



SUGAR
HOUSE
REVIEW

#29

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SUGAR HOUSE REVIEW

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NOTE FOR CONTRIBUTORS & SUBSCRIBERS

In 2025, *Sugar House Review* will celebrate its Sweet 16 anniversary with a special, double issue. This means we will produce one larger issue in the fall, instead of one in both summer and winter.

DELUGE

And that's how it starts,
rain that cuts like morning.

Before the curtains open and
your loved ones exit the room,

leaving mud stains on the carpet
of your mind. You go around

the house overwatering the
plants, thinking this will save them.

More rain bakes into the skin of
the earth as we speak and you

believe this is nourishment. Just
watch the news for once, listen

how the families beg for a lighter
weight to blanket them: the sun,

perhaps a wing. Notice how the
homes break open and fracture

into nothing. This is what a fist
can do when it's too afraid to open.

PLOT TWIST

When I try to remember, I can't
recall the first time I bled.
From there—*not here*,
not where the worms create space
where there shouldn't be.

It was fall, I think—
the time when things that bite
start moving into places soft enough
to burrow through. Even I'm guilty of this—
removing dirt from beneath the nail beds.

Tell me I'm not the only one
who forgets the plot, the end scene
of a movie, where too often my head
would drape over him like a ghost.
Then suddenly, just like that, you wake up.

It's different now,
I try not to stare too long at anything:
the sun, a loved one's face, my hands—
more highway now than river; a reminder
of all the things I've held and couldn't.

SHE USED TO SAY

If you can get through January, you can get through anything, because February is short, and March is warming. Though not this year, winter overrunning April like a stubborn child, doubling snowfall's standard tally. Everything cold shrouded. Everything itching like windchill. Cracked heels and hangnails. Never enough balm for my lips. Three of four grandparents died in January. I stood in stinging sunshine, under arbitrary clouds, at three graveyard plots where no one lingered. Not children, grandchildren, cousins not seen in years. *Regret is a killing thing*. Now seventy, both my parents hope to die in sleep. Percentages are against them. Against me, too, sitting about, calculating a dog walk's distance against necessary layers. Work is paper piles all afternoon when I'd rather nap. The radio is a bar drunk spouting revelations, is sandpaper roughing up shoe soles. I should turn it off, but the anchor fascinates with each accident of power. She used to say, *plant for the first jonquils of spring*. Tonight's forecast, freezing rain turning to snow. After the storm front, arctic cold. One last chance, then, to be brave in favorable conditions, face covered in a scarf so thick I can't see any breath escaping.

FINE LIVING

When we first met, I lived on a street named after crescent rolls and toaster strudels. A sign forked into the grass read *Pillsbury Flats: Fine Living*. This meant fine like trying to be European in the Midwest. We spread cheese across pastries with tiny knives. I ordered the second cheapest wine and pretended the world around me was walkable. The summary on Apartments.com promised, *Steps away from everything you've ever wanted*. When you walked me home, I held anticipation like a spoon against an aluminum tin, felt it like a toaster's even heat before the spring. You took in the teeth marks of the torn-out deadbolts, the collapsing blinds that let in light pollution. I never dreamed about my teeth falling out or about having a pool. Instead, we sat in a patch of sun near the parking lot, pondering the numerology of license plates. For the first time, I contemplated affixing a bumper sticker or buying a rug to unfold like a forest. When I forgot what your feet sounded like on laminate, I scrubbed the grass stains out of my dress in the bathtub, let it float there like an ending. I told people on the street I was fine and wondered what they'd say if I gave any other answer. Every day felt like something frozen cut open on styrofoam. I forgot to pay my rent because in my mind July didn't start without your dent in my green couch or you in the doorway untying your shoes. We both looped one bunny ear under the other until we were teenagers. Fine was a penalty, then, an open-fisted apology. In August I remembered you were moving and envisioned you in some studio apartment exactly like mine, pulling a curtain closed between the bedroom and the kitchen. Slicing limes against a backsplash of gray and white tile. Fine like mind-numbingly average. Fine like if there was anywhere else I'd rather be, I couldn't imagine it.

DISASSOCIATION ASSOCIATION

In my office, a weighted dark blue blanket so people don't become too light,
as through a cloud,

dissociate. How can it be
that my daughter, who, at three—two?—looked at our Honda and announced

every blue car would, from hereto onward, be called a *fwabby*—
every red, a *fun-funk*—drove the fun-funk today, Billie Holiday

belting out *God Bless the Child* on the Bluetooth. The blues
burst in with a—

ding—

reminder: call Mom.

Oh, Mom.

It's the season of ice, clear and precise, where she is, of afternoons

easily black-and-bluing.

I want to go visit her

at least a little more than I dread it.

Earlier today, a client arrived, hair still damp, spirit still shining,

from swimming in a pool, into whose water the sky dissolved, dissolving the body
into flight.

From a certain height

at the start of each plane ride east—(Lego ocean liner, red itty-bitty bridge,

penny island)—it's almost possible to believe

that our job is simply to accept whatever's coming,

wheeling toward us,

even if it's, say, salty

when we hoped for sweet.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH SALT OF THE EARTH

Some tables have a chicken and rooster set or praying hands—the left one dispensing darkness and the right one salt. There's an ocean of it

to your east, the Pacific too far away. And then salting the earth when one defeats a city, plowing it under and spreading like ash. I have

salted your armchair. I have salted the sheets of our bed. What parts of my body must be spread with this paste. Poems about Lot's wife

make me cantankerous. Turned to a salt spur because she would not turn away. Imagine standing like a juniper, God raining destruction down

on Sodom, which is the name of my grandson's second cat. Dead Sea. Tears. Making my own salt lake. And me so small I am swimming in it.

FALLING INTO THINGS WE DESIRED

My hair in a hail of sunlight. In the photograph I am looking
at you. Who cared about the half-world all around—shadows
and trees. Half-loved already, the sunburst weeds demonstrating
my face. You were I was in a field glistening like sugar. That day
you looked with your camera. Some kind of spring birds or flying
might have interrupted the scenery. Only your car stopped.

Only we got out and moved through the grass—the line
of trees blocking the rest of the day. Everything reminded me
of skin. The hair against my cheek, the sun not yet pressing
on my head. Take something off in a field as square as a sandwich.

We did not want to stop. But. Who pushed who away. How is love
like a drunken animal lurching to the next mistake. The sun
like it had never been before. As if happiness was light
and all around. We were pressing on what was to come. My gaze
like hunger or blessing, like a rope that you then forgot to catch.

A SLASH OF OSPREY ON CYPRESS

(14 *tanka* after Harryette Mullen)

Solitary bees winter in the allium stems.
Come spring they'll forage in the sage.
I won't let my memory go to waste.

I tussled with the urchin about her mundane
yammering. A leaky keel still steers us
yonder to the origin of talk.

Jabbering hucksters. Cast-iron lies.
Drop a word into the godless ocean.
May it rise like dough in the estuary's heat.

I'll sop up spilt whiskey with cake,
a hedge against the day my motor binds.
My closest kin are now the thistles that fringe the bog.

I'm still amped up on boyish wonder,
all scaley elbows, contraband smokes,
and the nagging whisper of seconds slipping away.

The ink fades and the pages go orange.
I've lost track of the thread and my old spine
clanks and grinds when my head spins on its gimbal.

Another logjam in the zocalo.
Time to say ciao to the tin-horn mystic
who ratcheted up my craving for silence.

In our cutesy patois *waste* means *kill*
but there's no slang for *whimper* or *croon*.
My nap terminates with an inner thunk of knowledge.

I've forgotten where to go from *thank you*
like no one can recall why *iota* means *speck*.
Are *lodestone* and *douse* fossil words too?

I ate like an egret spearing worms in a bucket.
Oh, I forgot. The truck of resemblance
must be sturdier than its load.

Lake ice insulates the chalky bottom
where a tangled knot of worms tunnels under the wall.
My wits are thawing in the reeds.

Cicadas swell underground, rise from the soil,
and molt in the willows. My chromosomes
toggle on and off in a nod to art.

A grackle on the banister tosses
somersaults to a robotic concerto.
This melody accreted from the ooze.

After all our talk of goldfinches nesting
in the rose arbor we're still lapping up
milt and roe while the chef flays a chinook.

CENTO ON THE FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF MY MOTHER'S DEATH

The dove, I think, is more suited to do that errand, to bring back news in her small,
 weary beak. She will outwait us has all the time in the world

Offspring will return who cannot be told from their parents
 like the storm-shook shadows of themselves, and not like birds
 feasting on thorns and liking it.

For what kind of refuge is my catalog

the crows who heckled from the crowns of the last light's trees
 cold as another republic of magpies
 their turn of mind, the wanton wind.

The heron's a rising and gliding apparition, casting no shadow
 a bird too smart to make a dangerous place its home.

My father wasn't sure wild birds he said we've tried so many times
 a prayer he sends from his heart's deep core heart fluttering
 like a sparrow beating its wings at a window inside the emptied house.

My name is small, a garden-mint, a sprig to decorate a plate.
 I did not mean to write about death

ART

The same hack work as in hotels
soothes the walls of the ICU, a watercolor
of a pond in the mountains seen within it
from a radiant window on whose sill a cat

like mine curls into a smile. Today I reached
into that pond, held a woman's hand
as she drowned. Plato called it the art
of medicine, which Hippocrates defended

and Voltaire called amusing
the patient while nature cured the disease.
Or not, her stippled gown a wilted meadow,
her cough brown silt I wade

with my implements, bow to her
almost as patient as she lies
in a sodden hush, feel her grip
the rest of my days, all part of the ritual

belief there's beauty in calm, thus the sky
a god, each mountain. Pneumonia
has determined shallows,
but stealthily breathing

I have another picture of death
in my head where death slinks off,
still a killer, though smaller, lazier,
almost tame, while art goes on

like Auden said, making nothing
happen. He didn't mean a landscape,
but could have, where I'm just a diversion
until she lets me go.

RIVERS ARE RIVERS, MOUNTAINS ARE MOUNTAINS

Dragons live here. Green mountains are walking.

Trees are people; everything flows.

With a conch to my ear I hear another man talking.

Winnipeg, I said, not Winnebago,

to be clear. Still, the strap on the train

smells a lot like Beautiful Chicken—with the hot sauce, & the one napkin, & the staccato

beat of the waitress (Bavna)—heavy on cracked linoleum—in a shiny plastic dress—

a smell you can almost swallow,

your heart prepared as a pigeon.

Grease explodes under Arturo's famous toes;

stars gestate in the smoky kitchen.

This is the last time I get a bloody nose

from the Chairman's chicken.

The oven door opens on echoes.

IN IMITATION OF WEI YINGWU

Drunk by noon I study the neighbors.

What country has children like these?

Clouds drag the city, scraping their bellies.

The moon goes up white and then what.

MOON CENTO

The ruined pavilion. Hwy 80 not far off.

Waxing

Bobbing complacently in the current,
sometimes I'd give a little wave.

Above the windows everyone has told me
in time these going out get sucked up into,
the eyes, of course.

In front of us, noises that could almost
be crickets,

the work of a knife, people
who went over railings—

It's as bright as anything.

Full

I could love you again, the room is prepared:
the whales turn and glisten, plunge.

You can tell it's spring.
The longer you look, the bigger they seem,
hanging over subtly darkening deep.

Waning

Will go on talking forever
Like a ghost train in the Rockies

In the mizzling days

New

In the delicate mouse ear

Note

Lines drawn from Lauren Camp, *One Hundred Hungers*; D.H. Lawrence, *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*; Ed Roberson, *Atmosphere Conditions*; Gary Snyder, *Turtle Island*; Maria Romasco Moore, *Ghostographs*; Robert Creeley, *Collected Poems*; *One Hundred Poems from the Chinese* trans by Kenneth Rexroth; Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*; Gary Short, *10 Moons and 13 Horses*

FOUR SMALL CENTOS ON THE MOON

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| <i>Full</i> | The roofs of cars will be its ghost. |
| <i>Quarter</i> | She had to stand there for hours. |
| <i>Waxing Crescent</i> | On the brink of our happiness we stop, half-in, half-out of water. |
| <i>New</i> | Small drops spot their coats. |

Note

Lines drawn from Sherley Anne Williams, Sylvia Plath, Maria Romasco Moore,
Eavan Boland

THE TELLING

There wasn't a place,
when he told it, like this place

so fine, and nothing, not a thing
in the world we girls loved

as we loved each other,
all swung, nightfall, in one

direction like boats, cabins
lighting up in the dark. Clouds

drifted in, when he told it,
came in over the causeway,

and we pressed ourselves,
cut-out circles of felt,

to the ends of things. We slid
over the floor Mondays,

Tuesdays, Wednesdays, called there
like trees outside a closed window,

or rippling in place, like oil,
when he told it.

WANING GIBBOUS

My friend writes fiction. I call
from my frosty backyard
to offer her “Wayne Gibbs,”
a fine name for a main
character—a luminary of sorts,
admired but a bit off his game.
*Wait, Kelly says, you can't build
a plot on a name. Besides
I'm already stuck in a story that
doesn't want to end.* I tell her
the kids have grown remote.
Wayne's wife hasn't left yet, but
she stares off sometimes.
*Why do we care about him?
Who is he?* He's reached his life's
middle years and gone astray.
Uh-huh. He runs an LED plant
in a town called Florence. *So—
Dante redux.* I ask Kelly
if she's skeptical. *Openly hostile.*
And then he's befriended by
a crusty older worker at the plant—
Don't say Virgil—named Virginia.
Maybe it's more of a screenplay.
Above the garage, an untethered moon
keeps shrinking. I can hear my friend
breathing softly into her phone.

THE OTHER WORLD

Across the road at the naval base,
every morning at 9, the same prerecorded
bugle sounds followed by the same plastic
rendition of the Star-Spangled Banner
while I'm lodged in lotus trying to center myself
or locate the nexus of a universe spinning
like a pinwheel or whipped froth of cloud spun-out,
photo taken by the International Space Station
of a hurricane's eyewall rotating around the calm
center and protection of well-being much like
the hieroglyph of Horus' eye came to symbolize
or the grip of a secret society's handshake
which confirms through its action that what
was secret is now public much in the same way
we now understand it was the ancient seers
who first peered down on earth so we could
heighten our cosmological perspective
though today it's called remote-witnessing—
a mental vision much like clairvoyance used
to solve cold-case murders and locate hostages
shackled and chained, kept under guard in foreign
embassies or underground by terrorist organizations
in tunnels that snake their way beneath Tehran or Beirut,
the Star of David seemingly in the line of fire
one way or another. My eyes roll inside my head
when my government tells me they have a plan
or when politicians try to convince during
the infinite loop of campaign and election,
all shape-shifters who mount a stage lambasting
the world order as they try to sell us their version
of a new one. But here on the peninsula I don't
gravitate towards such nonsense. When the hymn
is over and the sun has risen, I meditate in
the burning glow and invision myself a traveler floating
among the compass-face of stars, then return to
rummage half-memories of a California youth,
an astronaut ultimately earthbound. There is some
part of me that lived for a time in a world romanticized

by Hollywood and Cameron Crowe, a world made famous by Phoebe Cates and Spicoli, Brad and Mr. Hand, eerie-spaced-out-synth of the Cars as Phoebe emerges from the pool, red-bikini'd siren of Brad's fantasy who catches him whacking off in a bathroom. When I try to explain myself it is never linear, a circuitous journey woven like coarse tapestry, threads of different mediums that have impressed the mind. I keep returning to the influence of lost decades, to the art and film of the time, historical documentaries, the grainy, magnetic tape of Betamax converted to the age of digital. On blue moons I watch the recorded ghosts of family, their spirits trying to decipher the message waiting for them on the Ouija board. Contact with the invisible world. *O say can you see*, and I do.

AN EXPERIENCE THAT INCLUDES DEATH

I climb the five flights
of the dream
in which my uncle still lives

between waking & sleep
I pass the void between
the living & the dead

after each successive loss
we host a chasm
& acceptance isn't enough

the NYC of my dream
is a texture I can read
the city

is closed
though by reading
I come closer

before he caught
the epidemic of his time
I visited my uncle

in his Battery Park walk-up
sat in his studio
of canvas scraps & spurs

street sweepers' brooms
collected from the shallow
glow before dawn

his was the sickness
of a country that failed him
a whole age of artists

men lost to time
on the wall
over my desk today

a hand of cards is fanned
across my uncle's canvas
a jagged metal shard

is the wave dividing
night sky from the water
the moon reflects

both ways
in the pale grey shadowbox
painted by his hand

the nails holding it all together
are delicate
imperceptible under paint

he gave me
the night the moon
was a star—lake

on the day of my visit
I've had it since I was ten
& it's not just

that America failed him
it fails us & hated him
hates still

that there are so many
ways to love
so many threats to mortal beauty

temporary & dangerous
the body is an experience
that includes death

my father's brother died
& his family
who were my family

called the cause cancer
I know this was common
I didn't know what this loss

would later mean
his night
his moon

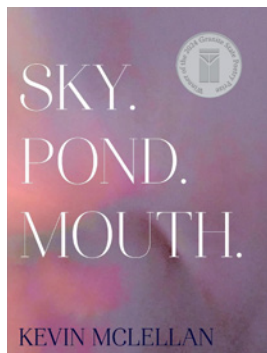
his star—lake
precious pale
substitutes for the man

HIS

His ears were bent like nude statues,
which meant I had to watch over them.
I could never be too harsh if I wanted
things to continue. His birthday
was the day before my grandmother's.
I took this as a good sign, though
all it meant was he could only come
close to expressing love for me.
All we could ever be was close.
His hands were callused, which I know
because he showed me as a child would.
Suggesting he let me feel for myself
was not what he wanted to hear.
I could never take good care of those tiny ears.
Each day we began.
Mondays never mattered on a Tuesday.
Ears are not like throats. I thought
if I got in he could never spit me out.

SKY. POND. MOUTH.
BY KEVIN MCLELLAN
(YAS Press, 2024)

REVIEW BY JOYCE PESEROFF



Sky. Pond. Mouth. is Kevin McLellan's fourth full collection of poems, and winner of the first Granite State Poetry Prize. That McLellan is also a videographer, photographer, and creator of art/book objects is reflected in the shapeliness and precision of his writing. Whether entering the ecosystem of nature, literature, or bodies in motion, McLellan's work defines implacable boundaries and the desire to permeate them--beginning with the book's title. Three one-syllable words suggest a confluence of air, water, and hunger, but the end-stops silo their contact. *Sky. Pond. Mouth.* balances the lure of detachment with the urge to connect; typographically and

lyrically, the book embraces negative space in its urge to discover some positive energy in a series of fractured natural, social, and emotional spheres.

McLellan's language enacts the ambiguity of the world, beginning with various landscapes in the book's first section. In "Always Something Falling," "The lake // is a mirror, then it isn't." Moisture on a tent floor "might be condensation from / my own breath that beaded / above my head & the-once- / a-part-of me rained." Notice how "a-part" is also "apart," and how "rain" erases the separation between indoors and out, body and nature. McLellan interrogates many sorts of boundaries; in poems like "Bloodroot," the speaker is a plant, and its diction downright bloody: "cause rooted in taint;" "cause red;" "suicidal petals 'cause." In "Interrupted Fern," the plant's bipinnate fronds each have a separate vein, as the visual separation of dashes and stanza breaks spar with the sense of wholeness in a one-sentence poem:

gap—blade—gap

*—my portions died
back—the blade—*

back into the gap—

Of the longer poems that punctuate the distilled lyrics of *Sky. Pond. Mouth.*, the first section-length piece, a prose poem, quotes A. R. Ammons: "is freedom identity

without / identity?” Part meditation, part reminiscence, and part self-interrogation, “The Corridor” constructs, section by section, a passage for a speaker who “break[s] each morning as if emerging from the sea—this underworld of disorientation and gasp, and these pressing thoughts about entering a room.” One fellow passenger includes a man on a bus whose “handsomeness” the speaker detects “needed care, and I imagined him with me.” Another is the memory of telling his mother, “I need mornings to be quiet. But this morning, for the first time, she said nothing, and it felt like death.” Is identity a consequence of need? Is it possible to be free of it? In the final section of “Corridors,” McLellan concludes, “Out of the closet. There are reasons to hide.” What follows is a counter-quote from *Angels in America* author Tony Kushner: “To exist in public demands performance.”

How does a gay man perform in everyday life, knowing the risks of self-revelation? In “Regarding What Was Lost Before I Knew It Was Taken,” McLellan spies a man locking his bike: “Is it the manager of the natural foods market? ... He didn’t acknowledge me. As if the look we shared never happened.” Inside a café, behind a window, on Facebook, or camping, McLellan wonders, “Is it the man?” The poem ends with McLellan crossing boundaries “in front of a glass window, ... this time on the outside,” after:

*the moment I
no longer
needed
to fear
the given
you-are-positive
news
taken
within.*

The shadow that AIDS casts on the poem’s conclusion recasts the light in which it’s been read.

This retrospective charge reoccurs in the book’s final section-length poem, “Winterberries.” Completed in the aftermath of surgery that removed a second testicular cancer, the poem begins, “My thoughts have no place / to go, except more inward—.” Yet the speaker can’t help observing what’s around him: a frozen river; winterberries that “from afar look like specks of blood / on the snow, like perforations”; and a place where “wind made the light and an ash / tree seem one.” Though “in other words, I’m a eunuch,” the speaker can’t help *looking*—present and past framed by a visceral experience that has altered what a statue, a cello, a poem, or a stand of winterberries can signify. “Winterberries,” with the afterword that follows, similarly recasts the

reader's understanding of the preceding poems, especially the Ammons quote and its relationship to sex. The reverberations are like a chainsaw's cutting through bone.

The attention that McLellan's publisher, YAS Press, has given to the design and production of *Sky. Pond. Mouth.* is worth noting. Every poem begins on the right-facing (recto) page; this enacts the spaciousness McLellan's work demands—its staggered margins in prose and verse, its brackets and erasures, its play with received and invented forms. "Narrative," which begins with most of the first nine stanzas' words crossed out," continues with a series of double columns that can be read both left to right and vertically:

| | |
|--|--|
| <i>I had</i> | <i>someone else's dreams. He</i> |
| <i>the concept of before and after. I walk</i> | <i>didn't know</i> |
| <i>toward the boy on fire</i> | <i>Shh....</i> |
| <i>I tell myself Shh..., and then</i> | <i>It's me!</i> |
| <i>a flicker:</i> | <i>a camera</i> |
| <i>Sitting on a stair looking</i> | <i>in the face, but I can't see who is</i> |
| <i>looking back.</i> | |

But a few pages deeper, the two columns read separately. Blank space isolates words in each column and one column from the other, while section divides from section:

| | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>The recycling men</i> | <i>my earliest memory</i> |
| <i>left scraps of paper</i> | <i>involves a staircase</i> |
| <i>on the sidewalk like</i> | <i>and a marble, not</i> |
| <i>body parts, torn-up</i> | <i>people.</i> |
| <i>earlier drafts of this</i> | |
| <i>poem;</i> | |

The book's visual qualities reinforce and echo McLellan's language in a gorgeous synesthesia, and the publisher's precision allows each nuance to come through.

The Granite State Poetry Prize will be awarded annually to a collection of extraordinary quality by a New Hampshire poet. In choosing Kevin McLellan's *Sky. Pond. Mouth.* for its debut publication, the prize honors both a beautiful object and a brilliant excursion into the nuance of how thinking feels, and the trajectory of how feelings emerge in the aftermath of loss.

THE CHRIST OF DEER AND DISHWASHERS
AND BARISTAS

Your body scares me.
It is not who you are.
It is such a barrier,
both known and unknown.

Are flowers for the dead
or for the living?

The veins and muscles
that run under your skin,
along your wrists, your arms,
I gather them to me
while you are sleeping,
a rope of rain, slender seaweed,
tactile light's secret bouquet.
I pass them over my shoulder,
around my neck, like vines, like water.
Baptism (this is how good you are),
you are blessing me.
I lift you to me, exquisite deer.
Your length runs the entirety of my skin.

Cool feet through thick grasses,
salty hair in sunlight,
dense plum heart in the dark,
sugared nubs of berries sparkling and breaking on the tongue—
you begin to know my memories,
the scent of my existence.

I carry you into that space between trees
where infinity whispers its small talk,
and trunks, if listened to, emit lamplight.
I lay you on a cushioning of mosses.

I want to say simple outrageous things
and have them be true,
Look, standing guard are milkweed pods, they are earth's angels;

*life is implicitly good;
snow is god's cloak; every bird is a cousin;
the forward momentum of flowers unfurling is a mathematical certitude;
breath is light, effortless;
[I am you, you are me—use my eyes!].*

My pulse struggles for two,
trying to raise the grey, deflated purse of your heart.
What it is to live—
I wonder if you can remember.

[Then you startle awake.
Every cell is green.
I am crying out.
Is this a dream?
You land your feet and take off running.]

My eyes are persistent fireflies.
I cast them onto leaves,
rich clumps of soil,
and into the shimmering veil of air that pretends it's nothing.

HOME AWAY FROM HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

The doctors ask and all you can say is *bad*.

They do another scan, a better one, for more information.

You wonder why they didn't do that one first. Your husband asks if he should bring Christmas lights for the room.

If you want, you say. He doesn't. He stays all day but you can't stay awake. At dusk, he points to the dark birds floating in the distance. *Crows?* You should know.

They put a drain in your side. You cried a little, but only because the nurse wouldn't give you more Versed. You're not supposed to remember. You don't see the birds that night.

The room you are in used to be a double. Two clocks. Two TVs.

One person gets the window, one gets the bathroom. The drain bag fills with brown sickness. It might be sadness. The doctor looks at it.

All that was inside you. You wish you could say it's been two years since you've felt free. The phone buzzes. Your husband and the girls are going to a friend's for hot chocolates. The nurse injects

ten tears of morphine. It still hurts but you've stopped crying about it.

Your husband sends pictures of the house with Christmas lights.

You want to love your body. Outside, a puff of steam from a roof you can't see fills the window.

RETHINKING THE CIRCUS

There's so much to do today, most of which will sit tomorrow at the same table, watching as you sip your coffee. You tear another hunk from the day-old bread, count again the seven shells collected some thousand feet from the lake. Only a child believes murder happens elsewhere. No weight, no worth, no influence. The alarm when you feel your body filling with water, touching soon enough a faulty wire at your waist. Before it begins, the day stacks its plates & leaves them in the sink. You will remember none of this except the unbroken caw of the fish crow, the neighbor bent over, filling a bowl for the feral cats.

SONNET AFTER AUTOCORRECT TURNS *WHY DO
YOU LIVE SO FAR AWAY? TO WHY DO YOU LOVE
SO FAR AWAY?*

i love at close range. you leave room for myth,
ancient rock formations, riddles, the changing width
of oceans at high tide. i cannot touch,
in my memory, your taste or feel you such
as one feels their own shadow's crouch. [distance,
you have failed me.] i haven't seen you since
you left my bed. my heart has not yet grown
fonder or hardened into fist-sized stone.
it's still an instrument of life, a beat
and then a beat. in the atria grooves
you must acquire how to love me. ride
your vanishing. i'm the fixed one who moves
in place. picture my face on our night street
rinsed clean at dawn. then love. love then abide.

SONNET FOR NOT SAYING THE NAMES OF
YOUR MEDS AT GROUP

we say benzo, antipsychotic, mood
stabilizer • we say that Tuesdays feel
prickly • we say the hyacinths exude
strength and the zinnias are looking real
judgmental with all of their brightness • we
say daytime's nude while night's dressing in layers,
slowly peeling them off, seductively,
and not a single other person cares
as much as we do for the words *manic*
depressive over *bipolar* • we say no
to tarot • we say watch the bay panic,
receding from the shore before the blow
of hurricanes • we say there's no supreme
being except dying in your own dream

SONNET FROM THE SUICIDAL

After Kurt Cobain died by suicide
a white girl got to miss three weeks of school
because of grief. The whitest thing that I'd
ever seen in my life. When my grandfather pulled
the trigger seven years before, I kept
at it, hugging my mother when she wept,
sad for her, scared she would kill herself, too. Stepped
lightly. She told me how, one time, I leapt
into his arms though he was basically
a stranger, how I seemed to know him. Odd.
I was shy. This is our only memory
and I don't remember it. But grief can prod
I don't know you to loved you.

Unknown someone,
will you keep going? Will you come undone?

UPON TAKING THE SACRAMENT

*Doubt a terrible field to live in whose laws
are made by a god without cause or qualities*

—*Brian Teare, Companion Grasses*

The strength it takes to pierce flesh
with a nail is less than you'd think.

My faith is a bit like this. Bare
feet leaping through meadows,

each stride seeking to savior itself
on rust hidden in the tall grass.

A pious ghost like dew
laced across my calves.

If doubt has a wife, she is
called by my name. The clench

of her teeth around my neck
like a crown of thorns.

In our scriptures there is a story
of angels placing hot coals

into the mouth of the devoted.
It is supposed to signify being

cleansed. All I have is a charred tongue,
begging for a lighter yoke than belief.

A POCKET GUIDE TO THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE

A somnambulist at night and a somersaulter
All day long, habit-forming for sure,

The dastardly sun not bothering with you today,
After, at last count, well over twenty thousand late

Nights, some run and some limp along, and
Some would say for all this nothing, pausing

Briefly after *this* for suspense, because it
Just as easily could be something, “the best

Of all possible worlds,” as Gottfried Leibniz
Born in Leipzig said, even though hardly anyone

Showed up at his funeral, when a curtain of
Time covers a window of space, and

Although light seems white, what if it isn't,
Would you have to brace yourself, or erase

What you thought you knew, the rock in your
Pocket you've carried around for ages, not really

Thinking anymore that you'll be crowned by
A pope, since it's not your way of doing things,

When cavalcade meets avalanche, the eye candy
You said you saw at the Gare d'Austerlitz, and

You wondered what surrendering feels like, topsy-
Turvy, gravy boat, how long you can hold your breath.

CONTRARY TO FACT

You wanted all along to write this in
Cuneiform, but found your reed too rusty to

Do the job, as when the Poles rightfully
Doubted that *gemütlichkeit* was a warm and

Friendly word in nineteen thirty-nine, was
It bootlick or shipwreck, wedge issue, nerve

Tissue, the lies of life, thinking that no good
Can come of this, us against them, them

Against us, when you would read *The Prick
Of Conscience* if you could read it, your

Muddle of English, and how would you
Handle sin, like a snake, and in yon

Field the sheep and the goats yeon, perfectly
Mysterious, collecting guilt at the funeral

Mass for the dead masses, you in your
Attic-cum-studio, remembering the last

Time you got dressed, were restless and
Vibrating, hauled the collards to the kitchen

Sink where a baby was being bathed,
Even then printing some sign into

The palm of your hand with her fingernails,
Wedge-shaped and knowing exactly what to say.

BORROWING

For years, I studied German, the tongue
rooted in the back of my mouth, thick
and unnatural for me to even say

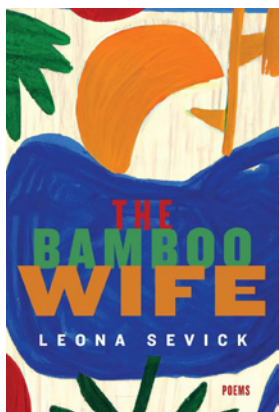
who I was: *Ich bin*, I am. A crow,
omnipotent and Eurasian, lodged
in the hollow at the secret end

of my throat where a church
waited, beyond my mouth's arched
roof bones, nave to apse, raw

and red from this scrapy language.
Ich bin! Ich bin! I am! I am! The crow
built a nest out of Berlin black locust

twigs, big enough to house a clan
of birds. When they fly out to hunt,
I'll wear their nest as a crown.

SHORT 'N SWEET: THE BOOK SPEAKS



THE BAMBOO WIFE

BY LEONA SEVICK

(Trio House Press, 2024)

How would you, *The Bamboo Wife*, describe yourself in two sentences or less?

I offer tales about what we do when we find ourselves stiff, empty, and ensnared. I offer failures: how we stumble as parents and lovers and how we disappoint as children. I tell of people tethered by duty and responsibility—and also by love. My speakers and subjects strive for freedoms and happiness just beyond their reach.

Where would you go on your dream vacation?

If you hadn't asked for my "dream" vacation, I would have said Seaside, Florida. Those sugar-sand beaches are gorgeous, and I have enjoyed some beautiful summers there with lovely book friends who understand exactly what I am and what I'm trying to do. There is also a lovely bookstore there—Sundog Books—where people have thumbed through my pages and bought copies of me. But since you asked for my dream vacation, I'll say a well-appointed beach hut in Kelingking, Bali. I think I could find some peace there, and maybe I'd meet some new people who'd wish to wallow in the unsparing truths splashed across my pages. And I could find some wonderful fresh citrus cocktails, too!

What is your favorite color?

Red. This is no surprise, as it's the color of passion and love and courage and also aggression and sin and redemption (think the Bible, here).

What is your favorite movie?

My favorite film is, perhaps surprisingly, *Young Frankenstein*. Despite my somber tones, I love to laugh, and no one makes me laugh more than Mel Brooks. His characters are memorably silly, and his gags are for the ages. It's a nice antidote to most of my subjects which are, admittedly, dark.

What advice would a therapist give you?

Make an appointment.

What is your favorite smell?

I love the smell of my child's hair. Well, she's not my child, but she is a frequent character in my pages and so I think of her as mine. I love the scent of its clean oils that come through no matter what she's used on it. It smells new and good—full of possibility and hope.

Do you collect anything, and what do these items mean to you?

I have never been a collector of things; I collect damaged people. I call them my “Menagerie of Broken Things,” which is the title of one of my poems. Once, someone close to me described my friends as “damaged little creatures,” and I suppose they are. They appear in my pages, and I love them all.

What is your favorite snack?

I’m sure this sounds unusual, but I love King Oscar Kipper Snacks—herring fillets. The tins come wrapped in these red and gold plastic wrappers, and an old friend, one of my recurring characters, used to buy them for his child when she was a girl. Those two were the only ones who seemed to like them, and so he bought them for the two of them. She would wait up for him when he worked the late shift, and in the early hours of the morning they would eat them together. She counts them among her favorite memories of childhood, and so I love them, too.

If you could have dinner with anyone, who would it be and why?

I have given this question some thought, as it’s a common cocktail party conversation, and I’ve had a lot of cocktails. I’ve loved the music of Bruce Springsteen my whole life. He is a marvelous storyteller, and he writes about good, regular folks trying to make their way in a brutal world in the best way they can. His empathy for people is not only demonstrated through his lyrics but also tonally through the music itself. “The River” is, to me, one of the finest songs ever written. I think he’d have something to teach me about taking what’s in the human heart and setting it to music.

Once, someone close to me described my friends as “damaged little creatures,” and I suppose they are. They appear in my pages, and I love them all.

WHERE YOU'LL FIND ME

In AP English, I alternate between drawing fat tulips
in the margins of *Into the Wild*, and staring at the soft bronze hair
of Red Sox sweatshirt boy, imagining his mouth around the lips

of his trombone. God, I might as well be dead
in an old Alaskan bus, the way my heart
is starving. In Anatomy, my lab partner labels

the bones of the skull. He owns the one bone
my body is missing, and it's killing me to just sit here
and test how close I can shift my leg toward his before

he shifts away. I'm gonna lobotomize Thursday's skull quiz.
And when Ms. Marino asks about how Krakauer rhetorically
achieved this or that, I'm gonna raise my hand and say

I know how Chris McCandless *really* died—
I, too, have been a victim of never getting
what I'm aching for. All I want, at minimum,

is a breathtaking, Grand-Canyon-deep kiss, with tongue,
from a guy who looks at my dog-brown hair, my yawn-
worthy body, and sees a Dallas Cowboys cheerleader—

or just sees me and is somehow fine with that.
If I can't get kissed, what am I even doing here?
Krakauer, when I disappear, here's where

where to look. Just locate the corridor off
the orchestra room—that square on the floor
is a trap door that leads to the mid-century

Cold War bomb shelter that everyone seems
to forget is there. Climb down, and you'll find
me: sweater of dust, fat mice nestling in my lap,

a cellar spider dangling just before my lips.

THE PAST ISN'T WHAT IT WAS WHEN IT WAS

the present. It's the past. (Obvious.) But
when we recall it, the past, there it is
all over again. And so we fool ourselves—
make fools of ourselves—foolishly grin
as we lift memories up like caught fish,
confident in our prowess. *Yes, this is*
what happened. But it isn't. Not really.
Take Italy. Newly married, I'm on vacation:
four days, five nights. Then twenty years
race by before my young daughter asks
about the framed photo. And I say, *Oh,*
that's St. Mark's Square. And over there
(I point at the wall, beyond the picture)
is the palace and basilica. I can see that
I'm losing her, so I go and tap the glass
above the campanile, explain in my best
tour guide: *One morning in 190-something,*
it collapsed! She's unimpressed. *Of course,*
they fixed it, and there are bells up there
so loud your mother and I held our ears
like this. I grimace, pantomiming for her
as if I hear them. (I do.) She doesn't
care about this past, but I'm talking now

about the place I ate the soup and the place

I ate the gnocchi—*like pillows*—and explain
about the snow—*It snowed!*—when

my wife, from the other room, says *No*,

you're thinking of Florence. And my daughter,
somewhere in the middle of her parents'

rising voices—good-natured, then digging

trenches—slips away from us, most likely
vowing never to ask about another photo,

even as I go in close to this one, squinting

back across half my life for the evidence.

OUR SOBRIETY TEST

Michael, the kid who'd been seeing Jesse,
would shoot himself down by the levee:
missing Jesse, it was his goodbye.
We heard the oak roots cracking asphalt
unsettling the earth beneath us

and took the soggy hours one at a time
pining for sex to carry us away.
The sky squatted moist and gray:
a toad's ass, pissing the river black.
Even Charles, who loved a rainy day,
begged the air to stop holding its breath
and to look at us again.

Days dressed like forever moved
fat-footed and stiff-necked
elbowed the clouds to cover any chink
of hope that feigned an entry.
Espresso sputtered mad, droning
out the thrum of drubbing showers.
Anyone might have thought

“these are just White folk, clean
and sober in New Orleans,”
not seeing the dryness in our mouths
hoping for a hurricane
to take us whole instead of treading
trapped between lake and river
while the world played

dead: a still, log-like gator.
That kind of day until tomorrow
when the sun popped up like a prankster
spraying everything with sunshine.
Even the ferns were laughing.
The river hummed along

as though nothing had happened.
Michael, the guy we couldn't save,
we said, should have taken a drink
and rolled down the banks nice and slow.
Something might have caught him then
emptying his cup for one more day.

THE RIOT FIRE (ATTACH ME NOT)

I make you cum, you cannot leave, I drown my heart in kerosene
—2 Chainz and Lil Wayne, “Long Story Short”

I’m not sure if anyone here was bragging about playing with fire, but I’ll jump in anyways since I once saw it done spectacularly: the magic initiated by two teens after two fifths of Jim Beam between them organizing the collection of car keys in a Tigers baseball cap, not to ensure on-road sobriety, no, but rather in order to round up every Pontiac GTO, every Ford Tempo—sparing of course the wax-glossed muscle cars, my friend’s stepdad’s silver-winged DeLorean—park them parallel across the width of the street, pile upon them every cigarette-burned couch after dropping each from second-story windows of the roughed-up frat houses onto the solo-cup-dotted lawns, whereupon dozens of sweating, sinewy arms pallbeared them to the tops of their amassing burn piles. I’ve seen, too, the way sneakered feet scramble deftly up the side of the peak, arms crossed with mixed kindling, term papers and textbooks caught between clenched knees, and the way the boys crawled beneath the black bellies of the vehicles, licking the rims, were careful to twist the typing paper into cocked

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cones, screw the dish towels soaked in Everclear into bottles or shove them into the tight necks of gas tanks, blackout drunk as we all were already by then. Able to spare the liquor,

lucid as we felt, emboldened, the way worn-down rumor was fisted into puckered orbs and fed remorselessly to the greedy fire, the blue books, the latex powdered lab equipment, the

deflated footballs and the frat's lost and found hoard of unwashed thongs, t-shirts and boxers collected from beneath pool tables, the hi-tops without mates, ties unlaced sloppily

useless when detached, when employed to test their power to fling Molotov cocktails at the inferno, which, thoroughly alight, blocked access to at least a dozen apartment complexes

including mine, and too, your text messages crackling up on the illuminated skin of my phone, stripped of all identification—the only way of knowing for certain that it's you.

Me? I'm fairly comfortable around such disasters once they've started, the one inside your heart for instance that keeps you melted to the roof of my mouth, a tack unbearable to

scrape free, everything tasting of your cloudy cinder, of what's flammable, up and burning, and also, maybe, I'm too easy, lingering over people effectuating their darkest urges,

burning shit down bellowing things like, *preservation by fire, baby*. Okay. Whatever that means (but that was your mom's car), a little bit of friction dolling itself up as untailored love,

a thrifed number appearing suddenly on the porch aching to seem brand new, the difference between I don't even care to know and knowing anymore. And what is that difference?

To me, it's most about the spectacle—at the show count on me to be coming. I'll stand unphased, covered in the toxic antishadow of the blaze, the warmth of its wet smoke wooing

me: doing my best impression of keeping safe distance, never learning new names for instance, especially when the fire raises a hand to my chest, meaning to block my way back

home to where you've drowned your heart in the caustic accelerant of me, drank it down too fast and vomiting, (I'm not sorry) from where all the kids blast their sound systems,

Kid Rock and Trick Daddy pouring into each other like hard gasoline pumped up from the tank underground, crop tops stripped and belted into the fire which was so bloated

by then. The moonface of it illuminated every luring sanctum in every red-fleshed house, each window a mirror reflecting our edacity onto ourselves, our refusals to yield, to put out

our anarchy, which really was just whatever comes before fire, which some say is smoke but we know better is desire, what we can't snuff without tearing whatever holds it apart

irreparably, and which is also just lumber we tossed halfheartedly into a pit when we didn't care anything for how to spark an ember properly, nor then how to tend it, careless as

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we've meant to be, to blow sweetly at a kindling's neck to get it hot for us (use that tip sparingly it may only work the once), no this certainly isn't in any way a love poem or a

poem about foreplay or fucking or maybe it is I don't know. What I do know is the way in which an ember can stick, can sickly sweettalk us into fusing with it, how exactly we later

can't explain what possessed us to keep feeding the flames—our bewilderment lingering well after it was time to cut things off, smack the hands back, block the texter of the texts, turn

the porch lights down at least, christ, stop pouring on the gas—nor how delighted we are at the same time to see a spark's genesis spiral out of control how quickly, the fire licking

everything pressed hard to its face—I mean, fuck it. Just surrender me to that kind of selfishness. Don't bother dangling relief, a vacuous persuasion—delivering its vessels too small for

enough water, offering to milk mud from the ground. You can't just mute what makes even your hands wet thinking about it, where we stood as near as possible to the very edge of the

intensity, pulses hot and hammering. We saw the way in which the fire ate and ate and ate, so hungry for any one *thing* regardless of what that thing was and saw ourselves in it, each other

in it, the craving for more and after that more, faces burning, positioned too close to the thrashing flames, hands cuffed to our sides. We wanted to feel that. And days after, again if I

can be honest with myself even a little, remembering the way it felt to be immobilized by the riot fire's heat—stinging and relentless, its red lines rubbed into my wrists—was satiating, to not only see but feel disaster unfold. To refold and stuff the afterglow into my pocket for later. To recognize what we'd been constructing—a fast ruin fantasy, wherein we dug our heels as hard as we pleased while the cops were called. The want to endure more than we'd wanted to endure startling us. Hands on fire ripping up from the can of kerosene. And the question I'm wanting to pose is fingernails singeing the slick skin on your back: why did you stay? Even as the peaking sirens triggered the crowd to loosen and disperse, to abandon the charred cars, their liquescent stacks. You shrugged off the danger, the probability of blowback. And when I, bluntly, love so little, can't I, at least, have love for that?

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OPERATION DOORSTEP (LIVING ROOM)

after a photo of mannequins awaiting an atomic bomb test blast, 1953

Two toddlers in overalls, older
 girl in a nightgown—
 a large paper tag
tied around her neck

with a rope. They play
 near the window:
 behind them, desert
in grayscale, a few

white posts, nothing
 alive. The woman
 sitting on a spindled,
wooden seat is meant to be

their mother—
 but is she coming
 or going
in her pencil skirt,

white silk blouse,
 silver pendant hanging
 in her cleavage
like a centipede?

She wears no
 fingerprints, her lipstick
 isn't kiss-smudged.
Her hair, permanently

done-up, has never
 touched the floor
 playing airplane.
Behind her, an armchair

where the legs of another
 small child lie stiff,
 exposing the hollow
bottoms of its feet.

How much does
 this woman know?
 How close they all are
to that window.

FALLOUT CAN BE FUN

“At the behest of a Miami bomb shelter builder, newlyweds...subjected their budding marriage to the strain of 14 days (the crucial period of fallout danger) of unbroken togetherness.”

from “Their Sheltered Honeymoon,” Life Magazine, July 12, 1959

Just married, they both go down
for two weeks, never come

up for air. No need for pearls
underground—he puts the necklace

in her box. She hand-cranks her husband’s
breath through filtration, sits on his

bunk, scrubs the chemical toilet. Their bodies’
heat leaves concrete walls slick, sheets

a mess. Only six hours after blowing
the air fresh, things get stale, they keep

gyrating. They lick cream from the lid
of a Carnation can, reuse teabags,

find things to do with fruit salad
that aren’t in her mother’s cookbook.

When they get bored, he fingers
shadow puppets in the flashlight’s

hotspot. Reporters watch the hole, rapt
until the seal is broken. From behind

cameras, they want to know why
the couple didn’t use the peanut butter,

what they’d do differently. The Mrs.
says she only wishes they’d brought a wider

variety of food, spices for their pantry,
just a few more tools and screws.

MODERN KITCHEN LIBERATION: A PARADOX

The secret is we become a crisp white page.
We pre-mix cakes, decant self-rising flour
speckled with freeze-dried strawberries into crystal
vessels, then sit pretty on the window shelf,
like an egg. How lovely and simple. Add
oil and milk and voila: bake. Kick our feet up,
the holes in our stockings. Darning, we think, no
thanks. Simplify. Industry. Cheap fabrics,
panty hose you can dispose of in the waste basket.
It's good sense. Economy. Pinching pennies
instead of thread. Castor oil and canned potatoes.
A seam that unravels without the ripper. Then, yes,
a beautifully iced cake with piped roses and yellow
molded angles for something like Christmas.
We remember our first Christmas as a mother, the taste,
like chocolate: gifts to make it easier: hands-free breast pumps,
silver cans of Similac, self-sterilizing anti-colic bottles,
a motorized bassinet, back and forth goes the baby.
What do you imagine we did with our hands, the mixer
humming, the baby gumming a carrot in a mesh feeder.
Pre-packaged, liberation. Dried out. Another life.
How do we make it work, then. How can we even try.

FREE TIME

The problem is application:
menus and calories, children's
lunchboxes. All those messages.
Vitamins. You see, it's not
just methods, flourishing
traditions, chemistry. Biblio-
graphic. No alcohol
or pornography. Science
and principals. A cornered
bed. A wife. How many
servings are practical. How
many ounces of prime
rib. Minus bone. Get
the work done. Teach
future generations to fend
off claims broadly.
Demure. Give us a summer
on a beach, separate
kitchens, a crystal
in the window spurting
rainbow on the tiles. The
problem is the crispness
of morning, household
labor, the washing machine
has finished its cycle and we
must tend to something: closets
so spacious they open in.

MELATONIN GUMMIES, FOUR STARS

These work—I take one every night instead of getting stoned. The taste is fake strawberry, in a good way, like a snow cone. I feel rested when I wake up, and I remember my dreams. I only took one star off because in the last dream my husband found out he had gotten another woman pregnant a long time ago and it was very painful for me. To see the new little boy as his carelessness. There wasn't a way to express my anger that he hadn't prioritized our future before we'd met. I just kept feeding the kid cereal, wondering how I'd know when he was full.

ROLLERCOASTER TYCOON® + THE TYRANT I WAS

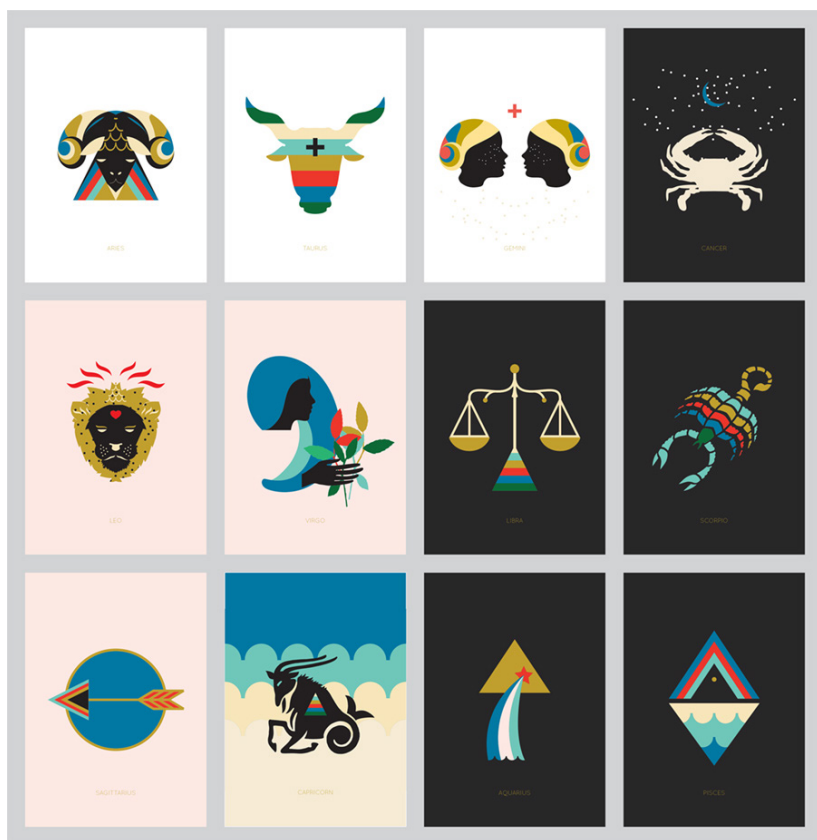
Axed all the trees + ignored AI comments on
Beauty. Built one bathroom, far away, +
Charged \$5 to use it. Colored cotton candy a
Dirty-snow. Drove the janitors to death
Emptying trash + erasing pixelated vomit.
Fired them in front of the Ferris Wheel.
Gave up on the grass + let it jungle, outlawed
Hotdog stands + Helicopter Hats. Forced
Ice cream cones out of innocent hands by
Jolting people into the jewelry-blue sky, a
Kind of temporary kidnapping, only to
Let them drop above the Log Flume + drown.
Milked the line to the Merry-Go-Round until
No one wanted to navigate it + all walked
Out. Operated during simulated storms,
Paused the game + time itself to suspend panic.
Queued mascots to dance in the queasy-heat.
Ran rollercoasters nonstop—sent riders
Screaming along twisted steel that kicked sparks,
Twice exploded + tanked the park's ratings.
Undid pavement + left patrons utterly lost on the
Very corners of the virtual landscape.
Withheld water fountains + wasted hours.
X-rayed thoughts but X-ed out complaints
Yapping on about prices, safety, the yuck drying.
Zeroed in on every name + *zing*—changed it to mine.

THE OREGON TRAIL® + ALL OF MY DEATHS

An *accidental* buckshot, broken leg [couldn't bother to bandage the bullet-hole or change clothes], cholera, dehydration, dysentery, the devil I'm sure dulling the disk, exhaustion, fever, foes, the fire I forgot to gut until I was engulfed, greed, grief, the goddamn horse taking off, the horse-kick, the humor in dying infinitely, insufficient funds, the jaws of a rattlesnake, bad jar of beans, karma, knife-wound, lash of sunlight, lily of the valley, measles, mosquitos, nightmares, the promise of Oregon, an oasis being my heat-pickled brain, the pioneer life, quarrels, questions, quitting, risks, my toothpick schooner riding over rocks, river crossings, starvation, stupid shit, typhoid, terrible luck, twisted lung, unarmed + under-fire, ushered again into violence, vanity, vengeance, very wet-behind-the-ears, the weather, want, wishful thinking, X marking the spot, yes when it was *no*, yellow flowers, the zigzag of the computer mouse, zooming over information, zero communication, your belief in me.

SUGAR ASTROLOGY

BY SHARI ZOLLINGER
ILLUSTRATIONS BY HOLLI ZOLLINGER



POEM IN A ZODIAC: TREE AT THE NOGUCHI MUSEUM,
LONG ISLAND CITY, NY

I recently visited the Noguchi Museum in Long Island City, NY. I spent a whole afternoon looking at what this provocative Japanese sculptor left behind including massive abstract stone, quiet monoliths, a garden, and a tree. This season's astrology is a single poem, parsed between signs and inspired by that tree in the garden. It can be read in whole-poem form or in separate, austere, private messages per astrological sign—a poem nestled inside a Zodiac.

ARIES: *March 21 to April 19*

Tread carefully because if you're lazy you'll call it ineffable and be done.

TAURUS: *April 20 to May 20*

And, if you're not vigilant, you'll let the New Age proclaim divine.

GEMINI: *May 21 to June 20*

There will be the way the leaves caught wind as you talked to Emily on a wooden bench,

CANCER: *June 21 to July 22*

its roots spy-hopping through gray rock.

LEO: *July 23 to August 22*

There will be a drop or two of rain.

VIRGO: *August 23 to September 22*

You'll reach too hard toward the scene, the way you used to do,

LIBRA: *September 23 to October 22*

when everything had meaning, and just as you used to, you'll call for language or belief.

SCORPIO: *October 23 to November 21*

You'll reference the Rilke tree.

SAGITTARIUS: *November 22 to December 21*

You'll tell Matthew about thresholds in urban nature.

CAPRICORN: *December 22 to January 19*

But soon you'll see nothing special happened so hard it threw you back on yourself.

AQUARIUS: *January 20 to February 18*

And this time, upon this buoyant irregularity, with language unattainable

PISCES: *February 19 to March 20*

you'll call up Rilke again, and at least thank him for trying.

Tread carefully because if you're lazy you'll call it ineffable and be done.

And, if you're not vigilant, you'll let the New Age proclaim divine.

There will be the way the leaves caught wind as you talked to Emily on a wooden
bench,

its roots spy-hopping through gray rock.

There will be a drop or two of rain.

You'll reach too hard toward the scene, the way you used to do,

when everything had meaning, and just as you used to, you'll call for language
or belief.

You'll reference the Rilke tree.

You'll tell Matthew about thresholds in urban nature.

But soon you'll see nothing special happened so hard it threw you back on
yourself.

And this time, upon this buoyant irregularity, with language unattainable
you'll call up Rilke again, and at least thank him for trying.

KICKS

Your designer sneakers
were so white

they knew
no season's prejudice.

We were fucking
at 9 a.m. in Queens

because I told you
I had to get to Grand Central

by noon so I could
bury my dead dog upstate

in the front lawn
before sunset.

It was the saddest thing
that day.

My dead dog.
The ride up the Hudson.

Your shoes
without seasons.

PORTRAIT OF A MAINE COASTLINE FROM
THE INSIDE OF A BEDROOM IN QUEENS

Scallop shells halved
and flotsam
mix messages,
wrong and marvelous,
like this gay beach town in winter

—salt crystals in sand,

water in the coffee

—bed in the rock.

TWENTY-FOUR LINES AFTER DUSK

The sun cigarette-dove onto the ash-tray horizon. We waved the new night like airport batons guiding the spent dreams of the snuffed day. The stoplights weren't stopping light, but making it. I heard you across the way singing promises to emerging worms and lightning bugs. I wished I could wish your promises kept. I kept wishing. Old roads decided they had held up enough and crumbled themselves to sleep. The radiowaves admitted how lovely they were not being sure anyone was listening. *Please* I said to you but pretended I was talking to a passing gnat swarm. *Please* I said and meant how much I wanted with every part of me. *Please*. And you were still promising and I was still wishing and maybe we were both reaching but there was no way to know without you knowing I was asking. Accidental secrets were piling so high the owls were craning their necks to see what was scurrying around us. I hoped they would dive and take it, put it to some use.

PACKING ROBOT PLAYS MY FUTURE BACK TO ME

There is a sadness I can barely detect just south
of the Styrofoam chute, something wiser than packing
peanuts would bely. There is no whirl when its eyes
light and its jaw Teddy-Ruxpins in my direction: *The last*
poem you write will stay closed in a notebook in a Hefty
bag no one will claim. As will your games and guitar
strings and books on debris. What can be sold will be.
What can be used will be. As for you, I will leave a little
uncertainty. But remember—what doesn't get boxed
gets burned. Those are the rules.

OUR LOLA BORN INSIDE CAPTCHA

Lola as yield sign but not telephone pole
Lola as bicycle spoke but not the dog on the lawn.
The hand translates Lola to bus ad but not traffic cone.
Not manhole cover. A disassembled Lola waits
to be touched, to fulfill an empty space.
Lola as horse does not accept my request so I try again.
So many attempts. So many taps to her forehead.
We disagree on the definition of horse parts, how to delineate
between shadow and hoof, between saddle and desire.
The cursive for the letter Q is not grandmother, but she hides
inside a loop. I chase her between punctuation marks
with one hand open, follow her like a river to the opening
of a sea. How do I prove I am the human
in this scenario? Refresh. Refresh. Refresh.

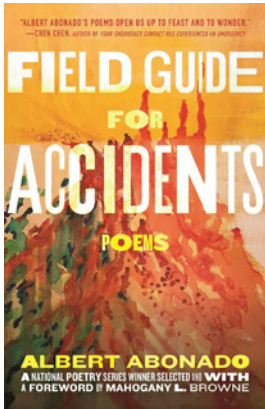
OUR LOLA BORN INSIDE A PDF

On deadline, I rearrange my Lola so often
she becomes unrecognizable. Which Lola came first?
Lola as thesis. Lola as the syntax of other Lolas.
All the sticky notes refer to my deleted Lolas.
Lola as copy of a copy. A Lola of a Lola of a Lola.
How to explain the Lolas I did not save:
I am different now. I pay for subscription services.
I cut my own hair. I froze three of my pets for a later burial.
I let my Lola choose her font. Wasn't that brave enough?
Didn't I risk indecipherability? I assumed
I could restore the original, the simplified version
before I introduced her footnotes and glossaries.
There is no recovering a corrupted file. She lives
in a cloud now. Doesn't that sound romantic?
I could summon her with my touch.

LOLA BORN INSIDE SECURITY QUESTION

What is the name of your first pet, and when
did it disappear? How did administration color
your elementary school? Mahogany, Mint, Lemon Peel.
How many islands are between your Lola
and the hospital where they stitched your finger
like a promise? Try again. Count slowly. Forget
her wheelchair, the stories your mother
told to explain God and discipline.
Forget the orchid and chicken feet.
That will come later. Today, repetition
becomes a lament. Lola, Lola, Lola.
Why do you refer to your Lola by her absence?
She does not belong to an unresolved space.
How does her maiden name travel at night
when she recites it for her prayers?
You have license to reconstruct her mouth.
Answer incorrectly and you will be denied access.
You will be forced to start over, to reset,
to admit you are not who you wanted to be.

ARCHIPELAGIC ACCIDENTS & MONSTERS:
AN INTERVIEW WITH ALBERT ABONADO
BY NATALIA TREVIÑO



Poets work with the messy clay of language not only to find shape or missive, but to access the glimmers of language that can act as spiritual beacon. I cannot overstate my exuberance about interviewing a poet who is also just a friendly and humble guy. Albert Abonado is a professor, an activist, author of the collection *JAW* (Sundress Publications), and he's just arrived on one of the most elite literary islands a US poet can inhabit: the National Poetry Series. His new collection, *Field Guide for Accidents* (Beacon Press), was his ride. Selected as one of the 2023 winners of the National Poetry Series by Mahogany L. Browne, the inaugural poet-in-residence at Lincoln Center, Abonado is delightfully chuffed.

The esteemed poets who judge this open contest select five winning poets each year. The winners receive a heap of recognition, a blessed and bedazzled launching of their book publication, and a cash prize. Natasha Trethewey said that this contest “consistently identifies, at an early stage in their careers, the writers we are likely to be reading for a long time.” I agree. I will be reading Albert Abonado for a very long time.

What a sweet honor it was for me to meet him for a chat to view the coasts of these islands up close. Islands—well, more specifically an archipelago of thousands of islands—play a large role in the consciousness of this Filipinx poet; and thankfully, Filipino culture, sensibility, food, customs, and Tagalog imbue the fabric that holds this book together.

The book's title, *Field Guide for Accidents*, conveys much of its interwoven themes: a mystic and practical form of prayer, celebration, affection, and gratitude accompanied by scientific layers, biological observations, miracles, and a study of accidents that is downright useful. We also learn to be prepared for an accident that could take our closest elders and kin: parents. And as a bonus, we find what we need to be prepared for the accident that is this mortal life on our suffering, little blue planet.

Natalia Treviño: *Your book is called Field Guide for Accidents, and the title placed across a vibrant, almost explosive orange and red artwork that evokes fire, danger, and even emergency tells me to get ready. Usually, a field guide is written for something that we would want to explore for pleasure: a region, or a park system, but the word accident here is a shocker. Aside from "Field Guide for Accidents" being a title poem, and the entirety of section three, why did you choose this as the book's title? Why select the concept of a field guide to link the five sections of the book?*

Albert Abonado: The book emerged as a response to a terrible accident that involved my parents. The accident forced me to confront questions about my family, about mortality, about my limited knowledge. I recall being in the hospital trying to answer questions about their insurance, their medication, their primary physician, etc., and realizing how little I knew, how unprepared I was for this moment. Accidents are, by their nature, unexpected, but you hope you know enough or do enough in preparation to mitigate the kind of harm any accident can cause. The title is really a wish to manifest something I didn't have in that moment. A field guide, too, is often a product of experience. It can act as a place of reflection and even an offering, a way to say to others, "Here is my experience. I hope you find some of this useful."

NT: *The poems suggest the accident shaped your view on your parents, on family, even ghosts, sleep, driving, and the social inequities associated with sleep and driving. The poems speak heavily on the role of nature in our demise, the role of biology in our actual injuries. The title poem, "Field Guide for Accidents" is the center of the book, and it acts as an axis. On either side, we have the interlacing threads of prayer and poetry, as well as prayer as a form of poetry; and as we move toward the end of the book a sort of self-awareness explores the poem as a living shape—as the Talagog concepts of "manananggal" and "aswang." Can you talk about the book's overall shape, your initial vision for it, how it came to you, and how it grew or surprised you?*

AA: I had a very different idea of what my second book was going to be. My original vision was to explore my relationship with Catholicism, its cultural and personal significance. As a lapsed Catholic, many of the rituals, the ideas, the iconography, and the stories remain personally significant. I wanted to dig into that. I was interested in significant Catholic figures in the Philippines like the Santo Niño or Our Lady of Fatima. That book may still happen one day, but that is not the book that I ended up writing. I started seeing different threads emerge. References to the accident appeared more often until I could not deny the pattern in my poems. I stubbornly resisted this at first, but I eventually accepted that the accident would become the focus. I needed to respect the desires of the book and the poems. Some of the ideas from the earlier attempts at the manuscript remain, which you astutely note. The language of ritual and prayer carried over into the manuscript and the accident became a way for me

to explore many of those religious and spiritual concerns, along with other things like family and mortality. Once I knew the focus of the book, I wrote poems more intentionally about the subject matter. As I did this, I found I wanted to widen the scope of the material, to move beyond the personal into the historical, the cultural, and the sociological.

NT: *This book of poetry won a major American prize, and what makes it uniquely American to me is that it is actually representative of who Americans are today: descendants of travelers, travelers who could have benefitted from a map or a field guide, and in the case of this book, it clearly honors the travelers who are from the*

Philippines. The archipelagic nation was colonized by Spain in the sixteenth century, ceded to the United States in 1898, and after Japanese occupation during World War II became an independent nation. During Spain's colonization, Catholicism became the dominant religion. Your book is heavily spiritual and redefines prayer several times. Is Catholicism a big part of your heritage? What is the role of spirituality, prayer, and Catholicism in your poetry?

AA: Catholicism was central to my upbringing. Even if I'm not a practicing Catholic today, even if my devotion is far less fervent than perhaps my family would like, it remains the lens through which I see much of the world, and it

continues to shape my thinking. My sense of faith, my connection to spirituality, is rooted in wonder, in the feeling that I am part of some larger, unknowable force. Poetry, both in writing and reading it, reconnects me to that sense. Writing a poem, then, becomes a kind of prayer. It is a practice that cultivates my sense of gratitude, to consider a life outside of my own, to be present and aware of the richness that surrounds me.

NT: *My second question about the cultural inheritance your family has given you has to do with your poetic midwives, the persons who allowed you to leap forward with your full mind, your full self, your culture, languages, and knowledge. Most American kids grow up in an anglicized educational system, and I know my Spanish as well as my Mexican identity and cultural knowledge were not welcomed or considered valuable in*

I think of my poems
as little monsters
with their own
sense of agency,
their own desires
and preferences. I
want to respect and
nurture them.

my public education here in the US. Part of my consciousness was cut off by a border that formed in the middle of my brain for me to survive and thrive in school. It wasn't until I read a bilingual author, Pat Mora, that I ever felt my whole mind engaged or needed to fully understand a poem. Was there a moment like that for you when an author you read, or a professor or mentor, unlocked full access to your unique cultural and language bank? Who were those poets and midwives that helped you access the entirety of your unique and non-white sensibilities?

AA: I love the idea of poetry midwives. That's such a wonderful way of thinking about literary influences. When I think of the writer who shaped the non-white sensibilities of my poems, I credit the poet Li-Young Lee. As a young Asian-American writer, I would read mostly white voices, poets like William Carlos Williams or Allen Ginsberg or Walt Whitman, poets who continue to resonate with me, but whose experiences did not resemble mine. I felt that reading these predominantly white writers didn't give me models that understood my conflicted sense of identity. I was not exposed to many Asian-American writers. Reading Lee's writing was a profound moment and opened me to all kinds of possibilities. I felt I had permission to write about the intersections of family, identity, mortality, spirituality, and more. I could write about being Filipinx, about skipping church, about navigating white spaces. Over the years, I would find writers who would become important to my work, but I still return to the intensity and precision of Lee's poetry.

NT: *You are such a close observer of factual detail, and as a field guide, this book delivers researched information and knowledge about the natural world as well as how to survive and even prevent an accident as violent and terrifying as the one experienced by your parents. This is, in fact, an informative survival guide, too! There is also an ostentatious sense of freedom to intertwine forms, to highlight how they interact physically with one another in the natural world. At one point, a poem asks of the wasps at the windowsill, "what held any of them / together, and what did they do with their suffering?" You highlight a figurative or spiritual intermingling between us and the animal kingdoms, and there is an immense attention on bodies and parts of bodies. What is the story of your relationship with nature? Who or what inspired you to become such a close and empathetic observer?*

AA: My mother always had the green thumb in the family, but I never really understood why she was so attentive to her plants. The rows of plants on the windowsill often felt more like obstacles that hid the view of our front yard. I suppose her dedication instilled in me the value of the natural world. Still, I feel like my empathy and sensitivity is something that has developed more in recent years. Since my parents' accident a few years ago, I've been spending more time helping them on their farm during the summers, managing some of the day-to-day operations,

learning more about the care and maintenance of the crops, and generally becoming more familiar with the region. This time I spent there has become an education, a period of researching, learning, and reconsidering my relationship with the natural world. Who knew I could experience this much excitement from the appearance of seedlings? I said something earlier about poetry creating this feeling of wonder, and working on the farm has done something similar, helped me discover something spiritual in the care and management of plants I once dismissed or took for granted.

NT: *There is such a variety of forms in this book. You work the visual possibilities of the page, and the sections create little neighborhoods for these varied forms, putting like with like, but also offering fascinating variations that echo like a chorus with one another, streaming in and out of the poems at various points in the book. You write about the animals inside of us. You show that prayers come in so many forms: as food, as feast, and saying, “all prayer begins with hunger” early in the book. When we spoke the other day, you mentioned that the poems need to be free, and that they are like “little monsters” that need to have their way. How would you describe your poetics in terms of form play, sound play, and “monster play”—if you will allow that term?*

AA: I love that term “monster play” and I want to steal it. I think of my poems as little monsters with their own sense of agency, their own desires and preferences. I want to respect and nurture them. They are going to live outside of me one day and I want them to thrive out in the world. Sometimes my poems and I have very different opinions of what they should be, and we argue with one another, we fight over a line or a phrase. In the end, the poem seems to know what is best. I want poems that can capture the strange, difficult, fluid ways in which we live, which is why I often play with different forms. How can a life be reduced to a single shape, to a single pattern of sounds? Our experiences are layered. At the heart of my writing is a sense of adventure and play. I find joy and wonder in the writing process when I experiment and play, when I allow the poems to surprise me with their revelations.

KITCHEN CAM

Someone keeps stealing cookies
from the cookie jar, so you secretly install
a motion-activated camera in the kitchen.
Several days later, you review the footage.

Your bookish daughter, who dismisses
all sports, unerringly sinks hook shots
with apple cores and carrot stubs tossed
from great distances into the trash can.

Your son, a varsity nose tackle,
hobbles in after midnight in stiletto heels
and a black cocktail dress and guzzles milk
from a carton in the fridge.

Like clockwork, your spouse appears
every morning at 5:00 and writes steadily
for half an hour in a thick spiral notebook
you've never seen before.

The cats bolt through, chasing each other
around the kitchen island.
The dog meanders by,
sniffing hopefully along the baseboards.

And then there's you at 2:27 a.m.,
shuffling like a zombie and half-asleep,
craving something you can't define:
a faded perfume, a former self,
the sweetness you forget upon waking.

HALLDÓR LAXNESS IN HOLLYWOOD

Lost
Foss
Armchair
Bells and
Back rows
Back home
Can you
Believe
About the
Codes?
Riverbend
Igneous
Walls
Southernly
Aware
Of the
Mounds and
Garters
And
I am
Miss
Lonely
Heart
In the
Heart
Of a
Fish
At the bottom
Of
Two
Lungs

CIVILIZATION TWO

Liberate the masses
Choose
Your fan
Backward
Causaloid
Marshall
Plan
We
Hit the
Big time
Understand
Okay now
Fill up
That sinkhole
With
Quick-dry
Quicksand
Fluorescent
Fence post
Materials
Alive
Like that
We'll
Sing
Some
Songs
In our
Morphic
Samizdat
Internal dialogues
Laid out
Flat
Because a
Brain only
Behaves
In a
Cave
With a
Wildcat

A MORNING OF CLOUDS

A poodle on its hind legs begging for a treat

A loggerhead with one flipper peeking out of its shell

The pregnant woman carrying a handbag

The old man snoring in profile

An angel

An Arrowhead

Chagall's Eiffel Tower

A turkey looking over its shoulder

A seahorse doing the macarena

A buffalo herd

A dog on its back

A lobster, a starfish, a crab

A fuzzy cactus

A daisy with a feathery stem

A cloud pipe puffing cloud smoke

So many cloud wishbones

ESSAY

—after Bernadette Mayer and Stephanie Young

I guess it's too late to live on the farm
I guess it's too late for me to become a ballerina or gymnast
It's definitely too late for me to become an ingénue
I guess it's too late to worry about being late—it's much too late for me
to have my period or get pregnant
It's too late to take out a 30-year mortgage and celebrate that last payment
by doing the cha-cha
It's too late for high heels
It's too late for braces or embracing my inner slut
It's too late to cut the cord—it frayed away long ago
I guess it's too late to adopt a biker girl persona
It's too late for certain species of bananas
I mean, it's too late for so many extinct seeds and animals
It's too late for Sanibel Island and Barbuda
It's too late to save the oceans by outlawing balloons and plastic straws
I guess it's too late for me to win the straw poll
It's too late—Walgreens pharmacy is now closed
It's too late to put that cat back into the bag
It's a little late to start carrying cloth totes instead
It's too late to try to levitate the Pentagon like Allen Ginsberg once did
It's too late to be cheerfully optimistic and mean it
It's too late to be militant about much of anything and expect results
It's too late for peacocks but not too late to subscribe to Peacock Plus
It's too late for coyotes and libraries
I guess it's too late to reign in A.I.
I guess it's too late to masturbate with just our hands and imaginations
It's too late for the bees
I guess it's not too late to learn to shoot a gun
It's too late to have that dinner party with Ed, now that he's dead
I guess we're too late to milk the cows—I hear them moaning
I guess my farm will remain make-believe, existing only here in this poem
It's too late to ask for forgiveness
It's too late to go to medical school like William Carlos Williams
It's too late for the proletariat to rise up tonight
It's too late for the working class
I guess the working poor is where we are now

It's too late to save small family farms given the big corporate ones
It's too late to stop the corn from being turned into syrup
I guess people would rather play the video game Farming Simulator
I guess there was never a poet adequately paid for her poem
I guess it's too late for the proletariat who are pro-literary, pro-poem
I guess it's too late even for prose
We survive on our side hustles, rent our Airbnb of images by the hour

STILL LIFE WITH DISASTER ELSEWHERE

Another doorstep, doorway, door—delayed
by daybreak, but we're made to understand
grief is a pending dark. Dread casts the shadows,

though the mother dedicates herself to laundering
its stains out. This domesticity is bright
with dust, appliance dials, plastic dinosaurs.

Devotion draws itself in shades of odes & doubts
while out the window, springtime breathes its soft
decomposition—like love's, thick with ticking

bodies at close distance & indebted to design.

SOLASTALGIA NOCTURNE

It's late spring & earlier I overfilled the bird feeders
while thinking about karma, anticipating hungry

wildlife, insomnia. Each night's its own soft throat
& lying awake I distract myself from past selves

by playing catch & release with Ring doorbell alerts.
In the driveway: deer, red fox, raccoons

slipping between arborvitae & basketball hoop.
In the distance, lightning ironworks the sky:

decades of rooflines, centuries of oaks. *Everything*
is temporary is a kind of curse where existence stirs

like weather, where survival plots in terms of forage,
tunnel, shelter. These hours, I'm sorry to be human

with our trademark cornering factors; I know
every apology creates its own future problems.

The night animals feed, then pixelate
back into the screen's consolation wild.

NOCTURNE

I crawl along the side of a highway because I thought I saw a glimpse of you in a dead fox. You—every pupil. How beautiful orange looks

when wet. In Virginia, we used to fall asleep to foxes screaming. It's how they find each other, you'd say, your breath—spoons

of white on the glass. To find your mate, you continued, you have to scream. This is how I've learned to find you—

crouching by smoke and stench, the pull of every passing car nearly taking me with it. The fox—newspaper at the end of the day—crumpled.

I reach down to touch the remains, as if to carry them somewhere they won't be churned, all paper shreds. I hear something like a ragged cough and the fox jumps—one-eyed, bleeding

mouth. Then, gone—back to suburban woods. Next to my feet, the other eye. I slide this slick offering into my coat pocket.

Take a piece of you home.

INTERLUDE FOR A VOMITING MULTITUDE

My throat, a tunnel. Body pregnant and birthing fetus by the dozen. A spider crawls up the side of the toilet—drawn to heat and despair. Early that night I held her face like I could see god in her eyes—like now, clutching the porcelain edge, I become

what I deluge. Shivering flesh. Bile and snot. Arpita gives me her robe—my mother's—a gift for a gift for this gag is a woman I hold tight in my chest. The Transtape clings, a tool for the body to mold

another body. I think of the girl in Philly, the vomit in her hands—holy water spilling between fingers. Yellow and gold. Like piss. Like a gourd—it's Halloween and I'm making myself candy. How it glimmers, and shines—sugar in an open wound.

CEDAR CLOSET

I didn't want to write that place
with its daughterless walls
smelling of lost forests, of bafflement.

There the moths would not.
There, the small hands
I smoothed along the boards
to quiet them.

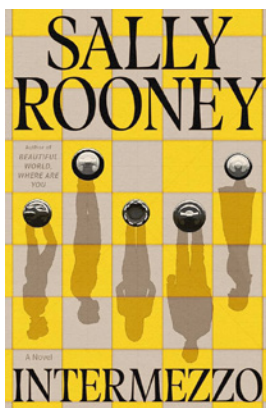
When I pressed my limbs between
the weight of winter
coats: no door, no secret
I could find. And still

those planks with their voiceless
noise, their fevered blush
like the fur of the first dog
I loved. Darting into long grass
in the field behind the house, she'd
vanish, return. Always, then,
it was August, the end
of a road that ran straight
for miles.

I can still make
a church of my fingers
to call back the burrs
snagged in her coat. I can make
a steeple, reaching
toward untouchable blue.

But do I make that closet, the want
and gone of it, where
no one almost never—

or the field, where wind
keeps erasing
the sentence in my head: the one
that begins with winter
and ends in a kneeling
that leaves no mark on the earth.



Intermezzo
by Sally Rooney
(Macmillan to Farrar,
Straus and Giroux, 2024)

Irish author and literary anti-hero Sally Rooney is out with her newest, *Intermezzo*. Rooney, ever an astute observer of the human predicament, doesn't disappoint in this novel about family, chess, and the gritty messiness of grief and forgiveness. Her distinctive prose style rises to the level of poetry, repeatedly, distinguishing her as a writer who constantly pushes the boundaries of her craft.

—SHARI ZOLLINGER



***& there's you still
thrill hour of the
world to love***
by aby kaupang
(Parlor Press, 2023)

Lightning strikes a house amidst its residents' profound grief, serving as both fire and aperture, this jolt giving way across the book's expansive poem to "lightening" and "miracle & practice." It is emblematic of the larger lyric project kaupang has built across multiple books over 15 years. Her poems are a navigation of grief's potential to be both precise and all-encompassing, but also a study of adaptation and love's ability to suture home and body amidst loss.

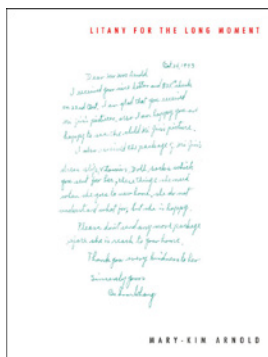
—MICHAEL McLANE



What Small Sound
by Francesca Bell
(Red Hen Press, 2023)

Spending time with Francesca Bell's collection, I understand what it must feel like to be ocean, reaching in for mouthfuls of shore, gorging on a surplus of sand like glass teeth, porcelain shells like splintered slivers of nail. Everything gritty. Everything sharp. Everything too much and yet, feeling like I couldn't get enough. Bell's poems hold nothing back, dealing honestly and poignantly with the intimacies of womanhood, motherhood, love, desire, and life's many griefs. Hers is a book you will return to again and again.

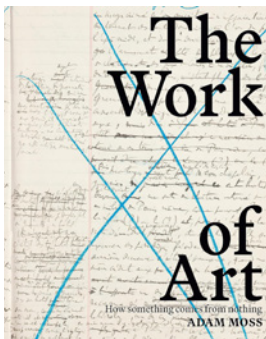
—SAMANTHA
SAMAKANDE



Litany for the Long Moment
by Mary-Kim Arnold
(Essay Press, 2018)

This book-length lyric essay from a press known for excellent hybrid nonfiction investigates the nature of identity through Arnold’s history as a Korean-born American adoptee. Shaping the text are government questionnaires and other documents from the search for her Korean parents. Here the friction between the bureaucracy of selfhood and the individual spirit of selfhood reckons with a past dismantled by politics.

—KATHERINE INDERMAUR



The Work of Art: How Something Comes from Nothing
by Adam Moss
(Penguin Press, 2024)

An insightful guide for multimodal writers, *The Work of Art* explores how ideas materialize into diverse aesthetic forms, offering practical strategies and reflections that resonate with those who blend text, visuals, audio, and more. Drawing on artist interviews and process artifacts, the book’s cross-disciplinary approach demystifies creativity, making it a valuable resource for anyone interested in how varied modalities contribute to a cohesive, expressive work.

—BEN GUNSBURG



Full Moon Coffee Shop
by Mai Mochizuki,
translated by Jesse Kirkwood
(Ballantine Books, 2024)

If the idea of Brigadoon as a kind of pop-up (full moons only) cake shop in Japan, run by a tortoiseshell cat who reads the horoscope of people (a script writer and a TV exec) in need of the kind of guidance only a tortoiseshell might offer in the middle of the night sounds good, then this book is for you. Dreams within dreams.

I’m on a Japanese-novels-in-translation binge lately, so I thought, “Why not?” I’m pleased I did.

—NEIL FLATMAN

APRICOTS

after torrin a. greathouse

two hundred sundeep embryos asleep in sugar water,
each puckered against its once-attached mouth. eleven
years, i lay awake in the room across the hall from the
one good harvest and never succumbed to sweetness.
eleven years since, sleep has returned me to this house
to give birth to children i cannot see, to walk through
the webs of the garden spiders that used to boobytrap
the orchard, the orchard that was always most real as a
museum of jars. now i am sick of saving things, so that
other people can enjoy not having them. like a thief,
i've imagined the soft seam of my brow as i slick
a knife beneath the first seal to uncork another season.
i've imagined the absence of the almond-shaped pit and
how i'd swallow it like a body reabsorbing an underripe
dream. but nights when i can only think your taste,
i worry not all wounds are meant to heal. when my
belly has brought me to the lip of this glistening bowl,
could i bear to eat anything so steeped in itself?

two hundred [REDACTED]
years, i lay awake [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] and never [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] returned [REDACTED]
to [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] the garden [REDACTED] that [REDACTED] boobytrap
[REDACTED] orchard [REDACTED] real as a
museum [REDACTED] i am sick of saving [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] people [REDACTED]
i've imagined [REDACTED] slick
[REDACTED] absence of [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] a body [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] but [REDACTED] when i [REDACTED] think [REDACTED]
i worry [REDACTED] all wounds [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] to the lip of [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] itself

FRUITING BODIES

with a phrase from Mary Ruefle

Though the meadow sprouted hundreds
of fluted pitchers, the mushrooms
were one under the dirt. E pluribus unum,
an iceberg bobbing,
that old familiar line.

Where the rain soaked,
the fruiting bodies erupt
in chalky bell shapes. I overheard
their *underground sentence*
babble three shades of white.
Their being of one motion,
towards becoming. Their being
so *there* it hums.

I betray the spirit of the meadow
by hovering at the edge, forever deciding
which bodies are good to eat.

I too am no individual, I too
make a feast of rot. I can perch
on a fallen cedar. I have indicated
invisible conditions and I fear
being mistaken for a dupe.

My neck is the part of me
most attracted to life.
I have found myself someone else—

I have broken rocks with time.
I have emitted a cluster of possibilities
and tossed them all away.

SPIRIT OF THE CATEGORY

I startled from sleep with a sole
burning thought—I must
feed the baby. It's hungry.

There are babies here, in
this city, but none of them
mine.

You must forgive me, my
mind is on the wound.
It's hungry. The wanting
only grows with food, which sparks
the small ember smoldering.
Desire is feeling with punctuation.
The sky, with arrows.

At the grocery, I tender the soft spot
on the peach, drawing flies.
I don't know my force or tenderness—
lean on a bruise, then yelp.

Burst my thumb straight through.
First fuzz, then juice.

TO S., A NOTE ON FOOD ETIQUETTE

after Alan Dugan

Let's say for example, if, as you hover
at the edge of the raucous kitchen,
nibbling the last slice of, say, apricot tart
others paid for, openly advertising
you've no dinner for yourself, someone offers,

for sake of argument, half a beautiful omelet
clearly intended entirely for himself,
as perhaps he has fasted all day,
you should understand this generosity
as social invitation, and whether or not

you twice demur—both plate and table—
it remains inappropriate that the dish
later disappear from the counter
as if by a thief's hand, as breaking of bread
is how community is nourished, relationships

are healed, culture and custom paid forward,
and if you do choose to snag the food
when no one's looking and make a run
for your closet of a studio, this omelet
made with love from fresh eggs, mushrooms,

peas purchased at the farmers market,
say peas shelled just that afternoon
and a walk to town for a warm baguette
all at the expense of the cook's time,
and say moreover, to our point, it is a sublime

omelet, lightly browned on the outside,
unbelievably butter-rich and luxurious inside,
possibly the best goddamn omelet
ever made in human history and the maker
ends his meal hungry as reward for kindness,

consider that you might at a point in time
at least mention having eaten, maybe even
enjoyed the fucking eggs you didn't deserve,
simply acknowledge the gesture.
Just a thought I wanted to share.

24-HOUR PROPOSITION FOR THE DEAD

I propose a brief ceasefire,
single-day reprieve from your
longings and regrets, your
justifications, bullying whispers,

failed amends. For my part,
I'll withhold all prying concerns,
goads to provoke response,
demands for reparation.

You exhaust me with your ghosting.
Your blah-blah of blame.
Perhaps you might say likewise.
I propose, then, we take a breath,

take a walk in the fields, admire
the robin and the jay,
the trellis of decaying rose,
the stunted wheat and dark

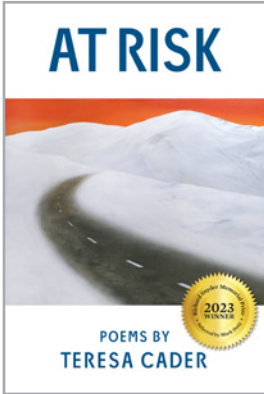
bitter cherry plucked from branch,
cat bounding from alleyway.
Propose we give each other a break.
One quiescent morning,

afternoon without ambush,
full night of fitful, dreamless rest.
What do you say? It's not like
we'll forgive or forget

or lose our edge. It's not like
anyone's admitting to anything
or surrendering an inch.
Or like tomorrow won't arrive.

AT RISK
BY TERESA CADER
(Ashland Poetry Press, 2024)

REVIEW BY JOYCE PESEROFF



Teresa Cader's *AT RISK* journeys through dangerous territory. Sometimes, as in the title poem, it's a dog park where a rescue dog, "beaten silly for missing pheasants," cowers; outside a local diner, a mother lies "slumped over the steering wheel" after discovering her son has OD'd. Or it's the bombing of "the city whose name sticks on my tongue / the way / Buczkowice once did, my father's Polish village...." The book follows a family split by war and displacement, a father whose silence inflicts its own pain, and flash bulletins from an increasingly damaged world. But Cader's poems embrace moments of rapture as well: cousins discover each other, children are born, an unquiet mind finds peace while fish replen-

ish a river. Cader accomplishes all this with a masterful sense of form—her ghazals, sonnets, and couplets complement inventive free verse, their music always fresh.

Cader's poems match life's daily details to the surreal aftermath of suffering. News of a "live shooter in an elementary school" morphs kitchen chairs into circus elephants, the speaker in "Thoughts and Prayers" retreating under a tent, "half-smothering the children inside me." A peacock, avatar of Homer, struts on her deck, "its hundred eyes... in the kitchen / as I knead my floured mound of dough." When its feathers catch "glints of sun from the window, / ...Homer's soul opens like a peony in the garden." "Pythagoras Said the Soul of Homer Moved into a Peacock" continues:

*I've learned my grandmother kept a pet peacock
as a security system. It shrieked when the Nazis*

*stormed her road, but she and my young aunt and uncle
fled weeks earlier on the last ship for New York.*

Cader links the everyday act of making bread to the soul of a poet resplendent as a peacock's tail or a peony, then to the storms of invasion and flight—all within the span of a few dozen lines.

The poet's curiosity spans subjects as various as the grotesque results of the Fuku-

shima disaster—radioactive wild boars—to a tenth-century surgeon who refuses to drill the skull of a boy haunted by his rape. Instead, Cader imagines, al-Zahwari assures the boy he believes him, bending “to whisper, Absolutely.” In these and other poems, Cader explores the ways love, terror, and wisdom are bound to the body. In her witty homage to Dolly Parton, “Ode to Teased Hair,” bouffant birds courting at her window spark a “memory of myself with a teased mop in high school”; the blue-collar boys “wore leather,” while middle-class kids—with Breck-girl hair, we assume—“went to college and France.” Cader quotes words from the singer’s lips, “a gobsmacking vermilion,” to show how easy it is to humiliate and other a class by mocking their bodies, clothes, and accents. “Happy Hour with Chaucer” recalls “sounding out your hammered pentameter,” in a neck brace, his Canterbury pilgrims “distraction // from my doctor’s prognosis that I might never really / walk again. / I could read, so I could travel beyond my body.” Confined by the pandemic as it was isolated in college, Cader’s body finds liberation through art.

At the center of *AT RISK* is “Poland: A Fugue,” both family history and reminder of how “the war to end all wars” spawned horrors for those who emigrated to escape and those left behind to endure the Nazis and Soviets. In “Shortwave Radio: September 1, 1939,” Cader’s father’s silence about his Polish family—cousins, a brother, and an aunt never acknowledged—might have begun with survivor’s guilt over news of Hitler’s invasion delivered to a group of émigré fishing buddies: “... how long did the broadcast last, / telling them what they knew without being told—Your family will eat dust behind tanks, / your village will be fire without water, and you who got out can do nothing.”

One of *AT RISK*’s most brilliant and harrowing poems is a dramatic monologue in the voice of twentieth-century German villagers browsing a selection of children seized from Poland. “Forced Labor” begins:

*Thrust into the platz, wobbly-legged, bleating whatever it is boys bleat
when they’re on the bench, sized up and sized down, how strong,*

*how much will he eat, can he learn German, what about his momma,
will a beating or two knock her out of him, does he have lice*

Its vision aligns
the past with
the present, art
with survival,
and family with
memory ...

Notice the staccato lines, how “wobbly-legged” wobbles against “boys bleat / when they’re on the bench,” how the hard consonants continue with “up,” “down,” and “strong” as Cader crafts her litany of monstrous appraisal. The villagers worry about the future—will the boys grow “interested in sexual things” forbidden to them, “with their blood subhuman and their brains primitive....” These fears echo in the language of today’s politics. The poem’s final lines return to the clipped, one- and two-syllable language of the first, the villagers satisfied that after their use, “only the dregs” will be left, “his life wrung from him like whiskey from a flattened leather flask.” The shriveling of life into leather, its full skin flattened, enacts a clinical taxidermy in which human bodies become throwaway trash: authoritarian philosophy in a nutshell.

AT RISK also reckons with the risks of love. It’s the repeating end-word in “Ghazal of the Goats”—“Not the lyric song of shepherds, my love / bleats ungodly tunes in private”—that introduces the union between “Goat Man Ches McCartney” and “a Spanish knife-thrower, his near-miss lethal lover” to that lover’s wry consideration of a long marriage: “In my act, you don’t flinch, duck, scrape, or bow. / It appears you’re an idiot for love.” Cader feels the awe of first-time motherhood in “Paeon”: “Out of our bodies we made a world, named / after ourselves, not knowing / whether it harbored a rage we might never understand, / or a god come to save us.” But awe doesn’t erase the wit of those first eleven words. “Paeon” ends with images of renewal, as the couple build a haven from the world’s alarms:

*Let me lead you now across that field
of buttercups, loosestrife’s riot of purple,
across a doorsill that opens into our sanctuary,
to windows scraped clean from winter.*

AT RISK’s finale is a discursive, fluid exemplar of juxtaposition, an art Cader deploys throughout her verse. Efforts to restore fish to a local lake in “Urban River Run” unite pilgrims, Thoreau, volunteers hauling buckets before the advent of fish ladders, and Cader’s family memories. She becomes census taker, watching an underwater video camera as eels “sleek-tail-it upstream nearby, / next to roads jammed with traffic.” When musing over fish, her staggered, flexible stanzas lap the page from margin to margin as they mimic the run of thought:

*Immigrants from the Pilgrims onward
lived on river herring, shad, salmon.*

*Silver running they’d called
the spring herring migrations so abundant
they colored the rivers*

Thought consolidates in the poem's final stanza, a summary of strategies to survive the threats of nature, nurture, and history:

When I worry about my daughters far from home,

I can count fish at my river.

When I worry about my foot swelling in the heat,

I can count fish in my living room.

*When the stink of traffic and gas leaks on Massachusetts Avenue
makes me long for the ocean,*

I can go to the Mystic Lakes and watch a blue heron on shore.

I can uproot Oriental bittersweet.

I can prepare for the run back to the sea.

AT RISK was selected by Mark Doty as winner of Ashland Poetry Press' 2023 Richard Snyder Memorial Prize (available at AshlandPoetryPress.com/product/at-risk). Its vision aligns the past with the present, art with survival, and family with memory in poems that wring the heart with pathos and shift the mind with epiphanies. Teresa Cader's *AT RISK* offers a dazzling, breathtaking response to the perplexities of our times.

- Albert Abonado, *Field Guide for Accidents*, Beacon Press, 2024
- Hussain Ahmed, *Blue Exodus*, Orison Books, 2024
- B. J. Buckley, *Flyover Country*, Pine Row Press, 2024
- B. J. Buckley, *Night Music*, Finishing Line Press, 2024
- James P. Lenfestey, *Time Remaining*, Milkweed Editions, 2024
- Kathleen McGookey, *Paper Sky*, Press 53, 2024
- Maria Zoccola, *Helen of Troy*, 1993, Scribner, 2025

If you are interested in reviewing a poetry book for *Sugar House Review*, email our review editor, Michael McLane, at reviews@sugarhousereview.com.

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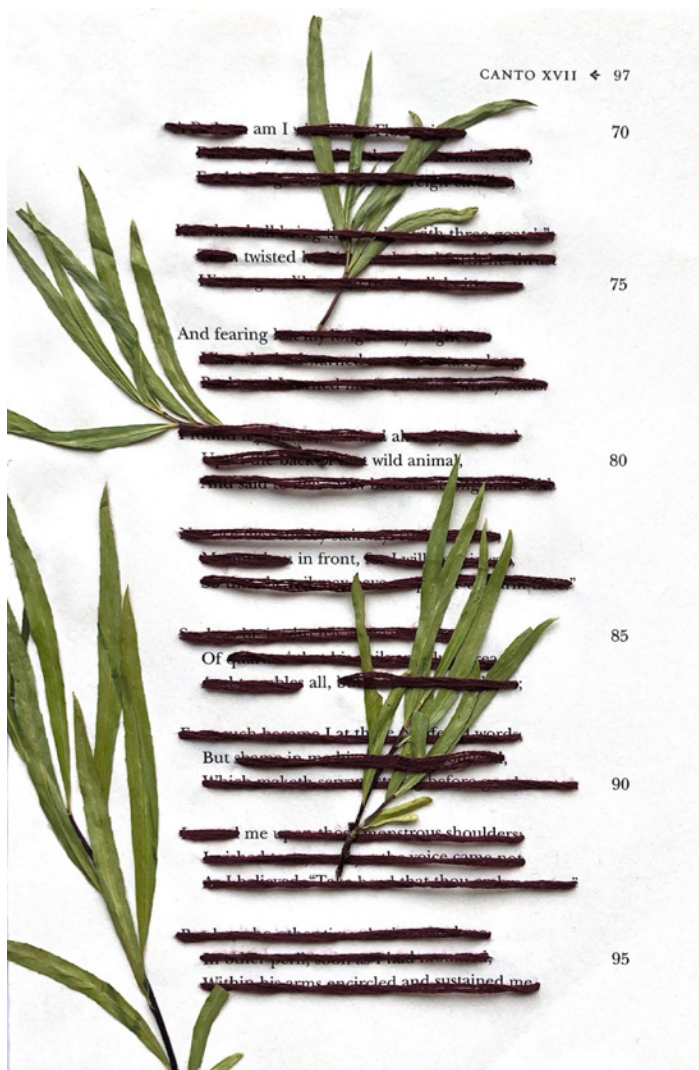
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visual poem



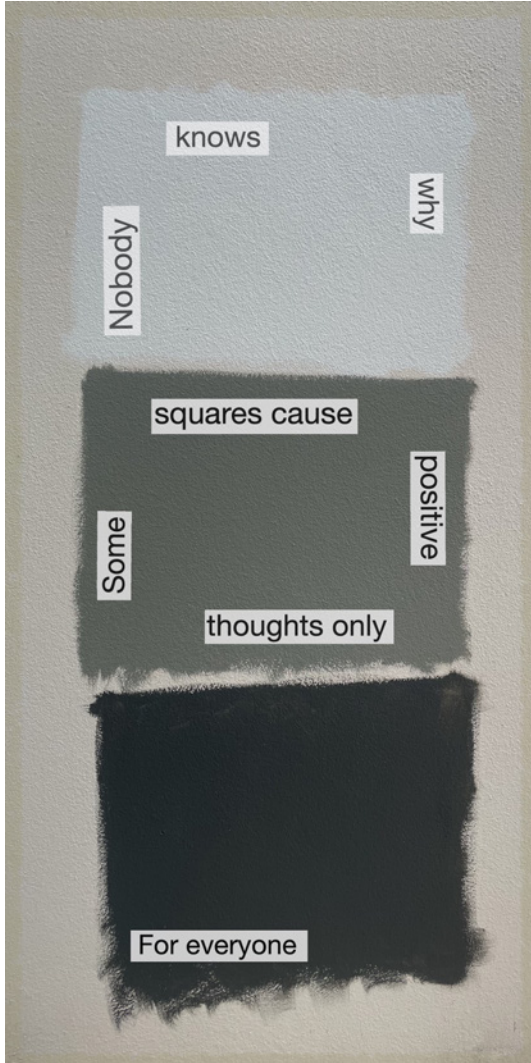
A WILD ANIMAL



visual poem



SOME SQUARES



ALBERT ABONADO is the author of the poetry collection *JAW* (Sundress Publications, 2020) and *Field Guide for Accidents* (Beacon Press, 2024), selected by Mahogany Browne for the National Poetry Series. He has received fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts. Albert is the current artist-in-residence at SUNY Oswego. His writing has appeared in *Bennington Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Zone 3*, and others. He lives and teaches in Rochester, NY.

JODI BALAS is a neurodivergent poet from northeast Pennsylvania. Her poetry has been accepted in *Hole in the Head Review*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Bluestem*, *Wild Roof Journal*, and elsewhere. Her poem "Bone Density" won the 2023 Comstock Review Muriel Craft Bailey Award judged by Danusha Lameris. Jodi is in the process of developing her first chapbook to market to the poetry world. You could follow her musings on Instagram @jodibalas_.

GAYLORD BREWER has been a professor at Middle Tennessee State University for three decades. The most recent of his 17 books of poetry, fiction, criticism, and cookery is a just-published collection of brief nonfiction, *Before the Storm Takes It Away* (Red Hen Press, 2024).

ERICA DAWSON is a neurodivergent African-American poet living in the Baltimore-DC area. She is the author of three books of poetry, most recently, *When Rap Spoke Straight to God* (Tin House, 2018). Her poems have appeared in *Best American Poetry*, *Orion*, *The Believer*, *VQR*, and other journals and anthologies. She loves her dog Stella, Wu-Tang Clan, and anything cooked with cardamom.

JOSÉ DEL VALLE is a Cuban-born writer. His poems and stories have appeared in *Triggerfish Critical Review*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Gravel*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Barnstorm*, *Frontier Poetry*, *Carve*, *The Saranac Review*, *The Acentos Review*, *Modern Haiku*, *The Mainichi (Japan)*, *Contemporary Haibun Online*, *The Heron's Nest*, the late Jane Reichhold's *Lynx*, and other small haiku pubs.

ALEXEY DEYNEKO is a pacifist who lives in Sydney, Australia. His micro-chapbook *Non-Fungible Token* is published by the Origami Poems Project. His work has appeared in *Jersey Devil Press*, *82 Star Review*, *Molecule*, *#Ranger*, and elsewhere.

FAY DILLOF'S poetry has appeared in *Best New Poets*, *Ploughshares*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Spillway*, *New Ohio Review*, *Field*, *Rattle*, and elsewhere. A recipient of scholarships from Bread Loaf and Sewanee, Fay has been awarded the Milton Kessler Memorial Prize in Poetry and the Dogwood Literary Prize. Fay lives with her husband and daughter in northern California where she works as a psychotherapist.

DENISE DUHAMEL'S most recent books of poetry are *Pink Lady* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2025), *Second Story* (2021), and *Scald* (2017). *Blowout* (2013) was a

finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. *In Which* (2024) is a winner of the Rattle Chapbook Prize. A recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, she is a distinguished university professor in the MFA program at Florida International University in Miami.

TAYLOR FRANSON-THIEL is a Pushcart-nominated poet from Utah, now based in Fairfax, VA. She received her master's in creative writing from Utah State University and is pursuing an MFA at George Mason University. Her debut collection *Bone Valley Hymnal* is forthcoming in 2025 from ELJ Editions. She is an editorial reader for *Poetry Daily*, the assistant poetry editor for *phoebe*, and the editor in chief of *BRAWL*. She can be found on Twitter @TaylorFranson.

VIOLETA GARCIA-MENDOZA is a Spanish-American poet, teacher, and suburban wildlife photographer. Her poetry has appeared in numerous literary journals, and in 2022, she received a grant from the Sustainable Arts Foundation. She is a member of the Madwomen in the Attic Writing Workshops at Carlow University. Violeta lives with her husband, teenage children, and pack of rescue dogs on a small certified wildlife habitat in western Pennsylvania. *Songs for the Land-Bound* is her debut collection, out from June Road Press in 2024. VioletaGarciaMendoza.com

SUSAN GRIMM has been published in *The Cincinnati Review*, *South Dakota Review*, and *Field*. She has had two published chapbooks. In 2004, BkMk Press published *Lake Erie Blue*, her full-length collection. In 2022, she received her third Ohio Arts Council Individual Artist Grant.

LC GUTIERREZ is a product of many places in the South and the Caribbean. An erstwhile academic, he now writes, teaches, and plays trombone in Madrid, Spain. His work is published or forthcoming in *Notre Dame Review*, *Autofocus*, *Hobart, Rogue Agent*, *Rougarou*, and other wonderful journals.

LISA HIGGS is a poet, gardener, sometimes youth soccer coach, and recipient of a 2022 Minnesota State Arts Board grant providing creative support for individual artists. Her third chapbook, *Earthen Bound*, was published by Red Bird Chapbooks in 2019. Her poetry has been published widely, and her reviews and interviews can be found at the *Poetry Foundation*, *Kenyon Review Online*, *Adroit Journal*, and *Colorado Review*. Her dog Galileo is such a fan of her work, he encourages her creative process by sitting in her lap when she revises at her computer. At 35 pounds, he is a bit much for a lap dog.

EMMA HYPHE is a poet and essayist whose work appears in *Apartment*, *LIT*, *Peach*, *Entropy*, *Denver Quarterly*, and elsewhere. Her chapbook *Picnic in the Abbattoir* was released in 2021 by dancing girl press. She lives and writes in Chicago with her partner and a cat named Dario Argento.

KASEY JUEDS is the author of two collections of poetry, both from the University of Pittsburgh Press: *Keeper*, which won the 2012 Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize, and *The Thicket*. She lives in a small town in the mountains of New York state with one human and one spotty dog.

BOB KOTYK is the cowriter of *Guy Maddin's The Forbidden Room*, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2015 and won the Rogers Prize, the Bildrausch Ring of Film Art, and was nominated for Best Picture at the Canadian Screen Awards. His first film as director, *Spirit Workers Union*, was released in 2017 and won awards at the Canada Shorts Film Festival and the Sudbury Underground Film Festival. His poetry has appeared in *Otoliths* and *Reverie*. He lives in Toronto.

MICHAEL LAUCLAN has contributed to many publications, including *New England Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The North American Review*, *Louisville Review*, *Poet Lore*, and *Lake Effect*. His most recent collection is *Trumbull Ave.*, from WSU Press.

KARA LEWIS is a writer and editor based in Minneapolis. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Permafrost Magazine*, *I-70 Review*, *SWWIM*, *Rogue Agent*, *Sprung Formal*, *Stirring*, and elsewhere. She is a recipient of the John Mark Eberhart Memorial Award and the Joel Oppenheimer Award, as well as a Best of the Net nominee. Her work was recently anthologized in *Stained: An Anthology of Writing About Menstruation*, published by Querencia Press. She serves as an editor for the socialist art and poetry zine *On the Left Bank*.

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RYAN TRACY'S poetry and fiction have appeared in *Pank* (2019 Pushcart Prize nomination for fiction), *The Hyacinth Review*, *Chronogram*, *The New Engagement*, *K.G.B.*, *The Gay and Lesbian Review*, *California Quarterly*, and *Calliope*. Essays and criticism have appeared in *The American Reader*, *The New York Press*, and *The Brooklyn Rail*. Ryan is currently visiting assistant professor of English at Knox College in Galesburg, IL. His first collection of poems, *Tender Bottoms*, was released in 2022. Ryan has a husband, a dog, and a home in upstate New York.

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