



POETRY

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POEMS

EMILY BERRY

Two Rooms

I went into one room and then I went into another.
I was in a room inside a room.
There I felt safe.

Freud's War

A cento

I became a therapist against my will
A strange feeling of forlornness, a feeling I could not have stood
Painful isolation, quite steep and slanting
A beautiful forest which had the one drawback of seeming never to
 end
I have had to struggle so long
I have always been frank with you, haven't I?
I wanted to explain the reason for my inaccessibility
I am lying here on a short leash in this filthy hole
So far I haven't been locked up
Several people point to gaps in my face where the little girl has been
 cut out
She screams and screams without any self-control
Ravaged by the heat and the blood-&-thunder melodrama
Neither describable nor bearable
I felt I had known her all my life

Freud's Beautiful Things

A cento

I have some sad news for you
I am but a symbol, a shadow cast on paper
If only you knew how things look within me at the moment
Trees covered in white blossom
The remains of my physical self
Do you really find my appearance so attractive?
Darling, I have been telling an awful lot of lies lately
If only I knew what you are doing now?
Standing in the garden and gazing out into the deserted street?
Not a mermaid, but a lovely human being
The whole thing reminds me of the man trying to rescue a birdcage
 from the burning house
(I feel compelled to express myself poetically)
I am not normally a hunter of relics, but ...
It was this childhood scene ...
(My mother ...)
All the while I kept thinking: *her face has such a wild look*
... as though she had never existed
The fact is I have not yet seen her in daylight
Distance must remain distance
A few proud buildings; your lovely photograph
I find this loss very hard to bear
The bells are ringing, I don't quite know why
What makes all autobiographies worthless is, after all, their mendacity
Yesterday and today have been bad days
This oceanic feeling, continuous inner monologues
I said, "All the beautiful things I still have to say will have to remain
 unsaid," and the writing table flooded

HELEN HAJNOCZKY



ERIKA L. SÁNCHEZ

Narco

Highway of Death — the indifference
of snakes. Sky is ripe and everywhere
the colors are breaking. *¿Quién es el jefe
más jefe?* In the filmy stillness, Possum-face
carries a bucket of heads and spills them
like marbles. *La yerba, el polvo, las piedras —
Que traguen fierro los cabrones,
iyo soy el más chingón de Pisaflores!*
Rompe-madres, gazing at mountains
the color of elephant skin, pulls a woman
from a bus and onto the thorns and dirt:
White hiss of heat. Hummingbirds. Milkweed.
A pack of spotted horses look to the foaming
moon. *May God bless you all and lead you
toward righteousness.* Under the final gash
of light, Rompe-madres wipes the sweat
from his eyes, and ties her panties to a creosote bush —
a colony of vultures waiting for its tribute.

CHASE TWICHELL

The Ghost of Tom

At family gatherings,
a Family Friend liked gathering
the girls to make us sing rounds.

We always wanted the spooky one,
Have you seen the ghost of Tom?
Long white bones with the rest all gone ...

We'd substitute words, like long white *boners*

with the rest all gone,
which he pretended not to hear

because who knows, any one of us
might blow his cover at any minute,

unpredictable little liars that we were,
the girl cousins, talking preteen trash
about him, the things he likes to do,

for example gather the girl cousins
and make them sing against their wills.

His personal favorite was
Tender Shepherd, tender Shepherd,

Let me help you count your sheep.
One in the meadow, two in the garden,

Three in the nursery, fast asleep.

One Christmas there were only
three of us, so we sang

the round with one part missing.
I still listen to the fourth part —

that's the real ghost.

MONICA YOUN

Blackacre

Sonnet 19 (On His Blindness) by John Milton

I. SPENT

In Sonnet 19, Milton makes the seemingly deliberate choice to avoid “the” and “a” — respectively, the most common and the sixth most common words in English usage. Instead of these articles — definite and indefinite — the poem stages a territorial dispute between possessives: the octave is “my” land, the sestet is “his” land, with the occasional “this” or “that” flagging no man’s land. We come to understand Milton’s mistake — the professed regret of the poem — as this act of claiming. It is only through his taking possession that the universal light is divided up, apportioned into “my light” — a finite commodity that by being subjected to ownership becomes capable of being “spent.”

“Spent” — a word like a flapping sack.

My mistake was similar. I came to consider my body — its tug-of-war of tautnesses and slacknesses — to be entirely my own, an appliance for generating various textures and temperatures of friction. Should I have known, then, that by this act of self-claiming, I was cutting myself off from the eternal, the infinite, that I had fashioned myself into a resource that was bounded and, therefore, exhaustible?

2. WIDE

The “wide” is always haunted by surprise. In a dark world, the “wide” is the sudden door that opens on unfurling blackness, the void pooling at the bottom of the unlit stairs. To be bounded is our usual condition; to be open is anomalous, even excessive.

A wide-eyed girl is extreme in her unlidness, her bare membranes flinching at any contact, vulnerable to motes, to smuts, to dryness. A wide-hipped girl extends the splayed arches of her body to bridge the generational divide. A wide-legged girl unseals a portal between persons; she is disturbing to the extent that she is open to all comers, a trapdoor that must be shut for safety’s sake. A wide-eyed girl is often thought desirable; a wide-hipped girl is often thought eligible; a wide-legged girl is often thought deplorable. A wide-legged girl is rarely wide-eyed, though she may have started out that way.

We can understand why Milton, in the narrowing orbit of his blindness, would have considered wideness, unboundedness to be threatening. What’s less clear is why the wideness of the wide-legged girl is also considered threatening. Does the wideness of the wide-legged girl evoke a kind of blindness, a dark room where one might blunder into strangers, the way two men once met each other in me?

3. HIDE

“But why hide it in a hole?” asks the Master, returning from his long absence, sparks of bewilderment flaring into rage.

An unanswered question worries at the Parable of the Talents: why is the Master so terribly angry? It is not as if the servant had stolen the money, or spent it—his sin is one of omission, of overly risk-averse investing. A talent was a unit of weight in ancient Greece: in monetary terms, it was worth eighty pounds of silver, or 6,000 denarii—nearly twenty years’ wages for the average worker. But Milton uses the word in its more modern sense, dating from the fifteenth century: a natural ability or skill.

How did a word for a deadweight of metal come to mean something inborn, innate? Confusion between the inorganic and the natural trickles into the parable and the poem. The Master prides himself on being a man who reaps where he has not sown and gathers where he did not scatter seed. Was the servant’s fault to confuse coins for seeds, did he think he was planting when he was merely burying, did he mistake for viable what had no chance of living, what had never been alive?

4. BENT

And what about the hole, which for so long had held treasure? Did it wonder why — despite all the moistness and richness it could muster — those cold, glinting seeds never sprouted? Did it understand that, if released into the wider world, the coins could have quickened, multiplied? That instead of an incubator, the hole had become an oubliette, a place where otherwise fruitful things were sent to languish, to become lodged, useless?

“Useless” — a word like a capped lead pipe, like the extra bone in my foot I will never pass down to my daughter.

A thing becomes useless if it is bent out of shape. To “get bent” is to be put to another kind of use, a use my therapist considered tantamount to rape. To bend is to be bound, to bow down without breaking, with perhaps just the head tilted at an angle so as to peer upward.

5. PRESENT

The Master has become the Maker. The servile body wholly “his,” splayed wide in a welcome-home, bound up in a beribboned bow.

But the reader will object. This is all wrong. First of all, in the sonnet, “bent” doesn’t mean to bow down as if in submission to an outside force, but instead denotes an innate or internalized tendency or inclination. Second, a “present” is not a gift, but a verb meaning to offer openly, full-faced, the sun beaming down on a clean page. Third, the body never comes into it at all.

“Therewith” — a safe word, a strongbox to be buried.

6. CHIDE

Is a “true account” a story or a sum? Is the Maker an audience or an auditor?

The page scoured white by little grains of fear.

A story has an ending. A sum has a bottom line. There was no accounting for me because my allotment leaked out of me, month after month, I scrubbed the sheets as if effacing the marks of a crime.

Then one day the fear reversed itself. Like a photo negative but in higher contrast — its whites more glaring and its darks more glossy, as if a whisper-thin suspicion had come unzipped.

“Chide” is an enormous understatement. The servant isn’t merely scolded, he is cast into “the outer darkness” where there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” If the “outer darkness” is deemed to be a punishment, then does that lustrous inner darkness count as a reward?

7. DENIED

It seems unfair, is Milton's point. To be assigned a task, but not provided sufficient materials to complete it, is to be placed in a situation of contrived scarcity, like a lab rat or like the youngest sister in a fairy tale.

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins—which prefaces the Parable of the Talents—centers on this scarcity. The virgins wait for the bridegroom, to greet him with lamps alight. Five virgins have brought extra flasks of oil, but five virgins have let their lamps burn out and must go lampless into the night to look for oil. That much we are told, but questions hover around the shadowed margins of the story. Why isn't the bridegroom with the bride? Why is he so delayed? Why is the bridegroom met in the middle of the night by a phalanx of lamp-bearing virgins, like a troupe of pom-pom girls or like a sacrificial rite?

The virginity of the virgins renders them piquant, memorable. Adorning gothic portals, evoking thresholds, entrances, they are a particular feature of French cathedrals—much more so, one suspects, than if the parable had called them “maidservants” or even “bridesmaids.”

The presumed desideratum of the story does not interest us much: the sated bridegroom at the midnight feast, the smug, unctuous faces of the wise virgins. Instead, the imagination pursues the foolish virgins rushing into the night, their desperation making them vulnerable, their vulnerability making them erotic, the fill-holes of their useless lamps dark and slick with oil. Is this how I was taught to sexualize insufficiency, the lack that set me wandering night after night, my body too early emptied out?

8. PREVENT

“Prevent” — a word like a white sheet folded back to cover the mouth.

A white egg bursts from the ovary and falls away, leaving a star-shaped scar. *Corpus albicans*, the whitening body. Such starbursts, at first, are scattered constellations, frost embroidering a dark field. But at what point does this white lacework shift over from intricacy to impossibility, opacity, obstacle — the ice disc clogging the round pond, the grid of proteins baffling the eye?

“Prevent” — a word that slams shut, a portcullis (Latin: *cataracta*).

Letter to Leonard Philaras, September 28, 1654: “the dimness which I experience by night and day, seems to incline more to white than to black.”

9. NEED

Has Patience been looming in the background all along, silent, so as not to intrude upon a blind man's consciousness? Patience, whose garment is "white and close-fitting so that it is not blown about or disturbed by the wind."

At the turn of the sonnet, Patience pries open its sculpted lips, its stiff tongue like a weaver's shuttle drawing woolly strands through the warp and weft of Milton's blindness, a white monologue that admits neither interruption nor rejoinder.

Milton's little murmur stitched back into his mouth.

Woven tight enough to repel need — a liquid beading on the surface, the blood the needles drew from me week after week, hundreds of stoppered vials consigned to the biohazard bin, en route to the incinerator.

"Need," from the High German, for danger.

"Murmur," from the Sanskrit, a crackling fire.

IO. BEST

The best beam in contentment, ranging themselves in rows. Erect as test tubes but forswearing undue pride in such uprightness, mustering shoulder-to-shoulder with the fellow-elect. The best arrayed in regimental ranks, in refrigerated racks, white hymn of the unneeded, white hum of the unneeding.

“Best,” originally superlative of *bot* (Old English: remedy, reparation).

The best affect a pious pose, mouths held taut in tongueless Os. *Sotto voce* chorus of that soft, subjunctive song: *if you were complete ... if you were replete ...*

Superlative. The most remediated. The most repaired.

II. STATE

To be scooped out, emptied of need and rinsed clean of its greasy smears, pristine as a petri dish on a stainless lab table. Enucleated, the white of the egg awaiting an unknown yolk.

“Yolk” from *geolu* (Old English: yellow). Not to be confused with “yoke” from *geocian* (Old English: to be joined together). A yoke is an implement, meant to be used, to fill a need. But where there is no field to be plowed, no wagon to be pulled, why demand a yoke that is useless, needless?

One day the Romans sent for Cincinnatus to lead the republic against the invading Aequian army. He laid down his plow in the field and went to war. When the Aequians surrendered, Cincinnatus spared their lives but decreed that they must “pass under the yoke.” The Romans fashioned a yoke from three spears, two fixed in the ground, and one tied across the tops of the two verticals. Since the horizontal spear was only a few feet off the ground, the Aequians were made to crouch down like animals in order to complete the surrender. This is thought to be the origin of the word “subjugate,” to be brought under the yoke. To bear a yoke is to be bowed down, oxbowed, cowed.

One day they laid me down on a gurney, my feet strapped in stirrups, my legs bent and splayed like the horns of a white bull.

12. SPEED

But why would Milton, of all people, use the word “Kingly” as a compliment? Roundheaded Milton, who wrote tract after tract in defense of regicide, who would later be detained for opposing the Restoration?

At this point, our suspicions are confirmed: Milton has disappeared entirely from the poem. We haven't heard from him since the turn of the sonnet. We've been lulled by the cadenced voice of Patience, its dusty tongue self-lubricating, its pallid breath clouding the room, precipitating frangible chains of hydrocarbons, their branchings barbed like fluffs of eiderdown. Through the faint reticulations, we discern no dark stoop-shouldered figure, but only white-robed forms, upright as if hung from hooks, their faces unyielding as lanterns, shuttered as if once aflame.

13. REST

Rest — a word like a gauze bandage, a ropy weave of collagen knitting its way across a wound. Outspread as if fingered, gelid gestures suggesting solace: to stanch, to shield, to seal, to shut off.

Rest — the rind of the best, a contoured pod that cradles the shape of what it doesn't hold.

Rest — those who are left when thousands have sped away, the bereft, who litter the land, with husks for hands, vacant-eyed, vacant faces raised like basins under a contrail-scarred sky.

14. WAIT

To stand and wait is a task far weightier than simply to wait. It is to permit the distractible body neither ease nor action, nor food nor drink nor any such reprieve; it is to pit the body in enmity against its own heaviness.

To abide in readiness as in a winter orchard, the lacerated land bandaged in snow. To exist inert as if limbless, skin seamless as if reknit over what had been pruned away, knotted rootstock fit for no other service: no branch, no leaf, no fruit. To persist as a stripped stick persists in a white field, bark peeled back from one exposed split, uptilted as if eager for the grafted slip.

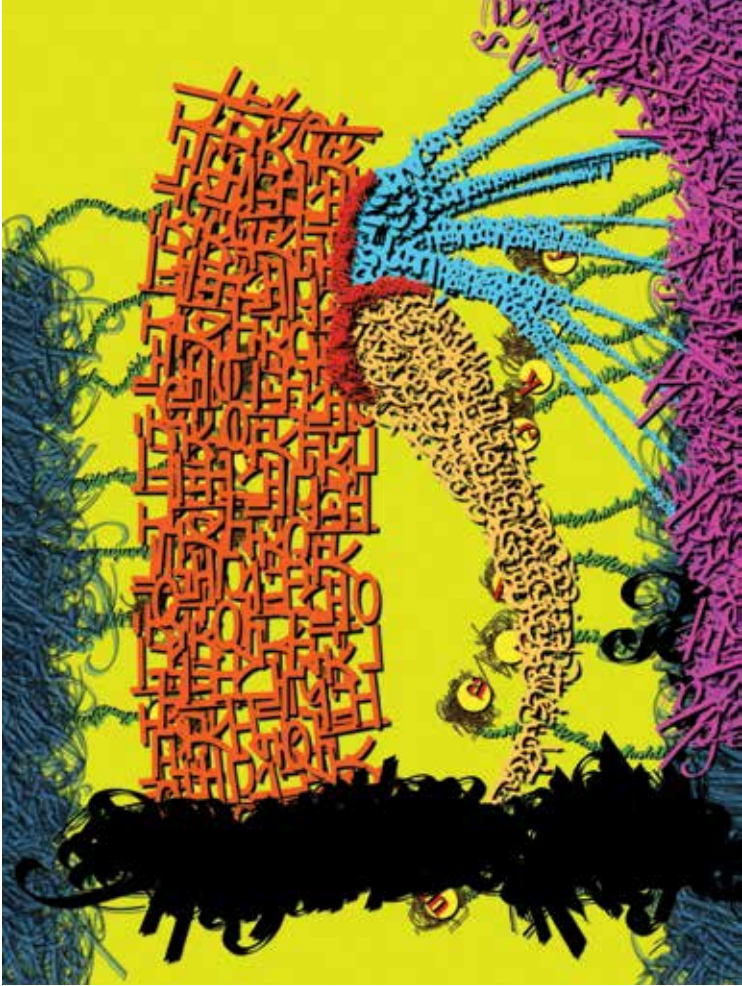
To stand and wait for the one who reaps where he has not sown.

Mercy sugars the starving soil with nitrogen, potassium, phosphate. Mercy captures rain in silver beads and stitches them through the threadbare weave of cloud. Mercy wields a scalpel cutting a cleft in the lopped-off stump, mercy forces home the rootless wand, mercy seals the join with tar and tape.

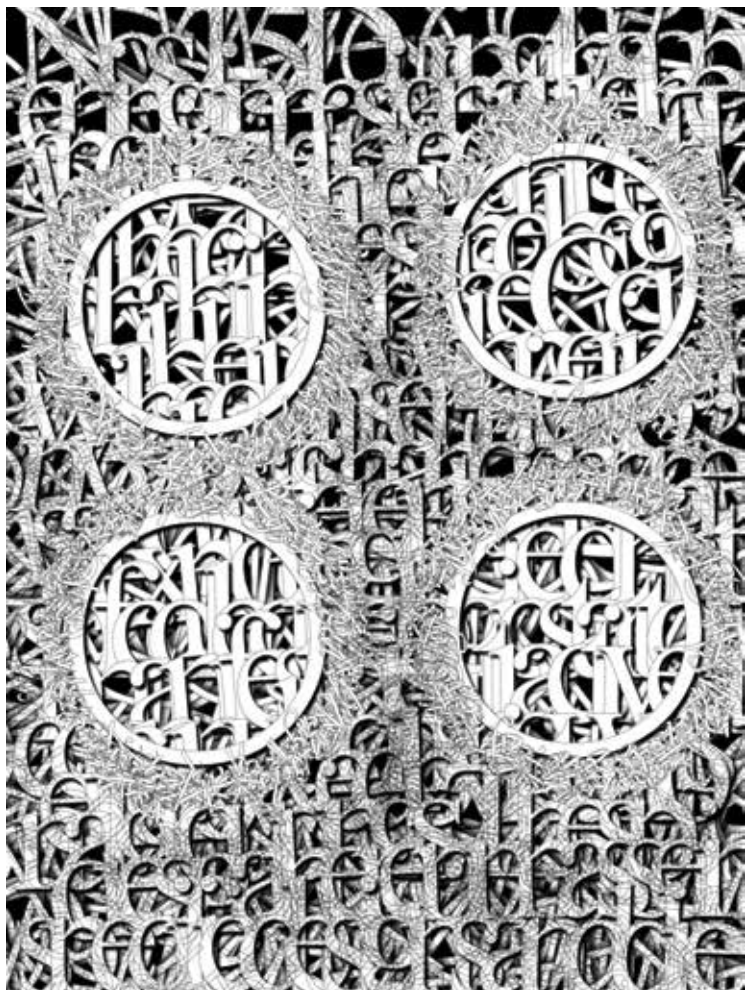
To foster the raw scion as if it were a son, to siphon light down through its body as if it were your own.

NICO VASSILAKIS

Receptor



Coins



KATHRYN STARBUCK

Sylvia En Route to Kythera

I never much liked
forsythia, never
liked yellow, but
liked the sounds:
for syth i a
for Kythera for sight
for sky for Sylvia.

Forsythia made an
okay divider between
our place and hers.
Sylvia used to trod
through it to see us
too often so we let
all of it grow massive

and dense hoping
she'd go blind in
it then hop aboard
a bumblebee who'd
follow his lovely great
queen as she flew to her
dream isle of Kythera.

LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI

Beatitudes Visuales Mexicanas

October–November 1975

Autobus on Paseo de la Reforma with destination signs: BELLAS ARTES INSURGENTES. *Exactamente*. Just what's needed: Insurgent Arts. *Poesía Insurgente*. This is not it ...

1

Bus to Veracruz via Puebla + Xalapa ... Adobe house by highway, with no roof and one wall, covered with words: LA LUZ DEL MUNDO.

2

Passing through Puebla late Sunday afternoon. A band concert in a plaza next to a Ferris wheel—I have passed through many places like this, I have seen the toy trains in many amusement parks. When you've seen them all you've seen One.

3

Halfway to Xalapa a great white volcano snow peak looms up above the hot *altiplano* — White god haunting Indian dreams.

4

A boy and three burros run across a stubble field, away from the white mountain. He holds a stick. There is no other way.

5

Deep yellow flowers in the dusk by the road, beds of them stretching away into darkness. A moon the same color comes up.

6

As the bus turns + turns down the winding hill, moon swings wildly from side to side. It has had too many pathetic phallusies written about it to stand still for one more.

7

In Xalapa I am a head taller than anyone else in town—A foot of flesh and two languages separate us.

8

At a stand in the park at the center of Xalapa I eat white corn on the cob with a stick in the end, sprinkled with salt, butter, grated cheese + hot sauce. The dark stone Indian who hands it to me has been standing there three thousand years.

9

I'm taking this trip from Mexico City to the Gulf of Mexico and back without any bag or person—only what I can carry in my pockets. The need for baggage is a form of insecurity.

10

Two hours in this town and I feel I might live forever (foreign places affect me that way). The tall church tower tolls its antique sign: PRAY.

11

In early morning in the great garden of Xalapa, with its terraces and immense jacaranda trees, pines + palms, there are black birds with cries like bells, and others with hollow wooden voices like gourds knocked together. The great white volcano shimmers far off, unreached by the rising sun.

12

Brown men in white palmetto cowboy hats stand about the fountains in groups of three or four, their voices lost to the hollow-sounding birds. Along a sunlit white stone balustrade, student lovers are studying each other, *novios* awaiting the day. The sun beats down hot and melts not the mountain.

13

On the bus again to Veracruz, dropping down fast to flat coast. A tropical feeling—suddenly coffee plantation + palms—everything small except the landscape, horses the size of burros, small black avocados, small strong men with machetes—each still saying to himself *Me llamo yo*.

YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA

Michio Ito's Fox & Hawk

Ito ran to a window. He danced.
He howled. He cursed the moon,
interned in a camp before he was
carted on a ship back to Tokyo.
Hadn't he almost died for art
the evenings he ate bread soup?
If he wished to forget those days
& nights dancing in drawing rooms
in London, or translating Fenollosa's
notes on Noh, he'd have to unbraid
himself from *At the Hawk's Well*,
& then let go of the Egyptian
mask Dulac painted him into —
claws, beak, feathers, & legend.
Why did that silly boy tell a story
about his grandmother weeping
when she first saw him dressed
in his grandfather's samurai armor
to hold the gaze of Lady Cunard?
He was again studying the fox
holding a biscuit in his hand,
saying, "I went to a great hill
in Hampstead & I made my soul
into the soul of a fox." Finally,
he would let go of his Europe,
& not think of those he loved
& taught, Isadora lost. Now,
powerless & alone, he dances
his ten steps again & again,
wanting to know if a hawk
could peck the eyes out of a fox.

I'm not a religious person but

God sent an angel. One of his least qualified, though. Fluent only in Lemme get back to you. The angel sounded like me, early twenties, unpaid interning. Proficient in fetching coffee, sending super vague emails. It got so bad God personally had to speak to me. This was annoying because I'm not a religious person. I thought I'd made this clear to God by reading Harry Potter & not attending church except for gay weddings. God did not listen to me. God is not a good listener. I said Stop it please, I'll give you wedding cake, money, candy, marijuana. Go talk to married people, politicians, children, reality TV stars. I'll even set up a booth for you, then everyone who wants to talk to you can do so without the stuffy house of worship, the stuffier middlemen, & the football blimps that accidentally intercept prayers on their way to heaven. I'll keep the booth decorations simple but attractive: stickers of angels & cats, because I'm not religious but didn't people worship cats? Thing is, God couldn't take a hint. My doctor said to eat an apple every day. My best friend said to stop sleeping with guys with messiah complexes. My mother said she is pretty sure she had sex with my father so I can't be some new Asian Jesus. I tried to enrage God by saying things like When I asked my mother about you, she was in the middle of making dinner so she just said Too busy. I tried to confuse God by saying I am a made-up dinosaur & a real dinosaur & who knows maybe I love you, but then God ended up relating to me. God said I am a good dinosaur but also sort of evil & sometimes loving no one. It rained & we stayed inside. Played a few rounds of backgammon. We used our indoor voices. It got so quiet I asked God about the afterlife. Its existence, human continued existence. He said Oh. That. Then sent his angel again. Who said Ummmmmmmm. I never heard from God or his rookie angel after that. I miss them. Like creatures I made up or found in a book, then got to know a bit.

Poplar Street

Oh. Sorry. Hello. Are you on your way to work, too?
I was just taken aback by how you also have a briefcase,

also small & brown. I was taken by how you seem, secretly,
to love everything. Are you my new coworker? Oh. I see. No.

Still, good to meet you. I'm trying out this thing where it's good
to meet people. Maybe, beyond briefcases, we have some things

in common. I like jelly beans. I'm afraid of death. I'm afraid
of farting, even around people I love. Do you think your mother

loves you when you fart? Does your mother love you
all the time? Have you ever doubted?

I like that the street we're on is named after a tree,
when there are none, poplar or otherwise. I wonder if a tree

has ever been named after a street, whether that worked out.
If I were a street, I hope I'd get a good name, not Main

or One-Way. One night I ran out of an apartment,
down North Pleasant Street — it was soft & neighborly

with pines & oaks, it felt too hopeful,
after what happened. After my mother's love

became doubtful. After I told her I liked a boy & she wished
I had never been born. After she said she was afraid

of me, terrified I might infect my brothers
with my abnormality. Sometimes, parents & children

become the most common strangers. Eventually,
a street appears where they can meet again.

Or not. I've doubted my own love for my mother. I doubt.
Do I have to forgive in order to love? Or do I have to love

for forgiveness to even be possible? What do you think?
I'm trying out this thing where questions about love & forgiveness

are a form of work I'd rather not do alone. I'm trying to say,
Let's put our briefcases on our heads, in the sudden rain,

& continue meeting as if we've just been given our names.

VICTORIA CHANG

Mr. Darcy

In the end she just wanted the house
and a horse not much more what
if he didn't own the house or worse
not even a horse how do we

separate the things from a man the man from
the things is a man still the same
without his reins here it rains every fifteen
minutes it would be foolish to

marry a man without an umbrella did
Cinderella really love the prince or
just the prints on the curtains in the
ballroom once I went window-

shopping but I didn't want a window when
do you know it's time to get a new
man one who can win more things at the
fair I already have four stuffed

pandas from the fair I won fair and square
is it time to be less square to wear
something more revealing in *North and*
South she does the dealing gives him

the money in the end but she falls in love
with him when he has the money when
he is still running away if the water is
running in the other room is it wrong

for me to not want to chase it because it owns
nothing else when I wave to a man I
love what happens when another man with
a lot more bags waves back

DANNIEL SCHOONEBEEK

The Dancing Plague

Who was the woman who lived in the kingdom behind the barrier.
There are those who will tell you she was the wife of every man in
the village.
And one night while her husbands were finishing their day at the
gasworks,
the woman was boiling oats for her only child,
a young girl who'd amassed a beautiful collection of spoons in her life,
each one given to her by one of her mother's husbands.
And this same night the young daughter died.
And the woman buried the daughter with her spoons in her pockets.
Come daybreak the hostiles appeared at the barrier with ice in their
beards.
"To hell with Pax Americana," they said.
And they camped outside the wall that night chanting war cries.
You say you want to know the names of the war cries that survived
history.
"Wheel the gun carriages up to the barrier of the empire of husbands."
"Our first word is ruin and our next word is value."
There are those who will tell you the hostiles carried on like this for
some weeks.
Until one night the dead daughter led them behind the barrier,
through a tunnel she'd dug in the earth with her spoons.
It was thus the hostiles made it their business to burn everything.
They burned the village crops and the distillery.
They burned the apothecary, the potash mine.
Black soot fell on the livery and they burned the livery too.
And there's another war cry that's since survived history:
"Tonight like god's scalp in your kingdom behind the barrier
our burning makes snow and ends nowhere."
You say, where were the village husbands while all of this was
happening.
There are those who will tell you they were working their jobs at
the gasworks,
and when they heard the bullhorn roar in the watchtower
they were smoking cigarillos and pacing the floor of the gasworks.

And the roar of the bullhorn had a strange effect on the husbands,
who each began daydreaming of his wife at home in the village.
The first husband thought: "The taste of the breath of my wife,
it's like saying the word *houndstooth* to myself in the dark."
The next husband thought of her letting her hair down in front of a
vanity,
and smearing her blue eye shadow onto her fingers,
and plucking the stray hairs and flyaways off her head.
The next husband thought of her saying, "I'm correcting god's
blunders,"
when he asked her why she wears all this foundation on her face.
Another husband thought: "Quitting time is worthless to me
so long as the work I do in the gasworks makes me think of my
wife's jawbone."
And all together the husbands said: "The jawbones of my wife,
they beat both the same, like when I watch a train leave the
kingdom,
and all I can see is the pistons beating away in the smoke."
And when the hostiles entered the gasworks the husbands were
dancing.
And you say you want to know the words the hostiles spoke when
they entered.
There are those who will tell you they said this: "Don't quit dancing."
"There's a penalty for an empire that believes it can survive itself,"
they said.
And so they pointed their war clubs at the husbands,
and they said don't quit, don't quit dancing on the floor of the
gasworks,
and they bludgeoned to death the husbands who refused to keep
dancing,
and one by one the husbands fell dead on the floor of the gasworks,
each one dancing himself to death at the hands of the hostiles.

And this dancing took many deaths.

But you say where was the wife who lost all her husbands this day.
There are those who will tell you she was hiding the last of the
cheese in a boot.
She was rolling up the deed to her house in the village.
She was picking up her daughter's violin and stuffing the scroll in
the violin's f-hole.
She was fleeing for the wall when she was stopped by the hostiles.
Dance, said the hostiles, and they pointed their war clubs at her skull.
And these war clubs had a strange effect on the wife,
who began daydreaming about a man who wasn't her husband.
She thought of cutting his hair in a sunflower patch in the village.
The time should be dusk, she thought, and the shears,
they should flash once in her hands like a scythe.
She thought there should be two swarms of no-see-ums,
one smoldering around each of her hands.
And she'd tilt back the head of the man who wasn't her husband.
And she'd oil his throat with the badger brush in her hand.
And he'd smell the sandalwood lather she worked in the bristles.
And he'd smell the eau de cologne on her neck when she leaned in close.
And she'd shave his throat with the blade of a balisong.
And the woman thought each time he moaned when she stroked him
a dragonfly should dance from his mouth.
And he'll moan until the dragonfly quits dancing, she thought.
And I'll dance around his throat all night like a lantern.
"Because a war club doesn't taste like a war club," she said.
"It tastes like my husbands all breathing at once."
She spoke these words with a hole in her skull in the snow.
And the smoke coming out of the hole was her thoughts.
And her body lying there in the village square was so beautiful
the hostiles began to dance on either side of the body.
And they danced, and they danced, until they too fell dead in the
snow beside her.

D.A. POWELL

Not Overlooking the Kum & Go

Who needs a scary movie when there's scary life.
Icy days pile up like empty pill bottles.
One craves hot soup and bear sex. I can't hibernate
above the Kum & Go when there's Smokey lights

all night. It isn't easy making change for a twenty
on a Tuesday night, when they're filling the tanks
beneath the pumps and the manager's on break.

All underage kids must come here. And go here?
The world rhymes with itself. Earth is earth
and row is row, whether to pull a set of oars and scull
or a line of cornstalks completing the farmer's math.

Up above the Kum & Go
I'm reading Maya Angelou

And there's a head shop open 24 hrs
they do not sell head but you might think it
the way the patrons come and go all night
all fall all night all fall.

I lived behind a sex club called The Power Exchange.
All words have been charged with electric bodies
ever since I wandered into my first poem.
It was surely the Road Not Taken.
Or maybe The Body Electric ... I'm easily mistaken.

An alder is reptilian in its body, lithe
leaves at night and such vocal things.
It is a sexy tongue the world speaks.
So many licks to get to the polished moon.
Tell me a story then. How did you come to be
trampled or new or high where the warblers land
and recklessly shit where they eat.

The universe I fear to be crashing.
No painkillers for Doug. Ugh.
It's just autumn come. Electrical storms.
The brave fire of the leaves and everything.

The pawpaw, along with the huckleberry,
the chokecherry, cranberry, Concord grape, and persimmon
is one of the indigenous fruits. I usually only get it here,
and only this time of year. Fear
is real. Especially that most unholy fear
that we will be forgotten. Fruit, when it's rotten,
opens a door to memory from other lives. Is it wrong
to wish for another life? My hand can barely
write the thought. My eye can barely
see, my soul, translate the fire into autumn's sweet flush,
persimmons taste like semen, pawpaw tastes like flesh,
large hard seeds like date pits I spit off the balcony
in summer into the parking lot below
where none are sure to be hit nor anything grow.

A spider would not lower himself to touch such
concrete ground. I would not live to see a tree
grow to fruition, and yet each year I'd like to try.
Well, Midwest, here I am. It's pumpkin time.
The cicadas have stopped singing.
It's just the crickets now along the river.
But above the Kum & Go, it's wind and machinery.
Why do they all take the same path, and why
do these undergrads shout against the fall wind.
The rebel angels' cries are but the check-in
cries of birds, "hey Mike, hey Mike." It must
be hard to be Mike, your name reduced
in the ears of others to a syllable of grief.
And then it seems that Mike is gone. Relief.

EREZ BITTON

Scaffolding

On the threshold of half a house in the Land of Israel
my father stood
pointing to the sides and saying:
Upon these ruins
one day we will build a kitchen
to cook in it a Leviathan's tail
and a wild bull,
upon these ruins
we will build a corner for prayer
to make room
for a bit of holiness.
My father remained on the threshold
and I, my entire life,
have been erecting scaffolding
reaching up to the sky.

Translated from the Hebrew by Tsipi Keller

MICHAEL KLEIN

Other Horses

I wept in a stable.
I found money in the dirt.
I reenacted a car accident in the tack room.
I asked a horse van driver to let me off where the bridle path stopped.
I looked at the jockey for what he was dreaming.
I told him he was wrong about making things happen.
He couldn't make things happen.
I couldn't make things happen anymore.
There is exactly not enough money in the world.
Magical thinking got me where I am today.
Animals are warriors of time.
I stopped keeping things hidden.
That wasn't a horse we saw in the winner's circle.
I can't stop horses as much as you can't stop horses.

BRIDGET LOWE

Rocksteady in Dimension X

No longer interested in evil,
the soul turns on its back
at the watering hole, kicks its muscled legs.

Everything goes neon pink
and green in the noonday sun
when I press my thumbs

to my little black eyes. My snout,
wet with its own abundant grease,
smells nothing of threat,

of consequence. I put my hands
behind my head, I have no
bidding to do. My feet go up

on the desk, a woman appears
at my side. This is what I've earned
in Eden. The right to close my eyes

when the camouflage trousers
come wading through
the apple blossom's slough —

and the dream of myself as a baby
emerging from the mortal
body, hoof by gleaming hoof.

Revival

Here, I am blowing this little stream
of blue vapor into your parted lips.

Here, I am placing my hands on your chest
in an X while my red nails distract

the crowd of impostor lifeguards
closing in. Here is the place to raise

the tent, I can feel it in my bones.
The snake has perfected his skin, he is

ready to be lifted and passed. How
did I do it? The process was messy,

I'd rather not share it, but look, look
at us now. Lemon drops and cherry bombs.

It's the eye of the tiger, went the song
I used to sing in the basement alone.

STANLEY PLUMLY

Variation on a Line from Elizabeth Bishop's "Five Flights Up"

Sometimes it's the shoes, the tying and untying,
the bending of the heart to put them on,
take them off, the rush of blood
between the head and feet, my face,
sometimes, if I could see it, astonished.
Other times the stairs, three, four stages
at the most, "flights" we call them,
in honor of the wings we'll never have,
the fifth floor the one that kills the breath,
where the bird in the building flies to first.
Love, too, a leveler, a dying all its own,
the parts left behind not to be replaced,
a loss ongoing, and every day increased,
like rising in the night, at 3:00 AM,
to watch the snow or the dead leaf fall,
the rings around the streetlight in the rain,
and then the rain, the red fist in the heart
opening and closing almost without me.
"— Yesterday brought to today so lightly!"
The morning, more and more, like evening.
When I bend to tie my shoes and the blood
fills the cup, it's as if I see into the hidden earth,
see the sunburned path on which I pass
in shoes that look like sandals
and arrive at a house where my feet
are washed and wiped with my mother's hair
and anointed with the autumn oils of wildflowers.

TIMOTHY YU

Chinese Silence No. 92

After "Exile's Letter" by Ezra Pound

To Tom S. of Missouri, possum friend, clerk at Lloyd's.
Now I remember that you rang a silent bell
By the foot of the bridge at the River "Thames."
With dull roots and dried tubers, you wrote poems and laments
And grew more English month on month, bowing to kings and princes.
Americans came drifting in from the sea and from the west border,
And with them, and with me especially
Everything was pig-headed,
And I made hay from poppycock and painted adjectives,
Just so we could start a new fellowship,
And we all escaped our personalities, without expressing them.
And then I was sent off to Rapallo,
 trailed by children,
And you to your desk at Faber-Faber,
Till we had nothing but China and silence in common.
And then, when modernism had come to its worst,
We wrote, and published in Po-Etry,
Through all the one hundred kinds of shy and whispering silence,
Into a poem of a thousand blank pages,
That was the first heave;
And into ten thousand poems full of Chinese reticence.
And with chafing saddle and the bit in his mouth
Out from the East came Confucius and his philosophy,
And there came also the "True-man" Ben-it-o to awe me,
Playing in the death-mask of Jefferson.
In the botched houses of Europe they gave us more foetid music,
Clanging instruments, like the sound of a myriad dying.
My forefather Confucius got me drunk and I danced
 because my savage mind wouldn't keep still
Without his music playing,
And I, wrapped in silence, woke up with my head on his lap,
And my voice returning to me from every radio,
And before the end of the broadcast we scattered like cards, or bombs,

I had to be off to China, so far across my desktop,
You back to your London-bridge.

And our Roosevelt, who was brave as a rodent,
Was president in Washing Town, and let in the usurious rabble.
And one May he sent the soldiers for me,
 despite the long distance.

And what with broken idols and so on, I won't say it wasn't hard going,
Over roads twisted like my brain's folds.

And I was still going, late in the war,
 with defeat blowing in from the North,

Not guessing how little I knew of the cost,
 and how soon I would be paying it.

And what a reception:

Steel cages, two books set on a packing-crate table,

And I was caught, and had no hope of escaping.

And you would walk out with me to the northeast corner of my cell,

Toward the Alpine peak, with clouds about it as foul as London air,

With you whispering, *and with a bang, not a whimper,*

With glasses like dinner plates, glowing grass-green in the darkness,

Pleasure-fasting, with women, coming and going without speech,

With the dandruff-flakes falling like snow,

And the hyacinth girls eating lunch in silence,

And the sea, knee-deep, reflecting white eyebrows —

Eyebrows turned white are an awful sight in the sunlight,

Hideously aged —

And the sea-girls singing back at us,

Drowning in seaweed brocade,

And the wind twisting the song, and desiccating it,

Covering our eyes with dust.

 And this is the way the world ends.

 With a bang, not with a whimper.

I went up to the court for prosecution,

Tried standing mute, offered a madman's song,

And got no conviction,

and went back to Saint Elizabeths
Committed.

And once again, later, you stood at the foot of my bed,
And then the visit ended, you went back to Bloomsbury,
And if you ask if I recall that parting:
It is like the hair falling from my hieratic head,
 Confused ... Whirl! Centripetal! Mate!
What is the use of talking, until I end my song,
I end my song in the dark.
I call in the nurse,
Hold the pill in my hand
 As she says, "Take this,"
And swallow it down, silent.

STEPHEN DUNN

Always Something More Beautiful

This time I came to the starting place
with my best running shoes, and pure speed
held back for the finish, came with only love
of the clock and the underfooting
and the other runners. Each of us would
be testing excellence and endurance

in the other, though in the past I'd often
veer off to follow some feral distraction
down a side path, allowing myself
to pursue something odd or beautiful,
becoming acquainted with a few of the ways
not to blame myself for failing to succeed.

I had come to believe what's beautiful
had more to do with daring
to take yourself seriously, to stay
the course, whatever the course might be.
The person in front seemed ready to fade,
his long, graceful stride shortening

as I came up along his side. I was sure now
I'd at least exceed my best time.
But the man with the famous final kick
already had begun his move. *Beautiful*, I heard
a spectator say, as if something inevitable
about to come from nowhere was again on its way.

DAVID TOMAS MARTINEZ

Consider Oedipus's Father

It could have been a car door
leaving that bruise,

as any mom knows,
almost anything could take an eye out,

and almost anybody could get their tongue
frozen to a pole,

which is kind of funny
to the point of tears
plus a knee slap or two
that an eye can be made blue, pink
by a baby's fist, it fits
perfectly in the socket. It's happened to me.
Get it?

Any scenario is better,
beats sitting in a car and hearing
someone you love
sob,
which I have done
with a black eye.

For me, a woman's tears
are IKEA instructions
on the European side.

I'm sure for Laius, Oedipus's father, it was the same.
Think of him sleeping
after having held a crying Jocasta
because they had fought for hours
because she was stronger.

Who knew better the anger of young Jocasta?

Knew that when the oracle, or the police,
come, they are taking someone with them.

I'm sure Laius looked at the crib
and thought *better you*
than me, kid.

Now consider your own
father, or the guy your mother
dated until he took
the three-sided road,

crouched in front of a paper
plate with a catcher's
mitt, teaching
a curveball grip —

but did he ever teach
the essential lesson
of how to block a punch
from a finely manicured hand,
or to walk away when
records are being candled and books disemboweled,

teach the wonderment of
a jar of peanut butter jammed
in a TV screen
below a snail trail of ice cream
near broken pictures on the wall?

Not while he's king, I bet, and not while
there are mothers and their jobs,
like breastfeeding or serving a warm plate
on a table

next
to cold beers
from the hand

of a mother he made from a virgin
with his own hands, his own hands.

ALEX DIMITROV

The Last Luxury, JFK, Jr.

Born of the sun, we traveled a short while toward the sun.
Where there were seasons and sky. Where there were monuments.
Like a single engine plane in a July haze.
Or our nights that pile up like shoes in a guest room.
I would talk about the weather when I'm in the right weather but
when.
At the Stanhope Hotel, just hours before, they were people.
The Navy divers found them lying under one hundred and sixteen
feet of waves.
Or a small body of water meeting a new, larger body.
Healthy body. Nobody. We just couldn't decide.
Spatial disorientation occurs when you don't refer to your
instruments
and begin to believe the whatever inside you.
When I punished the Austrian roses by forgetting about them
I knew that they couldn't keep beauty and they couldn't keep time.
The day of his father's funeral: November 25, 1963, was also his
third birthday.
Then — sometimes: the urge for new windows.
A color other than black for the best days.
In fourteen seconds plummeting at a rate beyond the safe maximum.
The safe maximum at the office, bedroom, or bar.
On the way there, somewhere between floors, no velocity could
recover us.
And again. Sometimes the right music,
sometimes lucky to be in good light.
Once a week I go into a room and pretend to have similar interests.
Every day I wake up and brush to the left.
We're the good people, the bad people, and the people we aren't.
Socialite, journalist, lawyer. Americans. These Americans.
They always button their coats when they see luck.
*Dear Johnny boy, thanks for asking me to be your mother
but I'm afraid I could never do her justice.
My eyebrows aren't thick enough, for one.*
But you know, it was like eating the best grapefruit.

Being here. Here. (Here and then what.)

“... yet once you start answering those questions ... where do you stop?”

The old photograph of a young salute.

That one send-off to death, family; the beginning of character.

Maybe you know it's the last year of the century. So come late and
leave early.

(Others flying similar routes reported no visual horizon.)

It's the last luxury. To go early and never come back.

CARL PHILLIPS

Brothers in Arms

The sea was one thing, once; the field another. Either way, something got crossed, or didn't. Who's to say, about happiness? Whatever country, I mean, where inconceivable was a word like any other lies far behind me now. I've learned to spare what's failing, if it can keep what's living alive still, maybe just

awhile longer. Ghost bamboo that the birds nest in, for example, not noticing the leaves, color of surrender, color of poverty as I used to imagine it when I myself was poor but had no idea of it. I've always thought gratitude's the one correct response to having been made, however painfully, to see this life more up close. *The higher gods having long refused me, let the gods deemed lesser do the best they can* — so a friend I somewhere along the way lost hold of used to drunkenly announce, usually just before passing out. I think he actually believed that stuff; he must surely, by now, be dead. There's a rumored

humbling effect to loss that I bear no trace of. It's not loss that humbles me. What used to look like memory — clouds for hours breaking, gathering, then breaking up again — lately seems instead like a dance, one of those slower, too complicated numbers I never had much time for. Not knowing exactly what it's come to is so much different from understanding that it's come to nothing. Why is it, then, each day, they feel more the same?

Musculature

The last dog I owned, or — more humanely put, so I'm told — that I used to live with, she'd follow me everywhere. She died eventually. I put her down's more the truth. *It is the truth.* And now

this dog — that

I mostly call Sovereignty, both for how sovereignty, like fascination, can be overrated, and for how long it's taken me, just to half-understand that. Pretty much my whole life. Mortality seemed an ignorable wilderness like any other; the past seemed what, occasionally, it still does, a version of luck when luck, as if inevitably, gets stripped away: what hope, otherwise, for suffering? When did honesty become so hard to step into and stay inside of, I'm not saying

forever, I could last a fair time

on a small while. Sovereignty sleeps hard beside me. I pass my hands down the full length of him, like a loose command through a summer garden. Let those plants that can do so lean away on their stems, toward the sun.

REBECCA GAYLE HOWELL

Every Job Has a First Day

Slade was pulling minnows out of the dry river
the day we met. Puddles, more or less, was what
was left. But what could live wanted to and tried,
treading narrow circles, a glide of brittle fins.
He wore those rubber boots, though the sun was
an anvil, and very little wet; he smiled, I remember
that, his nickel smile right at me, his fingers
letting fall the small fish muscles into a bag filled
with yellow tap. I didn't ask his name, or what
it was he thought he was doing, but we talked,
I listened as he taught me to relax the hand just enough.
They can smell, he said, the oils our pores release
when we tense to catch. You have to believe it,
he said. You don't mean any harm.

Something's Coming but Never Does

I follow locusts. I think they're loyal, but it's a story.
In morning's bleached streets and nights
of tungsten glinting, their fretted steel legs
ticker the minutes. What do I know, except I need
a thing to walk behind. The lot tagged *The Devil*,
red spray paint, two concrete steps. This is where I go
when the heat comes, when no one alive can tell me
how to make the day move on. She lies there, the bitch,
in a bed convex from her weight. Though it's dusk,
I see she is the color of dirt. Though fleas open
new roads through her hair, she is asleep. I hear thunder.
Some days it rumbles dry, no rain. I'm tired. The air here,
it's like breathing gasoline. I lie down, too. A razor,
a latex glove turned inside out. I curl my body close
to hers, my lips, nose to her spine. I close my eyes.
I want the mites to leave without me, but they don't.

WILLIAM FULLER

At the House of the Rhyming Weir

An idea is sometimes sweetened by refusing to be expressed, if it attends, solicitously, to this failure, and urges us on to discover the true impediment to its adaptation. In that spirit, and bearing that intention within us, we note here, as elsewhere, there are generally three alternative courses. The *first* is simply to accept without question an explanation someone in our proximity, and whom we know, proffers and then elects to modify out of concern that small details are escaping to set up camp opposite what is being said. The *second* is to surrender one's reluctance to withdraw from the presence of an unsolved problem by grabbing crudely at vacant affirmations that nothing further need be done, that everything to be accomplished was accomplished well before current advocates approached the threshold, coaxed forward by the desire to indulge their own vanity. The *third* is to remain absolutely uncommitted to any specific course, and to insist that the process begin anew each time, contending that no information will ever be adequate to the task of judgment, that the requirements, as they evolve, will make each element moot, or at a minimum place the likelihood of resolution in ever greater doubt over time, with the paradoxical effect that the impulse to continue is not thereby diminished, only channeled into a narrower, more determined form. Although no benefits are likely to accrue from this last course, it's unquestionably the one most often followed, owing perhaps to people's need to test the strength of a membrane designed to repel assault, or their perennial enchantment with kaleidoscopic complications spreading over the earth, as time walks through the sky.

JOHN WIENERS: SEVEN LETTERS



John Wiens, Detroit, 1966

JOHN WIENERS

Seven Letters

There are two geographical facts central to John Wieners's life and poetics. First is Boston, the city he lived in for most of his sixty-eight years, whose side streets and ghosts he knew by heart and recorded in his poems, and whose cadences he recreated in his prosody. Then there is Black Mountain, nine hundred miles south in the mountains of western North Carolina, a place he only lived for around six months, in two separate seasons over the course of a year. It was there that Wieners, a twenty-one-year-old college graduate, a queer and effervescent child of the working class, learned to make what he called "a living that counted," a life devoted to the poem, to the hammering out of "experience into form."

These letters offer snapshots of four pivotal moments in Wieners's early life, four pauses in a meteoric rise. First is a series of letters to Robert Greene, an old friend from college, in which Wieners breathlessly recounts his momentous first term at Black Mountain College. Until the letters became available four years ago, when Greene donated them to Boston College, such an account was very difficult to find, available mostly in the impressionistic memoirs of Michael Rumaker, Fielding Dawson, and Basil and Martha Winston King. What these letters offer is an immediate rendition, the heady flush of a life being changed. "Read slow," he warns Greene at the start, "this is a bombshell."

Wieners had first heard of Olson through Boston poetry legend Cid Corman, who hosted Olson on his radio show to promote a reading at the Charles Street Meeting House. Wieners was spellbound by the giant, charismatic poet, and studied his manifesto "Projective Verse" assiduously. When he wrote to apply for study at Black Mountain, Olson himself wrote back immediately with offer of a loan for room and board. The school was on its last legs — it would close the following year — and desperate for students. Wieners drove down from Boston with Joe and Carolyn Dunn and his boyfriend Dana, a handsome blonde firefighter who never felt comfortable in the strange school, and fled home after a brief and bristling stay.

Wieners thrived at Black Mountain. In his indispensable memoir of the period, Rumaker remembers the newcomer's trial by

fire: Olson asked him to critique Rumaker's story "The Pipe," then upbraided him when he delivered a "snidely academic" report. "Although John was quite caught off guard by the vehemence of the attack," Rumaker writes, he had a "glint of surrender" in his eyes. "He, too, had found his master." Wieners returned to Boston after that term, desperate to make it work with Dana, but came back once more, the next summer; he remained Olson's student and close friend until the latter's death in 1970, and was a pallbearer at his funeral.

The next two letters, to James Schuyler, were written in the late spring and summer of 1957, Wieners's last months before moving to San Francisco and breaking through with *The Hotel Wentley Poems*. He was putting together the second issue of his small poetry magazine *Measure*, a solo venture that had already established him within several intersecting networks of poets, many of whom he published for the first time. Wieners was twenty-three, confident, and devoted to Olson with the zeal of a convert: "Projective Verse" in mind, he expresses disappointment at the regular line breaks in a poem Schuyler submitted for *Measure*. He urges him to think of his rhythm more physically, to add "the twist of the hip" and imbue the lines' energy with the force of breath: "even the way we walk will be put in the poem — it gets that basic."

"Olson is one of our fathers," he tells Schuyler in the second letter, going on to clarify a tricky point in his poetics, an apparent gulf between Wieners and his teacher that stymies many readers of both: how can the love-sick lyric poet behind *Hotel Wentley* be an heir to the epic-historical Maximus? On this point Denise Levertov is very helpful; in a 1965 essay on Wieners, she situates his poems' "grief and disaster" within his Projective poetics:

The things various confessional poets describe have happened to him too... but in his case they are not autobiographically written *about*, they are conditions out of which it happens that the songs arise.... I am brought to remember Orpheus, who did not sing *about* hell: he was *in* hell, and sang there, leading the way out.

The distinction here is in the outward-facing stance he learned from Olson. "USE, the man said, of yr self, as object," he tells Schuyler, with "no hurt ego in the way," confessing that this worry about excessive ego "is more my kick." The choice of object is up to each

subject: “when you see it, set it down, even if this ‘it’ is yrself.”

His next letter is to Black Mountain classmate Ed Dorn. It was ten months since Wieners had moved to San Francisco, he was living on various friends’ sofas, and he had just completed *The Hotel Wentley Poems*. He doesn’t mention them, but does include four new poems that continue that book’s penetrating depiction of his life as a self-styled *poète maudit*. “We are desperate men,” he says to his old friend, “and the rest bore.”

Finally in this series, he writes to Don Allen in the fall of 1959. Having made a splash with his first book, he’d been asked to contribute a statement on poetics to accompany poems that Allen chose for his canon-making anthology *The New American Poetry*. Wieners included a new piece, “A Poem for Trapped Things,” which was added to the selection and would be read by friend Jim Dunn forty-three years later at Wieners’s memorial. His statement of poetics reflects a fusion of his lived experience with the Projective Verse of Olson, four thrilling years after the two first met. Anticipating the ars poetica he would present later in “The Acts of Youth,” he writes movingly of the connection between “pain and suffering” and a life lived for poetry: “one cannot avoid the /days. They have to parade by in all their carnage.” This, for Wieners, is the ticket to the dance.

—Michael Seth Stewart

TO ROBERT GREENE

Read slow, this is a bombshell.

Thursday, the 20th [spring 1955]
[Black Mountain, NC]

Dear Bob:

This will be short and confused, but have and wanted to tell you about this place, and this shall serve as asking you to write when you have time, to tell me 1) re: Veronica 2) future plans 3) Joe's marriage 4) summer still at Vermont YES YES YES 5) how does Dana look, and all other news but especially bout plans, and if you say Army, I will, yes, all over you.

The student body numbers at the most 15. Excellent living conditions. No cubicle, etc. but a wing of a little Dutch house, called Mountain Stream, with a mountain stream running beside it for 24 hours. Three rooms, a kitchen, a piano, etc. Joe and Carolyn in one, no one in the other if I can help it, and me in the back, under trees, with a little screen door, and three screened windows, one window with only a screen. I take theatre, lithography, and writing under Olson who is the only Man to have said anything NEW or FRESH about Poetry — since before Pound, and before Pound, Ernest Fenollosa, in his essay "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium of Poetry" and before Fenollosa, John Keats, not in his own poetry, but in his letters, when he attacked Milton and Wordsworth for their Egotistical Sublime, as he called it. His doctrine was the only new thing said (Negative Capability) for many, I do not know how many, hundreds of years. Look, read, and read, and try to refute this. Poetry for 300 yrs. up to 1910 and Pound, was nothing but imitation of old forms, from Shakespeare, and Elizabethans to Pound to Olson, who has added more. His essay, "Projective Verse" in Poetry: New York, 1950 Issue no. 3. the first thrust. And he has gone on from there. Naturally, this is the only place of its kind in this country, no one has any major interest but in what they create. The pace of life is something I have never known, and which you probably Touched, mind you, only touched, at Middlebury, with their hundreds, at the most here, with wives, and four kids, it comes to 25, and with 600 acres. at least 13 buildings, many unused and in disrepair. Classes are as follows: Writing: Monday and Wednesday nite — 8 on, usually to

end at midnight, once at Peek's, a tavern four miles out, and last Mon, having coffee in one of the rooms until 1.

Theatre — Mon, Tues, Thurs, Frid, mornings — 9:30 on usually to noon.

Lithography — Tuesday nite — 8:30 to 10:30.

Naturally my whole interest is in Mon, and Wed, and the wild stimulation that follows.

Advisory Committee to the school reads as follows:

Albert Einstein — head

Norbert Wiener — MIT

Franz Kline — Painter — NYC

William Carlos Williams — one of the THREE Men who have done ANYTHING in this century — poet

Carl Sauer — Head of Geology — Univ of California

Since Einstein dead (School's telegram read: Sympathy for your loss, ours, and theirs)

the school has ritten to Carl Jung, to ask him to take over head of Advisory Committee)

You see Olson believes it is the artists who alone can, with the scientists put Man back on his track. Not Culture, art museums, Shakespearian movies, rare collections, all the shit that goes by as culture, but Art, that can put man on again, as Homer did, and the early ones did. That is what this country has, don't you agree, culture running everywhere, but no art, nothing new, no language new, but culture running everywhere, and people [hanging] Renoir and Degas in their parlors.

I am sorta run out of fire, but do hope you will do something with what you have this fall, and fuck the Army, but you can't, and will probably have to go into two years of waste, the best time shot, but hold off if you can, and write everywhere for openings. Even write here for teaching position, they would love a bona-fide Romance language. I don't think you'd get much pay, but a good food allowance, 12,000 books on an open shelf, no locked doors, and some of the most exciting hours of your life.

Write soon to me, Bob, as I would like to hear your doings, and all the doings of all the ones I love. There is a Black Mountain Review which would make interesting reading, plus so many benefits for the writer. Jonathan Williams, publisher, of Olson, Creeley, taught here last summer, editor of Merlin, literary quarterly in Paris, THE

Divers Press, Caresse Crosby left here 2 days before I came, leaving on exhibition first editions she and her husband Harry printed on the Black Sun Press of Hemingway, Pound, D.H. Lawrence's "Sun," Hart Crane "The Bridge," Letters of Proust, Letters of Henry James, etc. etc. Plus Archibald MacLeish, letters from all the above and other people like Kay Boyle, Eugene Jolas, other impeti from the 1920s which line of electricity has fallen directly into Black Mountain College and its surrounding men. If there is any force in the world of letters today, besides the one which Olson is in the center of, please tell me, and ask the adversaries of this statement that also. Which and who are they? Not eliot or Spender, etc etc, as they are old, and never really brought in anything new. Olson and the people above, with one man in Canada, in the mag, called Civ//n (Irving Layton) who shall teach here, it is hoped this summer, are the only ones. And the Boston Arts Festival gives its award to men like Robert Frost and Sandburg. WHAT GOOD DOES THAT DO FOR POETRY, or for sandbirg or Frost either. Farce, farce, and more.

Please write soon, I would like so much to see you again, but write.

Love,

J

Shall wait a week, and then send some subversive magazines to your house, if you have not answered, addressed to;

Robert Greene, Atheist.

I will, too.

Black Mountain College
Black Mountain, North Carolina

[...]

Show this to people, as I can't keep repeating myself in letters.

Thanks.

•

TO ROBERT GREENE

Thursday [spring 1955]
[Black Mountain, NC]

Dear Bob:

Well, Bob, it's begun for me, or rather a part of it, only a line of it is done. I brought seven new poems into class Monday, and after I finished reading them, I heard someone clapping, and I looked up and it was Olson. There was no real criticism of them until last night, when the class asked me to re-read them, and after they were, to begin a critique. Nothing really important was said, but then it was Olson's turn. He admonished the class for being too modern to enjoy these poems. He said that one had to applaud after hearing them, as they were bursting from their seams language-wise. He also suggested that I submit one of them, the longest one, for publication, as the poem says everything about the subject that can be said, that I had held nothing back, and on these grounds alone, it should be published. After class he told me how lovely parts of them were, and all of this from a man who really is first-rate in poetry today.... I will leave this for a while, but I first want to tell you some of what I have been doing. In Lithography, I have completed a drawing on stone, from which I shall print 12 copies. Would you want one? It's real shat, but you could use it in the bathroom, and it is an original litho, this is the process of Toulouse-Lautrec. Mine is quite quite abstract, but if you want one, just ask. O.K.? In theatre, I appeared two Sunday nights ago in a scene from *STREET SCENE* by Elmer Rice with a girl called Mona Stea. I was Sam Kaplan to her Rose Marrant. She was excellent, and I could have been better, but it was a wonderful production, and much enjoyment. I am now doing *FAUST* with me as Mephistopheles, and we are also rehearsing Ezra Pound's translation of Sophocles' *THE WOMEN OF TRACHIS*. There will be dance, drama masks, music, etc. in the production.

About French, a Robert Hellman is coming here for the summer from the U. of Iowa, and last summer, he gave a course in Proust and Rimbaud, and intends to offer another course in French Lit. this season, so I will definitely be able to enjoy a little of francais.

It was very good to hear that you had enjoyed some or achieved some satisfaction from working on Bellay's poetry. And the question you put forth is a good one. Don't you think that one Learns

because he has, not that he wants to. We know many things, but to keep knowledge we must learn it and keep on learning, thus it is not so much a perfection of self, but a damn necessity of self. We have to learn, not to be educated or articulate or successful, but simply because there is something there that makes us learn, and thus we should only learn that which we are forced to. This is not progressive education. I mean when you have the essentials, whether you want them or not. This is simply something above the essentials, then again, the things we are learning now are really essential to ourselves.

About movie fare, it was funny to hear you speak well of *Heart of the Matter* when sister Marion had wrote that it was corn corn etc. but her main complaint was the lack of spiritual struggle. As for me, I would love it, I think. Also *The End of the Affair* is out in Ny, with Debbie Kerr and Vannie Johnson. What ridiculous ads if you've noticed. I think *Time* gave it a shoddy write-up. The movies I have seen are two: the bill of fare here is impossible. *The Revenge of the Creature*: sequel to the original *Creature of the Black Lagoon*, which I had seen up in Boston, and whose sequel I couldn't miss. It was riot. Lori Nelson gets seduced by a half-fish-man. But naturally is saved. The other film was *On the Waterfront* (now my 3rd time) but I was stinking, so it didn't matter. The afternoon of that day, I was walking to the Studies Bldg. and met Ed Dorn, poet published in *Origin*, and he and his lovely lovely wife invited me to Peek's for a beer. They brought their baby, who was brought up in a bureau drawer in a chicago tenement. And at midnight we returned, bare-footed, hysterical, the baby had been taken home earlier, after having devoured a package of pretzels and two packages of peanut butter and cheese crackers. But they are fine people, she being a divorcee who left her husband taking two other children with her, Fred and Chansonette, to live with Ed and sleep on dirty sheets on a mattress in their living room, the same house that Joe and Carolyn share. As she said, I left convention and a PHD for him, but he's so beautiful, I love him, etc. He really isn't but she loves him, etc.

I close now for a day or so in the rain here, it's like Monsoon country.

Monday.

[...]

your friend always, and all eras.

John

•

TO ROBERT GREENE

Tuesday, May 24th. 1955
[Black Mountain, NC]

Dear Bob:

Of course, I have to answer your letter right away, even now when I should be writing, and the main reason is because I feel so elated by it, and also by another writing class last night. I brought in two poems, a love poem, which begins, "I have wanted to write a love poem like the river merchant's", and another, an address to Hart Crane, and Harry Crosby, two suicides. I did not work hard on them, especially the suicide one, as it was written while I was stinking on Friday, and written while I was in tears up to my knees. I brought them to class last night, read them in my turn, there were so many manuscripts we all read them one after another, and then waited, me sure that they were a failure and a dis-appointment to the ones of the week before. They talked for an hour on two poems of Mike Rumaker's, and then a boy asked to read mine again, and then he commented that he liked them, and I asked a question: I would like to know how I can stop writing poems like this: Olson laughed and laughed, he said you never can, and you better not. He asked me what I meant, and I answered with: preoccupation with myself. The class then launched into them. In a second, failure is turned into success, at least for other people. Olson then began answering my question. I don't remember what he said in quotes, but he talks about the intensity of me, me John Wieners, the desire, the trouble in the poems, that the use of language is my image, on and on, talking as if I am a poet, possessing the talent to convert experience into form. We went to Peek's afterward, and I could hear him talking up the other end of the table about the emotion in the poems. When we went up to pay the bill, he came over and thanked me for the night. I was writing to Dana this morning, at about 10:30 and he came in, and talked with me for two hours, talked not in the way that if you work hard you will be a poet someday, but that if you work hard you will be a better poet than you are now. He asked me to write 5 different poems on the same subject: "the river merchant" it's an allusion to Pound's translation that we loved so much in Boston.

[...]

You know how I feel. How does it happen, what has it happened I'm not even trying to find out. I just know now that as long as I live I will be a poet, that my life, way of and function of, will be the writing of poetry, as long as it lasts. Yesterday over the cliff, today on top of it. When I finish this letter, I will write a few words to Dana and then spend as long as I can stand it, writing it, because as they say here when you're in heat with the poem, write write and hurry. It doesn't last, and it's too good to waste while it's lasting.

I have only read your letter once, so whatever I say has to come from that, and I don't want to stop writing to you to even re-read it.
[...]

Love, Vienna John

•

TO JAMES SCHUYLER

April 22, 1957
Easter Monday
[Boston]

Dearest Jimmy:

[...]

I have written 2 poems I sort of like & if I ever get the typewriter (one is borrowed) fixed, the first thing I intend to do is type them up & send you & Frank a copy. They are the type where I speak as sort of the grand madam of this city giving advice & warnings to two of the Lady's Handmaids who are on their way here.

“Flair says wear big rings when you ask for
matches

and my flair's

hair
under the hat
for daylight.

I leave addresses in the hoof of the horse across the State House
on Tuesdays and never

never forget where we come from, what can't be sold, or
sucked off.

There's something green in the marquee lights
they use on Washington Street so wear same
but only the lowers.

I'll tell the musicians

you're coming if

you tell me."

Love,
The Local One

Do send them/and I thank you for the kind words
and poets don't pay.

The other poem I liked for its swiftness:

Father or Son.

only I cursed in it that you had not broken the line where the breath
(yours) demanded rather than let it measure out to a certain space.
Please read if you haven't Olson's essay 1950: Projective Verse — in
fact I'll send it if you can get it back. It has large rough spots etc but a
tremendous help to all of us, WCWms. reprints 1/2 of it in his Auto-
biography. You do it in Joint & I somehow think that's a newer poem.

Just a ps) I can't find the pen —

What Olson does demand of us is that we go back blind/have no rules
but as he says those the poem under hand demand.

A very basic thing and the subject/ content of those poems be-
comes more immediate to us. Thus a poem on boredom — wd. have
contained in it perceptions that we are running over — we vitalize
thru the process of running to catch up with what is going on at the
act of writing. It cd take us over the precipice — vide Le Fou — it cd
take us to Babyland. Cd fuck up the sentence as we know it, as W.S.
Merwin will never know it.

Bring an excitement form wise — not just word-wise excitement
but the twist of the hip — even the way we walk will be put in the
poem — it gets that basic. Should if we let it. Thus those damn readers

get their money's worth. They meet us. Watch us dance.

I am very happy right now.

•

TO JAMES SCHUYLER

June 11 [1957]
[Boston]

Dear Jimmy:

Let me just say this off the top of my head, that you are going to have a tough time making it alone / verse-wise, there. Now, I don't mean you won't have ears, and people liking what you do, but you will not find many truly digging what you are trying to do. Frank & who else? They might like the feeling: quote, but why you write this way (knowing there is no other) they'll plague you, cause you self-doubt, being weaned on Poetry: Chicago. So this initially is to urge you to develop all you can yr resistancies, even — when you think you have made a real hit: send off to Olson, for he is most open to any effort. Robin Blaser did just that, and rec'd back reams of stimuli. This is, only in case, you want to go back, to Tiamat, the easy couches.

USE, the man said, of yr self, as object, of the others as objects/ no hurt ego in the way, well, you don't have to worry here. That is more my kick.

I am most excited over what I call: yr market poems. That Christ, yes, this can be our gallery, will have to be.

That you are committed, involved & I suppose that is why the advice, because the involvement is such, you wd. go anywhere, where you think the green field is, & I don't want you in the wrong pastures.

PV set off a decade (1950 and MEASURE if my energies hold out, will end it. We must see ourselves as the new generation, initially our youth in these ten years, & if we survive, after 1960, then we will be at the point of departure. As Pd, Wms, Marianne have all departed bringing up their own wonderful gifts.

Now is the time for the dredge, the pooling of energies, where we can learn to be sure.

Olson is one of our fathers, and those others are our grandpeople. It is a continuity. And that bastard strain of Wilbur, Booth, Hall, on and on and on, They are everywhere, a reversal, a falling away from the “new” going thing. They must be ignored, as one wd imposters at a clan gathering.

This does not mean any sacrifice of individual quality, kicks, diseases, etc, simply that we are in agreement, these are here simply to be used, allowed in to lead us on. They the determinants. The individual perceptions, how yr eyes are like no one elses, and never should you look for someone else’s eyeshade to wear.

Of course, it means continual work/ it sleeps, stays down, away from us, if we sleep. And so much has been done already, even the grandpeople still at times set the pace. It means exhausting all that they have, and still having enough to go on. That is why Olson cursed once, he only had his sixty or so yrs. Of course, he wrote first poem in mid-thirties, (his) so that is why he feels behind. Also of course, why he has/does take such giant-steps. To catch up.

[...]

PS:

HOW HUDSON FERRY ON re-reading now 3rd or 4th time has all the qualities. That you need not worry about anything/ but sufficient work. That you strip until you think you’ll have nothing left, but three lines, that you be tight, and when you see it, set it down, even if this “it” is yrself, it does not need be “objective” as Big Daddy tells us.

But in the act of it, pin down, and watching so all the loose material be cut down away, as Ginsberg aint learned yet, in his compulsions, that too much is there that dont matter to anyone but him. And that’s wrong, becuz, stating them is not enough sometimes, as he does, that those myriad things dont even matter to him, because he has not taken the care to ‘order the ‘experience’ to its own rules, its own syntax, jumps,

allow me to faint dead now. go home.

When
can I expect more?
As you do them, maybe?

I cd. handle better than batches —

oh — you make the rules —

•

TO ED DORN

July 12 [1958]
[San Francisco]

Dearest Ed:

We are desperate men, and the rest bore. That is why we are friends. And I can write to you. And to Harvey in the nuthouse. (Only for a few months. It was that or jail for vagrancy. He moved into Joanne's soon after you left). I live now with the McClure's, another desperate man. In trying to preserve himself. I have a double brass bed. And not much else. Enough for the present time, when all have too much. It is necessary for me I imagine to have the movement of family around me now. I cherish them all. Am too tender to make it comfortable living tho. Still being such strangers. With them. There are drugs to break the barriers. And I am breaking down whatever stands before me. Not in a big prick way, but with the hands of love. Whatever that is. A regard as one touches leaves, that are still on the tree. Leaving oily grease on same. "The hand of man."

I wish there was a person to lay my hands on. In love. Instead of my own miserable prick. The hair of Joanne Mc bent before me as she fixed this machine. And it has been so long. That when she comes again, Lady Love, into my life, I will be swept away. The brushing of her hair. Against my flesh. How beautiful to have it. On our bones. I write to say I am alive and well. And that you are close. That your \$2.00 will always be remembered. I am glad Helene liked the silk. It is lovely.

No word on Measure. I live from day to day. I send you 4 poems I wrote a week ago exactly almost to the hour. They are not poems. But literal messages from somewhere. I send them only to have something to send you, as I am wordless. Now.

Write often, Ed, whenever you can. There can never be boredom for us. By no means, did you leave me, fed up with you. I was filled only

with the terror of the place I was living in. THE RATS, man. They nearly came in and took over. Scuttled the walls, etc.

After supper, with Fred Astaire's Bandwagon. OK. Enough for now. I send the communiqués.

Love always
John

You asked me what
I think & I will tell
you, I am not
one of those tight-lipped

•

Oh listen to my words for I am wise
I am like a lily fruit
blooming in the wilderness.

I write the same words again, sitting here with Charlie Parker and his rhumba band. I am one with the music, my cigarette stays on the top of the table. I have decided I write prose. No one understands me when I speak in poetry. It is not madness.

This sound, this syndrome

12/22

I pace the same ground as my forefathers,

let this be jagged, let this be a new continent. It is.
My fingers are determined by the laws of the universe. They are writing this. I have no power over what I say. I am ruled by La Cucuracha. Go

yells the Bubus from under her bedroom door. No she also says.

And if this is madness it is divine.

There are magic happenings going on all over the world.
I pick up an ashtray and it has the hair of Jean Harlow in it.

We have come to the place where we can worship.
That is enough. There is no need to address America.
We dont even stay cool anymore. We have the language
on our side. Brought in to us by musicians, by heads from outer space
the junkies, the far travellers who always walk with a knife in their
back pockets, as I have walked today.

It is not the time for poetry. We go under as Rimbaud went,
if we let it catch up to us, but we are moving that fast,
that we stay one head up on the game.

I know not what I do. I am ruled by wonder magicians.
The green grass.

Blades of it, switch in your back hip pocket. Swing

your ass sister on Market Street, there is enough for all. Your
baskets will be full in this day after the 4th of July, our forefathers
brought forth on this continent a new

•

2nd Communique for the Heads

I love my fellow poets.

But I do not write for them. I write for heads.
They who stick your necks up into outerspace, they who
will not allow my fingers to make a mistake on this machine, no matter
how I falter, or err. It is all here. The periods are struck in the
furnace the same as the chains we all wear, around our heads

hair.

I can do nothing but write. I starve, and have no roof over my head
but the homes of strangers

friends who take me in. I travel everywhere. I am as air.
I am puffed up with myself as a crow. I learned this trick
from a friend.

Who is a fellow poet. Traveller.

•

4th Communique for Joanne and all the women

I am wearing down. The ashtray lies littered with butts and matches, ashes even that the Lady Bubus will carry safely and empty in some other room. Her mother has given me corn to eat. And hash, and egg yokes, no not yoke, but egg

WHITES.

We who sit in such color, feast and drink to the whites of your eyes.

You maiden. You girls whose eyes turn blue with the sky. And who walk through the high house in white shoes. The typewriter is a magic instrument and I perform white magic upon it. I call down the gods and ladies of long ago

to wait on me. Patience with me, who sound horns into the mystic places of my heart.

I will come to you Lady bearing gifts, these white sheets of paper, the sheets I lie between each night, they are yours and blue,

from your linen closet.

•

5th and Finale Communique

There is a brass bed.

There is a rhumba band, there is a junky saxplayer on it. It fills the air with sweet space sounds.

It tells me of the long ago Mecico
down under land. If I went there, I would go down.
You will never get me there. You can beat your brass
bands, I will not go. Bands around my head

of yeast that feeds my hair, that makes bread
that fills ovens. As I am filling this space, with puffed up words

The drum

Pour water on me so I will stretch in the sun.
As in the morning rising from
the sea the sun does.
I do from a brass bed.

And the sun, where do you come from?
With a spectre over my shoulder, with night on yours,

Morning star.

It shone for me. Glitters on the headboard. It is what
we place in the firmament to take place beside nature.

The poem.

And always not enough. Not enough light. Water on the drum.
Air for the lungs. Earth for us to walk upon. We war.

Unless we rise, can stick our heads

(oh lustrous hair

up for the Morning Star. Up like the Morning. Not an imitation
but basking in reflected glory.

The sun shines for us.

We shine because of the sun. My brass bed shone

My hand pulses under the peyote plant placed there.

I am in pain, and it soothes me. Oh

•

TO DON ALLEN

Sept 20 [1959]
[San Francisco]

Dear Don:

Well. I cant do anything new. But I will send you a poem I wrote this morning. And an excerpt from a journal I keep, which is abt. poetics, as I have been able to come to it.

I just fell over on my back with the typewriter on my chest, and I looked up at the ceiling, and said, I'm gonna die this way. Like the goddamn cat I stepped on, with my left Mexican shoe, the drops of blood spread throughout the house. Gasping for breath. Always. Anyway.

A poem for trapped things.

Oh God what have you
given me that a black
butterfly lives in this room.
This morning with a blue flame burning
this thing wings its way in.
Wind shakes the edges of its yellow being.
Gasping for breath.
Living for the next instant
Climbing up the black border of the window.
Why do you want out.
I sit in pain
A red robe amid debris,
You bend and climb, extending antennae.

I know the butterfly is my soul
and it is weak from battle.

A giant fan on the back of
a beetle.
A caterpillar, crysalis that seeks
a new home apart from this room.

And will disappear from sight
at the pulling of invisible strings.
Yet so tenuous, so fine
this thing is, I am
sitting on the hard bed, we could
vanish from sight like the puff
off an invisible cigarette.
Furred chest, ragged silk under
wings beating against the glass

no one will open.

The blue diamonds on your back
are too beautiful to do
away with.
I watch you
all morning
long
with my hand over my mouth.

(1959)

Dont show TOO MUCH. I'm afraid they'll steal my style.

July 17

From a journal

A poem does not have to be a major thing. Or a statement?
I am allowed to ask many things because it has been given
me the means to plunge into the depths and come up with
answers? No. Poems, which are
my salvation alone. The reader can do with them what he likes.
I feel right now even the reading of poems to an unknown
large? public is a shallow act, unless the reading be given for the
fact of clarity. The different techné
a man uses to make his salvation. That is why poetry
even tho it does deal with language is no more holy act
than, say shitting.*
Dis-

charge. Manifesting the
process of
is it life? Or the action between this and
non-action? Lethargy vs

Violence.

For to take up arms against the void is attack, and the price of war
is high. Millions of syllables

shed over the falls of our saliva, millions of teardrops
roll out of our eyes. Giant screams echo through the halls of our house
at night. We do not wish it. It is so. By the action we are en-
gaged in. Hundreds of days, months have to go by before the
spirits descend and the right word rolls out sharp and full of
fire air earth and water

[off the tips of our

tongue. And one cannot avoid the
days. They have to parade by in all their carnage. The events of
them like images on a shield, we carry thru the streets of
the town

later on our way to the poetry reading." Drunk or
doped before that wild horde who press in
to get a peek at the bloody hero. And is he?

You bet.

As a postscript abt any of us writing on poetics: this.

(I changed
my mind.

Love to you always

J

*quote from Olson

Letters appear courtesy of the Estate of John Wieners, with special thanks to his literary executor Raymond Foye. Letter to Donald Allen courtesy of Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries. Letter to Ed Dorn, Box 25, Ed Dorn Papers, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries. Letters to Robert Greene from the John Wieners Papers, MS.1994.032, John J. Burns Library, Boston College. Letters to James Schuyler, James Schuyler Papers, Special Collections and Archives, MS 0078, University of California, San Diego. The photograph was taken by Leni Sinclair and is reproduced with her permission.

COMMENT

REBECCA HAZELTON

Warlords Are Not the Only Tyrants

My Favorite Tyrants, by Joanne Diaz.
University of Wisconsin Press. \$16.95.

My Favorite Tyrants by Joanne Diaz is a tightly crafted collection concerned with how narratives—historical, political, familial, and personal—are formed and shared. What do we privilege in different tellings and what do we omit? When and why do we falsify? The book opens with the exemplary “Larry David on Corregidor,” in which the speaker, on a tour of Corregidor Island, finds herself unable to silence her inner dissident and let the tour guide deliver his sanitized spiel:

The last thing the island of Corregidor needs is my correction,
but when I climb the staircase of the lighthouse and see the ruins
of what were tennis courts built by Filipinos for American officers,

the scent of sampaguita flowers wafting around and above
where the net once drooped, I have to ask: *The courts were built by
Filipinos
who served in the front lines, but they could not play on them,*

not go near them? And though I know the tour guide’s answer
before she says a word, I cannot stop myself.
Who ordered the tennis balls? Who restrung the rackets?

Who swept away the puddles early mornings
during rainy season? In the distance, we can see the path
of the Bataan Death March where thousands died, malarial,

diarrheal, bloodied by brutal force in a procession that violated
every convention and rule of decency; and to the right,
the haunted Malinta Tunnel, where the ghosts of soldiers

who typed and radioed and telegraphed underground for months
are shoed away by the “sight and sound” show three times each day.

I would have done better to ask about the separate barracks,
the single row in the back of the island's movie theater,
the ward in the old part of the hospital — but still I'm preoccupied
with the tennis courts, and in the moment that the tour guide stares

at my fourth question, I realize that I'm behaving like Larry David,
great dissenter in all things mundane, fighter for no one and yet
resister to everything beyond his own skin, symbol for all

that refuses to be corrected, straightened out, made right.

If that seems like a hefty excerpt, bear in mind that it comes from a hefty poem. Diaz's multi-page poems tend to be long-lined, their complex sentences spilling over stanzas. What's impressive is that they never seem baggy or shapeless; each one proceeds with seeming effortlessness along a meandering, but carefully planned, trajectory. In these lines, Diaz gives us a cinematic view of the island's ruins and its history as filtered through a stubbornly inquisitorial speaker, who, like the comedian and writer Larry David, takes her righteous commitment to accuracy to the point of absurdity. She wants an accounting of not only the broad historical injustices the tour guide neglects, but all the mundane specifics of that inequity. But historical narratives cannot be comprehensive — choices must be made, details neglected — and however well intended, biases typically guide those decisions. The picturesquely decaying tennis courts seem poignant in light of how many Americans died during the Bataan Death March, but look quite different when considered in light of the treatment of the Filipinos who built them.

Such selective narratives shape our present and our future. In "Pyrrhic," Diaz begins with "Art can make war look wrong, but most of the time/it doesn't." She then presents a rather different version of Keats's Grecian urn, one where the depicted figures gradually work themselves from a dance into a frenzy:

The kicks get harder, then
they're on their knees in a circle, and then up again,
stronger, ready to throttle the man who must have
wronged them.

The phrase “must have” stresses how, in the absence of other details, those who participate in violence, those who record it, and those who internalize that history assume that force is justified. War, mob mentality, and aesthetic fervor are bedfellows in this poem:

The men are young and this is a song
of war, a military drill meant to ruin the worst tyrant
ever known to man. For the pyrrhic to work,
it has to thrill every bone. It has to feel like sex
or food or applause until they're numb to cowardice.
The driving beat has to make the enterprise
seem clean — no blood on the shield, no innards
on the pike, no burning flesh to smell like cooked meat,
no orphans, no widows, no crime.

Like the music that stirs these dancers to violence, the artistic presentation of war as glorious and victorious, without lingering consequence or victims, doesn't just sanitize war, it promotes it. Poems like these show Diaz's gifts to her best advantage; she is adept at revealing the hypocrisy hidden behind slick presentation. In “Adamantine,” the ludicrous rebranding of cremation remains as “cremains” gets the mockery it deserves, and in the scathing and funny “Thank You, Brian Williams,” the speaker mocks the newscaster's simplistic and nationalistic interpretations of current events.

Warlords are not the only tyrants. The majority of *My Favorite Tyrants* concerns family, particularly the long second section, “Elegy,” which paints an affecting portrait of the speaker's deceased mother and her father's grief. By their very nature, elegies run the risk of sentimentality. Diaz avoids this danger by approaching the mother through surprising avenues — as in “The Nurse,” where the mother's corpse is clinically assessed for organ donation, or “What My Father Eats,” where the mother's handwriting left on labeled freezer meals gives us a glimpse into her childhood, “The Palmer method//that she had learned from the nuns as a girl;/the careful grip on the fountain pen's nib.” Moments like these suggest it is only through multiple points of view that we can begin to create a clear picture of the past. In “Barbershop,” we're given directions to the barbershop where the father gets his haircut, the streets and buildings revealing how national, community, and personal history are intertwined:

then drive around the rotary,
built around the tree beneath which George Washington
allegedly sat — is there any town in the former colonies
that doesn't have such a tree? — and keep turning
past the old town hall, which is the new library, then
the old library, which is now the senior center
where she got her flu shot the day before, then past
Sweeney's funeral home where she is now.

As impressive and admirable as Diaz's precision is, there are times when some of the poems feel a touch overworked. The depiction of Detroit via the Roman pantheon in "Motor City" is humorous but strained, and the end of "Dog Whisperer" snaps the poem shut too firmly. Some of the greatest pleasure in the volume can be found when tones of passion, humor, and bitterness break through the finely crafted lines, as in the ending to "Two Emergencies":

That plowman?
Of course he heard the splash,
the sounds of a drowning man. But he
had no idea how to swim, no interest
in knowing, and you'd have to be
a goddamned idiot to abandon your horse
and create two emergencies
where there was just one. Why not
tend to your own horse. Why not
go home to a crappy toaster
that sticks every time you push the lever.

Second Childhood, by Fanny Howe.
Graywolf Press. \$16.00.

In Fanny Howe's latest book of poetry, the stakes are familiar while the heightened tension is new. Howe's poems have always concerned themselves with the uneasy relationship between flesh and spirit, but in *Second Childhood* the aging body and the prospect of diminished physical and mental capabilities create a sense of emotional urgency in contrast to Howe's austere and distantly oracular voice. The title of her latest volume recalls the Biblical injunction to "become like

little children” in order to “enter the kingdom of heaven.” But dot-age, that other childhood, haunts this book, and lends the title an ominous tone.

The eponymous poem, “Second Childhood,” begins with a charming speaker whose childish outlook becomes worrisome as the poem progresses:

I have a fairy rosary called Silver who answers
questions when I dangle her in the sun at the window.
So I've asked her if I have a big ego and she swings
from side to side to say no.
We have other children for friends.
We don't understand why we are here in the world
with horrible grown-ups or what the lessons are that
we're supposed to learn.
It's not helpful for us to hear ourselves described in
religious, geriatric or psychological terms, because we
don't remember what they mean.
One cruel female said, “Don't laugh so much. You're
not a child.”
My cheeks burned and my eyes grew hot.

This speaker initially seems to be a child surrounded by other children, lacking that “big ego,” and pitting herself against the “horrible grown-ups.” But as the poem progresses, it appears we may be witnessing an adult experiencing the painful incomprehension of mental confusion. Of course, Howe is too smart for this to be the only possible reading—it works just as well as a description of ontological despair—but it's in these dual moments of delight and dread that this collection really sings.

The rest of the poem, like the book overall, is on more familiar ground. The rebelliousness and attentiveness of childhood is likened to a kind of mystical reverence, while the facts, obligations, and authority of adulthood are portrayed as stultifying, even dangerous, constraints:

For example, last night I dreamed I was on an airplane
that was open to the sky and a storm was coming
from a hive of stars, and I wanted to sit beside my
daughter to watch the wind as we strapped ourselves

tight to the invisible seats and stayed awake in the air.
If we had been grown-ups, we wouldn't have been
able to see the stars or the storm. We would have
perished.
So my commitment to childhood has once again been
affirmed.
Read the signs, not the authorities.
You might think I am just old but I have finally
decided to make the decision to never grow up, and
remain under my hood.
We are like tiny egos inside a great mountain of air.
Pressed upon by the weight of ether, we can barely
breathe.

Howe's line breaks follow the curious logic of dreams. The mundane airplane is revealed to be "open to the sky," and the familiar phrase "a storm was coming" is immediately turned on its head by "from a hive of stars." After this, it's not much of a jump to accept the speaker as simultaneously an adult woman and a child. It may be harder to accept the poem's insistence that growing up is a choice, and the book's argument that childishness is the gateway to the metaphysical. Whether you find these ideas comforting or impractical is probably a good gauge of your own level of stultifying adulthood.

For the most part, the poems in *Second Childhood* are spare and emotionally muted, the lines prosy with precise yet informal diction. Reading a Howe poem can be like eavesdropping on the inner life of a glacier — her words seem beautiful and unassailable, with a curiously unyielding clarity. The book's overall tone is that of loss, but it's through that loss that we discover continuity. Howe demonstrates that just as a single word contains many ("dearth, end, earth, ear, dirt, hen, red, dish" — the word appears to be "tarnished"), every thing contains in its present the entirety of its own history, such as in these lines about a city in "A Vision":

A layer cake sagging under
the weight of accumulated dust, dirt and now grass.

Each layer had been purchased at the cost of decades,
even centuries of hand-hurting, back-breaking slave
labor. *Caveat emptor!*

It's a real delight to watch Howe reveal these hidden histories, as well as the multitudes within even everyday objects:

Everything was in the banister:
crows on branches, crickets,
architects, handsaws and democrats.
Red moon at 3 a.m.

—From *Progress*

Yet in other poems, like “Loneliness,” Howe eschews this density of imagery and meaning in favor of an almost essayistic style. While “Loneliness” is probably one of the better loneliness personification poems you’ll ever read, it still has lines like, “It takes your hand and walks with you. It lies down/with you. It sits beside you.” Apt, yes, but not nearly up to the high bar Howe sets elsewhere. Even in her capable hands there’s a faint whiff of the self-help book here. Regardless, when the worst charge you can level at a book is that some of the poems are merely *very good* instead of *excellent*, it’s safe to say that you’re in the hands of a master.

Rome, by Dorothea Lasky.
Liveright. \$23.95.

Dorothea Lasky’s poetry has always depended on a passionate and playful voice. But in her latest collection, *Rome*, the voice is curiously subdued. Gone are the hyperbolic metaphors common to previous work, such as, “I am a fireball/That is hurtling towards the sky to where you are,” from “Poem to an Unnameable Man” in *Black Life*. In fact, gone are most metaphors entirely. Never an ornate writer, much of Lasky’s language in *Rome* is stripped down to the barest nouns and verbs. What’s left behind is puzzlingly void, though occasionally invigorating.

Lasky’s primary poetic device is repetition, which she’s praised in the work of Gertrude Stein and the hip-hop artist Drake. *Rome* provides ample examples of that device’s strengths and weaknesses. In “What’s Worse,” Lasky first evokes a common party game, asking which is the worst of two possibilities:

What's worse — a cheap man or a cad
What's worse — a man who eats the fingers or one who does not
What's worse — doggy style or up the ass
No, what's worse — his face or the face of the individual

As the possibilities become more extreme, Lasky uses the refrain to steer the poem toward romantic and existential pathos. By the end, the questions have become answers, and the poem transmits a certainty that's both pessimistic and pleading:

What's worse
To be endlessly waiting
To be endlessly waiting
What's worse — nothing or nothing
What's worse
What's worse than nothing
What's worse
No, what's worse

Throughout the poem, the language is straightforward and clear, each option succinctly rendered. The anaphora is purposeful and effective; the repetition of “to be endlessly waiting” reinforces the idea of waiting, and the repetition of “nothing” serves to highlight how meaningless the options have become.

Yet as successful as Lasky's use of anaphora is here, her reliance on it in other poems can come off as singsong and even facile. In “There Is Nothing,” here quoted in its entirety, anaphora seems to take the place of substance:

I remember how he looked when I ran to meet him
I remember sitting with our heads touching and the night trees
I remember how I went and walked
It meant nothing
It means nothing
There is nothing
But this
But this

The effect of the poem depends on the reader finding tiny shifts of meaning to be revelatory — “meant” to “means,” for instance.

Unfortunately, the payoff is lacking. Much of the poem is closed off to the reader—the situation is rendered in only the broadest of strokes, filtered through a speaker who isn't forthcoming on the details. It makes for a strange sort of intimacy—on the one hand, the poem makes us privy to a private moment between two people. On the other hand, why that moment is particularly important is a mystery. Lasky tells us it means nothing, and I'm not inclined to argue.

In this poem and in others, Lasky advocates for a plainspoken sincerity, unburdened by irony or archness. It's a sincerity that's very aware of just how sincere it is. This is a kind of boldness, but that does not make the poem's sentiment any less cliché. This poem is not an outlier—many of the poems read like diary entries not meant for public consumption:

You talk of things
To myself and others

You think of things
Her long tanned arms

You will realize you love me
But it will be too late

You will cry out for me
I will be long gone

—From *The Rain*

“Things” may be intended to convey the banality of the *you's* speech and thinking, as well as the objectification of the *her's* “long tanned arms,” but coupled with a general lack of detail and familiar sentiments this ostensibly personal subject is rendered anonymous and generic.

In many of these poems, the situation could be any breakup. The circumstances or participants are less important than the archetypes and the customary actions. *One day you'll realize you love me. You'll miss me when I'm gone.* This is a conscious effort on Lasky's part, at least as suggested by “The Empty Coliseum,” where the confessional poem is figured as a kind of abject display put on for the entertainment of others:

Even when I can speak no longer
I will make in full the anonymous I
Or I will make you in full in the anonymous I
I will fill the poems with great pain
And then suck out the meat so that they are only
Shells with only the memory of meat
So that they are only the memory of blood
So I will spill my own so as to make a fresh memory

Here, the poem suggests that the *I* and the *you* are interchangeable; it's only the appearance of emotion that matters, the shell left behind once all the substance is removed. This poem is far more interesting than the poems it endeavors to explain, precisely because it doesn't adhere to the poetic it espouses. The syntax is surprising and fresh, the abstract is viscerally and concretely rendered, and the emotion is intense but controlled.

Much like a collection of B-sides, there's a diversity of work here and, conceivably, something for everyone. A few poems like "I Am Eddie Murphy" have the humor and energy of Lasky's previous work, while poems like "Complainers" and "I Want to Be Alive" are both bawdy and bracingly acerbic. The pleasingly plain lines in "The Art Deco of the West" pack an emotional punch, and "The Amethyst" is strange and evocative. But mostly *Rome's* popularity will be ensured by poems like "Depression" and "Sadness," which have a blank non-specificity that allows any reader with a passing knowledge of either condition to slip right in.

MxT, by Sina Queyras.
Coach House Books. \$17.95.

By all rights, Sina Queyras's *MxT* shouldn't work. Diagrams and equations, many of which will remind you of half-forgotten science

classes, preface each of the book's many sections. Even the book's title is part of a fictional equation, "Ohm's Law of Grieving," which we are told is "Feeling = Memory \times Time," where "A potential difference of 1 unit of Feeling will force a current of 1 Memory through a resistance of 1 unit of Time." Such devices run the risk of seeming gimmicky or overdetermined, or at best merely clever, but in Queyras's hands they are more than stylish window dressing. They provide a formal structure to extremely diverse material: epistolary poems, lyrically associative prose poems, imitations, and elegies, with subjects ranging from grief to photography to Frederick Seidel's penis. More importantly, they promise an analytical distance from which to comprehend loss and its memory.

MxT generates its force through the perpetual denial of this promise. Over and over, the poems present a detached and clinical façade, only to have it break down or prove useless. For example, "A Manual for Remembering" instructs the reader on ways to encounter memory while remaining safe and insulated: "When remembering it is best to wear pants without cuffs, boots, gloves, safety glasses and a feeling helmet (shade 10 or higher)." As the poem progresses, however, these instructions become increasingly elaborate, fantastic, or impossible:

Never touch a banana slug, or cedar melting like lava. Beware of a failed city tumbling into the bowl of an upturned tree. If ferns adorning each dull ache are wet, apply a Cowichan sweater zipped up to the first branch.

The constant reminders to guard against memory reinforce its dangers, and our inability to follow the directions suggests that no amount of precaution can truly protect us.

Queyras writes, "Art is about framing things. But then what?// I see now that a woman has to frame herself or be framed." These poems depend on the reader's realization of the vast gap between the frame and the framed, the disparity between how we present ourselves and how we truly feel. Queyras often heightens this disparity by mixing lush, almost overblown imagery with harsher language, such as this excerpt from the "Emotional Field" section:

Doubt my rain, my love, eat my fear, my inside ferns, my nub of cock, my root lungs, my green callus, my water columns, my sea

cucumber . . . my lining in hooks, my hooked metaphors, come lichen, come moss, come caper, come cougar with your soft portals, come doe with your thin springs, come childhoods with your fist of leashes, come, my modernist loves, and latch a past in a Jell-O mould, float my heart in a rose bowl, my sincerity in a flan, I would be ornamental for you, I would spread, I would, like the hook of barbed wire, my other half useless without the knot, and coil my lamp for you.

Queyras matches her language to her subject perfectly, juxtaposing the squishy (nubs, sea cucumbers, does, childhood, and Jell-O) with the prickly (cocks, hooks, fists, and barbed wire), creating a tapestry of textural and tonal contrasts. This allows her to use words or lines which might seem sentimental were they not alongside violent or sexual imagery.

“Emotion Frame Dimensions” is a series of elegies in the style of the eulogized subject, more channeling than ventriloquism, that often draws attention to an author’s obsessions. “Sylvia Plath’s Elegy for Sylvia Plath” employs many of her images — tulips, balloons, cutting boards — and invokes her sonic flair:

You will have writhed
Across the page for a hard couplet, a firm rime, ass

High as any downward dog, and cutlass arms
Lashing any mother who tries to pass: let’s be frank

About the cost of spurs, mothers like peonies
Whirling in storm drains, families sunk before

Reaching open water. The empty boudoir
Will haunt, but not how you imagine it will.

To write an elegy for Plath, using Plath’s diction, might seem inherently satirical. But these imitation elegies aren’t interested in mockery; they instead call forth the dead, once more, to speak. The section’s final poem, “Elegy Written in a City Cemetery,” is a cento created from elegies written across centuries. Each borrowed line is footnoted, making the poem’s provenance as important to the poem as the lines themselves. The poem’s temporal scope and seamless

joining is a testament to Queyras's skill, but even more so to the universality of grief.

The city you graced was swift.⁴³ Now that the Summer of Love has become the milk of tunnels;⁴⁴ now that the chestnut candles burn,⁴⁵ so may the trees extend their spreading.⁴⁶ There is blessing in this gentle breeze.⁴⁷ What need of bells to mark our loss?⁴⁸ Shall I go force an elegy?⁴⁹ The dead sing *Turn the lights down sweetly*.⁵⁰ No more for us the little sighing, nor the grand.⁵¹ All the new thinking is still about loss.⁵²

....

⁴³Marilyn Hacker, 'Elegy for a Soldier.'

⁴⁴Larry Levis, 'Elegy for Whatever Had a Pattern in It.'

⁴⁵Jon Stallworthy, 'Elegy for a Mis-Spent Youth.'

⁴⁶Tibullus, 'To Priapus: Elegies i. iv,' trans. John Dart.

⁴⁷William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*.

⁴⁸William Wordsworth, 'Composed on the Eve of the Marriage of a Friend in the Vale of Grasmere.'

⁴⁹John Donne, 'An Elegy on Mrs. Bulstrode.'

⁵⁰Terrance Hayes, 'Stick Elegy.'

⁵¹Ezra Pound, 'Threnos.'

⁵²Robert Hass, 'Meditation at Lagunitas.'

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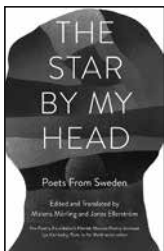
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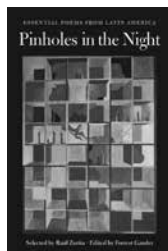
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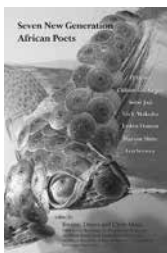
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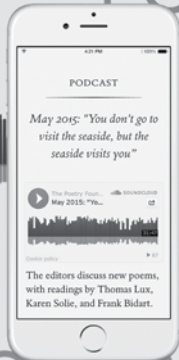
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Works by Wolpe, Flynn, Kitzke, and Ginsberg**
Created and performed by
Fulcrum Point New Music Project
Wednesday, June 17, 7:00 PM
- Reading* | **Danielle Chapman & Nate Klug**
Thursday, June 18, 7:00 PM
- Poetry on Stage* | **Sarah Ruhl & Todd Almond:
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Wednesday, June 24, 7:00 PM
- Exhibition* | **Cheryl Pope**
June – August, 2015



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