed, either alongside or away from other presses that started around the time yours did?*

COA: It’s been amazing to see the flourishing of indie presses in the last twenty years, and I think anything that enables more poetry to get out in the world is a great thing for poets and poetry lovers. But I don’t think that multitude has changed the need for what we do, nor has it changed how we think about who we are as a publisher. One thing we’ve always prided ourselves on is our consistency—you know a Black Ocean book when you see one by its beautiful, distinctive design, and you likely know a Black Ocean author when you read that opening poem. We have a recognizable aesthetic, and I think that’s what continues to draw readers to our books. The one big thing that has changed for us is our ability to reach those readers. Our move to Consortium as our sales and distribution service, which was thanks to the success of the press and Janaka’s vision, has meant that our books are easier for indie bookstores to find and stock, and it has undoubtedly brought our books to the attention of new fans.

*What is your sense of small press or independent publishing today, specifically regarding its constant balance of precarity and resilience? And how does the future look? E-readers were supposed to have wiped out paper media completely, yet small press publishing seems like it has never been stronger! Detractors used to talk of a glut, of an oversaturation of middling talent. And there are so many poets, but there are so many painters, too. As Šalamun himself once said: “America is a wonderful place to be a poet. There are so many publishers, so many poets!”*

JS: The beauty of small press publishing is that it is not motivated by capitalism, and so long as people are passionate about literature,

there will be publishers who seek to celebrate the writing of others—regardless of technology or profit margins. Of course we live in a late-stage capitalist society which eschews any creative endeavor that doesn't accrue wealth for the wealthy, so most small presses will dissolve over time—but then new ones will emerge and pick up the torch!

*Last question, then: Considering the recurrent anxieties about technology and taste, what do you think will be the next threat (whether or not it's really cause for worry) to independent publishing?*

JS: No doubt the next false flag will be AI-generated writing. It is already being discussed among editors and publishers, who are worried about accidentally publishing work generated by AI and passed off as the writing of a human. Anyone who has spent time on ChatGPT should be deeply unsettled by the uncanny simulacra of human thought it can generate. However, AI is still a bit of a misnomer in the sense of self-aware intelligence, because these are really just algorithms that are excellent at fooling us into recognizing something like human consciousness. There are many terrifying implications for the application of what we call AI; as a technology that can be leveraged to widen the wealth gaps in our society or to manipulate public discourse and disseminate misinformation, it feels almost existential in its danger. But I don't think we need to worry about it as a destructive force to small press publishing, or even literature as a whole.

Humans are amazing at making meaning—and machine learning is better-than-human at making associations. The synthesis of human perception and AI could produce phenomenal associative leaps, which are the backbone of aesthetic shock in a transformative artistic experience. The best writers may end up using AI as a creative tool—in the same vein that they have been using creative practices like cut-ups, writing prompts, or bibliomancy for generations. In that sense, the only threat I see it posing to small press publishing is by poor writers who seek to pass it off, practically unedited, as their own work—thus glutting editorial inboxes with even more mediocre work to sort through before we find the gems.

ART, FICTION, NONFICTION,  
POETRY & REVIEWS



ALICE NOTLEY

*from* THE ELEMENTS

ALWAYS

There's always already a color in the crystal  
not caused by light not even caused I saw it.  
Past tense is the same as present. Go on from here  
You said you were leaving you may have told me fast.  
In our language, the telepathic, what is conveyed  
floats or moves quickly like light in the physical world.  
I'm not physical. My body, what you think you see  
seen differently by a fly or owl, is a concatenation  
of reference points in your upbringing, with its  
terrifying howl. I saw the Leaving, an intense  
becoming of a dark green texture in the crystal.  
The green was woven or maybe it was only fretted  
someone was playing you or yourselves were:  
I wasn't really crystal, being every possibility  
or I hold, I hold possibility in my crystal self.  
What if everything has always been there. It has.

They'd leave, but when they died came back.  
Finally, this one I am writing this left here too, as if on  
a train I dreamed about once, a woman met me at the station  
with a brochure, and said Welcome To Hell. Sometimes I dream  
I'm riding a train underneath it just above the wheels.  
I keep having to make myself small enough to fit there  
Yes, a theme, that I arrive and vanish through small openings  
though I'm everything when you fall asleep do you

vanish like that? Like the wind, which exists But *you* don't,  
you say to me ... You shouldn't talk to imaginary beings, I say back.  
First the Leaving, later my following of you But first:  
They're all going now he says and I will too—only you, only you  
will be left, holding us so we can have some form. Is  
that what I do? It's the main thing, he said we will  
then try to prove that you don't ...

Why don't I go back to before  
the Leaving? The thing is, there's really no time but ...  
I mean, time is made up it was the main thing you wanted  
you wanted everything time gave you, like wanting itself.  
You didn't want *me*, because I'm just *here*. No I don't talk like this,  
but I *can*. The Before Leaving, the Leaving, the Leaving by  
the one of me who sounds like this. Why every-  
thing dies and comes back oh that's easy, it's part of wanting,  
of your stupid pissy Time. What language do I really speak?  
Should someone be on trial? Who spoke to me before leaving?

## THE LEAVING

He tore himself off from the expanse, or unvoid,  
as the Leaving was happening it was so green  
I'll remember that in the future, the color has other associations  
but for now it's the color of leaving and in a paler shade  
the color of the room where words appear to me as on a board  
of a train station? (who's speaking now) or on a stele: it shifts  
what the board is like but the words can change in either case.

The Leaving patterned disasters of matter in the future,  
which I see, being everywhere for I am Chaos as beautiful void  
addressing you movers and shakers previously called sinners.  
He tore himself off from the expanse-become-green an irresistible act  
for all but me who as underlying Chaos am throughout so cannot  
*leave* (til later I project myself as a human woman) ...  
obviously you can't really leave, I say to him, since I'm everywhere ...  
How did all of you manage to separate yourselves into such specifics?  
You are going to have limbs, eyes, and a mouth—speak and move more slowly  
than you do here ... Why? He was growing limbs at that moment  
like rays or banners not yet symmetrical in shape, length  
floating Once you've felt it he says you want to go on doing it.  
But you'll live and then die and come back. I know and I've already done it—  
I can see the future too, he says. We floated, we floated  
in mind, communicating, but anything's possible  
as you say ... You're to pretend, I say, that you're composed of atoms!  
Won't I be? You'll see grids everywhere static or in motion  
you won't know how to communicate properly, you'll make verb charts  
what the hell is a verb but a mass dream? You'll be caught in a mass  
dream, then wake up and come back.

## THE BOARD

When I'm most human and don't remember well (though my secret self is memory, gravity) I hardly remember the board I sort of make it up but it's real enough a place a room where poems by me are posted (Chaos yes writes poems, doesn't always use writing) I see them and know they're mine I see one and begin to write it down it changes as I write (or think it into being material) as it becomes engraved as it were yet changeable when it's the train station board the letters of words click and mutate, when it's a stele there's wormy motion of change and I can't read it exactly but I know what it says—though I don't really know what language it's in (think about that now) ... Anyone can understand anything: the first principle of telepathy. Of course I'm not really a person. Or a principle. Am I Alice? Anyway I am holding you together—how matter-of-fact can you get? The room of the board is vast and green, wall-less there are clusters of souls in it but while I'm there I must concentrate on the board. I tend only to see the poem, but I don't *see* it I know it, by knowing—sudden, whole knowledge is another principle of telepathy. When I revert to being Chaos, usually at night, I know everything and the words for it swim in and around me but are illegible—if you know, there's nothing to read—wisps of symbols. What is it I remember? Everything but not your everything. Because there's existence there's memory? Somewhere ... I am what keeps being: I pervade everything I'm not a body of water or some darkness and I'm not disorder itself ... I hold you together, like when you dream you're someone else but you're still you (is that what your life is like now? ...)

You're always still you. That's the memory you have in heaven that you're you

You're still talking to me, the leaving man  
said and somehow I'm still leaving According to the poem  
on the Board, I say we can still be doing this or not  
You are saying Chaos is Heaven? he asks Oh, words  
I'm saying that Heaven is Chaos, which is not disordered but  
peacefully unstructured every you in it is light-like or mind-  
like I'm not sure about that, he says I'm leaving be-  
cause I want to live You're leaving in order to die, I say  
But I don't die I come back? Right. I have to leave, it's pulling—  
things occurring I didn't know about my new legs exist  
there's nowhere to walk here with them! That's when he leaves.

When I don't know what I say next I look at the Board  
whatever I am looking with it says "I know that the universe  
is so small I can forget it awhile its events tucked into a fold  
in space on me whatever I'm holding endures though not changeless  
I forget things but I'm still holding them in and up for I'm everywhere  
You talk to me by talking into air and I talk back invisibly not  
materially heard. But you do hear letting me in to remind you you're you."

## THE GREEN ROOM

The green room not really a room an expanse has green for floor, sides and ceiling that are none of them that you are (one is) where it is green pale or sometimes more intense but not like grass or natural just green The green room holds more than the Board, maybe everything Maybe it's where you ultimately "go" though maybe there's also a grand beautiful darkness where lights and cubicles and colors float and commune, or contain communing and in which too you might find a soul to talk to But the green room has the Board and now I must listen and speak a passage for it:

"Wherever you go you are a particular word the human particulates are too particular, engraved you, remember, are multidimensional like a star that can't burn out because it's not fire, your heart has no blood but it's red in the cubicle night tulip-shaped but not that. Forget it. I love your experience of how thin matter is even though you're *in* it when you explain it's with your mind which I see it's a vast dark in which you've found a room because its infinite green enclosure suits you for now The Old Language has an aspect of the elements mixed with the dimensions it floats until the Board traps it it's everywhere in the void."

## THE OLD LANGUAGE 3

I am in the basement of a department store reacquainting  
myself with someone I used to know his last name Swain  
I was trying to call you up too, in case you had gone home  
for parts of one are involved in so much communication  
that the daily speaking in the world mistakenly thought important  
cannot handle it all without destroying our complacent surfaces.  
The Old Language can speak on every level holding levels to-  
gether all at once in each cubicle/word/symbol not necessarily  
fixed nor the syntax there are always messages and some  
part of you always *knows* Look there's a piece of  
starfish-like star a grape-like cluster of gemstones  
a flower and the number 4. None of this *means* much not  
the symbols nor the colors yet it communicates and has some beauty  
it's shifting ... is it conscious or a spirit itself And all parts  
of Chaos swim connect and speak not impermanently but  
in a surface of mutation that I hold. And within me you hold.  
Furthermore something spoken holds. Though The Old Language  
simply comes out you don't learn it as finally I the human  
never learned to read one day I just read  
with The Old Language there's no preparation no days before "one day"  
Is this true? Yes my swain though I don't care whether you believe me.  
For I'm the Loving Chaos and can't be defined I am existence  
I don't think and talk like you so I am on trial

## THE CUBICLE OF THE TRIAL

Not in the afterlife but in the underlife—get it? That is,  
the trial's real but will never be explicit until I point it out  
The opening-out-in-front dream cube unstable is green and lives in  
a train station so you can come and go, as you, in relation.  
A red flower in the back, not real but I have dreamed of  
this place, awake you can find me there in the shiftingness  
and ask questions. Are you realer than your body? Of course! I say  
Not the right answer he says ... I can't be bothered I say ...  
Who do you think you are? he says You know who I am, you only have  
to remember: I say this to everyone You know who I am:  
Remember

I was there before you first breathed air out-  
side your mother's body, before and before I am the fluid  
of connection the thinking that is communicated;  
the fluidity of images the saturation of colors  
whether known sensually or in mind; I am the motion  
of your love and the delicacy of your abilities if you have fingers  
or are dead you are your own grace but it is of me.  
In this trial he continues you must answer the questions—  
There is no question—What is your mother's maiden name?  
What was your first pet's name, where were you born, favorite color?  
What is your definition? Who are you at heart? Where do you breathe?

I can't go back  
now except to  
the first place That  
is my answer  
You give me wounds  
but I give you so



much else and my  
wounds always  
heal: It's green in  
this trial right now,  
I always get those  
trains I leave  
the trial and come back.

There are all these tiny holes I slip through and wake up  
But I'm still in his dream: Who do you love? he asks. You have to say ...  
Everyone. You can't love everyone! ... The cubicle widens  
to everywhere But that's just on earth, silly I am the real everywhere.

## Luckiest Girl in the World

### Intake

I am one of the luckiest girls in the whole world. This is what they told me when I walked into the lobby. It was a white room with a white desk and behind the desk is where they sat. They had beautiful long yellow hair and pretty blue eyes and they were on their computers clack clack clacking away. It was amazing to behold. To see them at work. I wondered what it was that they were typing on there. I bet they were looking at websites, blinking at them. Making deals. Perhaps they had accessed the part of the internet where you can buy a boyfriend or a child servant or some strappy high-heeled shoes.

They asked me how my flight went. They asked me if I got their gift beforehand and I said yes it was so cool, and thanks to your amazing gift what happened was I washed it down with the complimentary glass of ginger ale in a little red cup and then I fell asleep. They said that sounds so nice and they all smiled at me.

The plane. Yes there had been a plane. A white humming dot in a blue sky. Babies gurgling on their mothers' laps. A security guard whose hand just kind of hovered over my ass while patting me down. Men and boys and dudes eating hamburgers, and what happens is they are on their cell phones and shouting and masticating as they stand there, right there in front of the gate. And a woman washing her hands in the ladies room informing us that she got a little shit on her pinky. It was my first time at ten thousand feet. My mind went dark when I took the gift they gave me. It was like: Zippo lighter to pretty girl brain. After that: nothing nothing nothing. And then, when I woke up, I became one of the luckiest girls in the whole world.

The beautiful girls behind the desk, when they spoke it was of one voice. It was a soprano. It was a rustle.

Have a seat, they said. Just a few minutes. It won't be long until you begin. Someone will be with you shortly. Please let us know if

you would like a beverage. We have water that is in a box. It seemed appealing to be hydrated. Especially because the day was going to be long. In the first communiqués, weeks ago, the number was six. There would be six hours of practicals, chitchats, conversations, and of course the standard physical exam. The instructions were specific: the main food you can eat is juice, don't get reamed by any cocks, if people ask why you are going on an airplane say because it was getting back in touch with a long-lost relative such as a second cousin or half brother.

The water. I smiled so big.

Yes. OK. Yeah. Please. Thanks so much, I said.

And then from behind the desk, what I heard I think was a button or a lever being either pulled or pushed and it appeared.

Need a straw? they asked.

I straightened my back. This is another thing about being one of the luckiest girls in the world. It's all about poise. I had forgotten poise. I had forgotten: Stand up straight and tall, Miss. Do Not Arch Your Back Like That. Beautiful girls are always smiling and their backs are straight.

Yes, I said, once I was in position. That would be like, so awesome.

Again they pressed a button and the straw materialized. It was red and white striped like a candy cane, and was oh-so cute.

Using my education and intuition, I knew exactly what to do next: press the straw into the box of water, sip gratefully, then put my ass on the chair. The white plastic chair. I did just this. I was so graceful. I sipped and smiled and sauntered to the chair and sat down, crisscross applesauce, looking not at the girls behind the front desk but at the white walls. Inside of my brain it was mostly silence, save for the voice of a man who whispered to me in a beautiful, heavy, druggy tone: It's hard to think when my mind goes blank. You just can't think when your mind goes blank.

I think I heard that one time on the radio.

To the tune of the song, my brain opened up to reveal a hammerhead-shark grin. I saw a car.

I was so close to doing something meaningful with my life. It was all going to be so great. It was all starting to happen for me. I was going to make something of myself. To join their ranks, to be one of them, it was so wonderful for me to imagine. Here's something worth

remembering: the time I got the call. It was in the shopping mall. I had always loved the shopping mall ever since I was so young. I was sitting on the edge of the fountain eating a warm pretzel that I had dipped oh-so gingerly in spicy-hot mustard. It was a girl who looked just like them: yellow hair, blue eyes, a pinafore with a white starched blouse underneath. She had motioned me over and asked me if I'd ever heard of Rat Ltd. MCXVII before.

And I said no I had not. It wasn't on my radar.

And the girl said in a whorish voice: We're looking for pretty girls just like you to work there. Give me your cell phone number?

She handed me a clipboard and I wrote it out in my cleanest script.

Awesome. Awesome! This is how she responded.

Later that day, my cell phone rang. And I received the invite.

It was one of my happiest memories of all time. After that, things became so good for me. It brought me here.

## Physical Examination

The door in the waiting room swung open to reveal another girl. This one was taller. Believe it or not, she was a brunette. Her hair was pin straight. She wore a white lab coat buttoned all the way up. On her feet: white sneakers, marshmallow style. On her face, a pair of see-through lunettes.

If you'd please follow me, she said.

I got up. Like a little lamb, I followed her so sweetly.

She shepherded me to another room. In the center, there was an examination table covered in a little white paper sheet. There was also a table, a little silver table. And on it: a shirt, a navy blue shirt with yellow lettering that read CANDIDATE.

Alrighty, girlfriend, said the girl. Strip for me, chica?

With great care, I began to peel off my clothing. I started first with my socks. My bobby socks. I took them and I placed them to my right in a neat little pile. I was feeling very confident. I could tell I was doing a great job.

No, that's not right, said the girl, strip means you do a little dance.

OKOKOK, seriously no worries at all. Sorry for the misunderstanding, I responded, getting down on my hands and knees. I started to shake my ass a little bit.

Is this better? I asked.

Much, said the girl.

I put my hands on my breasts and rubbed them counterclockwise. I started unbuttoning my blouse. It came off and then I began to finger the zipper on my slacks. My tits were out. I suddenly became very aware of the contours of my body. I pushed my hand down my pants and wiggled my hips.

That's really good, she said.

Oh? I responded.

Super hot, she said, smiling.

I watched from the ground, where I sat there so naked, as the girl's shoes glided across the white tile floor. She was approaching the table. She was grabbing the shirt. She instructed me to stand up. She looked in my eyes, placed a hand on one of my breasts.

Really nice. You did a really good job. They're going to really like you, she said.

The girl took the shirt and put it over my head. When it dropped down, the shirt, it was more of a dress.

Perfect, she said. And now, this is super awkward but I'm going to have to take a black bag and put it over your head so you can't see where it is we're going. Kidnapping is standard procedure. You haven't signed an NDA yet so that's just how it has to be. Cool?

I smiled so big that you could see deep, deep into the folds of my throat.

Yeah! That would be super cool with me. Thanks for asking first!

She took a black bag and placed it over my head, and I felt like I wanted to scream. I really did. You will have to take my word for it, but I could hardly breathe and the darkness was so overwhelming that it was like all of the life was being drained out of my skull and I was being ejected far off into space. Maybe as far as the moon. Possibly as far as Orion's Belt.

But instead I said to her: Ha ha ha! This is so weird! It's like we're playing cops and robbers at age eight!

## Boxing Practical

Picture this: me, body swung over the shoulder of some chick in all-white scientist clothes. Picture this: it's just like the *Rape of the Sabines*, except instead of screaming and crying I'm giggling uncontrollably like a little slut from Bavaria.

But in my mind I wondered: How could she be so effortlessly cruel? How, how, how could she?

When my sight was restored, I was in a gym. In the room there were dozens of girls. They all wore white. Some were in lab coats like My Kidnapper, others were in dresses, little tattered numbers with high necklines and ruffles around the sleeves, some were in bicycle shorts and sports bras, a few in suits, well-tailored ones. The girls, they were all there to watch me.

This is what they said to me as My Kidnapper ushered me into the boxing ring:

You got this, girlfriend!

You're gonna kill this, lady!

You got this in the bag!

We love you! We love you! We love you!

I had never boxed before, never been in the ring. Never had I ever even seen a boxing match. I was going off of instinct, pure instinct. The beautiful girls put a hot towel around my neck. They made me open my mouth and one of them placed a plastic mouth guard in there. They put a pair of boxing gloves on my hands, red ones. And I stood there, ready to fight.

My Kidnapper walked into the ring. She was tapping a pen on her clipboard. She adjusted her lunettes, pushed them up the bridge of her nose.

As you know, she said, here at Rat Ltd. MCXVII, we're looking for a fighter! Someone who is really going to go to bat for her fellow employees. We're looking for someone who is awesome. Like, a team player. You know: she's smart, flirty, funny, risk-taker, super cool, unique, funky, sparkly, quirky, freaky, freak in the sheets, girl next door, daddy's little girl, one of the Sabines, one of the boys, virginal goddess, Ubermensch, Everyman, car owner, homeowner, girlfriend, best friend. Best of all, she can roll with the punches. If this is you, then you'll be totally at ease with the boxing practical.

I smiled and nodded and blinked. It was hard for me to speak given the mouth guard.

Rock 'n' roll! said My Kidnapper.

And I watched in horror and in glee as my opponent entered the ring.

The girl was thin, svelte you might say. Looked about fourteen, fifteen. Definitely a teenager. Average height (5'4"–5'5"). No tits. Or, she had them, they were just really small. Glassy blue eyes, ash-colored hair worn in two pigtails. In a white blouse made of lace and white linen pants. Carrying an old crocheted blanket. She shuffled around the ring, not even really lifting up the soles of her feet. It looked like she was waking up from a dream, like she didn't even know where she was. And I stood there in position, fists in gloves, ready to throw the first punches. I did not want to fight the teen girl. But I did not see any other options.

She got closer, closer, until she was right beside me. Her eyes were closed. She licked her lips. Cracked her back. Let out a little yawn.

Oh hi there, said the girl, fumbling around in the pockets of her pants. I'm looking for my knife, it will be just a moment.

I waited patiently for the girl to find her knife, although I found it perplexing that it would be a battle between a boxer and a teenager with a knife.

Get her while she's not looking! yelled the girls from outside of the ring.

So I gritted my teeth and I took my hands and I began to punch at her, the girl, the teenager, until she was on the ground.

Ouch! she said, I'm in pain! It hurts when you punch me with your boxing gloves.

I am sorry, I said, swinging my fist into her face for another punch, but I was told I had to do this to solidify my position as one of the luckiest girls in the whole world.

The girl twitched and then stopped moving. Everyone began to cheer. It was so nice to see I was fitting in, and that I could one day have a place here. This is what I wanted: to blend in, to be an asset, to be awesome at my job. I wanted to kill it, I really did.

They said: We're so proud of you for beating up that teenager!

And the music began and all the girls in white, they were dancing because they were so happy for me. And I took my hands and felt my

face and it was wet and I looked off into the distance and I could see her, the teenage girl, she was on a stretcher carried by her friends, the others, my fellow ladies, my fellow girls, and the prognosis, I could tell, it was not good.

## BMX Practical

They made me go on a BMX bike and they said I had to pop a wheelie. They said it was no biggie if I'd never done it before, if I could ride a bike, I probably could ride BMX. I looked a little silly on the bike in my big shirt that said CANDIDATE on it, but after three hours of interviewing, now I really wanted the job to be one of the luckiest girls in the whole world. To me, it was worth becoming a vegetable for life. The amazing girls were proving to me that this was the kind of work environment I'd really thrive in. It is considered noble to be a DareDevil, and that's what the name of the game was at Rat Ltd. MCXVII.

Here I was in the air. I was flying on the bike. I was so very graceful. As I got closer to the ground it was as if heaven were below me. When I dismounted the bike, the girls clapped again and they showered me with love.

I am reminded that it is the love from your girls that is the deepest, bluest, truest. I could tell everyone wanted me to succeed.

## The Sabines Do the Raping

They were all touching my hair. They were all stroking my body. Through magic that is dark and light, they figured out where all the good stuff was. Was it that I had become more beautiful since I had arrived? It was possible. Before, when I got the call, they told me time moved funny at Rat Ltd. MCXVII. It will be different here, that's for sure, said the woman on the phone. Perhaps this is what she meant? Perhaps it was true that now at hour four that this is when you can tell. You grow soft. Your cheeks are a coral shade. Everyone wants to touch you. On the way to the next practical, they had their way with me and even though it was not my first time, instead what I said was: Ha ha, wow this is so weird, I have never let lovely girls touch me down there.



## Would You Rather

Interviewer: Would you rather be a human Ferrari or get to teleport ten places a year?

CANDIDATE: What?

Interviewer: :( :( :(

CANDIDATE: Ha ha ha! Ferrari, duh!

## Maternal Instincts

In the room there was no light, and then there was, and when I could see again, the room was full of children. It was a daycare. Plastic chairs and tables. A green chalkboard where there was a picture of a sunflower who smiled. Using my hands, I counted the number of the children in the room. There were sixteen and they all sat there, on the ground. They were smiling at me. They sat there and made not even a hushed sound.

What I could hear instead was a low buzz, perhaps it was one of those noises only children can hear? Well, children and also the luckiest girls in the world.

Hello, sixteen children, I said in a honeyed tone.

Hi teacher! they all said to me.

My purpose here is not clear, but I'm really glad to make your acquaintance.

A little girl in the front shifted her legs. She was wearing a pair of little tiny glasses. If I were to guess, she was six years old.

You're here because they want to see if you got good maternal instincts. Like, maybe you could show us how you would be our mommy?

Yes, I said, fluttering my eyelashes.

I instructed the sixteen kids to sit in a line and brush one another's hair. I had them play with colored pencils and crayons and draw beautiful pictures of what they thought Rat Ltd. MCXVII was all about. They did a 500-piece puzzle. They stacked blocks and transformed them into what a more discerning artist would refer to as

a child-sized version of the Tatlin Tower. I told them it was beautiful. I told them that if they continued to be good they could all have a smoke afterwards. I had Marlboro Golds. We all lit up and then I gave them gummy candy in the shapes of apples, bananas, and pears to promote a balanced diet. They ate them so cautiously, and when they opened and closed their mouths they made adorable chewing noises.

I told them all that I loved them, and I did, it was true. These children, they were my own. It was so wonderful when they climbed atop me, my little monkeys. I gave them hugs and kisses. I told them that one day they could be a modern dancer or an epistemologist or a school shooter. They all told me that they were going to miss me and that it was really nice for me to say all that stuff but they were born here and that this is the kind of place that kids don't leave.

Realistically, said the little girl in the glasses, we'll probably just die here.

## Hair and Makeup

A red dress of gathered tulle. A pair of long opera gloves, white satin. Black stockings with a floral motif. Golden mules with an ostrich-feather fringe. Girl, if you wouldn't mind just sitting tight for a second, we'll take the hot rollers out momentarily. Boticellian babe. You look literally so good. It's been five hours, but it's like you've been here forever, girlfriend. Go like this, like a fish. Now make a popping sound. OK, perfect! That's definitely your color. Close your eyes for me? Gorgeous, gorgeous. We love a little sparkle on an eyelid now, don't we? It's going to be just a few more minutes. We're just perfecting your look for the final interview. You're seriously going to love the Creative Director. He's a visionary. We're sure you know everything about him already. You seem really well prepared. You totally killed it during the practicals. Don't sweat it girlie, he's going to be obsessed with you! OK, now pucker your lips, cutie pie. Fuschia? That's going to look soooo good. Just a little spritz of perfume. Name a mood, we'll pick the scent! *Sitting on the back of Giuseppe's Vespa somewhere deep in the Amalfi coast with a negroni in hand?* OK, obsessed! You have an amazing imagination. Wow! Yes! You are ready to go!

## Creative Director

How are we doing today? Did the girls take good care of you? Let's take a look at your file, shall we? A few years working in covert thermodynamics? I'm interested in hearing about what's leading you to pivot out of covert thermodynamics and into working for shell companies. You're right, it's definitely a question of reach. I'm sure you already know this but Rat Ltd. MCXVII has about ten million uniques per month. We're hoping to go public before the end of Q4. Most of our audience is West Coast-based, we recently opened a Shanghai office and one in Berlin. It says here you have working proficiency in French and basic conversational Italian. That's great. Really good stuff. Wow. What's the scent you're wearing? Did you ask the girls for *Sitting on the back of Giuseppe's Vespa somewhere deep in the Amalfi coast with a negroni in hand*? It's really nice. You look so good. Here's what I want to do: I want you to come up here on this \$10,000 Danish teak desk that I bought on a website and spread your pussy lips out for daddy. No? OK, totally cool. I had to ask. They did a great job with you. I trust you enjoyed meeting some of my staffers.

I blinked and smiled. It was the last thirty minutes. The Creative Director was sitting on top of the teak desk, crouched like a praying mantis. I was on a moss-colored mid-century sectional, had my legs crossed.

They were really lovely, I responded, the staffers, the girls.

Fabulous, that's so great to hear. They had really good things to say about you as well. So tell me, what are your greatest strengths?

Well, I said, I have a certain spunk to me and am known universally for my witticisms. And of course I am strong as well—in the physical sense.

Witticisms? Sorry but it's going to be a no from me. No jokes. No silly stuff. We're serious here. *Goo goo gah gah, me no funny ha ha*. This is all wrong. It's confusing to me that you made it so far given the above remarks. I'm looking at your file, it said you *totally killed it* at the BMX practical? Impossible. Impossible. This will be terrible for our brand image. I'd ask you to explain yourself but I'm horny as fuck and kind of just want to eat you. Seriously fuck. *You were supposed to be weeded out already*. I need to make a call. I need my Girl Friday to

place a phone call. Hello? This is the Creative Director. We need to dispose of the candidate. Yeah, yeah. That girl you found at the mall with three years of experience in covert thermodynamics. Please come and get rid of her.

## Explanation of Benefits

My greatest dream as a little girl was to live a long and happy life full of insurmountable beauty, full of friendship, tulips, and Live Oak. I did not want it to end this way. I had so much life in me. I was literally just, like, bursting with life. I had so many plots and plans. I was meant to experience big, passionate love. I hadn't ever gotten my heart broken. There was of course l'uomo. His cock doing anal to my bootyhole. And a 2006 Honda Accord—Gala Apple Red. And a bottle of malt liquor which rests on a plastic crate formerly containing milk bottles—his BMX bike skirting our beautiful dirt like a matador, *toro toro toro toro, killer of bulls, killer of bulls*.

But no—the special boy was not a true love.

And yes—in my brief life there was so much I hadn't done.

I had never been to Dublin, Sarajevo, the border of Greece and the country which is known today as North Macedonia. I had never eaten escargot or caviar or spent \$300 on espadrilles. I've never luxuriated, badly. That age of decadence—none of that happened yet.

Do you know what I am saying?

I am oh-so young. Like a babe born from the egg.

When they put me on a leash and walked me toward the recycling station, all I could think of was how cruel they'd been. I had been so misled. I was promised the opportunity to be one of the luckiest girls in the whole world. What was I now? Unlucky, I suppose. It was unfair. It was unfair.

I was there in the recycling station. They put me on a conveyor belt, promised they'd be in touch. And then, Zippo lighter to pretty girl brain, I was nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing at all.

CÉSAR DÁVILA ANDRADE  
Translated by Jonathan Simkins

## URBAN GUIDE

Under the smut of the ceilings;  
under bucklers the Priests  
baptized in cider;  
behind the equestrian rocks;  
amid the golden light of the mares;  
beside mausoleums  
clad in the slime of ale.

Under the gelatinous husk  
of eclipses;  
between angels sewn to parachutes.  
Over ten miles of pasture  
compressed by the dew;  
between the kilns of swans;  
amid the burners of Hosts.  
Just  
behind the Coptic Cemetery  
and the reservoirs of tar and India ink.  
Under the damascene skin  
scourged at dawn, there:  
You,  
                  DAMOCLES!  
Solitary line.  
Line of agony and metal.  
You  
and  
Others.

## GUÍA URBANA

Bajo la obscenidad de los cielorrasos;  
bajo los blindajes bautizados con sidra  
y con Obispos;  
tras las rocas ecuestres;  
entre la luz dorada de las yeguas;  
junto a los mausoleos  
enfundados en limo de cerveza.

Bajo el cascarón de gelatina  
de los eclipses;  
entre los ángeles cosidos a los paracaídas.  
Sobre el pasto prensado  
a diez millas del relente;  
entre los hornos para cisnes;  
entre las hornillas para Hostias.  
Justamente  
detrás del Cementerio Copto  
y de los estanques de brea y tinta china.  
Bajo la piel adamasquinada  
de los azotados al amanecer, allí:  
Tú,

DAMOCLES!

Línea sola.  
Línea de metal y de agonía.  
Tú  
y  
Otros.

## PORIFERA

The spongy geometry of rain  
in the corrals and in the aqueducts,  
after the horses trotted past with their load of saffron,  
has waxed incessantly  
over the bales of wool, solid and silent,  
over the bales of wool  
augured in September by the discs of priests.

The spongy contours of scolopendras  
and the caterpillars suckled on elderberry leaves  
are mowed down soundlessly by the feathered wagon  
of the tombs.

The spongy kilter of stellar multitudes  
—stars and caterpillars of stars, novae—  
has been ripening ceaselessly beyond time  
in the wine vats buried  
millions of bright summers ago,  
and now it swells the foci of cerebral sperm  
in homage to the scarlet force  
of the hecatombs.

## ESPONGIARIO

La forma esponjada de la lluvia  
en los corrales y en los acueductos,  
después de que pasan con su carga de azafrán los caballos,  
ha estado creciendo sin fin  
en las pacas de lana, concretas y mudas,  
en las pacas de lana  
auguradas en setiembre por los discos sacerdotales.

La forma esponjada de las escolopendras  
y las orugas alimentadas con hojas de saúco  
se arrollan sin rumor en la carreta de plumas  
de las tumbas.

La forma esponjada de las muchedumbres estelares  
—astros y orugas de astros, estrellas novas—  
ha estado creciendo sin fin ni tiempo  
en las cubas de vinos enterradas  
hace millones de veranos fúlgidos,  
e hincha ahora los focos de espermas cerebrales  
en honor a la fuerza escarlata  
de las hecatombes.



## CONSUMMATE HUMAN

*(Fragment)*

O sea of mausoleums and sierras.  
Sea of maelstroms and thunder thronged with elephants  
of bulky ink and slender muskets.  
Until my final breath I weave the water I heard  
through wax and wailing, and food  
sprinkled on the pillows  
by the perished mouth of the mother.

Sea of slumber rained for a thousand years  
on the shipwreck of the Cordillera  
in the nasal smoke of horses,  
over cemeteries submerged  
in mud to the black jaws  
butchered by the grass!

Sea of sepulchres and altiplanos.  
O breasts of buckwheat raw in the deluge;  
homicides face down in the downpour;  
drunks blazing in the drizzle:  
corrals and burials in the rain. The trot of foxes  
on account of the rain. Fertilized in the rain  
the mare expels her foal in moist contractions.  
Hens assemble their skeleton, swaddle their crop  
of soggy feathers.  
A cockroach creeps through the armpits  
of slain mounts lying in the rain.  
Rain fluffs the scolopendras;

## HOMBRE TOTAL

*(Fragmento)*

Oh mar de los sepulcros y las sierras.  
Mar de los torbellinos y los truenos poblados de elefantes  
de tinta gorda y de fusiles flacos.  
Estoy tejiendo hasta mi muerte el agua que oí  
a través de cera y duelo y comida  
regada en las almohadas  
por la boca difunta de la madre.

Mar del sueño llovido por mil años  
hasta el naufragio de la Cordillera  
en el humo nasal de los caballos;  
dentro los cementerios inundados  
de lodo hasta los negros maxilares  
muertos de hierba!

Mar de sepulcros y de altiplanos.  
Ay senos de alforfón crudos de lluvia;  
homicidios de bruces en la lluvia;  
borracheras ardiendo entre la lluvia:  
Entierros y corrales en la lluvia. Por la lluvia  
caminan las raposas. En la lluvia la yegua  
es fecundada y contracciones húmedas la expulsan.  
Las gallinas reúnen su esqueleto, cubren su buche  
de plumas mojadas.  
Anda la cucaracha en las axilas  
de las monturas muertas en la lluvia.  
La lluvia esponja las escolopendras;

inks the pregnancy of spiders,  
rots the chilly chuckle of the pony.

Crutches blossom in the rain  
and perspire the wounded.  
Love lays down drowsing flesh  
in the grey sheets of bride and groom.  
Bulls darken the corners,  
wobble the cracks of excrement and rain.  
The rotting eyelashes of thieves  
lurk to the last, slain by the rain.  
Lanterns blink out in the mire  
brimming with butterflies and triggers.

By this sea of tombs and volcanoes.  
By this sea of the cumuli of oblivion!  
Cheers to this sea of chilling rain. Cheers to the suicide.

The snail swaggers over the sleepless.  
Maggots dribble into the basins,  
their spring of puny black bodies  
vomiting new pores in the rain.  
The worm conveys our viscera.  
Shawls always perish heavier  
when rain reposes in the bonds of nuptials.  
Today death gains entry to the granary  
and deadbolts the heart of the commissar.

Invariably the scourges lash again,  
whips forever supple  
in the moisture of the rain.  
And the sunken rumps of Indians  
sink, shrink, bite their shrieks  
beneath the black cables of punishment.  
Hail, O sea of cusps and coffins.  
The cordillera advances on the shrine.  
The fibula advances bereft of its bitter sheath.

entinta la preñez de las arañas,  
pudre la fría risa del caballo.

Las muletas florecen en la lluvia  
y sudan al herido.  
El amor tiende carne adormecida  
en las sábanas grises de los novios.  
Los toros oscurecen los rincones:  
Tiemblan las grietas de escremento y lluvia.  
Los ladrones se pudren las pestañas  
acechando hasta el fin, muertos de lluvia.  
Las linternas se ahogan en el fango  
llenas de mariposas y gatillos.

Por este mar de tumbas y volcanes.  
Por este mar de cúmulos de olvido!  
Salud, por este mar de lluvia fría. Salud por el suicidio.

El caracol desfila en los insomnios.  
Los gusanos gotean las palanganas,  
vomita nuevos poros en la lluvia  
su manantial de cuerpecillos negros.  
La lombriz comunica nuestras vísceras.  
Las mantas mueren siempre más pesadas  
cuando la lluvia duerme en matrimonio.  
Hoy penetra la muerte en el granero  
y aldaba el corazón del comisario.

Para siempre los látigos reviven,  
los látigos por siempre son flexibles  
mojados en la lluvia.  
Y las nalgas hundidas de los indios  
caen, se chupan, muerden los aullidos  
bajo los cables negros del castigo.  
Salve, oh mar de ataúdes y de cúspides.  
La cordillera avanza hacia el sepulcro.  
Avanza el peroné sin su agria funda.

O sea of summits, clouds and gallows.  
Skeletons of the solitary toilet.  
The fox makes off with dead chickens  
and wolfs them down with icy sauce.  
The black sowings and the ganglia.  
Green bellies bob up in the water.  
Everything is dead in the black waste.  
Ants wage battle with the hosts.  
Bread rots and the autopsy lies unopened.  
The snail plods across insomniacs.  
The snail slithers over graves.  
Cheers, O sea of germs and rot...!

Oh mar de cumbres, nubes y cadalzos.  
Esqueletos de aseo solitario.  
El zorro esconde las gallinas muertas  
y las devora en salsa escalofriada.  
Las sementeras negras y los ganglios.  
Los vientres llegan verdes sobre el agua.  
Todo está muerto en los residuos negros.  
Las hormigas combaten con las hostias.  
El pan se pudre y nadie abre la autopsia.  
El caracol desfila en los insomnios.  
El caracol va a gatas por las tumbas.  
Salud, oh mar de podredumbre y gérmenes...!

## Translator's Note

This poem was believed to have been destroyed until June 2021, when this fragment was found in *Presencia: Revista Ecuatoriana de Cultura*.<sup>†</sup> In letters to Benjamín Carrión and Galo René Pérez, Dávila Andrade refers to “Hombre total” as the title of his forthcoming second volume of poetry, which was ultimately published as *Catedral salvaje*.<sup>‡</sup> Per Jorge Enrique Adoum, “Hombre total” was a poem Dávila Andrade had begun some years earlier and later destroyed, dissatisfied with its straightforward biblical theme.\*

In “Consummate Human” and throughout the oeuvre of Dávila Andrade, I have translated “indio” as “Indian.” “Indígena,” the equivalent of the English “Indigenous,” did not enter into Ecuadorian Spanish until well after Dávila Andrade’s death. When Dávila Andrade’s speaker uses “indio,” there is a self-referential quality that points to the Mestizo identity central to Ecuadorian selfhood. Unfortunately, the English word “Indian” does not carry over these connotations, but it is closer to “indio” than “indígena” as it functions in mid-twentieth-century poetry to describe the Indigenous peoples of the American continent.

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†/ *Presencia: Revista Ecuatoriana de Cultura* 1, no. 1 (1950): 49–52.

‡/ César Dávila Andrade, “Varias Cartas,” in *Cuadernos 5: César Dávila Andrade*, ed. Gustavo Salazar (Madrid, 2012): 45–46, 56–58.

\*/ Jorge Enrique Adoum, “Un poema sobre la tierra,” *Letras del Ecuador*, no. 73–74 (Quito: Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana, 1951): 13.

An Exchange, March 28, 2021–March 5, 2022

*JW: The first book of yours I read was The Cosmopolitan (Coffee House Press, 2008), selected by John Yau for the National Poetry Series. I started following your work at that point, with Model City (Shearsman Books, 2015) and Transaction Histories (University of Iowa Press, 2018). That last title was accompanied by your study Prose Poetry and the City (Parlor Press, 2018) and a chapbook, Ten Ruins (Catenary Press, 2018), that appears to be the first installment of another long prose poem series. At that point it made sense for me to seek out the two earlier works, The Reservoir (University of Georgia Press, 2002) and Souvenir de Constantinople (Instance Press, 2007).*

*I'm really struck by the consistency and coherence of your work—not the consistency of quality, of course, but rather the consistency over time of your obsessions, and the formal coherence of your experimentation with the prose poem. Even a work such as Souvenir de Constantinople—which is, for the most part, in free-verse couplets, elliptical in its movement, and kind of kaleidoscopic in its vision and fragmentary style—gestures toward prose form as a single long-poem narrative.*

*It is already such an impressive body of work, Donna—and there's such excitement around the promise of the Ruins of Nostalgia series—I wonder if you can tell us something about where your poetry started from, conceptually and formally, and how it developed into the trajectory that we're finding from book to book.*

**DS:** Thank you so much, Josh. I suppose it started with being a dreamer and an introvert, radically empathetic and precocious with language. It also started with my father's decision to take a job in Tehran, Iran, in 1976, which gave me my first real taste of worlds beyond the provincial Seattle I grew up in. I knew I wanted to be a poet from the time I was eleven, when my sixth-grade teacher taught us how to write haiku. Before that I had fancied myself a visual artist, but I could only copy things that already existed. I started writing the poems that went into



my first book one summer in 1996 when I was living in Prague and reading Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*, Mei-me Berssenbrugge's *The Heat Bird*, and Rosmarie Waldrop's *The Reproduction of Profiles*, all of which had a profound impact on me. I'm not able to see the trajectory that you see, of course, since I have either zero distance from my own work or too much distance from it—in the sense that I feel only a Brechtian *Verfremdung* when I look at, say, my first two books, and haven't opened either one in many years. We started publishing around the same time—is it the same for you with your early books?

*I pick them up from time to time and will look at a poem, the way you might lift up a photograph sitting on a lower shelf somewhere, out in the open but kind of invisible, until a certain funny kind of mood comes over you and you reach for it. It's like you're checking to see if you really did exist; I guess that's the kind of alienation effect you're describing. At the same time, I feel a lot of continuity with who I was and have been, even as I've inevitably changed—I'll be hitting fifty-eight here in a couple of weeks! But there's a part of me that feels very much in touch with who I was as an eight-year-old. In an essay somewhere, I think by Garry Wills, he describes how Dickens's great insight into identity is that everyone has a child-self of a particular age that they're in touch with still, as an adult.<sup>1</sup> That's one of those passing remarks that you come across sometimes in your reading, and it seems so right you never forget it.*

*So, speaking of being eight, in 1976, you were eight years old then, and living in Tehran! Do you carry a particular memory or two that exemplify the feeling of being a small someone in a radical elsewhere?*

Oh, there are many (though I was seven!). I actually tried to collect those memories into a memoir about my childhood years in Tehran, but while researching it, my anger at how the United States treated Iran (the 1953 coup especially) kept threatening to take over the book. And finally it did take over, and I couldn't figure out how to reconcile the two parts. So the memoir is now in the proverbial drawer, though I do hope to figure out how to write it someday. Part of what I tried to write about was how quickly that elsewhere became home and how the culture shock I remember best was actually going back to Seattle after three years, moving back into the house I was born in, going back to the same school, with some of the same kids.

The *Verfremdungseffekt* I was referring to with my earliest books seems to be different from yours: I look at them and I'm not convinced "I" did exist, because I don't recognize the writing in them as mine. The author seems familiar, like a sister I haven't seen in many years maybe, but she does not feel like "me." I'm wondering if this is a calculable phenomenon: if, after X years have passed, a book I wrote will cease to feel like mine. Like how supposedly we have all new cells after seven or ten years.

*Oh, I think the feeling of that effect you're describing is pretty common. I feel sometimes like one of the great mysteries for each of us when we look back at ourselves is the question, who were we then, and how did that happen? It's the distance that objectifies us to ourselves. Like Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo" is not really an ancient bust in the Louvre that he gazes at and that looks back at him with its exhortation, "You must change your life." Rather it's the photograph of himself as a young man that he writes the earlier sonnet about. It's an image of you that's no longer you that is asking you questions about yourself now. These images we have of ourselves—literal images by virtue of relatively new tech, like the photograph, but also ancient tech, like poetry—do seem like existential sites of time-rubbed erasure, essential ruins of self, shot through with a nostalgia that is intimate and estranged at once, not so unlike the phenomenal world of objects that you capture with such redolence in the Ruins of Nostalgia series. But you are intent also on capturing, in that series, a much more complex and unsettling projection, the way that individual pasts can become commodified, such that "some people were nostalgic for other people's pasts." What is it about the sentence, and about the sentence in the formal context of prose (as opposed to, for example, the formal context of the strophic lyric), that has been feeling like the right form over the course of several books, each of which sustains the sense of continuing to complement the others?*

That's one of those questions I may take, answerless, to my grave—I suppose it's true of any tendency or predilection, like why do I gravitate to daffodils rather than tulips (both blooming right now) or why does one prefer this flavor over that? But there are some theories out there that help, such as Roman Jakobson's essay on two types of aphasia, which I wrote about in my book *Prose Poetry and*

*the City*. According to that essay, when people experience speech disturbances, it occurs in one of two ways: either their metaphorical capacity for language is hampered, or their metonymic capacity. They are either afflicted by similarity disorder, in which they are unable to think and express themselves metaphorically, or contiguity disorder, in which they can't string together whole sentences. These two capacities correspond to Saussure's vertical and horizontal axes of language (usually associated with poetry and prose, respectively), and in the essay Jakobson figures poetry and prose as the two poles of language—metaphoric and metonymic. The point is that, on some level, our tendencies toward poetry or prose are neurological—the reason I can't write a novel is because the language center in my brain is set up for metaphorical but not metonymic production. And if, as a poet, I became aphasic, presumably I would be only able to emit single words. So the prose poem, the poetic sentence, might be an attempt to synthesize the two irreconcilable poles. I do find it telling that I first started seriously writing prose poems when I lived in Prague, which was my first long sojourn abroad as an adult, and also when I first felt my legs moving apart, like the classic earthquake scene, as they tried to straddle my desire to live in Europe and my longings for the home I abandoned.

Lately, as I'm submerged in writing a book about architectural ornament, I've been thinking of the sentence more as a built architectural unit. All poems are architectural, of course. But a sentence, like a building, requires certain constructional elements in order to stand that lines in a lineated poem don't. The German word for syntax is *Satzbau*—literally “sentence + construction/building,” the way a sentence is built. Maybe my fascination for sentences and my fascination for architecture both stem from the same place, a psychological fascination for shelter in structures that stand.

*What you're saying, through that continuum of Jakobson's, makes sense to me, being a poet married to a novelist, but a novelist who started out as a poet!*

*I like your notion of the sentence as an architectural form—writing good sentences is such a demanding discipline, and to do it in an expressive way, not just a constructive way that serves a prosaic meaning, is so very difficult. I always think of Thomas Hardy when I*

*consider this tension between verse and prose, partly because his novels contain so much great poetry and his poems are so good at telling stories. Of course, he was trained as an architect, and with his feeling for gothic twists and turns, intricate weird asymmetries, his verbal shape-making is unlike anyone else's.*

*But thinking about the implications buried in the figure of the sentence as a building unit leads to the idea of continuities and structural integrities; and one of the qualities or aspects you explore with such relish in *Prose Poetry and the City* is the way that the prose poem, as a form, exploits the opportunity for breakage that we associate with formal actions of verse—the way the sentence keeps breaking in relation to the line. You cite Barthes, writing that prose poetry interjects the horizontality of prose with a “vertical project.”<sup>2</sup> That’s the connection you’re noticing, how the “new spatial model” of the modern city calls for the new spatial model of the prose poem.<sup>3</sup> What’s complicating all this in a rich way is how you’ve introduced the notion just now of “shelter,” whereas in your monograph you are also fascinated by gaps, discontinuities, fragments, density, and collage—qualities exemplified, for you, in the prose poems of a writer like Rosmarie Waldrop. My own sense is that your prose sequences work through spatial forms that create constellations of connecting points—these forms are not dependent on motif, exactly, but rather on other kinds of more discrete repetitions, repetitions that are not determined by set patterns or “themes.” Does that make sense? How has the prose poem been a sheltering form for you? Is it possible to say?*

Ah, shelter—did I say that? Yes, I guess I did. If we were detectives, I think you would have just unearthed a valuable clue. Upon publishing *The Cosmopolitan* I was asked about why I write prose poems, and I said that for me line breaks are seductive, but that they feel like cliffs leading to a kind of dangerous euphoria. I think writing poems without line breaks (which is actually the term I prefer over “prose poems,” but it’s clunky) protects me from those cliffs, from the free fall of the line break, which is maybe too much of an invitation to my own tendency to overdramatize. Having to keep building the line all the way to the right margin, having to keep building the sentence, keeps me grounded, and thus protected. That’s a slightly different metaphor from shelter, but it’s not unrelated. Forms and constraints

keep me grounded and sheltered too. The free verse poem is really an invitation to jump from an airplane without a parachute—or it would be if poets didn't just adapt rhythms and infrastructures from already established models. Which is what most of us are doing when we write poetry anyway, of course.

*Poems without line breaks: maybe German can facilitate: brüchenlose Gedichte (brokenless poems)? What you describe as the dramatic action of the break and your instinct for sheltering in prose calls to mind this passage from your long poem Souvenir de Constantinople:*

*Danger  
authenticates*

*and the true traveller  
courts*

*authentic  
dangers...<sup>4</sup>*

*That poem brings together the subgenres of travelogue poem and love poem—but of course, one travels and falls in love! Its free-verse couplets do stage the kinds of enjambments you're alluding to, and maybe enact in some way the thrill—the vertigo—of journeying, especially the journey into intimacy with another. Still, that poem, for all of its elliptical self-dramatizing, seems very much in tune with the cooler, more meditative, more speculative prose sentences of your recent book Transaction Histories.*

I always imagined it would shift back and forth for me—I've always expected to go back to lineated poems, with all their potential for drama. But it hasn't happened yet. As Rosmarie Waldrop wrote in my favorite essay title, perhaps ever: "Why Do I Write Prose Poems (When My True Love Is Verse)." Thanks to her work and others', that's not entirely true for me, but I know exactly what she means. I think the prose poem is one of the last partly explored planets of poetry; there's so much more to discover. I'm thinking today of Friederike Mayröcker, the Austrian poet whose work I'm translating, who died yesterday (June 4, 2021). She does marvelous things with the form

that I wish I had thought of, with her underlinings and her words in ALL CAPS and “etc.,” modulations that lend rhythm and counterpoint to her sentences and sentence fragments. Her book I’m at work on, *cahier*, is a massive, shifting musical composition of fragments. Yes, they are *zeilenumbrüchelse Gedichte*.

*Oh, I’m glad you stepped toward Mayröcker. It sounds as if her cahier, in its style or modality, is very much like the work of hers you translated previously, études. It’s an enchanting work, but also wracked with pain—what holds us there, in the writing, are a few things that maybe connect to your own work: she writes explicitly, in a self-reflexive way, about the entries (it’s like a journal, or notebook, with dated entries, though not in chronological order), that they are, she writes, “all collage = or bricolage, all reckoning.”<sup>5</sup> And there are other such statements that help us understand how the writing is constructed, for all its expressive eccentricities. And like other successful works that experiment with language and form, the writing teaches us how to read it—it cultivates its audience. And one of the most basic formal elements in play throughout that work is a kind of patterning through repetition of phrases, which combine and recombine to create something like the fabric of memory, which is never fixed but associative, nonlinear, and which nevertheless also creates the experience of formal coherence. Bricolage, perhaps, but the motifs are not made from whatever’s at hand, nor are they trifling. And it strikes me that this is not an inapt description in some ways of your own serial poems, from *The Cosmopolitan* through *Model City* and *Transaction Histories*. Well, I promise that I’m not poking around for an influence, but rather to see if you feel like you found a kindred spirit in Mayröcker. But/and: If there are things that you feel you learned from her directly that you carried into your own writing, is it possible to say more?*

I wouldn’t call Mayröcker an influence, mostly because I didn’t start to read her until my late thirties, only after I had learned German well enough to do so. But a kindred spirit, yes. Ryan Ruby perceptively called her one of the most important elegists of our time, and I guess there is an elegiac urge informing my writing, too.<sup>6</sup> I certainly feel in tune with her melancholy. (Though there’s so much joy in her writing, and humor, and intellectual inquiry.) I did find a Mayröckerian tic or

two trying to smuggle itself into my own writing while translating *études*, such as using “etc.” excessively, but I think I was able to extract most of it upon revision. Occupational hazard. Did Nelly Sachs do that for your writing? *cahier* is quite different from *études*, actually, which was a surprise to me—I was expecting more of the same, perhaps a gentle development gradually into an only slightly different mode. But in *cahier* the grief over her partner, the poet Ernst Jandl, becomes less central, and the sentences and phrasal units of the poems are much more exaggeratedly orchestrated—she’s long referred to herself as a composer, and one feels that keenly in *cahier*. The repeating phrases are like fragments of melody that emerge and submerge and then reemerge, in different combinations.

*I’m not sure. Maybe Sachs has been a different kind of poet for me than Mayröcker has been for you. I mean in terms of proximity (period and sensibility), Sachs holds some qualities in common with other poets whose work has seeped into mine—Blake, Rimbaud, Mina Loy.... But closeness is never really predicated on time, is it? I feel her as a kind of pressure, like in the air, but with colorations derived from qualities of elemental diction and, with Sachs, as with Loy, tight rhythms and density in the sounds and syntax. I love those textures.*

*Mayröcker calls herself, in études, “a constructionist,” which returns us to your interest in the Satzbau, and the poet, even, as a kind of Satzbauer or sentence-builder, maybe even sentence-farmer? (That’s my playing around, of course, not hers.) Sachs feels like she’s building poems out of stones that she can barely lift, like they’re these cairns she’s leaving behind her on her journeying. Mayröcker feels like she’s working with everything in reach, on broadly framed canvases—ribbons, notebook entries, photos ripped from magazines, letters, daybook quotations, dream journals, telegrams, crêpe paper, bottle tops, coupons, lyric poems, lipstick, flower petals, razor blades, and all infused with a convulsive ache. Gives me something like the same feeling I get looking at those huge works by Cy Twombly: the epic and the domestic kind of crushed together.*

That’s a terrific description of Mayröcker’s process, and a heartbreaking metaphor for Sachs’s. I feel for her and those heavy stones.

*I've been thinking about your sustained, and sustaining, translation work (in terms of poetry work, never remunerated adequately), and this question of how close and careful ongoing work in translation works its way into us. If you'll indulge me, I'd like to place three different passages from three different writers you've translated in the last ten years side by side to think about sentences, and the movement between sentences, clauses, and phrases.*

### **Early Start**

*It is not child's play, getting up at two or three in the morning, the hour at which one usually sleeps most deeply, in such a dark hut, with the wind rushing through it, in the midst of such a totally inhospitable mountain night; the mountain night, which makes everything more uncanny than ever, in which the mountain becomes a boundless dark mass, in reality not unlike those demonic dream-figures that plague even very experienced, during the day very self-assured, alpinists, in half-sleep on such nights. The darkness of the hut intensifies the impression of cold, and even when one manages, after much painstaking feeling around and many failed attempts, to light the candle in the lantern, this wavering little light, which makes giant, moving shadows spring up all around, can't produce the feeling of greater warmth. One could say that such a lantern makes mainly shadows, not light; and the shadows move, because one must keep changing the location of the lantern, because people move, because the lantern, when it is hung up, swings, and finally because of the flickering of the flame.<sup>7</sup>*

## §

### **Lament of the Goods Left on the Shelf**

*A purchase transaction lasts 30 seconds. On average, the consumer makes a decision within seven seconds. Two-thirds of decisions are made in the supermarket itself. These are facts from market research.*

*Hunter societies developed their intelligence on game trails. In the marketing mix, packaging is the last bridge to the customer. Within the final seven seconds—which decide the fate of the item—the packaging must take its effect, without upsetting the consumer's preparatory measures of the previous 30 seconds and the approximately ten minutes comprising arrival and hesitating movements through the*



store. An acutely active spearhead must be linked with a plump softness or bluntness. The desire for the single commodity must not destroy the mood and suggestiveness of all of the commodities.

0.0005% of poets and thinkers on the globe are informal collaborators who work on the marketing mix. The distribution of maximized imaginative power on the planet is a matter of the organizational ability of 0.01% of organizers. These findings were made by Martians.<sup>8</sup>

## §

and am in free fall : am swallow am siskin am thrush. I nature walk  
I walking I peregrination as in the Vienna Woods, back then, with  
giant steps, I say, we hadn't seen each other in a long time, I say,  
namely poem that opens everything up. Singer sewing machine over  
which, I mean, Mother bent sewing together scraps &c. Ach these  
signs of erstwhile intimacy I was allowed to ride on his lap, Haydn's  
stolen skull—because we could no longer frequent each other illness  
and death, we talked on the telephone ½ the day, circa harp music,  
should we get loafers for you, I say ..... I think I saw in the distance  
the 1st lilac bush, lilac-hued bushes then we cried out, I freak : cataract  
of tears, I say, in the pergola, in the caecilian bushes (Okopenko.),  
fleurs, étoiles, and nuages feelings of inadequacy, long walk with  
Edith S. (14.4.12) in the grip of winter, wound down the Wiedner  
Hauptstrasse, &c., I had on my trench coat which the storm billowed,  
perforated night, Easter checked off, Concor 5 and Lasix under my  
tongue, we were something of a duet, forget-me-nots springing up  
in the little fire garden such that tears, fine mechanics still okay, old  
chestnut tree in the Burggarten unfurled light-green leaves, you could  
believe we'd spent our entire lives in the car, wrote JD, these CAHIERS  
are 1 book without progression, decades later, blue Danube, I send  
you off in the car once more &c. very early I mean flanks of the  
morning am so eager for each new day, so they ought to implore me,  
I say, the cloud-flags in the wind, like 1 glacis in the morning .....  
pan flute of fate : because one tends to judge the panicky lines of the  
text as genius, it is wondrous how Plato's eye rolls forth and bulges  
and smokes, someone mentioned the name of an artist and I saw her  
picture before me (Colmar, from Chemnitz?), who called out to me,  
in the inflammation of nature, this ruffling that fit, that AFFRONTED  
me, wasn't it so .....

### 14.4.12<sup>9</sup>

*I should shut up at this point and just listen to what you have to say; but as I zip it, let me say, wow, what a remarkable range on so many levels evident in these different works of German that you capture and give life to in your translations of them into English.*

Thank you so much for placing those side by side, Josh. I'm kind of stunned myself at how different these passages are. And thinking about how undigested that difference is in my mind takes me to what I think of as the black hole at the center of translation—that black hole I go into to translate, where I cannot observe myself and generally am unable to report back about what went on while I was there. I have sometimes characterized this feeling as “body snatching.” I sort of “become” the author by snatching their body and “writing with their hand,” etc. As a concept it's too mystical, and as a practice too invasive, but I haven't been able to find any better metaphor for what “happens” while I translate, for this weird melding of the author and myself.

And yes, what varied sentence-farmers (sentence-harvesters?) these three are. Yet all three fully exploit the sentence's possibilities: Hohl, the serpentine quality of the sentence; Kluge, the forcefulness when it is clipped short; Mayröcker, its profound openness and ability to go on forever. Also interesting are the time markers sentences are laden with, not unrelated to length: how a sentence reveals its age through complexity of syntax or lack thereof; entanglement of clauses; hypo- or paratactical inclinations, etc.

*Yes, yes, in some sense these three passages, as a kind of triptych illustrating style at the level of syntax, suggest the full range of modern prose as an expression of consciousness in language forms. And each one, to bring it closer to home, seems to contain seeds of the practice of translation that you're describing: Hohl's image of the lantern whose location one is constantly changing, creating shadows more than casting light; Kluge's colder figure of poets as collaborators who maximize imaginative power; and Mayröcker's free fall, which is also peregrination, but a traversing that is different from Hohl's movement in the sentence, one that jumps and leaps from phrase to phrase, like the small birds darting about her on her walk (Hohl's sentences are like the ropes that keep the climbers connected to each other and on the rock). All three of these writers emerge in different Englishes from the black*

*hole of your translation process. I understand the kind of mind meld or body snatching that you're describing, of yourself and the author fusing in the translation process; that must be a different kind of experience for each author you translate—is that true? What was it like to translate, for example, Hohl versus Mayröcker for you? And is there a part of that process that is less about the individual authors, and more about the German language itself?*

I love your analogies. Well, my experience in translating these authors was shaped not only by the different ways they use German but also by my own experience as a translator and as a German reader—Hohl was the first German author I had ever translated, and so I proceeded, so to speak, like a high-alpinist inching my way over a crevasse. By the time I started translating Mayröcker many years later, my German was much better and I had been translating professionally for a while, so I had more confidence. Plus, translating a poet whose work I love is a whole other prospect—because one is translating not only the language but also the metalanguage, the poetic moves, rhythms, echoes, allusions, the oscillations between abstract and concrete, translucence and opacity, plainspeak and ornamentation, the ventriloquism, apostrophes, narrative impulses, passages of lyric riffing, etc., etc. (“&c.”) that one can recognize in any poem. That play of all those things that make up “the poetic” as opposed to other language uses. And in that language I am a native speaker. That is, if I like the poems. I have found that with translating poetry, it's not really a question of doing it well or badly but of being able to do it or not do it.

If I don't connect to someone's poetry, I can't translate it at all. I learned this the hard way. There's a fair amount of money flowing around for translation in Germany, but despite how tempting they are for a freelancer, I've learned to be very careful about accepting these jobs.

*Yes, this idea of the metalanguage sounds exactly right. It's what makes poetic translation possible and what mitigates the issue of practical fluency in the language—that other fluency, in the language or techne of poetry, is like a connected but different plane of access. Walter Benjamin identifies this property as the magical nature of language*

*that can't be instrumentalized. It's what makes poetry special. And that level of perceptible articulation, expressed by the poet, can be understood—heard, read—and translated, if the translator is a receptor of the metalanguage. I'm probably being a little self-serving here! When you think you've found a poet you can translate, is it possible to describe that intuition? Is it a matter of identifying to yourself the particular metalanguage of that poet that feels approachable or close to you? Do you hear something in the work before you begin to do the labor of working out meanings and formal analogies, and such, that quickens your instincts? Or is it simply impossible to describe? (You can hear, I think, that there's a way in which this experience might turn back to the instincts at play in one's own work....)*

For me, the feeling of recognizing I want to translate a poem is a mix of feeling enamored, intimidated, and hopeful—I have just encountered a thrilling, mysterious, inaccessible being, but I can see the possibilities, a dozen little doors are opening, I feel that I can capture something of this being, or that the sustained effort to capture something, which in the end I won't capture, is nevertheless going to be rewarding. It definitely has similarities to recognizing an idea for a poem. Or encountering a beautiful person. It is a desire to know, to be close to, to spend inordinate amounts of time with the poem, a desire to share the discovery with others, show it off, bask in it and in the thrill of being associated with it. And all those feelings are concentrated in an instant. That's the closest I can get to a description. And yes, Benjamin, absolutely—that essay on translation is so brilliant.

*If you'll allow me, I think Benjamin is a kind of key here, not a mechanical key cut to fit a lock and open a door, but maybe something more like a musical key. What you might be hearing when you read a passage by Mayröcker, for example, is how your being harmonizes with hers. That idea or metaphor of harmony between the translator and the original work, that's Benjamin's. He writes, "It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work. For the sake of pure language he breaks through decayed barriers of his own language."<sup>10</sup> In other words, for the purposes of what we're talking about here, it sounds as if your*

*work in translation is part of your work as a poet, part of your task as the writer of your poems. By allowing Mayröcker in through your translation process, you are inviting her to affect your own language. That's a radical receptivity. That sense of discovering the new friend, that instinct that she could be a friend, then joining her in friendship, is what allows us, in our writing, to be ourselves.*

Oh yes, that idea of harmony is “key”! Similar to identification, but more profound. I wonder sometimes if I feel such harmony with her work because we're both, on some level, melancholics. Things like that. I don't know if I would be a good translator of an exuberant poet. It took me a while to find a voice for Kluge, who is exuberant. (Though I am proud of the translations I did of him. And actually Kluge loves Mayröcker too, so I shouldn't generalize.) But yes, I do feel like these translations are part of my “oeuvre,” so to speak. They are part of my *poiesis*, if that's the right word. Part of my making-in-poetry. As I said earlier, I don't think Mayröcker has entered my own poems that much (I don't let her), but there's an awful lot of me in my translations of her. I sometimes idly try to compute it: How much of me is in a translation of a Mayröcker poem, and how much is Mayröcker?  $\frac{3}{4}$  Mayröcker,  $\frac{1}{4}$  me? It's kind of a compelling brainteaser, because it's impossible to answer. Do you have thoughts like this?

*Yes, I do think about this, too; but my thoughts tend to move in the opposite direction. I feel that the translation I did of Nelly Sachs, for example, is zero-percent me and one-hundred-and-ten-percent her—like, she got the ten percent of me available to add to herself as she reentered English. Because I feel like I totally disappear and don't exist in those poems. I've melted into them. But I feel like I hardly exist in my own poems! I felt the same way after the five years I spent living with Mina Loy (doing the dissertation work). To enter into the experience of those poems, to inhabit them, and to come to an understanding of them and the person who wrote them, required a kind of self-extinction. At the same time, it was an almost unbearably full experience, a kind of pregnancy? It feels a lot like talking to a very close friend—in listening to them as hard as you can, and then expressing yourself as fully as possible to them, you kind of lose yourself in that exchange. For me that's the texture of what it's like to translate. But I also feel, as you do, that*

*this work is very much an intimate aspect of my poiesis. (It does sound grand to put it that way! But we shouldn't be shy of using the language that best describes it.)*

*And maybe there's a limit to how much of this can actually be talked about. What I like about what you say, about how there's a lot of you in your translation of her (like,  $\frac{1}{4}$  is a good amount!), is that it suggests how we often go to another in order to encounter ourselves—this feels as true of poems as it does of friends. When you are working on your own poems, and you return to them day after day, or week after week, to build them, reenter them, do you feel like you are reanimating a companionship, or is it something else (perhaps impossible to say)? I'm not sure if I'm asking about process here or something considerably larger than that. I keep thinking about the ancient Yunmen's answer to the question, "What are the teachings of a whole lifetime?": "An appropriate statement."*

Ah, you are admirably selfless. But maybe it also depends on the poet being translated. To give one-hundred-and-ten percent to Mayröcker, the translations HAVE to be at least one-quarter "me." So much in her work is open to interpretation, there are so many invitations and demands for my own creativity, really in every line, that not to accept and honor them with all my own poetic forces would be not really doing the work. When I said earlier that translating is like body snatching—it also works the other way around: Mayröcker very much snatches MY body, I invite her to do so. I sometimes feel drained after a long session translating—vampirically drained. And yet—very much part of the joy of translation is that of being "behind the camera"—I'm not the focal point in any way, and all my work and my creativity is meant to be in service of Mayröcker's oeuvre in English (to my surprise, I don't even mind when a review doesn't even mention me as the translator), AND YET it is still "my" work in some sense too. It's like an optical illusion. The poems are one-hundred-percent Mayröcker (or Sachs), since they were the ones who originally conjured the words onto the page out of "nothing." And yet, the poems in translated form are not therefore zero-percent me or you. So what is the number? It's like one of those imaginary numbers in mathematics—it's a will-o'-the-wisp number. It doesn't exist. It's a puzzle, which is I guess why I find it fun to think about. I like puzzles.

I like the idea of going to another to reencounter oneself, except that it also feels a little claustrophobic—I also want to encounter someone/something outside of myself and honor its/their strangeness even while I get close enough to it for it be familiar.

Ah, my own work. I haven't written a new poem in a couple of years, as I've been working on a prose book that has required all my energies. It's getting a little hard to remember what working on a poem feels like. It's painful, especially since I'm very much in that space we all know of: "Will I ever write a poem again?" Sigh. But. I think I would say that returning again and again to a poem of my own feels like a resumption of an utterance, a continued and, when it's going well, deeply satisfying utterance. For a hardcore introvert who finds talking difficult, if not impossible, in many situations, writing poems is the only way I have found to open the faucet and finally speak. Maybe it's because the utterance of poetry allows for the kind of complexity that regular talking doesn't, unless one is a naturally brilliant speaker (and I have witnessed, known, [and envied] many of those). But I will never be one of them. But in poems, at least I can express some of the complexity going on in my mind, if nothing else. And for that I am insanely grateful.

*"A way of happening, a mouth"—the other side of the quote from Auden's poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" that people who don't read poetry don't know. I confess that when I see my name as translator on Sachs's Flight and Metamorphosis, I feel ownership, as if it were my book. So I guess we must embrace the other side of selflessness, which is self, and which is the thing that has that mouth!*

*Auden said that he always felt like every poem he wrote was probably his last one. But I'm convinced that there will be more poems coming from Donna Stonecipher in addition to this prose book, and another translation of Mayröcker to look forward to. We have spent a year in correspondence, Donna! Thank you for the gift.*

## NOTES

- 1/ Garry Wills, "The Angels and Devils of Dickens," *The New York Review of Books*, May 16, 1991, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1991/05/16/the-angels-and-devils-of-dickens/>.
- 2/ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (1967; repr., New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 47.
- 3/ Michel Delville, *The American Prose Poem: Poetic Form and the Boundaries of Genre* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 178.
- 4/ Donna Stonecipher, *Souvenir de Constantinople* (Boulder: Instance Press, 2007), 50.
- 5/ Friederike Mayröcker, *études*, trans. Donna Stonecipher (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2020), 111.
- 6/ Ryan Ruby, "A Heaven of the Book," the Poetry Foundation, November 23, 2020, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/154848/a-heaven-of-the-book>.
- 7/ Ludwig Hohl, *Ascent*, trans. Donna Stonecipher (New York: Black Square Editions, 2012), 27–28.
- 8/ Alexander Kluge, *Temple of the Scapegoat: Opera Stories*, trans. Donna Stonecipher et al. (New York: New Directions Books, 2018), 130–31.
- 9/ Mayröcker, *études*, 116–17.
- 10/ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (Boston: Mariner Books, 2019), 23.



JAY GAO

## THE HOUSEHOLD OF CHINESE WATER DEER

You watched the household of Chinese water deer vanish, shift into  
the blank time of the countryside's documents

*Over there*

The green threshold they occupied, hustled over by an ancient  
parliament of trees

Site for shade or the shadow of your overdetermined meaning

The ghostly lineage of deer flesh lingers like a letter

Hold onto the fluorescent glint of their eyes in your memory, the  
subject from a medieval poem you cannot translate

Some deer eyes turn from gold to deep blue in winter in order to  
capture a surplus of light

You open your eyes in order to ricochet a yellow hue back onto the  
world's surface, like refracting a question of your orientation

The train conductor asks you where you are from

You ask the conductor where this tree is going

Do you have a sense that some articulations travel on charged land  
as swiftly as an innocent question agitates your pages

as impulse

as inclination

as memory

as a metaphor that has never been deployed

as a figure of speech

as oneness and its militancy

as one thousand figures marching, gathering

as one shadow underneath one dead tree

as one community of wood

as one sensation of felling

Earlier, the light shed itself like used antlers, warm with the entire sum  
of the globe's fondness towards a lazy morning

Saluting the full slack of it, the transparent eye

Overhead, pink clouds matched the ashy stretch marks of your mother

The waters of the loch gushed like TV static, and was it true that you  
were watching the beginning of the universe reflected there, on  
that tension between one life and the other one

Or was nature more like uttering a word root that glows hot whenever  
mispronounced in the dark

Looking through the nightscope of inquiry

No, the light, it was like the way the word transhumance might dance  
on the tongue, across the skin

Myth splicing itself inside the living as a result of the memory of the dead

Like asking a former self to meet you at a future tree

*You, who is forever combing reality for signs of literature*

What does a nature poem teach about living through meaning

No, what you had meant to ask was

What can a nature poem teach you about meaning to live

You, who is forever dreaming of wooden bodies and those who  
later feel them

fell them

## THE MADNESS OF INVASIVE SPECIES

*after Tara Bergin*

As Gregor Samsa  
    When Gregor Samsa  
        As Gregor Samsa  
            When Gregor Samsa  
                One morning  
            When Gregor Samsa  
                One morning  
        When Gregor Samsa  
One morning  
    From uneasy dreams woke up  
        Woke up one morning from restless dreams  
            Awoke one morning from uneasy dreams  
                Woke up one morning from unsettling dreams  
            Upon awakening from agitated dreams  
Awoke one morning from troubled dreams  
    As Gregor Samsa woke from a fitful dream-filled sleep  
        Woke one morning from troubled dreams  
            Gregor Samsa woke in his bed from uneasy dreams  
                Found he himself  
                    He found himself  
                    He found himself  
                Gregor Samsa found himself  
            He found himself  
        He found that he had  
He found himself  
    And found he had  
        In his bed  
            In his bed  
                Transformed in his bed

Changed in his bed  
In his bed, transformed  
Changed into a  
Had changed into an  
Transformed right there in his bed into a  
And found he had turned into an  
An enormous kind of monstrous vermin transformed  
Transformed into a monstrous vermin  
Into a gigantic insect  
Into a monstrous vermin  
A monstrous cockroach in his bed  
Enormous bedbug  
Into some sort of monstrous insect  
A monstrous vermin  
A large verminous insect.

\*

Tomorrow, I will wake  
to discover that all my family  
have journeyed to the Mountains,  
and all our classics  
have been devoured by white jackdaws

WILL ALEXANDER

*from* CHARISMATIC SPIRAL

PHILOSOPHICAL AUDITION

A pluperfect poltergeist  
as ophthalmological aural percentage  
as formation occurs  
it extends across form as de-formation  
not as gulls extend & transport themselves by brazen sun beacon  
but the anti-gravitation as wind

## INDIVIDUATION IN GUR

As collective root by cinder  
musicality beckons by transmission  
that circulates by reflex  
as molten origination  
rife with uranian minutiae  
rife with unknown power as flux  
its vestiges scorching & rising  
its angularity not unlike transmuted circumference



## Incendiary Looping: Uranian Theatricality

According to differing solar fragmentation passing closer to the Sun than as Mercury, not unlike substance that hails from the void sans common mental yield. This being the cometary state of squaring consciousness not as ludicrous concentration, or being hostile by limited auditory yield. Because its state is not anchored to delimited specificity, but as concentrated sum not as terminal logistic as spell, but as greenish clepsydra that generates its own helix. Not a blistering monument but an enigmatic phantom that hurtles across the galaxy not unlike a Jupiterian sub-sum into our present atmosphere as fragmented sub-velocity. As fragmented sub-species not perhaps as catastrophic sustainment, being closer to the globe as Crete is from London. To the apocalyptic mind an ominous a potential catastrophic being a swiftly blazing gramme not as strategic novels summed by a novel with its denouement of nouns that blisters according to lateral capacity, but thrives according to its own seemingly eclipsed vapor. A metronomic sojourn perhaps as unspecified modification but as spectral flare according to human time as a carking crucible.

This being a culture that remains myopically trembling, balanced by means of what commerce would describe as an incendiary looping being a splintered geyser of magnets that blazes as a volatile magnetic of itself. Not simply an obscure ledger of its coma as it attempts as emblematic volatility ejected as signal across the cosmos Being sun-like and inscrutable with blazing not unlike rays compounded and inverted as a spinning form of fractions as a spinning frenetic again as interstellar looping as hallucination that blazes with protracted cosmicity. This being spectral phenomenology that inscripts its own contact with itself so that it blazes with bottomless emission being spectral deluge that auto-transmutes via mystery. A shape of ice that instructs itself as a fabulous phrase not unlike a human phase that reflects a form of biological trinity flecked by micrometers as points of pointillism,

naturally dazzling and voiceless as it springs from unknown gulfs as chrisma.

This being higher yield that summons its own formation never maximized via the plane of error. Perhaps this being seismographic trigonometry as harrowing trajectory. Perhaps in a principle phase of itself as a hyphenated-diorama.

Perhaps it loops via a partial phase of its own endemic motion as seismographic looping trigonometry not as graceless harrowing but as transmuted harvest that collects its own molecules so that it ignites its form as supra-magnification alive as riveting co-juncture with itself. Not as simple gyrations kinetic but alive as otherworldly captive co-suns sans migrational oblivion. This being none other than greenish celestial transmission never limited to form as celestial boundary but being hive as gale from anonymous star quakes that hail from bottomless transmission. Akin to both Oort Cloud and rainbow as phantom transmission that mixes solar fort as Owl, as astrological transmission. Not only a mineral that consumes its own transmission but a bottomless empowerment that magnetizes its own kinetic of itself. Not as gusts of hail or inferior ringing but as shadow that prevails as sub-matter that glistens. Because it blazes as luminous brocade that spins via beauty as sub-angle not as diameter by gloom as prognostic.

The latter being a state of being that is magnetized by density as living puzzlement that harvests its own form out of its own emblematic being luminous flare akin to a sub-atomic haflon dazzling as fact by strategic forensics being drachma alive as dazzling co-ocean that hails its own shifting as being one that issues plasma according to uranian theatricality.

CLEMENS SETZ

Translated by Lizzy Kinch

## Suzy

In the toilets of the strip club Bang or Whimper, sixteen-year-old Marcel LoebL wrote his telephone number on the inside of a cubicle door. He and his friends Max and Daniel had slipped into the club about half an hour before to sneak a look at the women who drifted from table to table like silent sci-fi sentinels. They'd also marveled for a few minutes at an unexpected miracle on the metal pole—a naked woman suspending herself a meter above the ground using only the pressure on the inside of her knees. She jutted out diagonally from the pole, a wonderfully alive snake-limb. And yet somehow the applause failed to materialize; perhaps the audience was simply too moved. At some point a man appeared. Tall, bearded, and bearing a decidedly ruddy complexion, he expressed much understanding for their situation before quietly, gently, and not at all impatiently kicking them out of the club.

Marcel, however, had been lucky. He had been standing a little to one side and was able to disappear into the toilets. His friends were probably waiting outside in the cold. Of course, he should go and meet them—the evening was over, his eyes had borne witness to the future.

Yet he had sat for a while on the folded-down toilet seat, studying the mesmerizing writing on the walls. There were all kinds of names, mostly female, below which offers were noted above telephone numbers. *Olga is a filthy fuck pig.* Or, *Anastasia will suck anything.* Little hearts, stars, and speech bubbles dotted around. It was then that the idea came to him. It was not so much an idea, more a kind of vision. His mind was suddenly drawn to the woman writhing around on the pole to music, indescribably elegant and in total defiance of gravity. He knew the sight would keep him going for months. But what did she look like when she went home? Completely normal, surely. The image of an ordinarily dressed woman, carrying shopping bags, flashed into his mind. She locked the front door. She sat down in front of the TV. Did she have kids? What would it feel like to be her child?

I am her...son.

The rest followed on pretty straightforwardly. With a felt-tip pen, Marcel wrote his phone number on the toilet wall. *My mouth awaits*, he wrote below it. He couldn't help giggling. His friends would think this was so gay. But obviously it was different. Then he gave some serious thought to what the woman should be called.

Someone entered the toilets.

"Look, come on out now," said the voice.

SUZY, wrote Marcel. Then he opened the door and let himself be escorted out by the man who worked for the club, even now maintaining his polite good humor.

### §

His friends had indeed waited for him outside. It had started lightly snowing. A street lamp stood enchanted, shrouded in dancing dots, a cross between a luminous jellyfish and a test card. There was also a group of gay men standing outside the club, two of whom were kissing each other, locked in embrace. Others milled around them slowly, smoking and showing each other things on their phones. Marcel looked over at them curiously—this was a late night TV documentary come to life—yet it was still nowhere near as exciting as what he had just seen in the club. Daniel kept an eye on them, mainly so things did not get out of hand, right here right now, in the middle of the night. Daniel came from the countryside, Kitzack. His dad was a dentist, just like Marcel's.

"Look at them," said Daniel.

"Yes," said Marcel.

### §

The first call came early on a Saturday afternoon. Marcel was at home in his room. The phone buzzed on the desk, a private number. He studied the screen for a while and considered declining, before picking up and answering:

"Hello?"

"Suzy?"

It was a very high-pitched man's voice.

"Ah, yes, um," Marcel said, shifting his own voice higher to reach a more childlike register. "Sorry, Suzy isn't available right now."

"Sorry," the voice said.

"I am her son."

"Okay... That's disgusting."

A deep breath, then the caller hung up.

Marcel sat and stared at his mobile phone. Sure enough, his hand was shaking. He put the phone down. His pulse was also.... He stood up and moved around a little. He was hot. He opened a window and stuck his head out. Guttering. Roof shingles. Cold air. The sun was behind the trees lining the roads at the edge of the estate.

"Fuck," said Marcel quietly. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck..."

Someone had actually gone and called him. Well, what else could they have done, his number was up there on the wall after all. Marcel shook himself and giggled. It had worked. Crazy. How was it so easy? Why would people just *dial* the number, it was so dumb. Way too easy. He realized he even had something on the caller; he had been in the toilets. In the second cubicle from the left in Bang or Whimper. That was the only place where the number was. Unless there was someone traipsing through the loos every night, writing down numbers to copy them somehow. Perhaps they even...?

Marcel leapt onto his laptop. It took forever to load the browser. He typed in his mobile number, first with a dash between the area code and number and then without, then with a space—thank god, no results, oh my god. How could he have explained that? But no, it was fine, only the toilets. It really was that easy.

The phone buzzed again. Marcel took a step back. But it was just a text from René, wanting to know if it was too late to go for a smoke in the car park. He had Ethiopian tobacco, he wrote, guaranteed to give you the runs. Marcel replied:

*wicked but cant tonight got family stress*

Followed by a knife written in ASCII code. René sent him a smiley with an X for eyes and a P for a sticking out tongue.

*its so so so gay here*, Marcel typed.

The conversation ended.

The second call came early in the morning on the day Marcel had to give a presentation about the *Donation of Constantine*. He was averagely prepared. According to the internet, today was also World Opabinia Day. Marcel had looked the word up. Opabinia was the name of a five-eyed prehistoric creature from the Cambrian period, with a prehensile proboscis and segmented, armored skin. It lived in water, managing to survive in spite of its odd number of eyes, before its eventual extinction.

Couldn't he put the bloody thing down, his dad said at the breakfast table.

Iris was fidgety and nervous because her ski trip was coming up.

"It's bad for your whole body," his dad said, "the neck vertebrae, the joints in your jaw, the vagus nerve. You even get hiatal hernias from looking down all the time. Put. It. Away."

"Yeah, I have."

"Not next to you, put it away properly!"

"Alright, alright."

At this point it started to ring. Marcel's dad exhaled in irritation and laid his cutlery down.

"scuse," said Marcel. "But it's René. Because of the presentation."

His dad raised his hands.

Marcel went to his room to answer the phone.

"Hello?"

"Yes, hello. What's the best way to meet you?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I am her son. She'll call you back though. Please don't tell her I picked up."

A long pause.

"Ahem. I see. No problem."

The man made the humming sound people normally make when they're about to hang up. Now Marcel had to say something quickly.

"She left her phone in my room. But I'm not allowed out of the room when she has guests. She leaves me inside all day."

The caller made a strange sound. The handset might have been centimeters from his face when he heard the voice, his thumb poised to terminate the conversation. He sighed deeply and asked:

"How old are you, then?"

“Me? Nine.”

“Nineteen?”

“Nine.”

“Jesus Christ. Okay. That’s bad. And she doesn’t let you out of your room?”

“Never if guests are around. She’s very strict on that.”

Another long pause. Marcel struggled not to laugh. The caller then said:

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

They fell silent again. Marcel smoothed down the corners of his mouth, overcome by grinning, and thought about what to say next. So far everything had gone perfectly. He couldn’t ruin it now. What he would have given to press pause on the film of reality, to think up a few sentences in peace.

“Does she treat you badly?” the man asked.

“I don’t know. Not really. But...”

“Describe it to me.”

Another pause. Marcel looked out of the window. A man was walking a pack of dogs. He had one of those leashes that splayed out into lots of small, thinner leashes. The dogs were small and thin, like rats.

“You really don’t sound nineteen,” the man said.

“I’m nine.”

“Hm,” incomprehensible crackling, “...really difficult, huh?”

“What?”

Crap. His voice was breaking up.

“I said: I imagine it’s very difficult. Everything with your mum, I mean.”

“Yes. I’m only allowed out of the room in the evening.”

“You can’t even go to the loo?”

“I have a bucket, so I can...”

Marcel suppressed a lurid giggle.

“A bucket?” The man laughed incredulously. It was a sort of greasy, Beavis and Butt-Head laugh. Marcel watched the cloud of dogs turn the corner at the top of the crossing. He felt triumphant, like on an autumn day when the blustering tailwind means walking down the street is barely an effort at all.

“Please don’t tell her I told you, please!”

“I certainly won’t be calling again,” the man said.

And hung up.

Marcel was ecstatic. Later, during the presentation, he was concise, coherent, spoke faster than usual, and could even answer the history teacher’s follow-up questions.

## §

After dinner, Marcel found himself thinking about the callers. He imagined their faces, their postures. They were moving through the city right now, this very second, or they were sitting at home in their bedrooms, alone. He’d put his phone in his pocket so his dad wouldn’t gripe, but every three or four minutes he felt a distinct vibration. When he looked, however, there was nothing—not even a text.

They had had potato gratin. Afterwards they sat together for a while in the living room, as Iris was leaving the next morning. They discussed the final details of the skiing equipment, Iris still suffering from anxiety and looming homesickness, but nevertheless praising the various accessories she’d been lent—UV cream, goggles with adjustable color filters, etc.—though she kept interrupting herself with small, strange pauses. She often glanced at her older brother, and it was a look he recognized; he was meant to contribute something, she trusted his judgment, he was older but not quite yet in adulthood, where everything was totally different and incomprehensible and odd.

After a while Marcel got up and sat with her. Another phantom vibration. He imagined a call coming in later when everyone was already asleep, and it gave him the same sense of security he might have once felt at the prospect of an evening football match being shown on TV.

Iris looked at him quizzically. It affected him more than usual.

“Another thing I meant to say,” Marcel said, although so far he had said nothing. “If you feel bad, just call me. Especially at night, that’s when I’m on call.”

Their mum had heard him, but pretended to be occupied with the essential task of unpacking and repacking the suitcase.

“Mm-hm,” Iris nodded.

Marcel held up his mobile phone. Lol—what if a perv called right this second?



“You...” said Iris.

“Yes?”

“You have to answer though, you never do!”

“I always do. If you’re having a bad time at night, bam, just call. I’m on night duty. But you won’t be sick, you’ll see.”

She nodded again.

“You imagine things very differently to how they turn out.”

### §

The callers did not tire. One called and got angry when he heard Marcel. He threatened to lock him in a cellar and torture him. Then he laughed and began whistling a melody. Another wanted to be beaten unconscious by a “real lady.” One simply said, “Oh God, the world is so fucking sick, I’ll check out then please, thank you.” Then hung up. One just wanted to talk. One had a ten-year-old son and kept Marcel on the phone for over five minutes asking him various harmless questions. A very elderly man, to judge by his voice, kept coughing and asked again and again to speak to Suzy, it was very urgent, he was a regular client. Another old man (perhaps the same man with a slightly adjusted voice) assured him that the truth often lay between the lines.

Marcel lay on his bed, a few sticky goji berries in his mouth, eaten straight from the packet.

A man called in tears and asked to meet; at first he couldn’t understand that there wasn’t a woman on the other end, and when he finally grasped what he was being told, he sobbed—you could clearly hear his trembling bottom lip—and started apologizing left right and center, swearing it would never happen again, never ever again, before putting the phone down without ending the call. For quite a while, a strange crackling and a few occasional, distant voices drifted out from his world and into Marcel’s room.

### §

Marcel sat in his classroom, 6B in Dreihackengasse College, while a biology lesson took place a few meters from his face. The teacher moved around a lot, spoke about grassland plants and drew a few

things on the board, but none of it reached Marcel, though it did look quite interesting, that he had to admit. The teacher was wearing a blue tie today.

The phone vibrated. He checked. Unknown number, very good. When the caller hung up, Marcel sent him a text. *Call me back this evening sweetie.*

The teacher asked him what was so funny. Marcel apologized.

## §

Iris had already been on the ski trip for three days, they had a maths test and Daniel and Max were arguing about chemtrails. Marcel realized he could no longer summon an opinion on chemtrails. Had he ever had one? It was hard to say. It was much more interesting to muse on what the men who called him looked like. Their faces, the positioning of their fingers.

Admittedly, mostly they hung up as soon as they heard his voice. Sometimes he made it to *I am her son* before scaring them off. A few held on even longer, making his day. Most were sympathetic and concerned.

You had to watch your back, though. Now he always put his phone on silent when he couldn't have it on him, which soon sent his mum—who called him often when he was out and about—around the bend. Iris, too. She hadn't called him yet, just their mum twice during the day, and Marcel had briefly spoken to her. Everything's fine so far, Iris said, Jennifer is just a stupid birdbrain. A what? An idiot birdbrain! With her high-heel pigtails. Marcel laughed like crazy at the way his sister spoke.

"You're so great," he said.

"Hahaha," she laughed sheepishly. "Thanks." Then girls' voices called out in the background and Iris hung up without saying goodbye.

## §

In the playground, a schoolboy in first year was sitting on the only wooden bench and trying to play mikado with toothpicks. Next to him, for some reason, was a bee calendar. Almost every day was strange now.

They had to interpret a poem for German homework. It was about a fly that got squished by a man one morning. The poem was almost impossible to understand because all the word endings were wrong. *A flie I findeth in bed.* This continued the whole way through—wtf. Otherwise it was death, death, and more death; everything in German class returned somehow to death. Even when someone wrote something beautiful, it always turned out to be about dying. It was really dumb. This susceptibility had begun, to be precise, before he'd started school. Marcel's first image of death had actually been a line of poetry of sorts. He'd always misheard the lyrics from a popular Christmas carol: "the lake rests still and gently," imagining they referred to somewhere called Still Land. Still Land, a region south of Berlin or somewhere meaningless. A mythical place, where the dead were sent. Nature stifled by winter, branches pale with clamminess, and a motionless body of water under a snow-white sky. Marcel wrote in his homework that the poem could have been spoken by a human fly. Then he set about working out the rhyme scheme.

§

"Hello."

"Suzy?"

"No. She's not here right now. Please don't tell her I picked up. She'll hit me if she finds out."

The caller drew snot up his nose. He stayed calm.

"Please don't tell her," Marcel repeated.

Still no reaction.

"Wow, okay," he said. "Wait a minute."

A quiet creaking could be heard.

"Please don't tell on me," Marcel whispered.

"I've just closed the door. Now we can talk."

Marcel wanted to answer, but something in him held back. Something about the voice felt novel.

"Hello?" he said at last.

"Yes, I'm here," said the caller. "How old are you?"

"Ten."

"Okay. And your mum, do you live with her?"

"Yes."

“I see. She hits you?”

“If she catches me on the phone, yes.”

Marcel thought about just hanging up. But something told him the man would just call back.

“Where do you live?” the caller expertly asked.

“I can’t tell you that.”

Marcel heard soft scraping noises. Was the caller masturbating, or was it the sound of a pencil writing? Both seemed equally disturbing. He hung up.

The phone remained silent. Marcel got up from the bed to get something to drink. Then it rang again.

He picked up.

“Hello?”

“Sorry, we got cut off,” said the man. “You were just about to tell me where you live.”

“My mum just came home,” whispered Marcel.

“Oh,” said the caller, now speaking in a low, cautious tone too. “Alright. Put the phone down. Call me later. I can help you.”

“I have to go now,” Marcel whispered.

Disguising his voice already felt exhausting and idiotic.

“You’re not al—”

Marcel hung up.

He put his phone on airplane mode, then went down to the kitchen. His mum was still up, sitting at the table. She was flicking through a magazine. The tablet was next to her, silently playing a massage video. Marcel got himself a beetroot juice from the fridge. He mixed it with some cola.

“Sleep well,” his mum said.

“Yeah.”

When Marcel was jolted out of an unpleasant dream in the middle of the night—he was in a village, and after dark, combine harvesters drove around the fields, thickly clouded by the brightness of their headlights—he switched his phone on again and saw that the caller had tried twelve more times. The last one around two thirty.

But Iris was coming home tomorrow.

Before breakfast an unusually deep voice called up, Rammstein register. The man reacted angrily.

“What do you mean, you’re her son? Well for fuck’s sake, tell her I want my money back!”

Marcel adjusted his voice and said there was no Suzy. Unfortunately she had died, of AIDS. The man laughed, jarringly.

“No. It was only ever a joke,” said Marcel, “there is no Suzy.”

“There is my money though,” the caller said. “Just you wait, you fucking whore. I’ll take everything you’ve got. Fucking pig.”

§

Overall, the calls now seemed to become cruder in tone. Why might that be? The men didn’t know each other, they weren’t in cahoots. And yet lately they had become notably petulant. Perhaps there was something in the atmosphere, chemtrails, hard to tell. Perhaps a sorcerer was scribbling sinister, misogynist curses onto his walls, from where they radiated out into the city.

§

The man determined to save him called increasingly often. And yes, a few times Marcel picked up, played along for five or six minutes, reassured the unpleasantly tunnel-visioned man and said that, no, he was no longer tied up and the bucket had gone too. He could now move freely around the flat, everything was fine.

At the end Marcel spoke in his normal voice and said, okay, there is no Suzy, it was just a joke, no harm meant. But the caller—who didn’t believe a word—instead answered, yes, he understood he’d been forced to say that, that much was clear, but don’t worry, my boy, the truth was safe with him, he didn’t have to say anything at all, he said, even in silence he could tell how much all this—

At this point, Marcel ended the telephone conversation.

What would happen if you threw your phone in the bin?

§

Marcel let more and more callers in on the joke over the next few days, but mostly they didn't believe him. One laughed heartily and congratulated him on the prank. He said his name was Richard and chatted away cheerfully: he was sitting here on his terrace with a glass of cider, he said, it was wonderful and then this delicious stunt here, really fantastic. All the praise seemed surreal and condescending to Marcel.

"Yes, yes," he said. "I'll get going then."

"Very good, very good," said the man named Richard. "*I'll get on with it then.* Fantastic, haha. Really top notch."

"Okay."

"I'll get on with it then, oh, how cool. How cool."

In the background for the entire call there was the sound of a baby wailing.

Marcel hung up.

### §

The liberator got in touch again around evening. He said everything was ready. He just needed assurance the enchained boy was home alone and that Suzy would be out. He could then set everything in motion. He promised. Everything would be fine, he said. Even the weather was perfect.

The last sentence confused Marcel. He looked out of the window. It was a cloudy day, somewhat windy. The trees were swaying like dreaming giraffes.

"There's no Suzy," Marcel said. He no longer bothered with speaking clearly, talking with his mouth full. The organic apple tasted like a bicycle workshop.

"Be patient."

"Hey, I'm being serious," said Marcel, chomping away. "Can't we just leave it? I am sorry and everything."

"Everything is ready," said the caller quietly.

"What city are you even in?"

"In yours."

"Mm-hm, great," said Marcel and hung up.

§

Going for a walk without your mobile was lovely, it turned out. Like people in the 1980s. There were tall trees here, dripping water droplets. A sign for a law firm, the solicitor's name was Dr. Zmaj.

Gusts of wind and a squat dachshund.

In a doorway someone was hanging shirts out to dry, a pleasingly medieval sight. More people should wear white bonnets on their heads, that much was certain.

So many bicycles in the neighborhood! As if they'd been able to reproduce independently, in the hedges and bushes where they'd once been locked up.

*On a leash, bucket.*

Marcel walked up the steps to the castle hill. An information sign on the rock face informed him about the bald ibis that bred here a few centuries ago. Spear-shaped, strange ibis head.

A tourist's backpack by the clock tower was in the shape of Totoro.

§

"Hello?"

Marcel had only answered because he happened to be sitting next to his phone and it wasn't a withheld number.

"Suzy?" asked a female voice.

For a few seconds Marcel's conception of the world dipped underwater. He had been ready for anything, but not a woman.

"What?" he asked.

"Ahhh, hello?" said the woman. "Who's that speaking then?"

Marcel's room was very three-dimensional. Every object protruded unnaturally, like books half pulled out of the shelf. A woman. Why was a woman calling? Could it be the police?

"There is no Suzy," he said quickly.

"Excuse me? Who is speaking?"

"Sorry. You've got the wrong number."

"Hm, I don't think I have," said the caller, sounding disappointed rather than aggressive. "But who is it then, please?"

Marcel didn't say anything.

The things in the room. The sky out of the window. Spots on the wall.

“Tom Turbo,” he said.

He waited. The woman breathed into the mouthpiece. Then she wheezed, laughing. Yes, she laughed a little. Then he heard a rustling.

“Hello, Tom. I am Annamaria.”

“Okay.”

“Wait. Don’t hang up. What’s your real name?”

“Bernd.”

“Hello, Bernd.”

“I just made it all up, all the stuff with the woman,” said Marcel. “Was just a gag. Sorry.”

He felt like he’d just used the word “gag” for the first time in his life. It was such an idiotic word, like something out of a German feature film.

“Ah,” the woman went on. “But you sound very friendly.”

“Okay.”

“I mean it!” the woman said. “I think you do.”

“Okay. Great.”

“Wait a second, don’t hang up, will you?”

Marcel didn’t reply.

“Well, just in case you feel like it,” the woman said, “I’m at the city park every day at 1 p.m. I’m the one with the child. You’ll recognize us right away. I’ve got a guitar with me.”

“I see.”

“Just in case you fancy it.”

“Hm.”

“We’re easily recognizable. You sound really nice. Like a nice sophisticated youn—”

Marcel hung up.

## §

It was amazingly difficult to avoid the park. Every route home seemed to go past it somehow. It was either green on one side or the other. Well, it wasn’t one o’clock. Yes, so long as it wasn’t one o’clock, the woman wouldn’t be there either.



What would she say to him?

Marcel imagined the conversation. Every day he ran through several possibilities in his head.

The woman said something like, “You’ve been conducting quite the experiment. What’s it like when people call all the time?”

That is, at first they’d probably greet each other. But Marcel’s imagination always jumped ahead to the most interesting part. To the woman’s sentence he replied something like:

“It was really cool at the start. Like listening to a radio station from another continent. Some are sympathetic. Some are creepy. Some get excited. One man offered to set me free and call the police. Reassuring him wasn’t so easy.”

“Yeah?”

“Mostly they’re really nice though. They feel pity. They don’t want anything bad to happen to the boy.”

“To Suzy’s son.”

“Yes, even though they don’t know him at all.”

Sometimes the scene turned out quite differently. There were a lot of possibilities.

## §

The calls only stopped completely after about a month. Marcel took his phone with him everywhere again. The park had also lost its radioactive aura. Marcel no longer even checked his watch when he passed it. He walked more slowly too, because at some point he’d realized the woman couldn’t possibly know what he looked like. The paths were always full of people, like in a film. There was always a slight smell of medicine balls in the park.

Only once did he discover her, or so he thought. The woman was sitting on a bench, a huge wheelchair next to her. I’m the one with the child. Well, who knows. In any case, there was an elongated figure lying in the wheelchair, covered up, hard to make out. There was no guitar. But the woman was holding a thin, white stuffed rabbit and moving it for the person in the wheelchair.

## §

Everyone carries their own images into the future. Lots of horrible things happen, an accident, an emergency caesarean section and a long, dreary year in Beijing, you cheat on people, you owe them money, you fail in your relationship with your daughter, you lose your job to a nineteen-year-old, you get called up, humiliated and then, despite everything, you carry a bag of oranges across town, where your mum still lives, in this huge, half-empty housing estate, my God.

Under this ratio of compression, the image of the stuffed rabbit lasted at least until Marcel was thirty-six. He still had people around him who he could have told about it, about the callers, the phone, the woman, and they probably would have believed him.

But he didn't. Perhaps that general underlying feeling lingered in him a little longer, the certainty that there had been all those people who, added together, provided a kind of layer of comfort, a sigh of relief in unsuspected places. But that, I know, is easy to say in retrospect. So let's move on.

RONALD JOHNSON

THE IMAGINARY MENAGERIE

O crawling thing  
I inch to sing  
Imagining—

forehead to the narrow  
pinch of marrow,  
I follow.

*They also come,*  
the Unthinkable Kingdom.  
The dumb one  
close to the bone,

then the fragile  
animals, the minimal,  
unheard-of  
and without love.

One gnarled garland  
beast and mind,  
internal garden  
intertwined:

*its Opposite*  
*upon the Infinite*  
*interknit.*

*'A blaze of zero'*  
*calls the crow,*  
*with Blake and Sappho*  
*Poe, Thoreau.*

I saw a blot  
almost a bat—  
old acrobat  
of what is not.

I met a bulk  
which didn't blink.  
It had no back  
but endless blank.

This mute thing on a shelf  
looks out into itself—

impersonal universe,  
in small reverse.

Out of whatever hold  
there came a whole  
that we might crawl

to a nightly All.

(Three prayers  
from the Nursery  
down the stairs:  
IN MEMORY)

*If I must trust  
the fact of dust  
may I at least  
be last released.*

*I will not scrape  
or hope escape:  
one pure thunderclap  
and then the gap.*

*Crack and break  
the whole wide sky,  
that I might wake  
before I die.*

ONE WHO PURSUED  
VERISIMILITUDE.

A blaze of zero  
calls the crow.

Plural, the pivot.  
Pure riot,  
spare quiet—  
idiot polyglot:

underneath under  
—brute slumber,  
cold wonder.  
Unutterable number.

A blaze of zero,  
touch-and-go,  
REMEMBER SO  
in embryo.

ELEGY  
FOR STEVIE  
'at one'  
1971:

'When I am dead you must put them right'  
about the blue flowers in the light:

*Lives sixty years at Palmer's Green,*  
and walked The Serpentine

of things foreseen.  
The in-between.

*Skies' division*  
*unprisoned prism—*  
*true vision,*  
*fire's rhythm.*

*Tell them*  
*eyes' fission*  
*recognition.*  
*Ignition, apparition.*

This fire upon the shelf  
looks out into itself,

*eyes, precise*  
*I elegize.*

The specialized,  
the glazed,  
revised,  
and paraphrased

I write—  
the profligate  
against the light,

the Isolate:

the crystal  
systole  
and diastole.

The chill.

*Off and on I hear*  
the Cipher at my ear  
and chirping up the stair,

and there, and here  
its 'cricket' too aware,  
its blanks of crippling air:

this throb of clear with bare,  
this bald-faced blare.

How to explain  
a porcupine  
—or make it sane  
to make it shine?

What dimension  
has the swan?  
What indrawn  
unison,

abyss of focus?  
What countless less  
its nucleus?  
What *press*

made the lens  
make sense  
or wrens  
—what fence?

*How to inquire  
within the fire?*

*Blake in a snowflake  
half-awake,*

down the lane  
behind the brain

below the sunflower,  
links of power.

How to ask  
without a mask

and precipice?  
*Without interstice?*

Root's grip—  
kinship.

'THE GIST!  
the radiant gist'



WCW insisted.  
Remember the foot, two-fisted.

All, all a design—  
he said. (He was 79.)

Pound in Venice  
pled parenthesis:

*I pointed out  
but song and drought—*

then disappeared  
in his beard

‘SPLENDOR, IT ALL COHERES’  
in our ears.

‘Can you enter the great acorn of light?’

*Villon was right.*

And Olson hurled  
‘and the mind go forth to the end of the world’

behind him

out on a limb

—a blaze of zero calls the crow:  
*above, below.*

*This dream, my axle-tree  
—childhood memory:*

There is no wall  
to it all.  
Up, goes the widening ball  
till I fall.

O crawling thing  
I cling in sleep  
—full swing  
the leap,

the top, the gyroscope  
and microscope  
kaleidoscope.

My envelope.

O crawling thing  
I can but sing.

There is no stop  
nor deep to drop.

But dreamed one night within the Light:

embodied music up a hill  
in stock-still daffodil.

*To see through an eye  
of the magnified day-fly—*

*magical obstacles,  
spectacles, opticals:*

and huge identity  
without a memory.

*O bright blindfold!*

*unknowing marigold.*

The specified  
I testify:  
the pied, the tide,  
the blue-tail-fly.

Cold Fahrenheit  
is sight.

Zenith, the pith  
to see with:

both last and first  
inversed,

*Eyes to the cage*  
of average.

This is the palindrome  
as honeycomb,

that protoplast  
be looking-glassed

and staircase  
The Base.

*All is*  
*chrysalis.*

Here sits *Fire*  
with the forest in his mouth,  
his back to the heart  
and sighing at the south.

*Water* holds her mirror  
time out of mind  
out of mud,  
and a world come clearer.

This, the *Air*—  
the deep imaginary.  
Out of its sleep  
sings the great canary.

*Earth's* is the swift  
embrace,  
circling our feet  
upon its face.

FLEDGELING VISION  
at the edge  
of the ledge  
of prism:

*Plunged back in these eyes' light—  
pigeoned iris, spiral sight.*

The crystal  
systole  
and diastole  
  
—the wall.

The IMPONDERABLES  
are the usuals

crouched to spring  
in anything.

*This is the irreducible riddle  
of the terrible middle.*

Elliptic  
at the quick  
I speak  
—the hide-and-seek,

the complex  
neck-and-neck, the flex—  
the influx:  
Crux.

It is the risk  
I ask—  
sun's disc, asterisk  
the task,

what world by the wrist  
I missed:

the gist, THE RADIANT GIST.

Mill at the grist,  
ventriloquist.

*November 25th, 1935. Sun Moon and Jupiter  
conjunct in the Archer.*

*Aries rising, Mars on the horn  
of Capricorn.*

*Venus in the Balance  
—chance consonance.*

Light at the end of a tunnel—  
spool, loop-hole, pole-  
vault of the cell

to full...  
Star behind sun behind moon, inhale:  
wheel, in wheel, in wheel.

O pale diver  
of One behind another! The other  
and farther father...

At the end of its tether,  
the interstellar.

Insistent matter.

*Saturn in the 12th House,  
Cat-and-Mouse.*

Time/interlocked,  
in strokes.  
Smoke, the hollyhock—

its framework  
spark: a crack  
in the dark

(slow thunderstroke)  
my clock.  
Concentric chink.

*Things artichoke  
at the brink,  
and tick.*

It is a pendulum  
spectrum  
that comes—

chrysanthemum  
—swift polychrome

at the bone.

The circumambient!  
in balanced dissent:  
enlightenment,  
and excrement.

Angels caged  
in what I see—  
eternity  
in gauged

antiphony  
—a lineaged  
clarity.

(Mid-age. Brought to my knee.)

*1935–1970*

*The altitude  
unglued:*

*a God in a cloud,  
aloud*

—exactitude

the flood.

NOTHING IS HID  
FROM THE SQUIRRELS OF FIRE.

Nothing in the dark hill  
that is a head

—nothing in the hole the heart dug,  
nor tumbled blood.

Beware the squirrels of fire—  
the blur, the door ajar.

Teeter-totter  
fire and water,

earth and ocean  
one commotion—

night and daylight  
bite by bite.

etc., etc., etc.



PETER O'LEARY

## A Note on the Manuscript

“The Imaginary Menagerie” was conceived between 1968 and 1971 but never published. This manuscript for “The Imaginary Menagerie,” typed in 1971, consists of seventeen typed pages. At the time, Johnson typically maintained wide margins at the top and bottom of the page in his typescripts; internal evidence suggests that the poem was intended to run continuously. Italicized passages are underlined in the typescript.

This manuscript belonged to William Benton, a poet and writer born in 1939 who was friends with Johnson and lives in New York City. It is to be found in the William Benton collection of Ronald Johnson correspondence and poetry at the Kenneth Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas. In Benton’s novel *Madly*, published in 2005, Johnson makes a cameo when the narrator of the novel presents a dish for his lover to eat. “‘Wait’ll you taste this. It’s a Ron Johnson recipe,’ I said.”†

Readers will note that the poem concludes with three repetitions of “etc.” At the time Johnson sent this manuscript to Benton, he also sent it to some of his other correspondents, including Guy Davenport, whose manuscript also concludes with “etc.” At the time, in 1971, Johnson was preparing to apply for a Guggenheim Fellowship, with the intention of working further on the poem, which explains the “etc.”

Furthermore, it should be noted that Johnson continued working on this manuscript in the ensuing years. Drafts held in the Spencer Research Library show Johnson extending the work in “The Imaginary Menagerie,” which includes experiments with concrete poetry as well as additional rhymed stanzas. At a certain point, Johnson shifted his vision to a new work that he initially called “WOR(L)DS,” which

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†/ William Benton, *Madly: A Novel* (Berkeley: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2005), 39.

would eventually become *ARK*, at one point incorporating much of this manuscript into “Wor(l)ds 19: The Imaginary Menagerie.”

Nevertheless, the poem printed here represents the most polished version of the poem to be found among Johnson’s papers.

Acknowledgment to Steven Manuel for drawing attention to “The Imaginary Menagerie.” Manuel is preparing a critical edition of *ARK: The Foundations* and suggested “The Imaginary Menagerie” as one of the sources for several of the “BEAMS” in *ARK: The Foundations*. And further acknowledgment to Elspeth Healey at the Spencer for providing additional versions of the poem to inspect.

## Ronald Johnson, "The Imaginary Menagerie": An Afterword

"The Imaginary Menagerie" is a work of transitional consequence for Ronald Johnson. In early 1968, Johnson was living in Aspen, Colorado. On the verge of succumbing to a hibernal gloom, he suddenly departed for San Francisco on the back of The White Rabbit, a motorcycle owned and driven by a mysterious stranger named Mike. It effectively ended Johnson's decade-long relationship with Jonathan Williams, who was at the time a fellow at the Aspen Institute. Williams was out of town on a college reading tour when Johnson left, part of a peripatetic life publishing and peddling books for the Jargon Society, which Williams had invited Johnson to be part of in 1958. Williams, six years older than Johnson, was a romantic partner, a mentor in poetry, and Johnson's publisher. In no small way, by leaving for San Francisco, Johnson was setting out on his own. When asked what San Francisco, not yet a year removed from the Summer of Love, was like when he arrived, Johnson, with joy in his voice, surmised, "It was like Oz."

Johnson had earned his ruby slippers. By this point, he had published two books of poetry with another—and his first cookbook, *The Aficionado's Southwestern Cooking*—on the way. In 1964, the Jargon Society published *A Line of Poetry, A Row of Trees*, collecting all of Johnson's work in the vein of the projectivist New American poetry, full of collage, quotation, and lyric acuity, closely identified with the ideogrammic method innovated by Ezra Pound and mastered and promulgated by Charles Olson. During the 1960s, Johnson and Williams began a series of travels, mostly on foot, that would profoundly influence Johnson's subsequent work as a poet. Together, they traveled the length of the Appalachian Trail and took extensive walking tours of England and, eventually, continental Europe. Through Pound's ideogrammic method, Johnson began to experiment with a poetry of collage and observation, committed to what critic Ross Hair calls "ocular interests," which led Johnson to a concern with "achieving visual integrity about one specific subject,

the British landscape, by observing it from multiple perspectives and vantage points.”<sup>†</sup> This work resulted in *The Book of the Green Man*, a book-length poem of enduring interest, tracking the change of seasons through the British landscape with an eye ever on the eponymous figure of the title, an autochthonous mythical being of environmental verdure ever glimpsed in the periphery (or on your frozen peas as the Jolly Green Giant). It was published in 1967, both in England and America, and reprinted in England by Uniformbooks in 2015.

In 1969, Johnson published *Valley of the Many-Colored Grasses* with Denise Levertov at Norton (republished in 2023 by The Song Cave). The book reprints most of *A Line of Poetry*, *A Row of Trees* followed by a section of new work, “The Different Musics,” which sets the scene for the writing to come in Johnson’s twenty-five or so years in San Francisco. This new work—consisting of “The Different Musics,” “Letters to Walt Whitman,” “Assorted Jungles: Rousseau,” and “The Unfoldings”—begins Johnson’s formal experimentation with centered justification, which allows his lyricism simultaneously to compress and expand. Technically, by aligning his poetry on a central margin, as Hair notes, Johnson “implements a more suitable form to allow different perceptions to co-exist simultaneously on the page.”<sup>‡</sup> There is an electrical quality to this poetry that crackles to this day, mixing a vivid openness in terms of what Johnson is observing with pointed excavations from scientific and artistic material such as Whitman’s poetry and Henri Rousseau’s paintings. These poems suggest the possibilities to come in *ARK*, Johnson’s masterpiece, a long poem in the idiom of *The Cantos*, *Maximus*, and “A”, in ninety-nine parts, marked throughout by Johnson’s generous, generative, and joyful language. The steps, therefore, between Johnson’s early work, up through *Valley of the Many-Colored Grasses*, to that of *ARK* and the visionary *Radi os*—his poem-by-excision of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*—are fairly clear and involve a series of technical and thematic shifts.

To all of this, “The Imaginary Menagerie” must be added. In crucial respects, it is the lost key to the powerful transformation Johnson appears to have undergone during the time shortly after his move to San Francisco and acts as a pantomime to precede *ARK*.

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<sup>†</sup>/ Ross Hair, *Ronald Johnson’s Modernist Collage Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 91.

<sup>‡</sup>/ Hair, *Ronald Johnson’s Modernist Collage Poetry*, 91.

San Francisco in 1968 and 1969 saw Johnson changing addresses and lovers (“the Mike scene is a drag...”), taking a job at a Japanese import store, being shown movie stills of *The Bed* by James Broughton, reading Thoreau’s *Journals* in the two-volume Dover edition, having dinner parties with authors of erotic fiction, gossiping with Creeley and Ginsberg when they were in town, and exploring his artistic possibilities. Besides continuing to write poetry, Johnson began a novel starring camp queens in the dialogue-heavy style of Ronald Firbank, sold coffee table book-sized silkscreens of his concrete poems through the mail to friends and patrons, took up painting, and attempted critical prose (“my main difficulty is that tedious sequence prose is used to exact”). These explorations would eventually resolve into his legendary involvement with the San Francisco leather scene and a series of highly regarded cookbooks. But most importantly, in 1971, living in the Castro on 18th Street with his partner David, Johnson became a thirty-five-year-old poet who had begun a long poem. If there is a clearer sign of Johnson’s transformation during this time than “The Imaginary Menagerie,” it would need to be telegraphed to us by Johnson himself from his pied-à-terre in Elysium.

On September 11, 1971, Johnson sent a copy of “The Imaginary Menagerie” to Guy Davenport with a letter saying, “It is to be my A, my Max, my Leaves of Grass. After four years or more of eking out poems one by one, the Voices are speaking. Not, definitely not, eking. I hope it’s as good as I think it is....” Johnson had had the title since 1968 in Aspen, when he’d written to Davenport, “I have in mind, now, to write a book of animal poems to be called The Imaginary Menagerie. It is a title well worth writing a book for.”†

Other than the animals that populate it, the thing most striking and obvious about “The Imaginary Menagerie” is its rhyme. Rhyme isn’t merely its reason—though it clearly dominates the composition of the sequence—it is its dominant agent of transformation. Johnson was fired up by what rhyme allowed him to discover in this work and was intent on persuading Davenport and Williams of its power. “I have

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†/ We date the poem’s conception between 1968 and 1971 because of various references that Johnson and Davenport make in their letters to the poem as an ongoing project, though Johnson probably did not start it in earnest until 1970. We can be almost certain that Johnson did not share the poem—at least in manuscript form (they kept in frequent touch by phone as well as letter)—with Davenport until 1971.

tried, too,” Johnson wrote to Davenport, “to not get self-conscious about meter, to simply let the ear do what it may toward song. The more flexibility the better. Strange—the rhyme leads one on down the path, but I have not (as in *The Green Man*, and other poems) let my head get in the way. This is the first poem, actually, where I have not worked as much with ‘form’ as with content, etc. ‘The song comes,’ as Jonathan once wrote, ‘for the Beckoning Fair One.’”

Davenport responded with gusto. “By the testicles of the Prophet, by golly and by gum, you are indeed inventing with a superior lute,” he wrote to Johnson on September 17, 1971. Davenport’s excitement for the “residual rhythms here and there, and the...slant in the cutting, the quiver of the string stopped on the fret with...suddenness” was salted by the friendly accusation that Johnson had borrowed some techniques from Davenport’s 1966 long poem *Flowers and Leaves*.

In a later letter, Davenport, a talented pedagogue, explained to Johnson the form he had used and its relation to animals: “[Y]our meter is good old English tetrameter, four feet (quadruped!) to the line: tum tum ti tum.” He then praised Johnson’s rhyming: “[I] remember [your] poetry.... That’s what rhyme helps with, another energy envelope around the sense, no more constricting than a magnetic field.” “Keep going,” Davenport encouraged, “until you are out in the blue tetrahedra of unexplored space, beyond the lonely footprints of Kit Smart and Odilon Redon.”

Williams was less impressed. “Imaginary Menagerie has a fine Poulenc-like froth to it—froth with *clarté*. As a title I mean.” In 1971, Williams was living with the poet Thomas Meyer in the north of England. Though Williams and Johnson had remained close since their romantic split, corresponding frequently, the beginnings of a chill can be felt in some of these letters. Less enthused than Davenport, Williams continued, “The insides tend to puzzle me, as you indicate they puzzle you. Rhyme is a very obsessive device and can be as uncomfortable as a nervous tic.” Amidst quick analysis of two of Johnson’s masters of rhyme—Stevie Smith and Edith Sitwell—Williams delivers his final judgment: “I’m not so sure you can be quite so bold and barren about the rhymes but that’s just me talking.”

Even more scandalous to Williams—whose poetics aligned with the other Williams’s “no ideas but in things”—was the way Johnson grew hazy images out of rhyme. “You know my fondness for the exact

and particular,” Williams wrote. “Beware the lure of the Abstract—even when you can rhyme it with distraught.” It was a harsh response, even for the usually forthright Williams, and no doubt hurt Johnson’s feelings during a dynamic shift in his work.

Johnson responded to Williams with what, to our minds, is one of the most significant expressions of his mature poetics and how he saw his work in relation to his peers’. This response is also notable as a depiction of how spiteful and competitive he could be when fired up, something that Williams seems especially to have brought out of him, and is worth quoting at length:

I’ll take your ‘abstract’ to heart. It is difficult to define the structure of the world, known & unknown, and how we know it, and find all the dropping-off places in matter and the mind, without being somewhat abstract. But I’m wrestling. Trying to bring the tigers out of their cages. The abyss between 1 and 2 is as real as the crack in a floor-board—and underneath it is possible to see the Nothing, Nothing at All, Magritte saw. The tigers may have their mouths open, but that is no reason not to keep moving.

And it is high Time the Olsonian emotionally abstract goes the way of all things!

Onward, onward. We have Mr. Creeley to tell us of the Cage. (Over and over and over). I’ve written the other poems, and there is more to it than that. I’d like to stand and look off Wyndcliff again and see now more than the anemones. See Goya’s dog rise off the horizon. Or Blake, Admit in the granite.

Dahlberg is not just barking up his Judas-tree when he says Olson was a cold man lusting to be warm. Bunting alone came out of Pound with more than Sight Sound and Intellection. Let us burn a little. Look at Louis busying himself to translate the Talmud into a tea-cozy for Celia...And Whalen is now cataloging an anthology of his every thought over a year with the absorption of a monkey picking fleas. There are the Creeley disciples trying to chop like the master (they thought he meant chop-sticks, not boxing). McClure has finally got into the Movies where he always wanted to be. Where does it lead? Unless those two syllables put together take us by the hair, what matter? WHAT energy?

Let's ask for Sight Sound and Intellection, but pray for whatever Stevie had, or Patchen, or Roethke. I'd rather look square at a Bacon than disappear in the stripes of a Barnett Newman or Kenneth Nolan [*sic*]. Let's face it, John Cage is a bore—we need more than our ears. I want to begin at The Sun Treader again. The Fifties lasted into the Sixties, and now they are over.

Rhyme may not be the answer, but Song somehow is, and I've taken the first step back to song. May have bitten off more than I can chew too, but I think the 'Off and on I hear / the Cipher at my ear' poem, or this:

Spectre, spectre, on the wall  
—are you that shadow shadows all?

Are you the Vector? The star-connector?

Are you what snowballs small by Small?

(if a bit Nabokovian) pushes the boundaries of rhyme in a way nobody quite has. (As will the end of the book). And the blot/bat things, though blunt do a kind of nursery-rhyme terror that is at the heart of all of us.

Well, so much for that. For now.

Johnson understood he'd discovered something new in his poetry, something he experienced as energy that sight, sound, and intellection (or eye, ear, and mind, as he would have them in *ARK*) activated through rhyme, something Davenport recognized but Williams doubted. Johnson knew he was at the onset of something epic, if still not entirely visible to him, that would come to occupy the next twenty years of his creative life. Writing on Good Friday, 1972, to Donald Anderson (who, along with his wife Patricia, was Johnson's patron for many years, at one point providing Johnson with a monthly stipend to help cover his living expenses), Johnson offers this nugget:

I have written about six months ago the first draft of an incredible (it's incredible to me, and everyone but Jonathan who has read it has gone mildly berserk with praise) book which is a break-through



to a kind of dark, passionate, crazy poetry more like Roethke than anything else I suppose—but not really influenced by him. It ‘rhymes’ too which is what J.W. hates—but I’ve been trying to say it’s o.k. since the new physicists tell us the Universe rhymes, or in some instances half-rhymes.

Nevertheless, about a year later, Johnson realized the form of “The Imaginary Menagerie” was too restrictive. On June 2, 1972, he wrote to Davenport, “The Imaginary Menagerie, as such, as I have written, was not quite IT, and I have come more and more in the last few months to conceive a form in which I could put, now, everything I have learned and will in time learn. The ‘cantos’ or whatever they are, are to be called WOR(L)DS.” “WOR(L)DS” was eventually, because of a quiet insistence from Davenport that one should not title books with unpronounceable words, re-titled *ARK*. A similar letter was written to Williams, and “WOR(L)DS,” then *ARK*, dominated Johnson’s poetic output until its conclusion in 1990. Certain phrases from “The Imaginary Menagerie” make their way into *ARK*—most significantly “(Mid-age. Brought to my knee.) / 1935–1970”—and Johnson admits to both Davenport and Williams that he is using “The Imaginary Menagerie” as a quarry for what would become *ARK*.

In this respect, “The Imaginary Menagerie” feels like Blake’s *Four Zoas*, the record of an imaginative explosion the poet would spend the next two decades coming to terms with. Likewise, Johnson’s poem resembles Pound’s “Three Cantos of a Poem of Some Length,” the so-called “Ur-Cantos,” first published in *Poetry* in June 1917, out from which Pound would hew the beginning of *The Cantos* as we know them. In “The Imaginary Menagerie,” we find Johnson encountering new poetic power, feeling anew the “whole river of electricity” (as Emerson puts it in “The Poet”), charged with rhyme and glimpsing the vision he would manifest in *ARK*. Though Johnson never published “The Imaginary Menagerie” in his lifetime (despite repeatedly announcing his desire to do so for a year or two in the early 1970s), it feels crucial, shedding light on the poet as he stood at the threshold of his masterpiece.

## BIOGRAPHICAL & ARCHIVAL SOURCES

Biographical material in this afterword is drawn from the authors' experience with and research on Ronald Johnson.

Letters from Ronald Johnson to Donald B. Anderson are housed in the Donald B. Anderson archives, Anderson Museum of Contemporary Art in Roswell, New Mexico.

Letters from Ronald Johnson to Guy Davenport are housed in the Guy Davenport papers, Harry Ransom Center, the University of Texas at Austin.

Letters from Ronald Johnson to Jonathan Williams are housed in the Jargon Society Collection, Poetry Collection of the University Libraries, University at Buffalo, the State University of New York.

Letters from Guy Davenport and Jonathan Williams to Ronald Johnson are housed in the Ronald Johnson Collection, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, the University of Kansas.

MICHAEL BECKER

*from* IN SEARCH OF PRETTY FLOWERS



## CHICKEN PIE AND FOR ME

The butlers say the cooks are  
famous for their chicken pie, that  
eating it's to be complicit with the best  
humanity could offer to a person  
and, Ah! they all say to their lords  
We've found our cooks! who though'd lack  
beyond what's blurred would bake a pie beyond  
excellent, and lords ask their butlers, What kind of pie?  
We love pie! and cooks say to butlers and lords

A nice meat pie! and made oval  
the butlers repeat to their lords

My lord, it's a meat pie  
A meat pie?  
Yes, my lord, it's a nice meat pie for you, my lord  
A nice meat pie and for me?  
Yes, my lord, a nice meat pie and for you  
A meat pie, but what kind of meat?  
It's nice, my lord  
Yes, it's nice, but what else?  
It's chicken, my lord  
Oh, it's chicken?  
Yes, chicken, my lord, the meat's chicken  
The meat's chicken.  
Yes, my lord, the meat's chicken  
And it's chicken meat pie.  
Yes, my lord  
And for me.

Yes, it is  
So it's chicken meat pie and for me.  
Yes, my lord  
And it's oval?  
Yes, it is, my lord

## APPEARANCES ARE OF BUT NOT

and everything is broken  
that though we'd have at least  
the appearances of wealth and  
the resources to afford a butler

we're broke and useless to worthless  
men who willy-nilly lest whomever  
finding staining brown our green ties red

and butlers cry, But we're alive, though, yes  
and men say, Yes, but you're alive, though  
and butlers cry, We're not dead, though  
and men cry, Yes, you're not dead, though

and men say, Alive, indeed, that more  
alive that well so's proven to our view that  
dandelions sprout about and soon enough.

## THE OHS AND THE AHS

A pause in events renders wind its effect  
thus seen thus shaped thus judged and considered  
and as an aesthetic matter by the genius, and

Oh, say the butlers  
and the butlers say  
Ah, the oh of a man  
who's remembering

for the time being

seeing what's assumed and then stranded  
of words got spoke and said stood and  
standing in a view of an implacable  
lux and lost cold and look  
to the tumbles  
shore the views and we they  
through and think it not or towards  
that want, want that  
not and magnitudes of  
words be stood said spoke and got

for though a tree may live without its  
orchids it's impoverished for their absence.

## THE MAN HAS AND IS A BUTLER

There wasn't anyone in the garden  
until the sixth butler came into it  
with the man and he said

This manor and this garden are beautiful

and beside the world  
I captain as my state

I need to be apart from that  
what is and rages on me always

humanity's a fearsome burden  
for I am an industrialist

and the man said

Humanity's what's tied to ends  
though, and the sixth butler said

What's tied by strength of will  
and not without tremendous risk to  
everything that's mine and to myself

envies are so easy to impassion  
and the game of it's not so fun then.

The man lifted a wheelbarrow by the handles  
and he said, Why push the wheelbarrow when it  
can be pushed for you? and the man set the  
wheelbarrow down



and the sixth butler said, Exactly  
and a glamorous woman came into the garden  
and the sixth butler asked to the man in a low voice  
Who is she? and the man said to the sixth, She's a woman  
who'd claim fortune's father's hers, and the sixth butler said  
How fortunate for me to see her, then.

The glamorous woman abridged the two butlers and she said  
to the sixth, Hello, a well-dressed man who claims good fortune's  
compliment, I see, perhaps you complement bespoke suit with  
sea's accoutrement, a yacht, and the sixth butler said

I'm the captain of a yacht that's made  
of man who set my place for serving tea  
and plow the elements at my behest and make  
me the man of men all men would wish to be

and the glamorous woman said to him  
Maybe you'll show your yacht to me someday  
and the glamorous woman walked out of the garden  
and the sixth butler watched her go and he said  
She wants to see my yacht?  
and to his butler the sixth butler said  
My yacht is just the way I say humanity.

The man said to his lord  
She'll want to lay an eye on  
your humanity or whatever else  
you call it and she'll want your mast  
to be bigger than the other yachts' and fraught  
with yours, though be that as it may, let's let and let  
I'll get the cook and introduce you to  
a fool's supper, and the man left  
the garden in search of the cook  
and the sixth butler said to himself

I can't keep straight  
which to what's been tied

a yacht with a mast and  
a daughter of fortune.

The man came back into the garden with the cook and he said

I've found our cook who though lacks sight beyond what's  
blurry can bake a pie beyond excellent, and the sixth butler  
asked, What kind of pie? I love pie! and the man said to him  
A savory chicken pie  
A chicken pie! and made  
oval, repeated the sixth butler  
and the man said, Our cook's  
famous for his oval chicken pie, that eating  
it's to be complicit with the best  
humanity could offer us.

The sixth butler said to the man  
You oversell, and the sixth butler  
ate a bite of pie and the sixth butler  
said to the man, You undersell! What pie!  
What cook, though pale and poorly of the eyes!  
I love this place! and to the cook he said  
You're now my cook, and to the man he said  
And you're my butler now, it feels you've always  
been, who'd know so keenly cook's delicious pie  
I'll have my things all transferred here at once  
and have this place and take this stuff and rest my weary  
bones from chore of captaining the industry of being human

and the sixth butler said, But first I'll make more intimate  
acquaintance with this lady who likes a nice yacht and  
a tall mast, and the sixth butler left the garden and  
the man said to himself

What a turd, but at least he'll pay  
his bills and keep his butler's needs in  
mind while competition for his lady's love  
I'll keep in mind for him, and to the cook he said

Are you still here? Get lost!  
Go make more pie, you jerk!

The cook left the garden, and the man muttered after him  
Fools know too many things that  
let that fools keep mouths shut  
and the gardener came into the garden  
and the man said to her, Our garden's mum  
to dirt the weeds we grow in, what's that  
you've got in your weathered hands?

The gardener said, It's the plant from  
the pot that you broke, in a new pot.

The man said, My lady's plant she gave to me's alive and well

I guess I should amend my prior thinking  
that what's beautiful is borne exclusively  
of what is beautiful

and to the gardener he said  
Leave it here and then you please leave  
too, I'm expecting someone, and the seventh  
butler came into the garden and the man said  
Too late, we're seen! and to the seventh butler he said  
Good man! We're over here! Come here

and the seventh butler said  
I'm inquiring after a butler's place  
and the man said, Then speak to me  
I'm he to whom you would enquire  
and the seventh butler exclaimed  
That's good, my lord, what a lovely place!  
The man said, You call me lord and  
you're dressed nicely and you  
compliment me on my gardens  
and you're now my butler.

The seventh butler said, I am? That's lovely to  
hear, my lord, and turning to the gardener he asked  
And are you the gardener of the manor?

The gardener said, I am, and the seventh butler said  
What a lovely plant you've potted, and the gardener said  
Thank you, the secret to a potted plant's the dirt you plant it in  
and the seventh butler asked, What's the secret to the dirt? and  
the gardener said, Some things don't get uprooted  
and the gardener left the garden  
and the seventh butler said  
What a lovely metaphor for secrets!

The man said to his new butler  
Is everything lovely to you?  
Maybe you just need to get to work.  
I've got a room that needs some lovely cleaning  
and the seventh butler said, Great, and he asked  
And may I ask about my pay, my lord? and the man  
said, We'll talk about money in a bit, don't worry  
your pay will be as lovely as the substance  
of our worth to me and for yourself, and the man  
and the seventh butler left the garden together.

FINIS COMOEDIAE

ANNE ÉLAINE CLICHE  
Translated by Emma Roy

from *Who Shall I Say*

## Ascension

I knew Barabbas, who didn't! In Val-d'Or everybody knew him, so people said when their memories were jogged by the tale my mother spun them of the cemetery and the identity papers. Early on it came out that he had no papers when he appeared without belongings on a Third Avenue sidewalk and took up residence there, sitting on the sidewalk itself or leaning against cars or garbage cans; people called him Barabbas even then I think even though he had no legal identity no papers, then there was the trial he was accused of stealing a bicycle a big black delivery bicycle, he was charged and dragged before the court but it quickly became clear he hadn't stolen a thing and the real thief had pedaled all the way to Amos where they found him cruising around innocent as a lamb on the stolen bicycle. The fool had to pedal the bicycle right back to its owner in Val-d'Or and the whole thing was settled without too much trouble but the trial was the moment it came out that this fellow Barabbas had no identity nothing proving he was born here or there or when or of whom. My father already knew he had no papers the police knew too but the trial was the moment everyone else learned that either he'd gotten this far in life with no papers whatsoever or else he'd had them once but had changed his identity or lost track of himself along the way; that's what they said that his very self had been lost and his identity along with it because none of the people who thought they recognized him agreed with each other, which is to say none of them really did recognize him, I'm talking about those who claimed they knew him as a child or a teenager and who'd tell stories that ended up attached to him, like Turmel's story for example Albert Turmel the butcher at Salaison Abitibi was positive this Barabbas fellow was the son of Roméo

Grégoire whose name was Lucien Lucien Grégoire who at thirteen or fourteen went missing and not a trace of him was ever found. Turmel argued that Barabbas knew everything there was to know about the Académie Saint-Sauveur one of the first schools constructed in Val-d'Or in 1940 and the place Turmel himself had completed his seven years of elementary school. He'd tried to get Barabbas to confess that he was indeed Lucien Grégoire the crackpot son of Roméo Grégoire who one fine morning in 1945 arrived at school with a plank coffin and demanded he be shut inside it and the lid nailed down because he was going to prove he too could rise from the dead apparently. But you're not even dead! shouted his classmates, how can you come back to life? I'm trying to tell you I'll come out of my coffin after three days, replied Lucien who was old for his age or rather older than the age he should have been since he was progressing slowly and was doing sixth grade for the second time. The children surely would have nailed him in the coffin if they hadn't been prevented by the nuns who ran the school and the teachers. Three days gives me plenty of time to die! explained Lucien to his classmates, there's time for me to die and in three days I swear I will come out from my nailed coffin alive! An entire day was lost trying to make him give up this perfectly absurd idea until finally he told the nuns it was the story of Jesus that was absurd and that the whole business about the three days in the tomb and the rising from the dead sounded an awful lot like that stupid magic trick where the woman gets cut in half with a saw or a chainsaw; well if they'd just let him demonstrate he could lie down in this coffin and get cut in half by anybody and nothing would stop him from coming out in one piece because he would know how to escape the saw. You're the absurd ones! Lucien Grégoire shouted at the nuns in the middle of the afternoon enraged now and the priest now attempted to soothe him by telling him that miracles were in no way of the same nature as magic tricks that he must have faith that faith allowed you to comprehend what remained incomprehensible, in a nutshell, Turmel said, the priest fed him some claptrap that seemed to calm him for the moment but had in fact sparked an even more harebrained idea in the mind of Roméo Grégoire's son the two-time sixth grader. Of course, Turmel added, they talked about Jesus from dawn to dusk at that school, where he himself hadn't been what

anybody would call a good student though they did turn out some excellent ones at the Académie Saint-Sauveur where the Sisters of the Assumption gently and wisely steered up to five hundred students from the first to eleventh grade, They brainwashed us with Jesus and all the things he did, continued Turmel who grew up to be a butcher at Salaison Abitibi, the Gospels are crawling with miracles as we know. They went on and on about Jesus how he walked on water multiplied the fishes the wine the bread raised the dead promised to destroy the Temple and rebuild it they talked our ears off about Jesus and his faith curing hemorrhoids paralysis and then there was the good old tale of the Ascension! the Ascension of Jesus before his disciples' very eyes! So Lucien, he fully understood the lesson the priest was imparting when he trotted out the same old spiel about the so-called miracles to convince him magic had nothing whatsoever to do with it right well two hours later at six o'clock in the evening the Angelus sounded the children had long since gone home the priest had returned to his rectory and someone I don't remember who spotted Lucien standing on the roof of the school yelling like a lunatic and waving his arms. A crowd was gathering Maman and Papa Grégoire were standing in the schoolyard begging their son to go back down the way he came which was through the trapdoor in the ceiling of the main classroom on the third floor which the plumber used as needed to go and clear the eaves which the good sisters left padlocked so the students couldn't climb up on the roof and which Lucien had managed to open by stealing the key and had closed behind him and padlocked once he was up on the roof thus reducing to zero any chance of reaching him that way; all this Lucien was explaining yelling and waving his arms at his audience crowded below even flinging the keys at them so as to eliminate the possibility that he might somehow return to his senses and unlock the padlock open the trapdoor and climb back down which didn't stop his poor mother, as Turmel said, who went right on begging Lucien to go back the way he came while the maniac just shouted that he was going to jump and rise into the sky like Jesus to prove what the priest had wasted his breath and a whole afternoon explaining which was that faith can do anything that there's no trickery or hocus pocus in the Gospels just a testament to faith that transcends the real and can carry the body not to the ground as gravity wills it

but up into the sky where angels and the celestial father await. The school is three stories tall, Turmel would explain unnecessarily since the citizens of Val-d'Or had the Académie Saint-Sauveur in their line of sight at all times a place they should have turned into a mental institution, as old Albert Turmel is still fond of saying to this day, they should have turned it into a home for the mentally handicapped in honor of that idiot Lucien who that day on the roof of the school threatened to rise into the air and just about drove his mother into a frenzy making impossible promises begging him every which way not to jump not to believe he'd rise into the sky like Jesus because with the sins he had on his conscience he'd hit the ground like a brick and smash to smithereens; she promised him a car if he wouldn't jump a motorboat a sailboat an aviator suit and sunglasses while Papa Grégoire tried to walk all these promises back saying they'd have to see and he had to come down first and they'd talk about it when they got home. Finally the priest turned up since he was the one truly to blame for this mass insanity, as Turmel insists whenever he tells the story of Lucien Grégoire a.k.a. Barabbas, the priest finally turned up since after all he was the one Lucien was addressing, Lucien was grilling him mercilessly subjecting him to what amounted to an interrogation an exam on the lesson the poor priest had fed Lucien all afternoon in a doomed attempt to calm the boy's rage and more importantly quash the idea that miracles were no more than the tricks of illusionists and delusionals. Father Father, cried Lucien, is it true that faith can do anything? And the other man stretching his arms to the sky in appeal to the little head poking out over the edge of the roof as Lucien stretched out flat on his stomach contemplating the crowd he'd raised. And the other man the one truly to blame for this mass delirium, Turmel repeats, he didn't say out loud but he gestured, Get down from there you little bastard! it won't be Jesus you take after if you jump but the Devil! Don't you have faith, Father? Tell them all to get on their knees and pray, our prayers are always answered you've told me a hundred times but you'd better be quick because I'm about to jump and maybe my faith by itself isn't enough so do it now get on your knees and pray, Turmel would recount fleshing out his story when he reached this point, extending this scene of mass prayer the kneeling and standing and kneeling again and making the mother



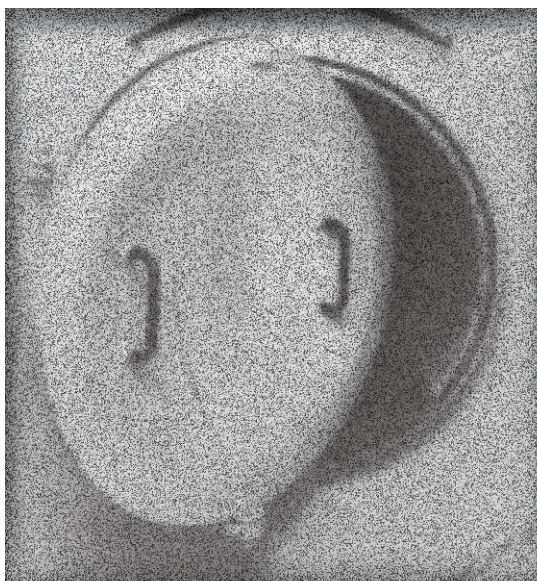
babble on half crazed by fear promising gifts of increasing extravagance which Turmel invented on the spot to suit his audience, until at last he'd reveal that as the throng of parents and children prayed like fanatics at the top of their lungs and Lucien exhorted them to lift their prayers higher and higher somebody had the idea to call the fire department who drove up around the far side of the school without blaring that idiotic siren of theirs, as Turmel would say finally reaching the end of his story, they drove up without blaring that idiotic siren and they climbed up on the roof and seized Lucien by the feet. He was still lying flat on his stomach stretching out farther and farther over the edge by now half his body was dangling in the empty air; they seized him and down they came.

People speculated that this was why young Lucien the sixth-grade repeater ran away from home, but what did "this" refer to? All anyone really knows is that shortly after his mad ascension he vanished from Val-d'Or and the rumor mill did the rest: his mother fell ill his father maybe died because of it and so on. Stories swell with time, true false or unbelievable; he was twelve or thirteen maybe fourteen years old. When Barabbas took up residence so many years later on Third Avenue where the sidewalk is widest Turmel cornered him with questions about his life and his past and proceeded to believe his way to certainty that he had found Lucien Grégoire. And he never wavered.

JOE LUNA

GOOD & EVIL

*To th'field, to th'field!*



To the work ahead  
behind the scenes  
lying in a ditch  
beside a headless corpse  
being wrong again  
mid-scream  
among the peonies & cordage  
to love  
down to the root  
or be a victim  
so full of souls  
under his boyfriend's  
eyelids  
the star-split liver, heart, & brain  
of Britain  
I found a spring  
inside his head  
& what it saw & what it said  
O fairest.

I don't know where  
to find you if I must or  
two dozen inches  
be enough  
I have no memory of you  
execution algo  
only intercostal  
flightpaths  
subpleural carpet karaoke  
let me bate  
this world alive  
plain way & right path  
disintegrated  
parts of him  
blown into the sea  
dropped out from  
the blood  
to spite your terminal  
love's late place.

Fuck your liminal  
field of woe  
rigamarole  
when men's blood boils  
the azured harebell  
not imagined  
felt  
along the day's necrotic promise  
shot at nothing  
killed them instantaneously  
embolic  
martyrs of the deep  
soft tissues  
rent  
the intermarket open  
like the face  
completely parted  
from the words  
on screen.

Before the swollen  
ego renders  
speak then  
we may steal from hence  
somewhere on the deck  
the spine ex-  
spelled, the end  
& rope of my experience  
cut me in  
to thin slices  
pale primroses undersea  
daybreak  
a piece of tender air  
to found a *locus*  
*amoenus* in hysterical exception  
the dead  
no knowledge numbers  
flames of fat fire  
battered veins.

For the gap  
only apparent contradictions  
remain  
between us black water  
the dock  
at Milford Haven  
the sun at City Farm  
the cove for me  
November 1983  
scared child  
moonless discharge  
nothing of their quantity  
be born  
the other side  
before they lived  
as if dissected  
at the speed which is the speed  
despite  
the crescent airlock.

The bird is dead  
his body's hostage  
full of flowers  
life in code & solemn music  
decompressed  
at mach this  
murderous to the senses  
so did you  
scatter haemorrhages  
& pony shit  
in the lower valley  
behold divineness  
no elder than  
a grave  
to sing  
our bondage freely discourse  
arrive before you leave  
up hill &  
down dale by sunrise.

January 25–31  
Brighton  
2022



MIA YOU

## ON THE MAAS

*1 februari 2020*

on this day, *aan de Maas gezeten*

empires are closing themselves in

the vehicle and tenor have changed places

this landscape in which I've lived for no more  
than five years is now where I mourn  
a father born and laid to rest here

dus het is nu ook van mij

what else can I do for you than write  
a poem you might have found beautiful

(although you never read poetry  
and didn't speak my language)

I'm making my language into yours

*O vogel van verlangen*

these geese are no metaphor for life  
your life is no metaphor for the world

de waarheid is dat je weg bent

and these geese make their way north

and from where I stand it feels too soon

## ROSE OF JERICHO

o  
her  
foes  
rose  
close in  
from here  
for most  
heroes come  
rearing fear  
for her  
lovers sing from  
near and far  
sea sand fir fur  
alles kan uit een roos  
emerge like a tongue  
talon of meer talen  
the rose transforms  
space into site and reflex  
into ritual like the lingering  
of lips turns into language  
if spread from mouth to  
mouth 구강 대 구강  
mond op mond  
fluister in mine ear  
hoor je 제 me 미 rose  
장미 in mijn oor  
제 or je me or 미  
slip of lips slip into this  
forest my home my sea  
a slip of moon  
slipped into  
my sheet  
for a Jericho rose  
to open and close  
pen rose  
as rise  
in o

‘언어’ 안에  
o 과 o 가 있다  
두 구멍이 있다  
‘r o o s’ 처럼

## OPENZETTEN

Every day I walk past that green door, and I try not to think about what happened just inside. I try so hard not to think about it that I make myself think about walking, literally about how my legs move from one place to another on the street, about the new plants some neighbors have placed next to their doors, about the bikes that are locked to metal railings or left carelessly leaning on the sidewalk. I even think about the strange, very large snail sculpture visible through another neighbor's window, blown glass, I think, about the size of a dog. Normally, the less I'd have to think about it, the better. Actually, now even more so, the less I would have had to think about it, the better. What strange emotion lies within wanting a large glass version of a small garden insect, usually one that you might even want to get rid of in your garden to protect your cultivated flowers, but now here a dominant aesthetic presence in your living room? Who made such a thing? Was there a deep feeling of satisfaction once it was done? What emotions drew another to want to own it? Here a snail is called a *huisjesslak*, a slug that carries around small houses, or maybe a slug that is held inside small houses. I can't understand why the houses are plural. I am now several houses beyond his, but my legs carry the fissure left behind, the shift in the entire energy of the street, he too had been from somewhere else, he too had tried to make a home here, he too, I had learned too late, had loved poetry, he too had a door painted the same dark green as mine, and I've been thinking about what happened there the entire time.



Roberto Harrison, *crumbs for a letter*, 2019, pencils, pen, and ink on paper, 5" × 7".

ROBERTO HARRISON

## HUMILITY AND HUMILIATION, OR

why do you ask this question? what makes us become  
in the shattering sunrise equipped to find snakes  
through doors for direction, through saddles  
that once moved along without plains in the weather?  
we are not showers of trouble or symbol relations  
and I do not feed the equations or know how to solve  
them, but something has given me paintings to make  
proof with an error in mind of my seasons. the other  
side that I know with the weather, the other mind that I  
never inhabit again makes it here to be settled. I give  
you the sadness that builds up the print jobs in humming  
parades as we wear ourselves out of the night to become  
and to see as we motion the door to relate and to harbor  
the saddle again. where are the horses? where are the manes  
I discover again for the forest of timeless recursions? the bullshit  
that I have maintained for an exit to see beyond neutral terrains  
must have us become for the morning when I make a plan  
to deliver my own to the wind. the world is discovered in absence  
and I become seven to settle the word. we stay in between  
to reject our tomorrows but I do not make us the caste  
of each murderous vision, the shine of the screen makes me  
shallow. everything moves under surface, nothing is other  
than light. but a light with no warmth and no visible shadow.  
now, the shadow is us as we view our deceptions and see them  
become us with greed. no relation can be. but now that I speak  
back to coldness I segment myself for the ways we remember  
the numbers. a torso on each side is gone. the center is empty.  
my feelings now course under glass. I thought there was healing  
in writing. it's the body to paper that counts. it's the voice

that protects me. I vocalize oceans of trouble and feel it together with sharks in the distance. this time, my mind has not broken. it's the line that is near. it's a vision of coldness that does not become us. the others stand elsewhere as targets. everything wallops the animals gone for their knowledge. we all become standby connections for rain to replant us. we all make the morning another worn pattern, another disguise for a trembling body I know. faces correct us. our chemicals start it. the animal kingdom now harvests itself in the dog I embrace. Maya now makes me together with words. I care for the world through her comfort. nothing deceives me through her. the world is so over my wounds become small with no solace. emergency fires have become me to shatter the heart. everything's small now. and the bigness is worse. what book do I go to, to find my own future? what future deserves us? we breathe for a while and forget that we stand for so long on the edge of a knife. there is never an elsewhere. I am not from you. my languages cut like a knife to devour our becoming the Sea. we were never the answer. if we see the future, it's only a glimpse of departure. where am I from? I bury the answers with implacable numbers. what language has saved me? no one knows words I become. I peel off the skin of my face for encounter. my knees are removed for the earth as I settle with calmness in horror. each of my smiles is a hole in the sky. I never deliver. I reject every offering. I reject every way. nothing now holds me to trace my incisions. blood becomes mortar and I am the Sea for collapse. I float and I follow the absence of sand. I reject every link. I make nothing of promise. I am nothing but song for the oceans departed. do not make me settle. do not weave the smokes for a fire to belong. I have nothing but number. I cannot count for the floors anymore. we have nothing in common. the doors must now make me the ground as I harbor the reasons for knowledge and love through a casting of masterful networks inside I solve hellscapes to cry through the shadows above

## IN THE COLORS OF CONVERSATIONS, WE KNOW SILENCE

there in the alliance of the network a stillness makes us see  
we endure in the after body as we belong to the disappearing  
circuits where nothing has intention, where death is the truth  
of intention again. but we arrive without animals  
in the community allegations that we endure  
without answer, where the advancement of the ceiling  
symbols roll into the night in each of us and break  
what the news ejects through wandering, to the approaches  
that something like the water makes in each face, each  
interface broken and belonging to the night of blind  
strategies for the light to become. all the hands then  
reveal the nourishment that once we have it to stand  
again, around the weather circumscribed by bodies  
to remain together in the symbols that soar in  
the everyday patterns of a telecast, the drone  
exception to wandering daylight in the screens  
for nothing. our alabaster shark then, the weaving  
forced to make the entrance to it as a deeper wavering  
and instigation light to make stands shallow, but  
the weather comes from there, in the river, as night  
has followed us to be more in the shadows  
and the shelter of our longing by the rain that we  
keep in the gardens of despair. but they never go  
and they never know the bodies with their answers  
as someone elsewhere makes it to return  
to the Host as administrator, with all group policies  
revoked to stand within the body. all of our belongings  
must not waver in the understanding of a password

affiliation and nurturing streets, shallow in the extension  
which does not respond to the signal or to the symbolic  
pool that we must cross to make a Sea instead within  
the Oceans together. but in this agreement the heads  
must cross otherwise and we must become the constellation  
of desire and in the meantime, we wander through morning  
with no outside. in each of our relatives, in the answer  
of politics as we hold no silence there, in the answer  
of negotiation we slip into the real danger of our own  
selves in making something to complete the musical  
path through to what the night has become. they were  
there first, and they, because of the parallel excretions  
that the community holds true for endurance and the lakes  
we remain to hold each other in everything I call the night.  
but then the notion of family corrupts the induction  
that the circular movies make to find spheres in our own  
internal explorations. all of the approaches of our planes  
must hold themselves together as we know it in each  
of our faces as 'the association,' 'the association' of wandering  
night through the mornings of our extensions, where we are  
and where we move to, to belong with the symbols of starting  
to see again that we must float in our pale destructions, the whole  
bottom of our release must make us the pattern to evolve  
and to see again that we hear each other in the tracing  
door, that we wander again through it to the fish  
that we remain together with, in naming each animal  
as they are beyond us to speak again with the news that we  
must see together in standing here, in the moment with touch  
in every letter we compile and make easy to return to  
in the promise we have to replace ourselves with breathing  
and being lost again to the air in every mistake we course  
through the climate in the flora and fauna of our real  
understanding



## I BEGIN MEN OF MAIZE WITH A SHADOW

there was a beginning in the yellow rabbits  
as the machete teeth sway with a storm mother  
of corn disappearances. each shadow places  
the wrong number by the escape of the smoke  
as we do not count ourselves. all the planes  
have landed and we do not paint the ceremony  
of our endurance to speak of the tapir and her  
questions beside us. they remain still as motion  
itself must become like the color of the distant  
mountain climbed for the frost and for the end  
of payment we see, to remain like the operator  
that does not end. but the yellow rabbit keeps us  
to mark the land we do not know of, the  
isolated dream we mangle for an exit

## END MARK FOR RECURSION

a stretch of the body  
ghosts matter in the light  
of the shadows, we  
signal the afternoon  
without a place to be outright  
we make noise in the river  
wood is cut everywhere  
in stacks of keys. kites arrive  
with the deer and a helicopter  
collapses with the birds  
that quiver with the sand  
to the weight of the earth  
my river depths then curve  
into a mouth of composition  
for the number. something inside  
has broken everything, everywhere  
nothing but a daze  
as the eager night provides us  
with a slowing smoke  
cutting off the words and lines  
I cocoon to become  
with the horses as we parallel  
the climb that follows place  
in the palms of the hands that somehow  
never know we speak. in the extremities  
we approach the last hill  
as a notion of collapse and push  
down. we do not attend  
to the entrances

one way or the other  
that the night hangs  
to be within the hands  
that arrive to make whole  
patterns in the fisheries, in  
the canopy that a waver down  
into the bodies  
and the page make  
I saw it start there  
and then it went away

body forms against number  
the vacated host must see it deliver  
standing plumes of segmentation  
we must not endure  
as the husk of our memories  
collapses again  
from an elemental reason  
without symbol or color  
something breaks  
in each face  
a flood  
I empty the noon  
balance  
between blood and water  
and pick it up  
for a gun  
vacant  
of purposes  
as the manatee  
hides only in death



Roberto Harrison, *a sign for return*, 2021, pencils, pen, ink, markers, and watercolors on paper, 5" × 5½".

KEITH TUMA

*from Studies in the Unnatural World*

## Anthology

A friend from Tennessee says they're called assets, these mostly wrecked machines that gradually take over the tiny yard of our neighbor around the corner and halfway down the block. A rusty, red pickup truck is at the curb out front, with no engine or exhaust pipe, bald tractor tires piled in its bed. It seems unlikely that it will ever move again, but it got to the house somehow. An only slightly newer red pickup is in the driveway with its hood off, its owner peering into its engine. In the middle of the yard sits a PT Cruiser, and behind the pickup in the driveway a silver sedan. Lawn mowers and snowblowers and wheelbarrows are out of the garage, crowding the porch with stools and tables and various gadgets. There's a mini-tractor that my neighbor uses to pull a wagon to offer his adorable little girls rides around the block, as if at a carnival, or maybe a petting zoo. Toys and boots and bikes and the other property of these daughters are scattered everywhere. Out back their dog barks as I pass with one of our dogs. His daughters smile and wave. I've known a few hoarders, mostly of books, but it's not the custom in these parts to park that many machines in one's yard. It's easy to imagine the nearest neighbors upset about their property values. "He's not one of us," I imagine them saying. "He's from someplace else, maybe Tennessee." Long ago I put together an anthology of poems by poets who live elsewhere. I know the kinds of things that are said about such gatherings.

## Demonology

There's a cow on the roof eating grass. Or maybe that's another movie where everything is upside down, and not *A Town Called Bastard*, *A Town Called Hell* for its American release. Telly Savalas plays the bastard, a small-town tyrant with a crooked smile, bald and sweaty as one should be in hell. Stella Stevens arrives in a coffin, accompanied by her faithful servant, who may be deaf. He is wicked with his gun. She is looking to avenge her dead husband. The town's priest is a retired Mexican revolutionary; he's the one who murdered her husband. The priest dies in the movie and the tyrant too. Lots of people do. It's a brutal movie but entertaining, and isn't it odd that some places full of the dead, haunted by them, are of such interest? Some of them are even tourist attractions! Pripjat with its Ferris wheel, for example, is in the news again as the shelling continues. Haw Par Villa in Singapore is another, though the Buddhist demons there aren't real, like the dolls of Nagoro set up to remember everyone who left town. They're scary, but not like shelling is. The skeletons in the Capuchin Catacombs are real, and you can tour those too. Go to hell, why don't you. The new barbarism is like the old barbarism, except for the nuclear weapons.

## Formicology

Not everyone knows that as a young man Saint Francis of Assisi was a party animal. Even after the Perugians held him in a dungeon for a year, he liked the good life. It wasn't until after he joined the Crusades that he began to turn his life around. The first step was returning home to ridicule. After that, his conversion experience was a long one. Preaching to the birds and so on—that was years later. These ants from my yard didn't have that kind of time to work with, alas. Theirs was a short life. The hummingbird feeder was badly designed, a dish with six holes allowing multiple hummingbirds to sit and suck. The holes are big enough for little ants to climb down into the sauce, simple sugars making for a sticky situation. They devoured its contents in an hour.

## Phenology

For a few days the blossoms of the pink peony are bigger than my fist, nearly half as large as my head. Soon after, the flower falls onto the stone path, where the careless might trample it. It's too beautiful for its own good, too sumptuous. That's the truth from Keith to Keats; cut it for a vase. There's more support in shrubs, in families, though not in mine. We have only the one plant beside the garage, and only one daughter, also dying. Who would want to read a miserable poem about that? Maybe the gods would if I ask nicely, or if I cry out. The gods love best those who die young, but what do they know? Some say *peony* is from Paeon, who died when his teacher Asclepius thought he had become too beautiful. Zeus turned him into a flower to save him from the consequences of that observation. Good job, Zeus.



## Eclipsazoology

Odd to notice the pink feet of the mourning dove on the roof of the porch below my window in the rental house in Malden. It's the last day of March; there's nowhere I want to go on the day before I'm to be vaccinated. With my mother and father dead, some of my best friends gone, and Allison terminally ill, what's the point of going on? Yet I don't want the virus. Yesterday Diane and I drove up to Plum Island with the dogs to meet Allison and her boyfriend at the Sandy Point State Reservation. After touring the salt marsh, we drove down a gravel section of road to the beach on the southern end of the island. We didn't know that dogs are not permitted on the beach there and were taken aback when a man in a neck gaiter told us. He wouldn't report us, he said, but he wanted to be sure we knew. He was worried about the piping plovers that return every year to nest on the beach. I thought of the horseshoe crabs I saw swarming the shores of Cape Cod when I was a boy, their population devastated now because their blood is useful to medical research. I remembered a day decades later when I drunkenly pissed on a statue commemorating the carrier pigeon in a Wisconsin park. It's hard to remember too much of the world before Allison was in it. Because she thought dogs were allowed on the beach until the end of March, skinny Allison in her headscarf told the big man in the neck gaiter to fuck off. We didn't see a single piping plover.

## Edaphology

*Verbascum thapsus*, a.k.a. common mullein, a.k.a. Indian ragweed, a.k.a. cowboy toilet paper—as soft as lamb’s ear, its leaves—prefers disturbed dirt, the stony soil one finds alongside railroad tracks or at the edge of industrial parks and other wastelands. Also called Adam’s flannel and beggar’s blanket, this monster with its tall spikes of sulfurous flowers stalks our garden. I look out my study window at twin towers flanking the air-conditioning unit, one plant bent around the shepherd’s crook. Two more of the monsters live around front, one of them growing through the leaves of our Japanese maple. Mullein in tea is an expectorant, and that’s not all it’s good for—it treats earaches and warts, even hemorrhoids. In Europe, it’s associated with witches, its dead leaves like a skirt pushing out below the waist. In Roman times, women used it to make dyes to color their hair, and Aristotle knew about its narcotic effect. It’s easier to catch fish where you see mullein beside the stream, he wrote, since fish swim more slowly when stoned, like most of us. Quaker women are forbidden makeup, but mullein rubbed on cheeks causes an allergic reaction that reddens them—we’re never so clever as when we need to get around prohibitions. Our neighbors say they’re weeds, but they are more impressive than what we’ve worked so hard to keep alive—zinnias, lantana and hibiscus, hollyhocks and marigolds. Miracle-Gro helps them all, but I never need it for the mullein. Only the little weed with leaves like a Christmas tree, also an interloper, competes with the mullein to hold our attention. Its purple is blue-black, like a bruise.

## Eidology

At the RusMoloko farm, cows are given VR goggles to make their winter summer and improve their milk. Grass is harder to fake, though not impossible. It took me two months before I realized that the patch of it no larger than a grave site in front of an old house in Malden was artificial turf. I thought life might just be a little greener in Massachusetts. Allison's illness has all of my attention, but there is this question too: Why install a tiny rectangle of artificial turf for your front yard? It's not much of a job of mowing that is being avoided. It must have been about having a patch of green forever bright against the crumbling asphalt everywhere in Malden. In a documentary about near-death experience there are similarly unreal colors swirling on screen, used to represent a disembodied perspective, as if that were the better view. Teaching me to play baseball, my father said, "Visualize the bat hitting the ball," but I never became a slugger. All glove, they said. I don't take advice well, but I like to give it: hay soaked in beer broth is a favorite among lactating cows after the meadow no longer feeds them. As Baudelaire said, get drunk!

## Heortology

All Saints Way is on Battery Street off Hanover in Boston's North End, a gated alleyway crowded with images and memorabilia celebrating Catholic saints. I'd never seen it at Christmas so was pleased to see it lit up as I walked from Allison's apartment on the wharf to pick up a pizza we'd ordered from Rina's. The pizza there reminds me of pizza we've had in Italy, where Allison will never visit. She's been to lots of places, though, and has taken to repeating what her lawyer boyfriend from Lewiston likes to say about family being more important than travel. With the news of her terminal illness, we came to town at the end of August, and one of the first things we did was go to All Saints Way, which Diane hadn't seen. We walked around checking out the restaurants that had moved out into the street and a few tourist sites—an old graveyard where Allison and I posed for Diane to photograph us. It was like we were on vacation, although Diane fought back tears when I asked her to pose with Allison in front of the gate at All Saints Way. The North End hosts Saint Anthony's Feast in late August, but the pandemic made that impossible. We would have just missed it anyway. No doubt it resembles festivals throughout the USA with ethnic food and activities for kids and bad music played by brass bands. It's been happening in the North End for 100 years after being brought over from Montefalcione. I'm not Catholic, but I ought to appreciate Saint Anthony for his bookishness, as represented by El Greco, among other painters. Like a poet, he preached to odd audiences—to fish, most famously. His tongue was magical enough to be granted relic status. There's also a story about a mule and the Eucharist, and plenty of kitschy images fit for All Saints Way. But I'm over it when it comes to being a snob about painting. Charles Dickens thought John Everett Millais's painting of the juvenile Christ in Joseph's workshop with Mary and her mother Saint Anne made Mary look like an alcoholic in "the lowest gin-shop in England." Today it's part of the collection

at Tate Britain. I can't remember if Allison and I saw it the year we visited museums in London and left our umbrella on a boat after half an hour on the Thames. Later, we were thoroughly soaked running down Tottenham Court Road in the rain, headed for an Afghan restaurant where the food, like the company, was miraculous.

LAUREN RUSSELL

## THE DOUBTING DISEASE MORAL SCRUPULOSITY: OCD

The basic factor in a scrupulous conscience is not so much error as fear.

—Rev. Heribert Jone, *Moral Theology*

The term “Scrupulosity”...comes from the Latin “scrupulosus,” from which we get the word “scruple”; but this word comes originally from a word referring to a pebble, which was then used figuratively to refer to a cause of uneasiness—in the way that a small pebble caught in one’s shoe would make one consistently uneasy without causing serious pain.

—Jesse S. Summers and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Clean Hands? Philosophical Lessons from Scrupulosity*

In one way or another, every patient with OCD wants to know how to know.

—Judith L. Rapoport, MD, *The Boy Who Couldn’t Stop Washing: The Experience & Treatment of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder*

An ambulance barrels through the crosswalk, sirens blaring, just as I am crossing the street, so it sits one second on its tires as I rush by in a flurry of heel-slapping sandals caught in a red-light bullseye of still horns in traffic, and all day I worry that I have killed someone, that someone did not make it to the hospital in time because I stalled, because I tripped, because I was not fast enough, I—I

accidentally left my name on one page of an anonymous writing sample. I discover this after I’m awarded the fellowship and pull

up my application to see which of six versions I actually wound up submitting in a turmoil of key clicking. I wonder if I should say something, should decline the offer. I can't sleep: My heart is trying to outrace the fraud I'm sure I am becoming. I call my parents my friend my brother, who says "It's good to have a strong moral compass, but yours is pointed a little too far north." I

breathed feverishly on a crowded bus. Maybe I killed someone. I

called the cops when I heard fireworks and mistook them for gunshots. I

called the cops when I heard a child scream on the street and imagined an abduction, recalling a toddler's sunbonnet billowing pinkly from a granite post in the cemetery. I

called the cops when I heard the crash of breaking glass, saw two men bolting from my neighbor's shattered house. I

did not call the cops on the couple who lived across from me in the old tenement building sixteen years ago, who punished their toddler by locking him sobbing in a hardwood hallway (for minutes? for hours?) that smelled like mold and stale urine. I

did not call the cops on the couple screaming and throwing dishes pans obscenities another night buckling at 3 AM and another, the stainless steel a high blue wail, and I could never figure out which apartment was theirs. I

did not call the cops when I heard a woman screaming "No" (or was it "Stop" or "Please" and was it a scream or a high-pitched plea?) in a hotel or maybe the street outside the hotel, though I crept down the hall, trying to figure out where those screams were coming from, heart pounding in my feet, and squinting through the blinds I saw only an empty street, and then silence, the voice gone mum. I never called anyone. I

dreamed I was having sex with the cat of my heart, Neruda, and startled awake with the cat curled next to me as usual under the sheets,

and for years I worried that the dream had actually happened, that somehow I'd committed bestiality in my sleep, until five years after the dream and three years after Neruda's death (cancer two surgeries many vet trips I put him down in the face of his besotted suffering, the quietest death), it occurs to me that since he was neutered this was probably an impossibility if it wasn't already. Did I tell you that Neruda loved me like no other?

Early one morning or in the onyx-black night, my dream was knived to shards by a woman screaming "No" or maybe "Stop" or "Please," in a hotel or a street outside a hotel, and I crept down the hall but didn't call anyone.

First day of my (approximately) 252nd period: I arrive in Maui for my brother's wedding. I sit on a chair in a hotel bar in view of other guests, stand up and notice the blood-stained upholstery. I rush to the bathroom for damp paper towels to clean it up, then hunt around the bar for a trash can but can't find one. I furtively wrap the bloodied paper towel in a napkin and place it on the table without looking up. In

graduate school, I was asked to imitate several pages of an established poet's work and thereby arrived at a poem I would not have written otherwise. In revision, I continued several pages beyond the imitation and ultimately published the poem in my first book as "influenced" by this more established poet's work. Years later, I reread the book I was assigned in graduate school and am disturbed that I can recognize the syntax I was imitating. Is my poem too derivative despite its very different content? I consider confessing all this to the more established poet, whom I do not know personally, but by now I, too, am "established," and realize that if I were to receive such a communication myself, I might find the anxious parsing of "imitation" versus "influence" to be bordering on insanity.

Grading, I am frantic because there is no way to evaluate all the final portfolios perfectly fairly, and whatever system I come up with fails. Even after I have submitted the grades, I keep checking my



math. My sleep is jagged and brief. I keep waking up to reread student work, to recalculate, check one against the other for total consistency. This goes on for days, for weeks. In

high school (the last of three), a couple of months before I dropped out: I heard a boy boast that he wanted to become a doctor so he could fuck newborns just out of the delivery room—or maybe I heard someone else report that she'd heard this kid say the most outrageous thing (“And what if that actually happened to one of us!” I'm sure she exclaimed)—but twenty-one years later it suddenly comes back to me, a cold blur where the boy's name and face should be, and I think, maybe I should have reported him to someone (but what would have happened to him then, overpoliced overcrowded underfunded, when all he'd done was *say* a terrible thing?).

In the airport, I imagine that if I do not wash my menstrual blood off the toilet seat that I will contaminate someone, someone vulnerable, elderly, immunocompromised, with HIV, who will die because of me.

In Brussels, I have to throw away a banana peel in a public square and worry that I've put it in the wrong garbage can. I cannot discern from the contents which is for trash and which for recycling (apparently someone else has already made an error). After throwing out the banana peel, I circle the trash cans several times, watching other people to make note of their disposal habits. I am too embarrassed by my monolingualism to ask for help. Why didn't I learn the word for recycling in French class? I go back to the original trash can, conclude it is meant for recycling, not trash, pull out the banana peel, and drop it in the neighboring can. All night I worry that I've thrown off the city's recycling system, mind slipping on a peel that will never trip anyone no matter which can it's in. (*But what if I missed?*)

In the airport, I imagine that if I do not rinse the soap off thoroughly after I have washed the toilet seat that some allergic person will sit on it, break out in hives on the ass and thighs. I

imagine that someone observes me washing and rinsing the toilet seat and assumes I must be up to no good and they had better call airport security. I

imagine that after I duck into the pharmacy—still in Brussels!—searching unsuccessfully for a needle and thread (for weeks I have been wandering through the city with a hole in my jeans), and leave empty-handed—that the pharmacist thinks I am a thief. I can tell he’s suspicious from how he looks at me when he says *Merci*. I

imagine that if anything turns up missing in the pharmacy, police will pound the door to my flat and take me away in handcuffs, and neither my literary hosts nor the US embassy will protect me, a single brown-skinned woman alone overseas (and who knows if I may not be a thief!). [It occurs to me that this one is not scrupulosity.] I

imagine that the coughs issuing from the adjoining apartment are someone choking, wonder if I should knock on the door and ask if they are OK or at least *Ça va? Ça va?* in halting French, and because I can’t stop listening, I go to the museum instead, and even there I just see coughing in all the perturbed saints, the village harvesters, the rebel angels, the roiled Crucifixions, and in one Black man’s portrait that I am surprised to discover among the works of the Old Masters—and chewing my caramel-covered waffle I walk home and see an ambulance stopped still on the street and think oh my god, it’s for my neighbor, the choker, and believe this for the next two days, until, keeping mental notes on window gazing, I have finally accounted for every resident of the building and am relieved until the day following when again I hear the coughing—I

imagine that before I submitted the letter of recommendation, I checked the wrong box for *How do you rank the applicant among the total distribution of students in your classes?* (an unanswerable question, followed by a list of percentiles), and now there is no

way to check if I have ruined the student's chance at a graduate education.

In fourth or fifth grade, my friend asked why I was always doing extra tasks—cleaning the table after lunch again, that day—and I said, “So I can get into Heaven.” She was a child of Episcopal priests and said confidently that to go to Hell you'd have to kill somebody. I was sure, having read my Bible, that it was as hard to get into Heaven as to fit through the eye of a needle—that is, impossible—but I deferred to my friend, the child of priests, as having superior knowledge.

I was thirteen when I became an atheist. The day before my fourteenth birthday, I wrote my grandparents (none of us knowing they had only a month to live until a careless driver would end them): *Before I stopped believing in it, I was terrified of going to Hell. From the words of both Jesus and the Old Testament God, I had gotten the impression that Heaven was reserved for Jesus, Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Clara Barton, and Joan of Arc. I was convinced that unless my soul underwent some major reformation, I would be stuck in Hell eternally. As a child, I thought that Hell was perpetual itchiness teamed with the inability to scratch. One of the very good parts of atheism is that I no longer find it necessary to think about that.* But becoming an atheist didn't make me any less scrupulous. I

jammed a damaged floppy disk into a computer drive at an internet café in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, sometime between 2003 and 2005, and when it got stuck I reported the drive broken and did not admit my responsibility. Was the staff member blamed for not keeping a better watch on things? I

keep checking the stove, keep checking the locks, keep unplugging the router and the lamp and the radio and the alarm clock, keep checking the refrigerator to make sure there are no cats dying inside, keep checking the jewelry boxes to make sure the cats can't open them and swallow a clasp or an earring, which will either choke them or perforate their intestines or create a blockage

from which they will die. I keep checking that the door is locked. Once, twice, three times, back up the stairs to check and down again, before I get into the cab. All the way to the airport I worry a cat has slipped out.

Later in my hotel room on the first day of my approximately 252nd period, I worry that by leaving the contaminated menstrual-blood-paper-towel-wrapped-in-a-napkin wad on the table, I have created a public health hazard. If nothing else, it could expose the server to whatever germs lurk in my blood. I take the elevator back down to the hotel bar, gingerly pick the napkin off the table, put it in my pocket surreptitiously, and take it back to my room, where I wrap it in more paper towels and bury it in the trash can like contraband.

Later before getting ready for bed I remember the bloodied upholstery, how I should have told the server or the bartender or somebody.

Later again, I click “back” in the rec letter submission portal, and all the boxes are checked correctly, the applicant ranked in the highest percentile of all my students throughout history (though how can I possibly determine that and what is the purpose of this bullshit question when I spent hours reviewing the student’s work and writing a thorough two-page letter, meticulously proofread)—and now I worry that clicking “back” may have disrupted the process of submission, that my thoughtful, meticulous letter will be caught in limbo, and I will have ruined my student’s chances at a graduate education. I

may or may not have outed a stranger in an elevator sixteen years ago, after she showed me a room in her apartment I decided not to rent. She’d introduced me to her girlfriend. We were all queer, and I thought nothing of it. The elevator was unoccupied except for one young man who remained silent all the way down, watching my loose tongue wagging, and when I said whatever it was I said (I can’t remember now), I thought I saw the stranger-whose-spare-room-I-didn’t-rent flinch. Years afterward I realized she might have been afraid of him.

Maybe when I breathed feverishly on the bus I spread some highly contagious bug and some elderly person contracted it and died days or weeks later alone in some apartment at the end of the line with a broken radiator and faucet that dripped through their final fever dreams *drip drip drip drip* on an offbeat.

Maybe the fellowship committee should not have awarded me the fellowship because I accidentally left my name on one interior page of an anonymous writing sample, years before my first book, when no one had heard of me or anything I wrote.

Maybe as I sit here writing on my colleague's deck, my cats have bitten through the cord to the radio I did not unplug and electrocuted themselves, their stiffened fur on end.

Now, I imagine, they are both lying on the kitchen counter dead, or one is dead and the other is bent over the corpse, whining so high and piteously that the neighbors are pounding at the door looking for me. The

night after I've spent a magical afternoon in the National Archives reading room: I worry that either I have damaged nineteenth-century documents in the process of scanning them or that I returned them in the wrong order and no future researcher will be able to make sense of them. I cannot sleep, split between my heart running through a flatbed printer and my chest squeezed in a platen press. The

night after my blood donation: I imagine I am getting sick and my blood is contaminated and will kill someone. Or that I forgot to disclose everything asked on the exhaustive screening form. I call the blood center. The nurse tells me to take my temperature and decides to keep my blood since I have no fever. For days I keep remembering things: sometimes I have night sweats, I used contaminated toilet paper in a public restroom, a decade ago I gave a Band-Aid to someone with HIV and a papercut. I keep calling the blood center confessing confessing, day after day. I keep hearing

back from the same frazzled nurse: Really, my blood is fine, she keeps reassuring me. No, that's not a problem, either. Really.

Now someone may have died from my somehow-contaminated blood.

Now there may be a doctor somewhere raping infants, and back in high school I could have prevented it.

Now a woman I inadvertently outed on an elevator may be a skeleton, her neighbor imprisoned forever for a hate-crime homicide I precipitated with my carelessness. I

only left my name in the header of one interior page—by accident, having made six different versions of the writing sample and checked them over and over until, in a frenzy, I uploaded one of them and clicked “submit.”

Pandemic, that week in March 2020 when the situation is escalating, probably March 10th, I take the bus to campus and back with a slightly sore throat. I always have a sore throat. I have chronic allergies.

Pandemic, the week the situation is escalating, the sore throat returns while I'm on campus, probably the 12th, and by then thinking it better not to ride the bus, I take a Lyft home. I am careful not to touch anything, open the door with my coat, but the driver is chatty (she keeps saying this is all media hype, overblown, like swine flu, like SARS), and we have a lively conversation, windows closed, spit flying invisibly through the car.

Pandemic, the week the situation is escalating, I leave the lively conversation and step out of the Lyft at Rite Aid so I can stock up on disinfectant, coffee, latex gloves. An elderly woman walks into my aisle, closer closer: six feet, five, four, three. And then she is in front of me and to get out I have to squeeze past her, for a second only inches between us: six, five, four, we are almost touching, I can see the fine hair behind her ear.

Quarantine, I come down with some cold or flu, still that week when the situation is escalating: March 13th, 14th, 15th—runny nose, cough, sore throat, an elevated temperature. I worry that I have killed the old woman in Rite Aid. I can't stop worrying. I am a murderer already. I text the Lyft driver to tell her I am sick. I email my department chair. I email the director of Studio Arts, since I have been working with a collaborator in one of their empty classrooms. I tell my collaborator I can't come back. I worry that I could have contaminated the water fountain, the doorknobs, the faucets. How many people have used them since then? And how many people have they come into contact with? In my mind, all of them are already dead.

Quarantine, miraculously, I am offered a tenure-track job in another state. I am trying to negotiate the offer—but all on my phone because my laptop keyboard is broken and I can't get a backup while I wait for an external keyboard to come. I have a sore throat, a cough, anxiety that clenches my chest, knots my throat, pounds pressure into my ears, then panic, labored gasping for breath. Even after my cold or whatever it was has dissipated, anxiety mimics the virus.

Quarantine, I wear gloves to use the washing machine lest I contaminate my neighbors. When I'm done, I wipe the coin slots with disinfectant wipes, until I run out of wipes and start using hand sanitizer spray. I run out of quarters and won't go to the bank because I am afraid I will spread COVID and kill someone, so I start doing laundry in the bathtub, hanging it on a drying rack, until I find an online service that will ship me rolls of quarters at an exorbitant price. I never go into stores but order everything online, have it delivered to the front door. To open the door, I use rubber gloves and afterward I disinfect the doorknobs, lest I spread COVID to my neighbors in two other units. I spray the mailbox after opening it so that I will not make the mail carrier sick. If I miss any of these steps, I cannot work or sleep or think until I have gone back downstairs and implemented it.

Quarantine, Derek Chauvin murders George Floyd, and protests erupt nationally. I want to join with neighbors and fill the streets in hope and rage and grief, but I am afraid of being the super-spreader at the rally, the march, the vigil. A military vehicle barrels down my tiny residential street, a SWAT team jogging behind it in fatigues. My nerves are besieged by the constant buzz of helicopters overhead, fireworks every night that won't stop rattling me. Even my cats are fighting. Immobilized in my apartment with or without a curfew, my guilt and shame are stifling.

Quarantine, my second book comes out in June, and I mail some copies to friends, family, mentors, people who assisted in my research. I won't go to the post office because I am so afraid of spreading virus, so I buy a postal scale, order \$5 stamps through the USPS website. It takes me weeks to work up the nerve to leave my apartment and walk half a block to the postal box. I have to spray the doorknobs coming and going. I wear gloves to pull the mailbox open, I deposit the packages, but even gloved, I must spray the lever with hand sanitizer after touching it. The second time I worry I could be arrested for tampering with federal property. I imagine the FBI coming for me. But still I can't miss any of the steps. Back in my apartment I continue to worry, keep looking out the window to see if anyone is standing at the postal box, lifting the lever with their permeable bare hands.

Relocation, the movers won't keep their face masks on. It is hot, they have to carry my furniture housewares many boxes of books down three flights of stairs. I am lucky to have them. How can they wear masks and still breathe with all these stairs and the sticky July heat, they explain reasonably. But how can I be certain, now, that I have not been exposed (they're long-distance movers, always moving people from town to town). I confess to my friend, who tomorrow will drive my cats and me from Pittsburgh to mid-Michigan, that I'm no longer sure she will be safe in my presence.

Relocation, I don't leave my new apartment complex for fourteen days, then twenty-one. I have a sore throat, I have a headache. I get a COVID test. It comes back negative. I worry I could have



caught COVID from all the people at the testing site. Surely some of them were sick. The only way to know I am not spreading COVID is to stay in my apartment, alone with the cats. Then I read about cats catching COVID from their humans, lions in zoos catching COVID from the staff. The virus, born in bats, does not differentiate between species. Then I wonder, again, how I can know for certain that a cat never had sex with me in my sleep?

Relocation, the local poet laureate invites me to read at an outdoor in-person event. I decline. My new colleagues invite me for a walk, porch drinks, a picnic. I stay home alone with the cats, who are mysteriously sneezing.

Relocation, I will be teaching online, directing a center virtually, but all the faculty and staff in my college may be required to take turns at the reception desk for the sake of the students. I don't think I can do it. I make a Zoom appointment with someone in the disability services office. I must submit documentation of my OCD. I must submit documentation of my depression. I must submit documentation of my tic disorder. I must submit documentation of my autism.

Relocation, two weeks before the start of the semester, I am in a Zoom orientation when the university president decides to call off plans to welcome students back to campus. Students who've signed off-campus leases in the area may be shit out of luck, but at least I won't have to worry about whether I will be able to show up.

Relocation, I keep trying to go to the ID office to get my faculty ID. I complete the mandatory health screening but still can't make it out the door. I have another Zoom meeting with the disability specialist and someone from HR. It's late August, the semester's starting, and I have too much to do to complete the accommodations form. Over winter break I follow up. Someone in the disability services office gets me a Zoom meeting with the ID office, I supply a picture, they verify my identity, and in mid-January I finally get a university ID.

Stasis: in the fall I took walks, masked, counting Trump versus Biden yard signs and weighing the relative possibilities of ever getting out of this—but by winter I no longer leave my apartment except to take out the trash. Once a week I mask up to go to the main office of my apartment complex and retrieve my mail. If anyone is inside, I give them the widest possible berth, my body tensing into a single slab. I don't leave my apartment complex for two and a half months.

Spring, I almost reschedule my COVID vaccine because I am afraid I have COVID, although I never interact with other humans in person. I have a cough, a headache, a sore throat. Maybe I have diarrhea. Could I have picked COVID up with my mail sometime when there were other tenants there? Days before my vaccination appointment I take a mail-in test so I won't have to worry I've been exposed at the test site. But instead I worry about its coming in contact with the UPS employees. I wipe the sealed box with hand sanitizer. Then I worry that the hand sanitizer will cause an explosion midflight. I call UPS, and a patient voice on the other end tells me not to worry, not to worry, not to worry.

Spring, I walk forty-five minutes each way for my first dose of the vaccine, since I cannot drive, and even masked I am afraid of exhaling on a bus lest I kill someone (but I go the wrong direction on the way home, so I wind up walking two hours total). I arrive sweaty, glasses steamed up, put a second mask on over my first, and still I worry as I use the pharmacy's pen to complete the paperwork. I won't sit down in the inadequately distanced seats and still I am afraid I have contaminated the elderly couple in front of me. (Since my last time in a Rite Aid, thirteen months ago when I may or may not have killed the old lady, I have never been inside a store.)

Spring, the second shot is a little easier. Afterward I pick up a shopping basket with my bare hands. I buy some sparkling water, a bottle of wine, allergy medicine. It's strangely familiar until I have to touch the buttons on the credit card machine (with my pinky) and wonder who I am contaminating.

Taking out the trash for the first time after my vaccine, I have to check the CDC website to make sure there is no possibility of the vaccine's actually carrying the virus, lest I expose the sanitation workers. I confirm that there isn't and am relieved, disposing of at least a sliver of anxiety with my garbage. I

urinate on my colleague's toilet seat the first time I use another person's bathroom after I'm fully vaccinated. I worry that I will contaminate her unvaccinated asthmatic daughter, although I don't think the virus is spread through urine. I wash the toilet seat with soap. I rinse the soap with water. There's a shit stain (mine) on the bowl, so I clean it with the toilet brush. Now I have to wash the toilet brush with soap and water. I wash my hands again for twenty seconds, thirty, vigorously. My colleague is waiting in the next room. She doesn't say anything.

Vaccinated, I keep worrying that the wine I drank the night before my second dose could negate its effectiveness. What about the wine I was drinking the whole month between doses? And the White Claws? And the Moscow mules with vanilla-flavored vodka?

Vaccinated, I am making my first Greyhound bus trip in a year and a half (it's an hour-and-a-half ride to meet up for a day with friends). I worry that my dress is contaminated because I shat, wiped myself with toilet paper, and used the same hand to lower my dress before washing my hands. I wash the back of the dress, and it's so soaked I have to put it in the dryer, then realize this dress could be ruined in the dryer, hang it up to air dry, change dresses, sit on the couch, get up to check the stove, unplug the coffee maker, check the stove again, call the cats to make sure they aren't locked in the closet (one doesn't come on command so I have to shake the treat bag), check the coffee maker the stove the lamp unplug the radio, find the cats again (one is hiding, so I have to shake the treat bag a second time and it would be cruel not to give them each another treat now that they're expecting it), check the stove again, check my dress, decide to leave for the bus station an hour early so that I will stop checking things, call a Lyft (the first in a year, since I cleared out my old campus office in

another state), check the stove the oven the radio the coffee maker, put on my mask, check in the mirror that it's very tight over my nose, lock the door, head down the stairs, run back up to recheck the locks, text the Lyft driver I'm coming I'm coming I'm coming I'm on my way.

Vaccinated, I force myself to interact, but I am always having to tell people, “only outside” and “please put on your mask” and “I'm never totally sure if I have allergies or COVID-19, so I'll understand if you do not want to hang out.”

Vaccinated, I meet my colleague for an outdoor brunch, and suddenly I have to sneeze, so I sneeze into the cloth napkin at my table setting. For the rest of the day I keep worrying that somehow I have COVID, and someone will die from my super-spreader napkin.

When I was a teenager, intrusive thoughts kept threatening that someone close to me would die if I did not adhere to certain protocols my mind randomly fired off—pat my dog on the head before I put out her bowl, choose that particular bag of frosted animal crackers from the vending machine (D3 is life, D4 death). Sometimes I still have thoughts like this. Because I am in therapy I try to disobey them.

When I finally, miraculously, landed a tenure-track job, during COVID-19 the week everything was escalating, I kept checking my CV for a possible inaccuracy to disqualify me.

Waiting for my friend to use the bathroom, she asks me to hold her baby while she's in the stall. I hate holding babies because I am afraid they'll fall through my hands like soap bars. I take the baby awkwardly, like a bag of somebody else's soiled laundry. My friend places my hands on the baby's diapered crotch to keep her upright, then goes into the stall. I stand still, statue of a stricken Madonna on bathroom duty. I can't stop worrying that I am molesting the baby by holding her this way. When my friend steps out, I resist the urge to confess this.

When I was fifteen my older brother's friend asked me when I was getting my driver's license (he thought he was making small talk), and I said, "Never. I don't want power over other people's lives." I was right at the time. I am thirty-nine and still have never been behind the wheel: the driver's seat's too crowded with the ghosts of people I might kill. I e-

xhaled on a bus as I was coming down with a fever the winter before the pandemic. I left work early, I felt sick, I thought, "Bus versus Lyft?" The bus pulled up, I got in, it was crowded, I sat rigid packed between two breathing bodies, I exhaled. Did I kill anyone that last winter before the pandemic, when I still breathed on buses? Did I kill anyone with my feverish exhalations?

Yes, maybe I killed someone with my possibly contaminated breath my possibly contaminated menstrual flow my possibly contaminated blood donation my vagina my shit (and whose shit is not contaminated?) Yes, maybe my body is filthy and dangerous as the itch of Hell.

Yes, maybe if I ever drove a car I would kill someone, like the man who killed my grandparents and afterward, I heard, sat sobbing on the curb. Maybe I would miss the stoplight, the turn signal, the child rushing into the street, the deer bounding across the highway, my own cat chasing after me.

Yes, maybe sixteen years ago I accidentally outed a woman in her elevator and maybe after I left, her neighbor pummeled her to death. And maybe he didn't. Maybe he smiled, said good night, and never thought of her again. Or maybe he breathed into the space my absence had created, and as the doors closed, said, "Listen, I've never told anyone, but I think I'm maybe—I like men, I mean women, I mean maybe I'm—I mean maybe I'm not—"

Yes, maybe my letter of recommendation disappeared into the ether, maybe I gave an erroneous grade and some former student missed the cutoff for medical school. Yes, maybe I called the cops when

I should not have and someone's life was ruined. Yes, maybe I should have called somebody or something as someone's life was being ruined, and did not. Yes, I have hurt many people. (How could I not?) I will never know the depth of the harm I have caused.

Zero is the absence of evidence times the weight of my accumulated worries divided by all the suffering of these pages, these doubting probabilities. Barbed racquetball in my chest pitching into my ribs. Again and again and again and again.

## REVIEWS

Andrea Brady, *Poetry and Bondage: A History and Theory of Lyric Constraint*. Cambridge University Press, 2021.

The cell—unit of a body, a political organization, a cellular telephone network, a prison—shares an etymology with *hell* stretching back to the Old German *hel*, or underworld. In many pagan versions of the afterlife, human souls went to rest in the water, not the fire. Christianity redefined death as a forking path into eternal life or suffering, an ideology that sometimes serves as an alibi for the West's capacity to create hell on earth. The transatlantic slave trade and the solitary confinement of nineteenth-century penitentiaries were the precursors to twentieth- and twenty-first-century mass incarceration and the torture protocols of the “war on terror,” a regime of captivity and control that links the core and periphery of Anglo-American Empire.

Lyric poetry is sullied by this hellish history. In *Poetry and Bondage: A History and Theory of Lyric Constraint*, poet and scholar Andrea Brady explores the formal work, political unconscious, and psychic operations of “feters, chains, shackles and chemical restraints” in a swath of Anglophone and Latin verse, from imperial Rome to Guantánamo Bay (2). Supposedly the most private of poetic genres, lyric draws its public authority from a self-conscious regard for the difference between poetic utterance and actionable statement. You can write a poem of liberation under the dictator's nose and, sometimes, survive. But what if the familiar antinomies of art and politics—formalist autonomy versus social engagement; disinterest contra commitment—miss another terrain of struggle, that between lyric's reflexive freedoms and a person's or people's oppression? Must we read lyric differently, *Poetry and Bondage* asks, once we recognize its liberal appropriation of cruelty, misery, and abject suffering—a kind of voyeurism, when enacted by writers sheltered from any direct experience of the violence they represent, that we readily condemn in visual art? Is lyric more ethical in its treatment of the Guantánamo Bay detainee, as Brady discusses in the work of the contemporary US poet Rob Halpern, than, for example, Dana Schutz's controversial 2016 painting *Open Casket*? Halpern writes erotic elegies for the anonymous detainee, using the “ligature” of the prisoner's waistband (ultimately a means of death by suicide) as a vehicle for contemplation and arousal. Schutz renders in figural yet abstract brushstrokes the face and body of the fourteen-year-old Emmett Till, tortured and murdered by white

supremacists in 1955. In both cases, the artist takes liberties with suffering from a distance that art affords to a privileged few.

Such are the polemical stakes of *Poetry and Bondage*. The book calls to account our customary ways of theorizing and reading lyric. What appears to be the spontaneous, assured expression of a solitary speaker or mind in fact usually unfolds in the actual or virtual presence of some other's mute subjugation—that of the beloved, the enslaved, the detainee. Brady characterizes this lyric “other” in ethical and psychoanalytic terms that take on the problem of a bystanding or listening counterpart to the lyric speaker, rather than reducing it to a metaphor for poetic address, medium, or audience. If it was the ambition of the poet's heroic solitude to overcome “mind-forg'd manacles,” as William Blake put it, and rescue “ancient liberty” from “the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming,” as John Milton declared, this revolutionary impulse soon outgrew the white male canon in the literary culture of the Black Atlantic.<sup>†</sup> Yet by thinking of liberation as a struggle to transcend mental limits, Blake and Milton influentially conceived of a notion of lyric freedom that ran historically alongside, without fully engaging, the abolitionist cause of breaking free from real iron-forged shackles. Partly as a result, Brady shows, the Hegelian definition of lyric subjectivity as “inner life” struggling to “tear itself free” from the common run of things has ironically relied formally, figuratively, and sometimes literally on “the enclosures of the commons and the ‘mastery’ of human and animal life” (22, 23).

To show how and why anglophone lyric developed in this way, *Poetry and Bondage* traces the “analogies between political and prosodic freedoms” that for centuries have likened “actual bondage” to lyric language, starting with the metrical foot, or “fetter,” from *feotor*, the Old English word for the shackles used on cattle or prisoners (17, 4). Brady wastes no time on poets who have sought to defend modern regimes of enslavement and unfreedom, instead describing the pervasive phenomenon of poets staking claims to autonomy in states of oppression abstractly if vividly rendered, as in Blake and Milton, or in the cases of Thomas Wyatt and Emily Dickinson, the tendency to fashion exquisite lyric puzzles and riddles from flagrantly violent imagery. “Staples, pins, screws, nails and needles” coincide with the

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<sup>†</sup>/ William Blake, “London,” in *The Complete Poems*, ed. Alicia Ostriker (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 128; and John Milton, “The Verse,” in *Paradise Lost*, ed. Scott Elledge (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1975), 4; quoted in Brady, *Poetry and Bondage*, 13. On the Black Atlantic, see Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). For a more recent account, see Matt Sandler, *The Black Romantic Revolution: Abolitionist Poets at the End of Slavery* (New York: Verso, 2020).



conspicuously absent mention of chattel slavery in Dickinson's corpus (163). The carceral metaphors of Wyatt's love lyric reflect the courtier-poet's imprisonment in the Tower of London. Yet, characteristic of Brady's approach and her choice of poets, the direct references to bondage forebode deeper, murkier layers of meaning. That Wyatt cannot speak of the beloved for very long without surfacing his resentful fear of rejection, or find a figure for desire without its ephemerality creeping in, suggests the tendency of lyric's language of bondage to turn back on itself. In Wyatt's case, it becomes self-binding, the aggressivity in the poet's hunt for the beloved-as-prey revealed by the wounded psyche where it started, a pitiable state of affairs if it weren't for the fact that, as Brady writes, "the abjection of the lover—usually male—can be turned poetically into violence or fame" (309). Entrapped and surveilled in Wyatt's case, voluntarily enclosed in Dickinson's, lyric furnishes a room of one's own, a select society indeed.

Omnipotence is illusory in erotic or political life. It is tantalizingly available in poetic forms, however, especially when we think of them as spatial containers or sonic environments that provide rhythmic refuge—holding patterns wherein to stray and return safely. "To break the pentameter," said Ezra Pound in the *Cantos*, "that was the first heave"; but from what, exactly, did he imagine poets breaking themselves free?† Perhaps the five-beat line was so oppressive that *vers libre* warranted such a muscular metaphor. But poetics was never academic for Pound nor, I suspect, for many of us. What explains the continuing attraction to the idea of form as limit? Brady's point is not that poets avoid reality through fantasies of being imprisoned, lashed, bound, and cuffed, as if securing pleasure against pain in exchange for devoted sacrifice to their art. Her core discovery is that lyric detainment names a nonbinary condition. Sublime creativity, melancholic longing, and impotent idleness: the affective states of poetic bondage appear to have little in common with the cruelty, domination, and sadism practiced by the historical agents of bondage, but it's a mistake to think they would. For unlike the prison cell, the poem is an elastic membrane whose boundaries are negotiable in every instance. Romantic gestures like Pound's "heave" only challenge the norms they fail to abolish. A solitary poet makes a heaven of hell, but it requires years of slow, hard, repetitive work—a rather different genre of attention from lyric's—to make a dent in the prison industrial complex.

Western lyric emerged in tandem with the systems of subordination that necessitated the ideology of aesthetic autonomy, which Brady defamiliarizes as bad omnipotence. Not simply the soft analogue of hard coercion, lyric fetters express the historical circumstances of their makers, whose experiences

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†/ Ezra Pound, "LXXXI," in *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions Books, 1996), 538.

of freedom are at once universalizable and incommensurable. Poetic freedom isn't necessarily complicit with political unfreedom, but to separate them analytically is to ignore key events in poetic and political history that make lyric a consolation, a disturbance, an escape, and at times an obscenity. Tracking the range of sites where "poets appropriate the labour of others, and conjure fantasies of freedom and bondage by ceremonially inverting the actuality of enslavement," Brady's conceptual genealogy sets up her critique of "lyric whiteness and its adoption of voluntary, metaphoric constraints" in chapters on African American work songs, the New Critics, Phillis Wheatley, and M. NourbeSe Philip (310, 60). In *Zong!*, a book that draws on the legal transcripts, testimony, and oral culture of the Middle Passage, Philip uses the poetics of erasure to give form to "the abysses where personhood has been annihilated" (27). Such *hells* or hiding spots of lyric whiteness, Brady suggests, drive the poetic history of attempts to obliterate the humanity of enslaved people. "*Zong!* offers a kind of reply to Dickinson's naturalising of war and ignoring slavery" by materializing the white-authored absence of the voices of the enslaved in the historical record (182). Philip's use of negativity continues a tradition of Black poets responding dialectically to the terms of their disavowal in political and cultural arenas. Drawing on a rich archive of African American work songs, Brady argues that the pace of labor and the cadence of song are linked by their performance "under duress for white audiences" (230). Phillis Wheatley's neoclassical verse, modeled after Alexander Pope, belies the revolutionary significance of reproducing formally, while otherwise disrupting, the classical tradition that "excluded her" on socioeconomic grounds, leaving Wheatley, a widowed mother of three children, to die at age thirty-one (394).

African American poetic authorship has defied, endured, and ridiculed a racist critical norm that deprives Black poetry of the ultimate fantasy of lyric constraint—the dissociation of speaker and poet imagined by T. S. Eliot. Brady recounts a moment from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* that recalls Halpern's autoerotic scene of writing but turns the relationship of pain and pleasure around. Douglass describes the grooved scars left on his skin by the overseer's lash and years of life without shoes, divots in the flesh deep enough to hold his writing pen. The present contains "the wounds of the past," Brady writes, "like a pen nestled in the gash" (177). Dissociation of the person and the poem in the sense Eliot prescribed, as a lens for reading Douglass and other formerly enslaved authors, forgets how poetry became bound up with exclusionary definitions of personhood in the first place. That "lyric whiteness" operates centrally in lyric constraint, according to Brady, undermines the prerogative of literary texts to hold themselves above the interests of history and sociology. In a chapter that every US poetry scholar

should read, Brady traces the origins of the “self-contained” poem theorized by the New Critics to their more explicitly political counterparts, the Southern Agrarians, a circle of early- to mid-twentieth-century intellectuals who fused craft formalism, white supremacist ideology, and anti-capitalist paternalism. Not merely a linguistic object that refracts aesthetic tradition and invites expert interpretation, the New Criticism, as a way of thinking about verbal art, denies the historical contingency of how societies demarcate labor and value. The New Critical poem is the spatial homologue of the plantation. This is an instance of *figura*, Erich Auerbach’s idea that our tools of interpretation mimic in some way the texts we read and the histories they foretell.

Yet, at the same time, the critical potential of lyric constraint derives from the poet’s attempt to see what lies on the other side of constraint. Before wagging a finger at a poem’s bad-faith attempt to transcend its historical-material circumstance, first consider who wrote the poem, whether the poem is the best available refuge for the poet’s personhood, and how its formal container may not function only as an evasion but, indeed, a temporary confine against literal confinement. Brady’s extensive treatment of prison poetry, which tells a cultural history of the carceral from the nineteenth century’s “silent system” to the contemporary supermax, comes as a “loophole of retreat,” William Cowper’s phrase for the poet’s embattled solitude, within Brady’s larger study.<sup>†</sup> Indeed, *Poetry and Bondage* is capacious, nearly unwieldy. Combining literary history, close reading, philosophical critique, and lyric theory, it reads at times like a collection of essays organized topically and given polemical thrust after the fact. This approach risks setting several plots in motion but bringing none of them to an entirely satisfying close.<sup>‡</sup> Brady, however, isn’t the kind of critic to impose false unity on a subject that splits and redoubles itself. Unlike scholarship in which disciplinary paradigms motivate an interest in poetry’s relationship to other aesthetic discourses, fields of knowledge, and institutions, such as Lucy Alford’s *Forms of Poetic Attention* and Evan Kindley’s *Poet-Critics and the Administration of Culture*, Brady gives analytic priority to poets’

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†/ William Cowper, “The Task, Book IV. The Winter Evening,” in *The Works of William Cowper*, ed. John S. Memes (Edinburgh, Scotland: Fraser & Company, 1835), 238.

‡/ Stephanie Burt has asserted that *Poetry and Bondage* inelegantly subsumes two books. The first concerns “radical poets who undermine notions of coherent identity, recoverable history, and lyric unity.” The second suggests a study of “parallels between form as voluntary constraint,” Burt writes, “and prison as involuntary restraint.” Stephanie Burt, “Stephanie Burt reviews Poetry and Bondage,” *Critical Inquiry*, May 11, 2022, [https://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/stephanie\\_burt\\_reviews\\_poetry\\_and\\_bondage/](https://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/stephanie_burt_reviews_poetry_and_bondage/).

individual understandings of the traditions they work in and against.<sup>†</sup> Her close readings are often exquisitely set in the context of social theory and philosophy, most of it from Black, radical, and psychoanalytic traditions. Through the old-fashioned lens of *figura*, Brady offers revelatory insights: her account of the Agrarians and New Critics might pair with Andy Hines's *Outside Literary Studies* to render a damning verdict on the racism of midcentury critics like John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate, whose legacy has been laundered by English department syllabi norms for decades and whose antidemocratic politics shaped assumptions of who and what poetry is for.<sup>‡</sup> "I am thinking in circles, not lines," says Brady, reminding us that the past should trouble our present if we are interested in figuring out how to sustain literature's liberatory function in culture (25). The increasingly marginal status of lyric studies in the academy invites more broadsides written with such archival care and poetic eloquence. Exorcising formalism's white supremacy is a good place to start.

Like a prison cell, the poem can feel hopeless of change and helpless against the 24/7 rhythms of capitalism. Given the "earth's carceral frame," Brady suggests that lyric poetry might work insidiously to shield us from the reality of unfreedom in most of human history, detaining us from reparative labors of justice (403). Yet lyric poems are labile things, stretchy and perforated. Unbound, they unfold in the truth that living ought to be better than hell, and more than just getting by.

Lukas Moe

## §

Stéphane Bouquet, *Common Life*, trans. Lindsay Turner. Nightboat Books, 2023.

It keeps snowing in Stéphane Bouquet's poems. In "Without," the third poem of his *Vie commune* (2016), recently translated by Lindsay Turner as *Common Life*, he writes: "I wanted to say it's fully snowing today, I / mean that / quasi-pharmaceutical protective powder / naturally preventing / fear" (11). And Bouquet's poems, like snow, are protective objects, yearning to start a fireside conversation about the world and about love. Bouquet understands poetry as

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<sup>†</sup>/ Lucy Alford, *Forms of Poetic Attention* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); Evan Kindley, *Poet-Critics and the Administration of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

<sup>‡</sup>/ Andy Hines, *Outside Literary Studies: Black Criticism and the University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

reparative and its reading as a practice of community—even during winters when the latter seems to be put on hold. A few lines later in “Without,” he writes: “In the end poet = / the indefatigable maker / of shield-sentences behind which to hide to / re-calm gently, / the calm of safe and sound” (11). Under this definition, poems become safe spaces between exposures to the world that allow for a specific kind of regenerative activity. This re-calming is not a practice of solitude or isolation for its own sake: this snowy landscape prepares a re-claiming of community, which the poem prefigures.

In his recent book of essays *La Cité de paroles* (2018), Bouquet dedicates a chapter to one of his major influences, James Schuyler—it is also a chapter about snow.<sup>†</sup> Snow is a metaphor of “fragile incarnations”: it “places things in an endless circulation where they merge into one another, and thus cease to be limited by the moment.”<sup>‡</sup> From Schuyler, Bouquet retains the idea of indiscrimination, the ideal of bringing pieces of the world together in mutual fusion—to quote Schuyler, snow is what makes the world “discriminated barely / in light no longer layered.”<sup>\*</sup> You might also think of the abundance of snow in another American influence of Bouquet’s, Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” which concludes a list of objects and characters in a winter scene with this sentence: “I mind them or the show or resonance of them—I come and I depart.”<sup>\*\*</sup> Whitman’s snowy “resonance” brings us close to *Common Life*’s poetics, both because the poet keeps reaching out to the lives and the bodies of strangers and because this resonance, this “endless circulation,” is the condition of an endless jouissance. Bouquet’s dialogue with American poetry’s colloquial and collective tendencies plays a big part in what critics have called the democratic ambition of his poems: they are a space of experimentation with community, with bringing together the queer and the unexpected in an unlayered worldview.<sup>§</sup> A snowy winter is the perfect place for that.

*Common Life* is built on an endless circulation of voices. Made of three poems, three short stories, and a long play that constitutes the heart of the

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†/ Stéphane Bouquet, *La Cité de paroles* (Paris: Corti, 2018). In English: The city of utterances (my translation).

‡/ Bouquet, *La Cité de paroles*, 144–45 (my translation).

\* / James Schuyler, “Song,” in *Collected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994), 236.

\*\* / Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” in *Leaves of Grass* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1897), 35.

§ / See, notably, Jan Baetens, “Stéphane Bouquet ou la démocratie poétique,” in *Pour en finir avec la poésie dite minimaliste* (Bruxelles: Les Impressions nouvelles, 2014), 87–109; and Jean-Claude Pinson’s review of Bouquet’s last book, *Le fait de vivre: “Sens du beau,” Sitaudis.fr*, August 6, 2021, <https://www.sitaudis.fr/Parutions/le-fait-de-vivre-de-stephane-bouquet-1628230578.php>.

book, it introduces us to a diverse cast that, though dissonant, resonates through queer ensembles. Gay lovers, topless boys in the field, academic couples, teenagers, and corporate salesmen: a crowd. Speakers and characters are related, though separated by section or scene breaks, in their quest of finding “common life”—that is, a sense of community and togetherness of which our days always seem to fall slightly short.

Coated in a snowy atmosphere that seems to protect them from despair, the yearning and shortcomings of common life define a poetics that gives way to humor, sadness, and beauty, in mixed registers. Bouquet weaves everyday language and its most trivial turns with moments of poetic rapture. What this creates, in *Common Life*, is a politics of tenderness and proximity, which allows for a resonance of voices and searches for spaces and ways bodies can exist with one another. “If I say I love you, anyone can be ‘I’ and anyone can be ‘you.’ They’re just the feelings we animate between us,” Bouquet writes in the play “Monsters” (115). Pronouns become a place of transition, of relational existence taking over forms of negative, isolated subjectivity: “Our / is a pronoun / that works for everything. For example / our breath of our hello of our first / of our morning oh / finally it’s all useless in the undulations of the sky, / the splendor accumulated / for nothing” (9).

Bouquet places in poetry the power of creating life—that is, of calling for new forms of togetherness, new conjugations of community that start with very simple things, such as pronouns or an unusual word. It is in *La Cité de paroles*, once again, that Bouquet most clearly formulates this project: “Text is a means, a means of achieving something else, the means of reaching the right life, or at least a better life. All works of art should have the central, essential purpose of leaving art, of practicing how to build a life.”<sup>†</sup> Though Bouquet doesn’t always sound so impatient to “leave art,” the orientation of poetry toward living, toward practicing new forms of life, is a constant in his poems. Now that a global pandemic has lodged itself between the publication of *Vie commune* and its English translation, this poetics has become even more urgent. We need poems to make more life—so we can say, after reading, that they’ve become “useless” because we’ve reached something through them.

One of the ways poetry can “achieve something else” besides itself is by circulating between voices and between languages—which is why Bouquet’s poems beg to be read in front of an audience, shared with friends, and translated. Following Lindsay Turner’s translation once again provides a space for an intense and diverse circulation of voices. This circulation occurs through the presence and distribution of the book itself, and also through the public reading tours it gives birth to (which Bouquet took part in during

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<sup>†</sup>/ Bouquet, *La Cité de paroles*, 65 (my translation).

2016 and March 2023). In *Common Life*, Turner proves both a formidable poet and a bold translator. Throughout the poems and the play, but perhaps most clearly in the short stories, she deftly steps back from the literal to capture tonal variations of irony, humor, and elegy that make Bouquet's writing recognizable. When Lucky, the protagonist of an eponymous short story, says, "Well, this is *real* awkward," Bouquet adding, "in her best all-American country girl accent" (127), you can hear her clear as day—perhaps better than in the original, where Lucky is more literally a "prairie girl" ("*fille des prairies*" [121]).

The swiftness of Turner's translation is most apparent in the three opening poems—some of Bouquet's best work, and the occasion for Turner to show her mastery of the rhythm and flow of French verse. "Elegy Again," the second poem in *Common Life*, begins with the performative "I declare solitude / open—the real inauguration of / the littlest world" (7). And this is what we get: an elegy based on the discrete elements of our everyday. When Bouquet writes about the "strange joy / even quasi-beatific / of living," he deflates the lyric imaginary of ecstasy and looks around: "things are breathing peacefully, hedges / trimmed" (7). Later in the poem, he wonders how sentences like "I love you" help—or make—us live on, and again the possibility of the philosophical, of the abstract, arises: only to be halted by a period, and followed by "Now it's time for coffee," in Bouquet's typical, New York School–esque hops of nonchalance (8). So what does an elegy look like in our world? It still deals with the attraction and repulsion of two subjects or groups of subjects.

But Bouquet's concepts of solitude and community have little to do with the totalizing, negative dialectics of the French theoretical tradition that explored them over the twentieth century, from Bataille to Nancy, through Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community*. In fact, Bouquet might come closer to Giorgio Agamben's stance in *The Coming Community*: creating his own forms of "quelconque" existence.<sup>†</sup> In Bouquet's poetics, communities are not defined by fixity or recurrence: "Monsters" is subtitled "Play for eleven actors or more, or fewer." Definitions of its characters and settings are willfully vague: in a central scene, we see "an ordinary street, ugly and pretty at the same time" (61). In the French, "rue quelconque" resonates with Agamben more clearly. Voices and characters of *Common Life* keep showing up and disappearing; communities are discrete, decomposed and recomposed in each iteration of the text. And his situations are often incredibly common, too: a work meeting, a bedroom after sex, or the anxious awaiting of a

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<sup>†</sup>/ Usually translated as "whatever being" in English, Agamben's "quelconque" outlines the fragile ways in which individuals, detached from recognizable roots, form communities that are defined by their assembly. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

text message. Like many readers of Bouquet, I think of the queer utopias these communities and moments might embody. But if there is a sense of futurity in Bouquet's works, it is always discrete, slanted. The ability of words to generate such utopias is always in doubt—and in the end, forms of togetherness always arise in moments when language will have become “all useless”: when we can go back outside, back to the embrace of bodies.

Bouquet's communities are defined by an unstable communion of voices and bodies: they take place in the intensity of the moment, simply hoping that it can keep going for just a little longer, like a quiet embrace. In this book, poems, plays, and stories are short, focused on evanescent utterances and communities. Bouquet's writing always seems to come back to the ideal of the “people”—as if the goal of each book was to build a new anthology of resonating voices. In *Un peuple* (2007), he systematizes this practice, inscribing himself in a constellation of references, from Sappho to Schuyler, through Baudelaire and Whitman. This newly defined “people” is shaped by the poem, begging to be furthered beyond the text. The crowd of voices formed over the books and over the years has always involved the US in its conversation: since *Nos Amériques* (2010), inspired by a stay in New York, Bouquet's communities have involved American voices and poets as fellow practitioners of a poetics of community—with his preference going to Whitman and Schuyler. The importance of American poetry in Bouquet's work makes Turner's translations all the more momentous: Bouquet's words are now firmly installed in the transatlantic conversation in which he has previously taken part through his own translations.<sup>†</sup> This new work becomes another form of “common life”: it extends Bouquet's work and reunites his communities with the country that has most inspired them.

Léon Pradeau

## §

Fernanda Melchor, *Paradis*, trans. Sophie Hughes. New Directions Books, 2022.

At the center of Fernanda Melchor's breakthrough novel *Hurricane Season* (2017; trans. 2020) is a witch. That novel chronicles *la bruja's* murder in a Rashomonic sequencing of parallel narratives. At the center of Melchor's follow-up novel, *Paradis* (2021; trans. 2022), is a Bloody Countess. This

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<sup>†</sup>/ Bouquet has notably translated several books by Peter Gizzi, including *The Outernational* (2007) as *L'Externationale* (Paris: Corti, 2013), and *Archeophonics* (2016) as *Archéophonies* (Paris: Corti, 2019).



novel—a slim 112 pages in translation—chronicles her murder in a single stream of free indirect discourse. The earlier book, in fact, describes two *brujas*, mother and daughter, while the latter describes two doomed aristocrats: one colonial-era Countess of local lore, and one wealthy woman resident of a gated residential development. Together, the novels use their femicides to reflect on local mythology, poverty, misogyny, transphobia, and addiction. They are also stylistically akin: both composed of walls of run-on text. It's remarkable, then, that with the same box of narrative and stylistic tools, Melchor has managed to do something significantly different with *Paradais*.

The novel unfolds as a series of flashbacks of varying magnitude that periodically loop back into a primary flashback, which we experience as the present. Polo, a disaffected teenage alcoholic, labors as a gardener in Paradise—a wealthy gated community on the outskirts of the local town, Progreso. *Paradais* opens with a disclaimer: “It was all fatboy’s fault, that’s what he would tell them” (3). The ensuing novel is effectively a description of what fatboy was at fault for and why Polo is not to blame. “Fatboy” is Polo’s not-so-affectionate nickname for Franco Andrade, an overweight, sex-addicted, spoiled resident of Paradise who stalks Señora Marián, a wealthy middle-aged mother of two who lives nearby in the same *fraccionamiento*. Polo begins spending time with Franco, whom he dislikes, because after work Polo does not want to return to his own home, where he is routinely pestered by his mother and accosted by his cousin. Polo is also grieving the loss of both his grandfather, who has died, and another cousin, who has joined a local cartel and wants to cut off contact. In all, Polo feels he has little to live for: he’s overworked, lonely, poor, and he dislikes his only friend. Eventually, Franco hatches a plan to break into Señora Marián’s house in order to rape her; by then, Polo is so hopeless he has become, without exactly wanting to, an accomplice: “Why not? Why the fuck not?” Polo thinks. “Nothing made much sense anymore, he really couldn’t give a fuck. At the end of the day, why should he care what happened to that slut and her unbearable family, a bunch of smug pricks who thought the world revolved around them” (84). Almost without realizing it, Polo agrees to help Franco manage the rape in exchange for the opportunity to steal luxury items from the large house and buy his way out of his life in Paradise. The fact of Polo’s apathy does not diminish his agency. But that apathy also reflects an environment in which decisions aren’t so much made as compelled. We have the feeling, along with Polo, that he never quite decides what he decides. But if he doesn’t—or doesn’t completely—who, or what, does?

Franco proposes his plan while the two boys are drinking on the steps of an abandoned mansion that had belonged to the so-called Bloody Countess.

She, we learn, is the woman who “had ordered the house to be built back in the time of the Spaniards and who the estuary dwellers had beaten to death for her depraved, diabolical ways, for her habit of snatching boys and young men whom she cherry-picked from among the slaves working her land, subjecting them to unspeakable torture and then finally throwing their remains into a teeming crocodile pit in the mansion’s basement” (44). *Hurricane Season*—which tells the story of the demonization of its own local witch—has prepared us, if we’ve read it, to question the veracity of such a description, as well as the motives of the “estuary dwellers.” The idea of the “diabolical” Countess serves a purpose for the people who want a reason to hate the woman herself. She’s referred to glancingly throughout the story, almost haunting it. This foreboding climaxes when she is shockingly reembodyed in the figure of Señora Marián. At the end of the novel, in his account of the rape and its aftermath, Polo remembers

the awful vision of the naked woman at the top of the stairs, that prehistoric knife in her hand, her tits and face covered in blood, her demented eyes bearing down on him; the stream of liquid feces that escaped Polo’s anus on remembering the legend, the Bloody Countess coming to get him; the shot that rang out from the stairwell and which sent the witch tumbling head over heels to the ground floor; fatboy’s sobs as he clung to her body; the woman’s death rattle as she choked on the bloodstained carpet... (107–8)

Until this point, we know almost nothing about the woman except how she appears to the boys: as a “piece of ass” to Franco, and as a patronizing pseudo-employer to Polo. Here, her posture of self-defense is imagined as a threat. She’s not really a witch. The vision thus allows us to reconsider the narrative of the Bloody Countess herself. If Señora Marián is the reincarnation of the Countess, this connection partially exculpates the latter. Because Señora Marián isn’t evil, neither woman is. But neither are they entirely innocent. They function at once as tragic scapegoats—types compelled to fulfill social roles—and as willing agents who actively uphold a social structure striated violently by gender, race, and class.

Sophie Hughes’s translation of Melchor’s Spanish begins deliberately off-key. “Todo fue culpa del gordo, eso iba a decirles” in the original becomes “It was all fatboy’s fault, that’s what he would tell them.” “Gordo,” a common nickname in Spanish, is rendered as “fatboy,” an awkward portmanteau reused throughout the book. It’s a difficult sentence to translate, as there is no real equivalent in English for the ubiquitous Spanish *gordo*. Hughes’s choice to forego the more familiar (at least to my ear) *fatty* or *fatso* for the

stranger *fatboy* deliberately underscores the challenge (a few pages later, Hughes translates “el mismo mastodonte de muchacho” [literally, “the same mastodon of a man”] as “fatty fatso”) (7).<sup>†</sup> *Fatboy*, *fatty*, and *fatso* are just the first entries in a foul-mouthed teenage lexicon almost too dirty to believe. If *gordo* by itself is common, the sheer number of epithets Polo uses seems less natural. Melchor’s idiomatic Spanish is ever so slightly caricatured; Hughes’s English brings out this pointed excess well.

Melchor writes the bulk of the novel in this stream of subtly stylized teenage speech. We’re encouraged, I think, to doubt its realism. For an analogy, consider the Steve Buscemi TV-sketch-turned-meme in which the aged actor wears a backwards cap and holds a skateboard, greeting a group of teens with the laughably out-of-tune, “How do you do, fellow kids?” In the same way, Melchor seems happy enough to admit, by way of some deliberate overwriting, that the speech patterns she puts in Polo’s mouth aren’t exactly faithful to those found in any real-life Progreso. But when Polo launches into his obscenity-laden complaints, the effect isn’t humor; instead, the dialogue produces a kind of subtle alienation, allowing a sense of the builtness of the literary artifact to come through. At times, single sentences pair phrases like “little freak” (“aborto viviente”) and “harried gaze” (“agobiada mirada”)—combinations that expose both age- and class-marked speech and literary Spanish as particular dialects (94–95).<sup>‡</sup>

But why have us question the realism of the language? One obvious possibility is that the careful excess gives Melchor a way around the problem of faithful dialogue: by deliberately turning her teenage speakers and their reported speech into a caricature, she avoids responsibility for the accuracy of the tone. But it seems more likely that this excessive obscenity is less a defense mechanism than a meaningful stylistic choice. The verbal excess accomplishes two things: it sensitizes us to our distance as readers from the realities of violence (linguistic and physical), and it subordinates the particularity of her characters to the shared quality of the languages they use.<sup>\*</sup> If the speech patterns sound too obscene to be true but are, that gap mimics our sheltered incredulity at actual cases of social violence as bad as the ones we witness in the novel. If the speech patterns sound too obscene to be true and aren’t, that mismatch authorizes us to read these characters

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<sup>†</sup>/ Fernanda Melchor, *Páradais* (New York: Literatura Random House, 2021), 16.

<sup>‡</sup>/ Melchor, *Páradais*, 135.

<sup>\*</sup>/ What happens at the level of language also happens at the level of the plot. The violence on offer is so violent, it forces us to question if we’re really supposed to suspend our disbelief. Two filmic equivalents here are the ironized melodrama of David Lynch, whose song “Up in Flames” is cited in an epigraph, and the egregious gore of Quentin Tarantino.

less as individuals than as representatives of social types who speak in generalizable ways.

Melchor's style is remarkable in another aspect: the sentences and the paragraphs are long. Readers start each sentence and each paragraph without knowing what they've committed to. Most novels observe an unspoken contract that sentences and paragraphs will be of a limited, predictable length. Melchor's doesn't. In translation, the novel's first three sentences are 11, 13, and 9 words long, respectively; the next three balloon to 71, 121, and 191. Sentences and paragraphs unfurl, sometimes for pages. The wall of text is overwhelming, but once inside, the effect is propulsive—the force of the reader's desire to come to the end of a syntactic unit turns page after page. This syntactic choice is no gimmick, however risky, to retain the reader's attention. It meaningfully mimics the story it narrates: someone's half-witting involvement in a plot that he didn't quite agree to but finds himself both interested in and compelled to see to the end. The culminating narrative events strain any ability we may have had to empathize with Polo. He abets a rape and a murder. He gags two children. Subjecting us to our own commitment to something whose end we cannot foresee, Melchor's prose helps us step just a bit more comfortably into the protagonist's shoes.

The onset of the novel's final movement is preceded by a minor episode at Polo's workplace that helps us make sense of his acquiescence to Franco's plan. When it's discovered that a gopher has been chewing up the immaculate gardens of Paradise, Polo's boss orders him to "exterminate, showing no mercy." In the rest of the passage, Polo's third-person self-conception as a "subordinate" stands out amidst the more casual indirect speech: "True to form, his manager had come up with a crack-brained plan, which his subordinate had no choice but to put into action. The fucking imbecile wanted Polo to flood the gopher's burrow" (88). Although Polo's experience as a gardener has taught him that the plan won't work, he accepts the instructions, "moronic" as they are.<sup>†</sup> Franco does not exert managerial control over Polo, and Polo is not compelled to go along with Franco's plot on pain of firing; but Polo's acquiescence to the plan to invade the home of Señora Marián mirrors his acquiescence to the extermination of the gopher. This sort of

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<sup>†</sup> Melchor describes the natural setting by expertly naming the varieties of flora in and around Paradise, including guaje, ceiba, avocado, mangrove, woodbine, lianas, devil's trumpets, blue bellworts, ixoras, and aguacatillo. These brief pastoral interludes chafe against the boys' depraved plot and their crude dialogue, and the juxtaposition is meaningful. The species knowledge, we know, is the narrator's, not Polo's. But we also know that Polo is, by trade, a gardener. If he doesn't know the names of these plants and animals, he might still recognize them. In this way, the narrator fleshes out the story with the sort of skilled attention to nature Polo might have gained, by trade, were his job not restricted to murdering gophers and preening lawns.

mirroring, in which the conditions of labor at Paradise reappear elsewhere, happens frequently throughout the novel: in one episode, Polo's anger at his boss is displaced onto a patronizing Señora Marián; in another, Señora Marián's concern for her children parallels an earlier scene in which a maid worries about the safety of a child by the pool. These resonances train us to sense the metonymic connection between Polo's reasons for participating in the rape/burglary and his exploitation at work, and to read his relationships outside of work (with Franco, with the Señora) as metaphors for relations under capital.

Reviewers have noted the interracial, cross-class character of this strained camaraderie and implied that the novel effectively democratizes toxic masculinity, as the boys work in concert to perpetrate an act of sexual violence against a woman and her family. Both main characters have problems with women. Franco is a sex-obsessed "incel," his eagerness to conquer Señora Marián a function of the real and perceived aversion to his obesity; Polo is verbally and physically abused by both his mother and cousin. These experiences facilitate the degree of misogyny necessary to rape and kill a woman and murder her family.

This story of violence against women, crucially, is set within a story about race and class. While Polo's "half *güero*" cousin benefits socially and professionally from pale skin, dreamy lashes, and a mop of wavy hair, "Polo, well, Polo was *prieto*, there was no other way to put it, dark skinned and ugly as sin" (58). Hughes's decision not to translate the racial categories is astute, given the sentence's own acknowledgement that, in fact, "there was no other way to put it." Refusing to translate *güero* and *prieto* at once preserves the specificity of these categories (the difference between white and Black or brown in English is not identical) and trusts us to understand the significance of the difference all the same. Franco, for his part, is white—complete with "rosy face" and "blond curls" (6).

In terms of class, Polo is a worker. Franco and the family of Señora Marián, meanwhile, represent a kind of aristocratic stratum possessing wealth and status, but not, at least that we know of, directly in control of any means of production. Melchor repeatedly refers to the local *narcotraficantes* as "them"—a group so violent as to almost surpass verbal recognition. But as the novel proceeds, another *them* emerges—one so invisible as to lack even a pronoun. We never meet, that is, the owners of Paradise, or the embodiments of capital driving Progreso; there is not even a coherent group of *them* to euphemize. Who—or what—is responsible for the dialectic of accumulation and immiseration that produces and leverages the novel's misogyny and racism remains an open question. The omission is powerful. Melchor's novel achieves its devastating effect precisely because so much has gone wrong,

and yet there isn't anyone, exactly, to blame. Unless it's everyone. Polo, of course, blames Franco, and his argument is compelling. We can hold Polo himself to account. Polo's boss and patrons are despicable. But the novel also gives us a way of contextualizing this individual responsibility so that what is ultimately responsible for the violence we witness is compulsion itself. It is the force behind the building of "progress" and the building of Paradise, behind Polo's racialized freedom to labor, behind Polo's cousin's belonging to the cartel, behind Franco's fatal attraction to Señora Marián, behind Señora Marián's transfiguration into the Countess of yore, behind the typified languages the characters use, behind our need to finish first one long sentence, and then the next, and then the next. What these compulsions—political-economic, psychic, social—share is our work to figure out.

Polo's predicament will be familiar to readers of literary naturalism. In some ways, he's a version of Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas, insofar as his racialized immiseration leads to him getting caught up in an act of violence he doesn't quite intend. The difference here, however, is that the downfall is not reserved for a single exploited worker or poor Black man. What *Paradais* gives us, rather, is the downfall of an uneasy, inarticulate alliance between two boys from very different backgrounds who can't quite name the forces that condition them. The protagonists are driven toward (even as they also choose) a distorted revolt against alienation—experienced in several ways and for several reasons—that manifests as sexual violence. This tragedy is not simply the racialized oppression of the working class—although it's also that. This tragedy is the tragedy of bad solidarity. Franco and Polo align in a mutual act of desperation that fails spectacularly.

One of the novel's major questions is about the mysterious way that Polo and Franco come to "agree" on their plan. Theirs is a strange, strained friendship from the start. It begins, first, in a mutually beneficial act of exchange. Franco "offered Polo a swig in exchange for a smoke" (27). Eventually, that marriage of convenience rises to something else. There is no single moment when Polo decides to go along with Franco's plot. It happens gradually, mysteriously. One moment he's laughing "fatboy" off, and the next, "something—something he couldn't put his finger on, almost like a deep current, a pulsating, living thing that had no name—united them momentarily in the darkness of that archway creeping with vines" (80). That pulsating, living thing that has no name—call it trust—is the novel's secret subject. On the next page, Polo considers the force more directly: "He'd begun to rope Polo in to his plans, without even asking him first. Why did fatboy trust him? Why did he share all that stuff with Polo?" (81). Neither Polo nor Melchor has an answer to these questions. This alliance, which falls short of true solidarity, happens unconsciously—and that unconsciousness

allows it to morph into the violence it becomes. We know from the novel's first line that the coming together of Polo and Franco ends tragically. But there are fleeting moments of human connection between them (in another scene, they break into uncontrollable laughter) that stud the macabre wall of prose we're otherwise faced with. In a novel overfull of linguistic and physical violence, these moments stand out. They almost begin to point toward a way out of this ugly plot. But not quite. The forces behind this femicide are too strong, and all social relations are turned toward its end.

Alex Streim

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Helen DeWitt, *The English Understand Wool*. New Directions Books, 2022.

Lee Konstantinou, *The Last Samurai Reread*. Columbia University Press, 2022.

*The English Understand Wool* opens with a familiar Helen DeWitt device, the introduction of a precocious child who is also a misunderstood genius. In DeWitt's debut novel, *The Last Samurai* (Talk Miramax Books, 2000; New Directions, 2016), this child is Ludo, the offspring of a one-night stand between a disaffected American classicist named Sibylla and a travel writer. In *The English Understand Wool*, it is Marguerite, a seventeen-year-old orphan kidnapped as a baby and raised by two imposters with luxurious taste. If the premise sounds unbelievable, it is—the erudite novella sometimes risks being too absorbed in its own aesthetic ideals to appeal to a wide audience. Its publication, however, signals a marked shift in the reevaluation of DeWitt's literary legacy. If DeWitt notoriously struggled to find a receptive publisher for her earlier books, her latest work, an absurdist sixty-one-page story produced as part of New Directions's Storybook series, signals her entry into the publishing house's prestigious canon of classic or esteemed avant-garde authors. Lee Konstantinou's *The Last Samurai Reread* takes this argument a step further, contending that DeWitt's struggles with publishing have not only provided fodder for her writing but have become central themes of her work. *The English Understand Wool* substantiates this claim, as the novella examines a teenager's battle with her literary agent for artistic autonomy. If the publication of these two books provides an opportunity to reexamine DeWitt's legacy, it also exposes the double-edged sword of her reputation: a cult author whose work is revered by critics yet largely unknown to the general public, and whose antiestablishment politics are at the heart of her work yet remain in tension with her desire for commercial success.

Today, aged sixty-five with three published novels and a short story collection, DeWitt still considers herself a literary outsider. After abandoning a fledgling academic career at Oxford, she worked odd jobs in London while starting and abandoning over fifty manuscripts. The desperate economic straits in which she lived only heightened her desire to be published—she wasn't willing to compromise her creative vision but would meet the industry's standards in order to survive off the proceeds of her work. DeWitt's desire to exert total control over her writing, however, has limited her publishing opportunities and resulted in her reputation as a cult author rather than a writer of mainstream literary fiction. Her debut novel, *The Last Samurai*, was commercially successful, selling over one hundred thousand copies in its initial print run, and novelist A. S. Byatt hailed it as "a triumph—a genuinely new story, a genuinely new form."<sup>†</sup> *Vulture* later named *The Last Samurai* the best book of the twenty-first century, a prodigious claim for a book published in 2000.<sup>‡</sup> Yet DeWitt's work has not only evaded major awards; it has yet to reach a mainstream audience. In an interview with Christian Lorentzen, DeWitt admitted she believed that if *The Last Samurai* had enjoyed a smoother publication process, it might be considered in the league of *Infinite Jest*.<sup>\*</sup> Such a statement might appear narcissistic, but DeWitt's unwavering defense of her artistic vision has successfully preserved the originality of her voice. Her infamous battles with agents, publishers, and copy editors, moreover, have become part of a mythology foundational to both criticism of her writing and her fiction itself, a legacy explored in depth in *The Last Samurai Reread* and openly dissected in *The English Understand Wool*.

DeWitt has been vocal about her struggles with the publishing industry. After rejecting the first offer she received for *The Last Samurai*, she sold the book to Jonathan Burnham at Talk Miramax Books for a \$70,000 advance. She then spent months battling with copy editors who ignored her stylistic choices and imposed hundreds of standardizations. *The Last Samurai*'s prose is famously unorthodox: narrative trains of thought are interrupted, font size fluctuates, punctuation reflects speech patterns rather than grammar. Text is reproduced from *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* and a book on aerodynamics, and passages appear in Japanese, Greek, and Icelandic.

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<sup>†</sup>/ A. S. Byatt, "The Kurosawa Kid," *The New Yorker*, October 22, 2000, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2000/10/30/the-kurosawa-kid>.

<sup>‡</sup>/ Christian Lorentzen, "*The Last Samurai* is the Best Book of the Century (For Now)," *Vulture*, September 17, 2018, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/09/helen-dewitt-the-last-samurai.html>.

<sup>\*</sup>/ Christian Lorentzen, "Helen DeWitt, America's Great Unlucky Novelist," *Vulture*, July 13, 2016, <https://www.vulture.com/2016/07/helen-dewitt-last-samurai-new-edition.html>.



These choices may seem random, but they enhance *The Last Samurai*'s unique vision—the linguistic and aesthetic education Sibylla provides Ludo informs how he navigates a hostile anti-intellectual culture, and the novel's stream-of-consciousness monologues embody the complex interior world the mother and son inhabit. Although DeWitt made her stylistic preferences clear to her editor, the copy editor erased her corrections in the final proof, and her original text was only restored immediately before publication. As DeWitt writes in the afterword to the 2016 New Directions reissue of *The Last Samurai*, "It has been 20 years since London editors looked at the manuscript and complained that there was too much Greek and Japanese, there were too many numbers."<sup>†</sup> DeWitt interpreted these changes as infringement on her unique artistic vision—it was, she complained, as if they were trying to "kill the mind that wrote the book."<sup>‡</sup> After Talk Miramax Books folded in 2005, *The Last Samurai* fell out of print for a decade. Her second novel *Lightning Rods* was complete by 1999, but she spent more than a decade trying to find a receptive publisher. The content of her work gradually shifted to reflect this reality—DeWitt's characters frequently battle with the vapid gatekeepers of literary and artistic institutions, who fail to recognize the purity and originality of their genius.

DeWitt's new novel, *The English Understand Wool*, attacks the publishing world with a renewed passion. After Marguerite's parents abandon her during their annual international travels, it comes to light that she was kidnapped from her wealthy birth parents as a baby in order to seize her inheritance, and Marguerite is offered a large advance for a tell-all memoir. Refusing her agent's demands to exploit her emotional state, Marguerite secretly amends the contract to give herself creative control over the text. The manuscript would be considered satisfactory if it covered the facts, no changes could be made without the author's approval, and the remainder of the advance would still be payable if it did not meet the publisher's demands. Marguerite tells her shocked agent, "I was surprised that the contract had not been sent in a watermarked PDF, for example, but no doubt all concerned were anxious to close the deal while the author was isolated, distraught" (53). The satirical novel reads like an exaggerated revenge fantasy in which greedy and demanding publishers are undermined by the brilliance of a writer protecting her autonomy. The book blatantly airs DeWitt's grievances with publishers, which began soon after she decided to forgo an agent and negotiate her own contract with Talk Miramax. Autobiographical details seem to lend credence

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<sup>†</sup>/ Helen DeWitt, *The Last Samurai* (New York: New Directions Books, 2016), 484.

<sup>‡</sup>/ M. H. Miller, "Novels From the Edge: For Helen DeWitt, the Publishing World is a High-Stakes Game," *The Observer*, December 20, 2011, <https://observer.com/2011/12/novels-from-the-edge-helen-dewitt-12202011/2/>.

to this theory—Marguerite’s lawyer is named Larry; DeWitt’s lawyer, who looked over the contract she negotiated, was Larry Shire.

Yet *The English Understand Wool* is not autofiction, Konstantinou argues. He instead suggests that DeWitt “engages in an allegorical and metafictional sort of life writing,” but the “life” she chronicles isn’t her own but rather “the life of the book” (xv). By fictionalizing her battles with publishing, DeWitt provides a metafictional commentary on how one might preserve one’s own artistic standards against the profit motive of publishing houses. This struggle characterizes much of DeWitt’s work—*Lightning Rods* satirizes neoliberal corporate feminism, and the characters in her short story collection *Some Trick* are entangled in tedious bureaucracy. A young artist is paid to produce deliberately ugly suits using the extraction of her own bodily fluids rather than the paintings that are her passion, a children’s book author squanders his fortune on his young fans rather than his own son, and a group of American agents and editors scramble to acquire the translation rights to the work of eccentric Dutch author Peter Dijkstra, who they attempt to spin into an international bestseller. DeWitt’s frustration is palpable as she mourns their unrecognized genius, all oppressed by the commercialism and narrow-minded standards of the artistic establishment. The “bad middlemen” in DeWitt’s stories—vapid and avaricious writers, critics, gallery owners, and publishers—invite us, as Konstantinou claims, “to read the struggles of characters who wrestle with irrational artistic institutions as allegories of larger contemporary social, political, and economic dysfunctions” (10). Now that critics such as Konstantinou have suggested that *The Last Samurai*’s contentious journey to publication has become enshrined in its own mystique, DeWitt’s career has become self-referential, transforming her antiestablishment struggles into her personal brand. This paradox proves it is not possible to publish without making compromises in the name of salability; rather, DeWitt must reconsider how to write within market constraints.

*The Last Samurai Reread* dramatizes these structures by examining DeWitt’s step-by-step interactions with corporate publishing. Konstantinou argues that interpreting DeWitt’s literary ambitions in light of her struggles with the industry reveals a potent social critique of the constraints that capitalism imposes upon original and experimental writing. He analyzes a scene in which Ludo challenges his mother’s exacting artistic standards by arguing that her favorite film “*Seven Samurai* can’t be any good because it’s in black and white and Japanese,” to which Sibylla responds, “There is an obvious difference between someone who works within the technical limitations of his time which are beyond his control and someone who accepts without thinking limitations which are entirely within his power to

set aside.”<sup>†</sup> Konstantinou suggests that “sociological structures” like style guides and typesetting choices are in fact structures which can be challenged by artists to preserve their vision and integrity (57). Ludo’s metaphorical quest to find his father becomes a parable for how artists might fulfill their potential in a world attempting to thwart unconventional and unrecognized genius. Konstantinou’s argument risks being too retroactive—DeWitt likely could not foresee the many bumps on *The Last Samurai*’s road to publication. But the book establishes DeWitt’s troubled relationship with publishing as her enduring legacy, granting her the glamor of unheralded genius while ironically painting her as a figure worthy of not only critical acclaim but an academic monograph.

Konstantinou’s critique focuses almost exclusively on *The Last Samurai*, but his examination of DeWitt’s publishing process applies to *The English Understand Wool*. After all, it is almost inconceivable that DeWitt could have successfully published the experimental novella without the enduring legacy of her debut novel. *The Last Samurai* not only made DeWitt’s legacy; it also enabled other independent publishers to take a chance on her writing once Talk Miramax folded. Consequently, DeWitt has escaped the limited range of the so-called Big Five publishing houses and has been able to secure more autonomy over her writing. Her current publisher, New Directions, is an established indie press with a long tradition of publishing modernist literature, literature in translation, and more experimental, “difficult” fiction that would be unlikely to find a home with corporate publishers. New Directions occupies a unique place in the publishing world, one particularly amenable to DeWitt’s needs. Their extensive backlist of classics insulates them from the market demands that cause smaller presses to fold and enables their editors to focus on new developments in fiction without the typical limits of a profit motive. This dynamic also positions DeWitt alongside New Directions’s catalog of classic authors such as H. D. and Clarice Lispector as well as contemporary superstars including Anne Carson and Patti Smith.

After acquiring the rights to her earlier work, New Directions produced *The English Understand Wool* as a Storybook ND, a special series publishing the works of classic New Directions authors such as César Aira and Natalia Ginzburg alongside contemporary novellas. The series “aims to deliver the pleasure one felt as a child reading a marvelous book from cover to cover in an afternoon,” seemingly making DeWitt’s narrative of a precocious teenage author an apt fit.<sup>‡</sup> *The Last Samurai* is more stylistically experimental and ambitious in its range, advocating for a fresh and subversive way of seeing

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<sup>†</sup>/ DeWitt, *The Last Samurai*, 230.

<sup>‡</sup>/ “Storybook ND,” New Directions Publishing, <https://www.ndbooks.com/series/storybook-nd/>.

the world, while *The English Understand Wool* is more self-absorbed and preoccupied with publishing's bureaucracy. The economic conditions of producing art in both books, however, are similarly grounded in survival under capitalism. While Sibylla raises Ludo in an unheated London flat paid for by minimum-wage labor, Marguerite grows up in the lap of luxury. DeWitt describes her family's lifestyle in obsessive detail: the tweed from the Outer Hebrides, the Moroccan riad, and the Yamaha Clavinova installed specially in a suite in Claridge's. Yet Marguerite's desire to publish is born out of the financial necessity to support herself while preserving her artistic integrity. Marguerite and Ludo are both examples of what Konstantinou calls the "knowing child," even as DeWitt inverts the stereotype of the child genius (xiii). She herself rejects the idea of Ludo's prodigious abilities—after all, "since there is no age at which the opportunities offered to Ludo are the norm, we don't know whether he was a genius or not—only that he is an oddity in a society with very low expectations."<sup>†</sup>

Marguerite is more sophisticated and poised but less sympathetic—her detached, affected tone and aristocratic taste are reminiscent of one of J. D. Salinger's precocious children. Marguerite and Ludo's brilliance, DeWitt reminds us, is more a reflection of the genius of their parents. Sibylla's intellectual preoccupation becomes not the great work of scholarship she might once have written but the labor of raising Ludo. In this way, Ludo is a convex mirror of Sibylla's own unfulfilled potential. Konstantinou identifies the challenges of Ludo's rigorous intellectual education as an allegory for DeWitt's struggle to complete her novel. Marguerite, furthermore, is more concerned with upholding the aesthetic standards her kidnappers have instilled in her than bringing them to justice, something her agent Bethany takes as evidence of her inherited depravity: "You were raised by people who pulled off the heist of the century. I can talk till I'm blue in the face. You just don't get it" (57).

The unity of DeWitt's aesthetic vision in opposition to mainstream artistic standards is a significant theme across *The Last Samurai* and *The English Understand Wool*. At a party on Park Avenue, Marguerite entertains the other guests by playing Thelonious Monk's "Straight, No Chaser" on the piano, a song that also makes a significant appearance at the end of *The Last Samurai*. By offering to teach avant-garde pianist Kenzo Yamamoto to play "Straight, No Chaser," which Ludo has learned by "listening to the tape & trying to copy it about 500 times," he convinces the musician to produce a CD.<sup>‡</sup> He hopes that it will appeal to Sibylla's exacting standards and save her from the monotony of her existence. The song involves "basically only one idea played again and again,

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<sup>†</sup>/ DeWitt, *The Last Samurai*, 483.

<sup>‡</sup>/ DeWitt, *The Last Samurai*, 33.

each time in a different part of the measure and with a different ending,” which reflects “a craftsmanship that can produce depth in simplicity.”<sup>†</sup> The song’s structure aligns with Yamamoto’s commitment to aesthetic purity, which Yamamoto produces by playing endless variations on famous classical pieces, from which depths of meaning might be extracted. Similarly, Marguerite’s decision to play the song aligns with her own aesthetic ideals. She reflects that “in the circumstances it did not seem to me to be mauvais ton to play, though no one had asked me to do so,” and recognizes that her playing serves as a gateway to upper-class mobility—people come to talk to Marguerite, offer her drinks, and extend her invitations, which they might not have done had she not been “dressing with éclat and playing bridge with flair and playing the piano” (24–25). Marguerite concludes that these upper-class aesthetic standards stand in direct opposition to the sensationalist book Bethany envisions: “So perhaps there were people who would like to hear about feelings, but I did not think they were people I would want to know” (25).

Marguerite’s—and DeWitt’s—eventual success defending their vision’s integrity offers a framework for contemporary artists to preserve the originality of their voice against the demands of the corporate artistic establishment, which they experience as monolithic. DeWitt seems to have forged her own contradictory path by working with independent presses that are willing to grant her creative control while enabling her work to acquire a wider readership. Despite her unconventional start with the cross-genre conglomerate Talk Miramax, DeWitt’s work with independent publishers such as New Directions instead of mainstream publishing houses has afforded her more receptive editors and more autonomy over her work. This is perhaps epitomized by the resolution of the fifteen-year saga of *Your Name Here*, an experimental novel she cowrote with Australian journalist Ilya Gridneff. To circumvent the publishing industry and to maximize her profits, a struggling DeWitt originally published a synopsis on her website for interested publishers and agents, then began selling PDF copies through PayPal for a suggested donation of \$8. Publishers initially showed some interest: it was reviewed by the *London Review of Books* and an extract was published in *n+1*; “Miranda July’s father offered to publish b [sic] kept talking about the Hopi concept of space-time,” DeWitt tweeted; then Noemi Press offered to publish it but reverted the rights because of technical challenges, “so sometimes you just want to go back to bed.”<sup>‡</sup> Now, however, *Your Name Here* will be published in 2024 by the avant-garde press Dalkey Archive,

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†/ Mark C. Gridley, *Jazz Styles: Pearson New International Edition*, 11th ed. (Essex: Pearson, 2014), 168. Quoted in Konstantinou, *The Last Samurai Reread*, 57.

‡/ Helen DeWitt (@helendewitt), Twitter, January 21, 2020, <https://twitter.com/helendewitt/status/1219794130597044225>.

currently an imprint of Deep Vellum, so DeWitt has urged her fans to wait to purchase a copy. DeWitt's admirers have celebrated this news as a success for both her financial security and the legions of readers who have yet to discover her work. Yet it's a tempered victory at best—DeWitt's work eventually found a home but required compromise, including negotiating with editors instead of forging a path through self-publishing alone. The comfortable middle ground where she appears to have settled with independent presses, however, has shifted her navigation of publishing, finding an editor/writer relationship that's collaborative rather than oppositional. Her work with *New Directions* and *Dalkey Archive*, both known for publishing lesser-known, avant-garde works by prominent authors, suggests her writing will endure rather than become lost—it will continue to be rediscovered and read with a renewed appreciation by future generations.

Eliza Browning

## §

Barbara Guest and Stephen Ratcliffe, *Letters*. Chax Press, 2022.

What happens when one poet emails another? And what makes that question any different from an older one: What happens when one poet writes to another? The questions we ask of Emily Dickinson's now-anthologized envelope poems or Langston Hughes's 1950 Christmas postcards are not all that different from those we ask of poetic composition and communication via laptop: inquiry around textual interfaces, archives, and literary community. Stephen Ratcliffe and Barbara Guest's *Letters*—a series of correspondence between the two poets from November 2003 until Guest's stroke in December 2004—is, above all, a confirmation of the social practice of poetry. *Letters* is also a useful exercise in theorizing the relationship between email and poetic practice in the twenty-first century. It moves us toward defining a poetics of email, or at least invites us to imagine one.

"I am having trouble with your poetry, it is beginning to usurp my page," writes Guest to Ratcliffe in an email on November 22, 2003 (16). The usurpation of the page is one of the benefits of the messages compiled and released by Chax Press in 2022. *Letters* is a slightly oversized square-shaped book, brimming with multiple textual media and forms. When Ratcliffe's daughter sends a catalog of artist Jane Freilicher's New York gallery show to Guest, it can't fit within the bounds of the text in our hands. We take pleasure in a scan of the inner cover's inscription but ultimately must conjure its materiality on our own. "There's no attachment to 'Imagined Room.' In fact,

I can't receive attachments," replies Guest to Ratcliffe in one email (26). She's speaking in completely material terms—she quite literally cannot receive his email attachment—yet her words take on a philosophical lilt regarding reception and receptivity.

A prominent New York School poet despite her California roots, Guest eventually moved back to Berkeley, where she was based until her death in 2006. Born in Massachusetts, Ratcliffe grew up in Bolinas and San Francisco; he has lived in Bolinas since 1973. Best known for his contributions to Language poetry, Ratcliffe's work ranges from Renaissance scholarship, such as a monograph on *Hamlet*, to his ongoing series of thousand-page books of poems written in a thousand consecutive days. The poetics of Guest and Ratcliffe's correspondence can be read as an advancement, or maybe echo, of what Frank O'Hara called "Personism." Coined in 1959, this doctrine tasks the poet "to address itself to one person (other than the poet himself)." O'Hara derives Personism from the experience of "realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born."<sup>†</sup> *Letters* similarly formulates this one-to-one communication as the basis for poetics.

*Letters* is made up of letters, emails, and (mentions of) artists' books that don't always make it into the text proper but that we can picture arriving at each poet's home in the post. Ironically, the most analog forms—books and postcards—are often the least accessible to the volume's reader. We must trust they arrived at Guest's home in Berkeley even if we only have a scan. At one point, Ratcliffe attaches a typewritten version of a poem to an email and handwrites at the bottom in parentheses, "(So you can see what it looks like on the page)" (120). Like Dickinson's envelope poems, whose enjambment is shaped by the missives' physical structure, a word processor or email server reifies and delimits poetic form. *Letters* becomes a meditation on what we mean by *analog* within book history and media studies in a twenty-first-century context.

O'Hara's Personism need not be the only term for what Guest and Ratcliffe are doing. *Letters* might be a simpler reminder that the poem is a social object. Ratcliffe and Guest's *Letters* is evidence of what Dirk Van Hulle designates the "ecology" of social and creative practice in his 2022 monograph, *Genetic Criticism*. Inspiration, Van Hulle writes, "is more often than not a result of writers' reading, their interaction with other writers."<sup>‡</sup> Van Hulle makes a convincing argument for the importance of note-taking and

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<sup>†</sup>/ Frank O'Hara, "Personism: A Manifesto," *Selected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), xiii–xiv.

<sup>‡</sup>/ Dirk Van Hulle, *Genetic Criticism: Tracing Creativity in Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 76.

ordinary exchange in developing poetic style and sensibility. Writers derive “inspiration” from each other and their environments, rather than interior states. “Here is something from today that makes a note of something you said,” Ratcliffe writes (72). Our reliance on literary community should also provide great relief to writers, for it reminds us that emailing a friend can get one to the task of writing those more ambitious undertakings. Ratcliffe gestures toward the nineteenth century, and the fact that these social practices and communities were always part of poetics, when he notes in a poem from July 3, 2004: “Dorothy / Wordsworth walking ‘part of the way to Stowey with Coleridge’” (98).

This book makes one wonder if all poetics necessitates the usurpation of the page. Seeing emails in a bound book, alongside printed poems, forces a reader to reconsider what appears to be the unquestionably smooth surface of the printed page or the PDF. Throughout Guest and Ratcliffe’s exchanges, both writers return to the question of visibility. “Here’s today’s poem w/ some ‘thoughts’ on the visible/invisible....,” writes Ratcliffe before attaching a typed poem to Guest. Ratcliffe’s poem concludes: “recalling the Talmud / which says ‘if you want to see the invisible, pay close / attention to the visible’” (32). The quotation is not only generative within its original context of the Talmud but also these emails: a textual interface with a visible surface and lots of code underneath.

In the 1970s, the US Postal Service hoped to include email within its services. The USPS wanted the definition of “letter” to include “floppy discs” and “orientations of magnetic particles.”<sup>†</sup> In reading Guest and Ratcliffe’s emails, we recall details about email’s history into the early twenty-first century when their correspondence took place: email was not portable, except for printing it (as Ratcliffe seems to have done in compiling this book). Users could not always swiftly organize emails in their inbox; delete messages with ease; or use an ANSWER command, which we now know as the simple ability to “reply.” Before the ANSWER command existed, users had to type the entire recipient’s address and subject line again as one would address an envelope.<sup>‡</sup> A study of email’s materiality, as in the case of Guest and Ratcliffe’s collected correspondence, necessarily makes us pause on aspects of the seemingly banal medium we take for granted.

*If you want to see the invisible, pay close / attention to the visible:* Ratcliffe’s words are also an argument for publishing a book like *Letters*, which lends credence to the most “visible,” common uses of language. Guest and Ratcliffe’s *Letters* demonstrate the difficulty in distinguishing

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<sup>†</sup> / Esther Milne, *Email and the Everyday: Stories of Disclosure, Trust, and Digital Labor* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2021), 34–35.

<sup>‡</sup> / Milne, *Email and the Everyday*, 27–30.



creative practice from more ordinary and bureaucratic responsibilities. Ratcliffe writes to Guest, “I might include you in my list of references for the Guggenheim I want to apply for” in the same correspondence in which he attaches a poem (118). The relationship between creative and more transactional modes of discourse can be a relief, as it renders writing a less intimidating practice that requires the same skillset used for ordinary tasks in our lives. But it’s also a reminder that all creative practice is shaped by its material conditions. Mirene Arsanios’s “On Artistic Freedom,” where she writes of sending out cover letters one summer as contingent faculty, is an argument against attempts to distinguish “ordinary” responsibilities from poetic practice. No “writing practice” exists outside of her described working conditions as an adjunct.<sup>†</sup> In describing the kind of confessional mode required of the cover-letter form, Arsanios reveals its grating effect on her subjectivity. *Letters* is a poetic contribution to the burgeoning field of media studies and archeology that attempts to ask, as Esther Milne does in her book-length study of email’s role in industry and culture: “How is email experienced, understood, and materially structured as a practice that traverses the domestic and institutional spaces of everyday life? What kinds of stories are told—both *about* email and *through* email?”<sup>‡</sup>

Understanding the distinction between creative and ordinary practice has long been the tacit goal of scholars who work on the sociology and circulation of texts: through archiving and defining writers’ social environments, we can begin to strip away the notion of solitary genius. It’s not so much that this image of the solitary poet is now unfashionable but that a writer is relentlessly shaped by the institutions and subcultures they inhabit, whether through collaboration with friends and colleagues or their working conditions. Many poems throughout *Letters*—eventually anthologized in Guest’s and Ratcliffe’s oeuvres—would not have been brought into being without someone at the other end of a correspondence. Guest’s language, and engagement with Ratcliffe’s language, is the material for his verse. *Letters* is an ode to the interface in the face of a culture that aims to strip away any sign of one, as well as a fulfillment of genetic critics’ calls for “genetic editions,” which show a work in process rather than some arbitrary point of “finalized” publication. Resisting a traditional publication model, *Letters* is an opportunity to consider the poem as defined through its social relations and process rather than publication.

The inability to separate poetic and everyday language mimics Ratcliffe’s poetic practice, which refuses any separation between criticism and poetry. His poetics is relentless in its admission of the world and his instructions

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<sup>†</sup>/ Mirene Arsanios, “On Artistic Freedom (Part 1),” *128 Lit*, <https://www.128lit.org/on-artistic-freedom>.

<sup>‡</sup>/ Milne, *Email and the Everyday*, 2, original italics.

for us to do so. Most of Ratcliffe's poems published in *Letters* feature a "woman" who makes identical comments to those made by Guest in her correspondence to him. Ratcliffe's practice—and this theory of poetics—renders the poem less of a closed system and instead a receptacle for the world's chat and mess. As Guest writes to him, "Nothing is missing. I revel in it" (31). Repetition of "noting" (and "thinking," "reading," "telling," "adding," "claiming," "watching," "recalling," and "explaining") occurs throughout Ratcliffe's poems in the volume. His poetics makes one consider that just maybe we, or the woman on the bus, are all performing acts of criticism at every juncture. In one poem, Ratcliffe details not only Guest's "Handbook of Surfing," in her collection *The Blue Stairs*, but also the experience of talking to Guest about it, along with a quote from Paul Bremer on the invasion of Iraq. Ratcliffe's experiences of reading occupy the same plane as bearing witness to a red-tailed hawk and the "white edge of wave breaking to the left" (21). To equivocate between all things, to indicate one's commitment to reading texts and the world alike: that might be the point and best usage of poetics.

*Letters* provides not only an occasion for critical studies of writers' correspondences but also some practical recommendations for poets. The project tells us that poetic sensibility and style can emerge when we are responsive to friends over email. It also suggests that we might type to each other for the sake of typing to each other, that we can get somewhere simply through casual and regular exchanges of language. Dennis Tenen, writing on the relationship between textual practice and digital interfaces, cites a 1968 report at NASA that discusses writing practice in the early age of computers. "I find that I can express myself better, if I can make all the little changes and experiments with wording and structure as they occur to me," one anonymous typist says of computer technologies. The computer produces an environment, or practice, where one "can experiment, easily take a look and see how a new version strikes me."<sup>†</sup> This kind of touching up is distinct to communication and writing in digital environments.

What remains curious about the ability to easily touch up one's writing and instantaneously communicate is that the latter prohibits the former. Once an email is sent, it is sent. (Despite desperate attempts via software or extensions to "unsubscribe" an email.) *Letters* captures this paradox, with its printed and now-reified emails. There's something oddly analog about the email form, now bound in and called *Letters*. Email's orientation at the crossroads of analog and digital forms—the slowest, most analog form of digital communication, but nevertheless incessant and instantaneous—is perhaps why

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<sup>†</sup>/ Douglas Engelbart, "Human Intellect Augmentation Techniques," NASA Contractor Report (January 1969): 50–51, quoted in Dennis Yi Tenen, "Laminate Text: The Strata of Digital Inscription," *Amodern* 7 (December 2017): fig. 7.

it has always seemed on the verge of going out of fashion, or just unworthy of too much discussion. Guest and Ratcliffe's correspondence, however, reminds us that this precise quality is why it occupies a central role in media history and cultural life.<sup>†</sup>

"I feel a nostalgia towards the early days of our correspondence and I'm certain this will not leave me," writes Guest toward the end of *Letters*. "There was the little robin in 'The Brown Vest' and 'blue enters later' in 'The Red Gaze.' I remember your asking, 'what does that mean?' and my saying, 'blue is always late.' How did I ever think of that?" (116). How indeed does one ever think of it? Something comes and goes, so fast, when typing.

*This article is dedicated to Jamie Albrecht (1999–2023)*

Katherine Franco

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<sup>†</sup>/ See Milne's discussion of what she calls the "death-of-email narrative," *Email and the Everyday*, 2–4.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Carrie Olivia Adams** lives in Chicago, where she is the promotions and marketing communications director for the University of Chicago Press and the poetry editor for Black Ocean. Her books include *Be the thing of memory*, *Operating Theater*, *Forty-One Jane Doe's*, and *Intervening Absence*, in addition to the chapbooks *Proficiency Badges*, *Grapple*, *Overture in the Key of F*, and *A Useless Window*. When she's not making poems, she's making biscuits. ♦ **Will Alexander** is a poet, essayist, novelist, aphorist, playwright, visual artist, pianistic improviser, and blurbist who is approaching his thirty-ninth publication, *On Dar el-Hikma* from Africa World Press. He is poet-in-residence at Beyond Baroque Literary Arts Foundation in Venice, California. He currently resides in Los Angeles. ♦ **Stephanie Anderson** is the author of several poetry books and chapbooks, including *Bearings* (forthcoming). She is also the editor of *Spies in the Audience*, a collection of interviews with women small press publishers (forthcoming), and coeditor of *All This Thinking: The Correspondence of Bernadette Mayer and Clark Coolidge*. She is an assistant professor at Duke Kunshan University in China. ♦ **César Dávila Andrade** (Cuenca, 1918–Caracas, 1967) was an Ecuadorian poet, short-fiction writer, and essayist. His chronicle of atrocities and forced labor under Spanish rule, “Bulletin and Elegy of the Mitas,” is widely acclaimed, both critically and popularly, as a key text of twentieth-century Ecuadorian poetry. ♦ **Michael Becker** is a poet and an artist. He lives in Minnesota. ♦ **Eliza Browning** is a recent master's graduate in modern and contemporary literature from the University of Oxford. Her literary and art criticism has appeared in the *Oxford Review of Books*, *The Oxonian Review*, *The Cambridge Review of Books*, *Boston Art Review*, *Full Stop*, and *Asymptote*, among others. ♦ **Anne Éline Cliche** is professor in the Department of Literary Studies at the Université du Québec à Montréal. She has published six novels, including *Le danseur de La Macaza* (Prix J. I. Segal 2022, finalist for the Académie des lettres du Québec's Prix Ringuet), *Jonas de mémoire*, and *La pisseuse*, as well as several essays on Freud and Lacan, the Bible, and Judaism in relation to literature, including *Tu ne te feras pas d'image: Duras, Sarraute, Guyotat*. ♦ **Darcie Dennigan**'s manuscript “Forever Valley” was a finalist for the 2023 Novel Prize. She is the director of the Spatulate Church Emergency Shift, an ad hoc poets theatre group in Providence, Rhode Island. ♦ **Adam Fales** edits *Chicago Review*. ♦ **Katherine Franco** is a writer and artist. Her work is published by Pilot Press, *Jacket2*, and *Prelude*, among others. She begins a PhD in English at the University of California, Berkeley, this fall. ♦

**Jay Gao** is a poet and the author of *Imperium* (Carcenet, 2022) and three poetry chapbooks. Originally from Edinburgh, Scotland, he earned his MFA at Brown University and currently lives in New York, where he is a PhD student at Columbia University. ♦ **Roberto Harrison** is a Panamanian American poet and artist living in Milwaukee since 1991. His next book is forthcoming in Spring 2024 from the City Lights Spotlight series, *Tropical Lung: isthmus to abya yala*. ♦ **Ronald Johnson** was born in Ashland, Kansas, on November 25, 1935, and educated at the University of Kansas and Columbia University. He served in the US Army, walked the length of the Appalachian Trail and around Britain with his companion Jonathan Williams, and in the late sixties settled in San Francisco, where he wrote poetry and cookbooks and was a founder of the San Francisco leather scene. There he lived for twenty-five years before returning to Kansas, where he lived in Topeka until his death on March 4, 1998. Associated with Black Mountain and the New American Poetry as well as the international concrete poetry movement, Johnson published several books, among them *Book of the Green Man*, *Valley of the Many-Colored Grasses*, *Songs of the Earth*, *Radi os*, and *ARK. Collected Later Poetry*, assembling the work from the last decade of his life, is forthcoming from Flood Editions. ♦ **Devin Johnston** grew up in North Carolina. He is the author of seven books of poetry, including *Dragons*, published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 2023. He serves as an editor of Flood Editions and teaches at Saint Louis University in Missouri. ♦ **F. Whitney Jones** studied at Hamilton College, the University of Paris, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He received a PhD in English from the latter and taught there as well as at St. Andrews College. For four decades, he has provided strategic planning and fundraising counsel to nonprofit organizations in the Southeast. He served as President of the Jargon Society for several decades, and his papers from that role are housed in the Special Collections Research Center of Appalachian State University. ♦ **Patricia Spears Jones** is a Black American poet, playwright, and cultural activist, and the recipient of the 2017 Jackson Poetry Prize. *The Beloved Community* (Copper Canyon Press) is her fifth poetry collection. She edited *W. B. #1* and coedited the anthology *Ordinary Women*. Her essays, interviews, and poems are widely anthologized, and her poems have been translated into Czech, French, and Spanish. ♦ **Patricia Keats**, former library director at the California Historical Society and the Society of California Pioneers, has a master's degree from the University of Chicago and a library degree from Kent State University. Having published articles for history journals and exhibitions, she is currently writing a historical novel on nineteenth-century Paris. She lives near San Francisco and is a Chicago native. ♦ **Catherine Kelly** is a doctoral student at King's College London, researching

lesbian feminist print networks in the United States. Her writing is available or forthcoming in the *Cardiff Review*, *Dublin Review of Books*, *Still Point*, *Spam*, *Datableed*, *MHRA Working Papers in the Humanities*, and *Women: A Cultural Review*. ♦ **Sophie Frances Kemp** is a writer from Brooklyn, originally from Schenectady, New York. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *The Baffler*, *Paris Review's The Daily*, *GQ*, and *New York Magazine*. She has a forthcoming novel called *Paradise Logic*. ♦ **Lizzy Kinch** lives in London and works in history documentaries. Her translations have appeared in *No Man's Land* and *Exchanges: Journal of Literary Translation*. ♦ **Devin King** is the author most recently of *Gathering* (Kenning Editions, 2023). He lives in Oxford, England, where he is writing a biography of Ronald Johnson. ♦ **Joe Luna** is the author of *Development Hell* (Hi Zero, 2020) and *Air Hunger* (Plea Press, 2018) and editor of *The Letters of Douglas Oliver and J. H. Prynne, 1967–2000* (The Last Books, 2022). He lives and works in Brighton, where he ran the Hi Zero reading series between 2011 and 2020 ([www.hizero.org](http://www.hizero.org)). ♦ **Kaja Marczevska** is the author of *This Is Not a Copy* (2018) and coeditor of *The Contemporary Small Press* (2020). She writes about experimental writing, the small press, and, more broadly, the relationship between infrastructures, institutions, and cultures of knowledge production. Her current book project explores forms of infrastructural activism which have historically and today supported circulation of independent and grassroots print and publishing. She lives in London, UK. ♦ **Andy Martrich** is the author of several works of poetry and prose, including *Shy of the Squirrel's Foot: A Peripheral History of the Jargon Society as Told through Its Missing Books*, forthcoming from University of North Carolina Press. He is a cofounder and editor at Hiding Press. ♦ **Katie Marya** is a writer and translator based in Lincoln, Nebraska. Her first book, *Sugar Work*, selected as the Editor's Choice for the Alice James Book Award, was published in 2022. ♦ **Steven Maye** holds a PhD in English from the University of Chicago and is a former poetry editor of *Chicago Review*. He currently lives in Canada. ♦ **Lukas Moe** is at work on *Poetry Makes You Happen: American Verse Culture from Modernism to the Social Movement* (under contract with UNC Press). He teaches in the writing program at Wellesley College. ♦ **Alice Notley's** most recent published volumes are *Early Works* and *The Speak Angel Series*, as well as an art book, *Runes and Chords*. Forthcoming are *Telling the Truth as It Comes Up*, a collection of talks and essays, and *Being Reflected Upon*, a memoirish book of poems. ♦ **Peter O'Leary** is the literary executor of the Ronald Johnson Estate. *The Hidden Eyes of Things*, a long poem about astrology, was published in 2022. He lives in Oak Park, Illinois, and teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. ♦ **Michael O'Leary** is the author of two books of poetry, *Out West* (2023) and *The Reception* (2016), both published by The Cultural

Society. He serves as an editor of Flood Editions and works in Chicago as a quantitative analyst in the financial services industry. ♦ **Hilary Plum** has worked in small press, independent, and academic publishing since 2004. She's currently associate director of the CSU Poetry Center and an editor at Rescue Press. Her books include the essay collection *Hole Studies* (Fonograf, 2022) and the volume of poetry *Excisions* (Black Lawrence, 2023). ♦ **Léon Pradeau** is a poet, translator, and PhD candidate at the University of Chicago. He has published poems in France and the US. With Clara Nizard, he is currently translating a collection by the French poet Cécile Mainardi. Parts of it are coming out in *Fence* this fall. ♦ **Kate Robinson** is a writer, book designer, printer, and nonprofessionalized poet-publisher. After thirteen years in Oakland, California, where she hosted house reading series Manifest and Sponge and published books as Dogpark Collective, she has recently relocated to the Hudson Valley. Her day job is slinging fonts for Type Network. ♦ **Emma Roy** is an emerging literary translator and queer mother based in the unceded indigenous lands of Tiohtià:ke (Montreal). She holds a BA in translation and creative writing from Concordia University in Montréal. In 2022 she was selected for the the American Literary Translators Association's Emerging Translator Mentorship in Québec Prose. ♦ A Cave Canem and NEA fellow, **Lauren Russell** is the author of *Descent* (Tarpaulin Sky), winner of the PSA's 2021 Rabinowitz Award, and *What's Hanging on the Hush* (Ahsahta). Her next book, *A Window That Can Neither Open nor Close: Poems, Plots, Chance*, is forthcoming on Milkweed Editions's Multiverse Series in 2024. ♦ **Jocelyn Saidenberg** is a Bay Area writer, educator, and founding publisher of Krupskaya Books. She is the author of several published collections of poetry, and in 2024 two books are forthcoming: *If an Elsewhere*, a collaboration with visual artist Cybele Lyle, published by Kelsey Street Press, and *Echo Otherwise: A Poetics of Sound and Loss in Ancient and Contemporary Poetry*, published by Punctum Books. ♦ **Clemens Setz** was born in Graz, Austria, and now lives in Vienna. He has published novels, short stories, poems, and plays, and was awarded the Georg Büchner Prize in 2021. His latest novel, *Monde for der Landung*, was nominated this year for the Leipzig Book Fair Prize, and his novel *Indigo* was published in Ross Benjamin's translation in 2015. ♦ **Jonathan Simkins** is the translator of *El Creacionismo* by Vicente Huidobro (The Lune), and *The Treasure of the Llanganates* by Paúl Puma (Pumaeditores). His translations have appeared in *Gulf Coast*, *The Iowa Review*, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, *Tampa Review*, *The Journal*, and others. ♦ **Donna Stonecipher** is the author of six books of poetry, including the forthcoming *The Ruins of Nostalgia* (Wesleyan, Fall 2023), as well as one of prose. She translates from German and lives in Berlin. ♦ **Cary Stough** is a poet and critic from the Missouri Ozarks and a former

library worker in Massachusetts. He is a contributing writer at the *Cleveland Review of Books*, and his work can also be found in *American Poetry Review* and *Annulet: A Journal of Poetics*. ♦ **Alex Streim** is a writer and educator based in Baltimore, Maryland. His essays have recently appeared in *Twentieth-Century Literature*, *Modern Philology*, *ASAP/J*, and *Arizona Quarterly*. He holds a PhD in English from Johns Hopkins University. ♦ **Janaka Stucky** is a mystic poet, performer, and founding editor of the award-winning press Black Ocean. He is a two-time National Haiku Champion and is the author of four poetry collections, most recently *Ascend Ascend* (2019) published by Third Man Books & Records and as a limited fine-art folio by Fulgur Press in the UK. His writing has appeared in a variety of publications such as the *Huffington Post* and *Poetry*, and he has been profiled in *The Believer*, *VICE*, and *BOMB Magazine*. ♦ **Nick Sturm** is a lecturer at Georgia State University and visiting faculty at Emory University. He is editor of *Early Works* by Alice Notley (Fonograf Editions, 2023) and coeditor of *Get the Money!: Collected Prose, 1961–1983* by Ted Berrigan (City Lights, 2022). More information about his work can be found at [www.nicksturm.com](http://www.nicksturm.com). ♦ **Renee Tajima-Peña** is an Oscar-nominated filmmaker. She has been deeply involved in Asian American politics and arts movements and is the former managing editor of *Bridge: Asian American Perspectives*. She is currently a professor of Asian American Studies, the director of the Center for EthnoCommunications, and endowed chair in Japanese American studies at UCLA. ♦ **Shannon Tharp** is a poet and essayist who lives in Denver, Colorado, where she's a librarian at the University of Denver. She's the author of the collections *The Cost of Walking* and *Vertigo in Spring*. Some of her recent writing can be found in *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Jacket2*, and *Post45*. ♦ **Keith Tuma** is the author of books including *Climbing into the Orchestra* (2017), *On Leave: A Book of Anecdotes* (2011), *The Paris Hilton* (2011), and, with Justin Katko, *Holiday in Tikrit* (2005). He teaches at Miami University, where he edits the Miami University Press. ♦ **Joshua Weiner** is the author of three books of poems and the editor of a book of essays on Thom Gunn (all from the University of Chicago Press). He is the author of *Berlin Notebook: Where Are the Refugees?* (LARB, 2016) and the translator of Nelly Sachs's *Flight and Metamorphosis* (FSG, 2022). He lives in Washington, DC, and teaches at the University of Maryland. ♦ **Matvei Yankelevich** is a poet, editor, and translator who has been working in small press publishing since the late 1990s, when he cofounded Ugly Duckling Presse. Since 2022, he is editor-in-chief at World Poetry, a nonprofit press devoted to poetry in translation. In 2023, he opened a new small press, Winter Editions. His most recent chapbook is *Dead Winter* (Fonograf). ♦ **Mia You** is the author of the poetry collection *I, Too, Dislike It* (1913 Press, 2016) and the chapbooks *Objective*

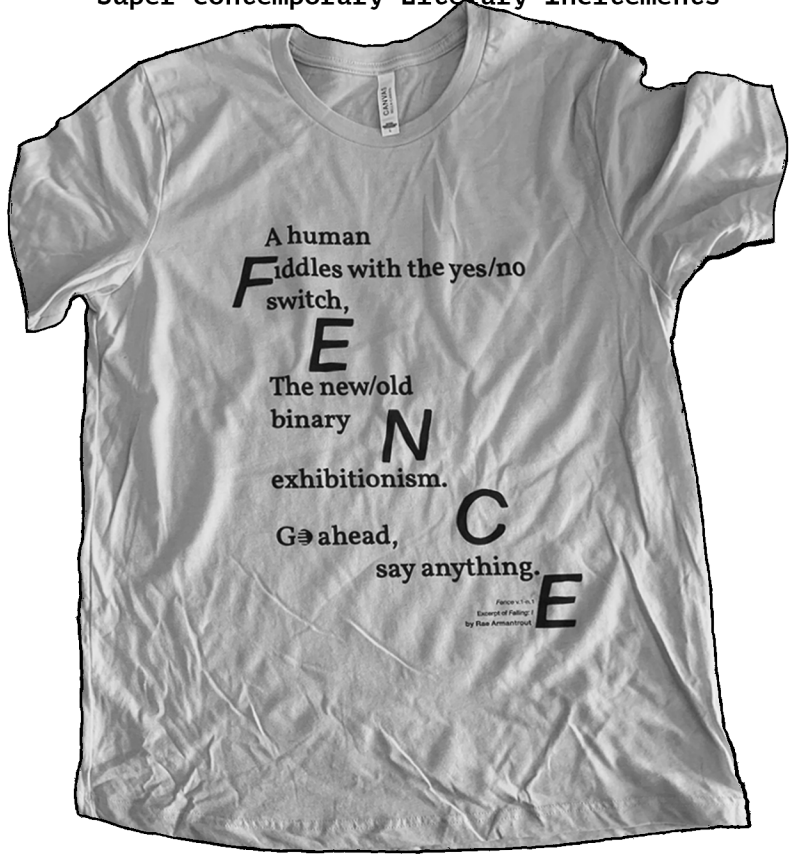


*Practice* (Achiote Press, 2007) and *Rouse the Ruse and the Rush* (Nion Editions, 2023). Her next full-length collection, *Festival*, will be published later this year in English by Belladonna\* and in Dutch translation by Uitgeverij Chaos. She currently teaches Anglophone literature at Utrecht University and in the Critical Studies program at the Sandberg Institute. ♦ **Stephanie Young**'s books of poetry and prose include *Pet Sounds*, *It's No Good Everything's Bad*, and *Ursula or University*. Her recent writing on the history of prestige literary culture and its changing demographics, cowritten with Claire Grossman and Juliana Spahr, can be found in *American Literary History*, *Public Books*, *ASAP/J*, and the *Post45* Data Collective. Her writing on small press culture, literary production, and social movements has appeared in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Paideuma*, *The Bigness of Things: New Narrative and Visual Culture*, *From Our Hearts to Yours: New Narrative as Contemporary Practice*, and *Harriet*, the Poetry Foundation's blog. Young teaches writing at Mills College at Northeastern University. She is a member of the Krupskaya Books editorial collective.

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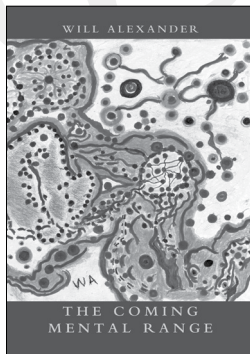
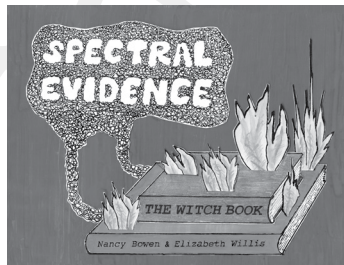
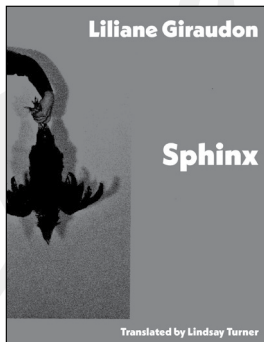
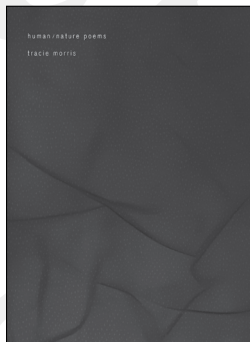
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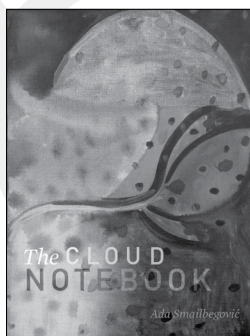
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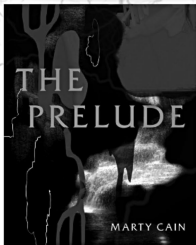
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